

"I'm proud of you . . . for choosing to be honest with yourself and those around you and doing something very, very difficult." —Matthew

"I wish he was here. I wish he was still alive." —Andy



SONS TALK ABOUT THEIR GAY FATHERS

LIFE CURVES

ANDREW R. GOTTLIEB

**Sons Talk About
Their Gay Fathers**
Life Curves

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Sons Talk About Their Gay Fathers *Life Curves*

Andrew R. Gottlieb, PhD



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To my nephew Marty,
for all that you are,
for all that you will be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew R. Gottlieb, PhD, is a Project Director at the National Development and Research Institutes, Inc. in New York City and a private practitioner specializing in the treatment of gay men. He has previously published in the *Clinical Social Work Journal* and is the author of *Out of the Twilight: Fathers of Gay Men Speak* (Harrington Park Press, 2000). Currently, he is editing an anthology of stories written by brothers and sisters of lesbians and gays.

Earth is round, the trinity is round, the concept of the universe is eternally round. Yet although we dine from round plates we humans set those plates on rectangular tables on rectangular floors in rectangular houses on streets and acres and miles, all square. We paint pictures in angled frames and hang them in rooms that are never globes. Does the free animal perceive his world, his human friends, as spheres? Do we contradict possibilities of endless joy by blocking out our life? Could we curve our lives?

Ned Rorem, *An Absolute Gift*

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Foreword

When someone discloses as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, it is not just an individual event. It is a family event. Based on estimates of married gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons, a spouse's coming out affects up to two million couples. Yet its impact has been largely overlooked. Children's voices are the least often heard. *Sons Talk About Their Gay Fathers: Life Curves* as a study is a gift to the literature, a gift to those families who have endured this crisis, and a gift to those professionals working with them.

Little has been written about sons of fathers who came out during or after marriage. Data for studies that do exist most often draw from the fathers' points of view. Rather than using reports by parents or outside observers, Dr. Gottlieb refreshingly explores the perspectives of the sons, the most reliable source for uncovering what this experience means. He brings us a range of stories as well as a psychological lens through which to view them. His narratives succinctly capture the complexity of the sons' experience, revealing interlocking components of their discovery and their handling of their fathers' homosexuality.

The significance of this study lies in its comprehensive, detailed picture of sons and gay fathers as they develop their separate self-images as well as the images of their father-son relationships over time. Painful, sensitive, often triumphant—the stories and analysis of their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings afford a multidimensional, longitudinal viewing. Step by step, we follow the complicated dance of these sons and fathers as they develop and define their connection. How the fathers perceived, revealed, and expressed their homosexuality and how their sons dealt with their fathers' sexual orientation and postdisclosure lives as gay men are significant subjects, but in the end the fact that they were gay remains only one small part of their individual and collective histories.

The importance of listening to the subjects under study in order to comprehend such a complex phenomenon cannot be underestimated, a lesson I learned well while writing my own book, *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming-Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families* (1994). The stories told to me by husbands, wives, and children revealed common concerns and individual meanings that the disclosure held for each of them. Until identified and acknowledged, these issues often remain unresolved and festering. For the heterosexual spouse, a partner's sexual orientation was not as painful an issue as the loss of trust, the sense of sexual rejection, the fear that the marital relationship might end, and the sense of disorientation, as assumptions upon which their belief system was built were negated. For the children, the parent's gayness threw into question their fears of peer rejection and an uncertainty about what the future held for them.

My research revealed the uneven nature of how families deal with disclosure. First, the gay, lesbian, or bisexual spouse struggles to come to terms with same-sex attractions. Next, upon disclosure, the heterosexual spouse tries to figure out what the new identity means individually and for the couple together. Finally, when the children find out, they try to put the new information into some understandable context as they cope with just growing up. Dealing with the disclosure proceeds at different rates for each of them.

As the family copes with these changes, the personalities, attitudes, and behaviors of the parents, siblings, and relatives affect how each of them processes the new information. Patterns of problem solving, anger, denial, secrecy, honesty, blame, and love also influence how each handles the disclosure. The family constellation, large or small, extended or nuclear, affects coping too. The larger the family, the more variables that impact its members. Children's views often differ from their parents' views. They are most concerned about having both parents be there for them and having a safe, secure, consistent, and loving home. That one of their parents is gay is not as important as the family breakup that precedes or, in the majority of cases, follows the disclosure.

As the stories in this book also show, the social context informs the perceptions and values that family members bring to bear on the issues. Prevalent attitudes in the neighborhood, social groups, place of worship, workplace, and school all play their part in how the parent

comes out and how each member handles it. The more conservative the context, the more difficult the coming out is for everyone.

During the tense postdisclosure period, is it any wonder that the children remain unheard? They face a daunting task: how to understand the parent's sexual orientation and integrate it with their age-related concerns. Since the majority of couples divorce after a spouse comes out and some fathers disclose after divorcing, the children in these families also face problems typically experienced by all children of divorce, such as the division of loyalties and fear of abandonment. Although being a gay parent is yet another difference for the couple to negotiate, it is not the primary concern of most children.

Recently reviewing the research on children of divorced gay and lesbian parents (Buxton, 1999), I found my earlier impressions reinforced: children's perception of their gay or lesbian parent change over time; most children are resourceful and resilient in coping with the impact of having a nonheterosexual parent; children's main concern is how to meet the challenges of growing up; and the behaviors and home environments created by both the homosexual and heterosexual parent—not the sexual orientation of the parent—make a key difference in how children fare. The quality of parenthood and the quality of the children's relationship with the parent count most in children's eyes.

Life Curves brings new voices to express the children's experience, adding a number of valuable insights. Running through these stories is the struggle of gay fathers to break through the initial absorption with being gay and embrace the concept of being a father. Before the recent increase of gay men adopting or having children by surrogacy, being both gay *and* a parent seemed contradictory. For these fathers, questions arose such as: "Does being a dad prohibit acting on my same-sex desires? Will I lose my relationship with my children if I come out to them?" In contrast to telling a daughter, telling a son more often risks rejection, especially as a role model. Although some fathers come out to everyone in the family, some may wait longer to tell their sons. The length of time that fathers delay the disclosure usually affects how their sons react. If the disclosure comes after a long period of secret keeping, some children are angered that they were not trusted with the truth. At the same time, that truth most often clears up confusion and answers questions sons harbored about their

fathers or about their parents' relationship. In contrast, some fathers never tell. Some sons hear it from someone else, depriving them of the opportunity to talk about it directly with their dads.

How fathers disclose counts too. Some provide too many details, rather than just enough to set the stage. Children are often satisfied with simple statements, such as, "I am gay. I still love you." There is sufficient time over the weeks, months, and years ahead to add more information as questions or opportunities arise.

Although coming out is pivotal in the parent's life, it is but the beginning of a long process in the child's life. The father's disclosure initiates a long trajectory for a son, perhaps going in a different direction than it might have taken had the father not come out. Rather than an epiphany about the identity of the son, a father's disclosure more often sets his son back a bit to reorient himself. Some sons yearn for a safety net. They want help to sort out their confusion or to find an outlet for their negative feelings. They are vulnerable to change. They cherish consistency.

The search for a father runs through many of these stories—the son seeking his father and the father seeking to be a father. Sons want to know, claim, and identify their father as father and, simultaneously, want validation for themselves as son—not the son of a gay dad, but rather as just a son. After disclosure, some fathers become more accessible, more approachable, more knowable. Others remain distant.

Reactions to the disclosure are as varied as the sons themselves. Although some sons appear to be accepting, many do not express initial feelings, such as fear, because of the shock or their desire not to alienate, anger, or disappoint their dads. These stories reveal many of those unspoken reactions.

Anger is common, especially if the son discovered evidence before he was told—and especially during adolescence when their own sexuality and desire for independence are emerging. Some displace their anger onto others, acting out as a way to gain control, feeling powerless to manage this situation. Sometimes the anger is projected onto the mother, as she is most available and safe. Other times, sons may direct the anger against themselves.

Sons may feel a sense of loss: loss of trust if the father had harbored the secret a long time, loss of control, loss of a sense of normalcy, and, if the parents divorce, loss of an intact family.

Changes in the postdisclosure behavior of the heterosexual parent also affect how sons process their fathers' homosexuality. Their mothers' acceptance or nonacceptance, support or anger, or understanding or blame often create situations that can help or hinder, respectively.

The sons' reactions are fluid and most dissipate over time, a transformation that Gottlieb's narratives capture nicely. At first, some sons are preoccupied with the new information about their dads. Everything the father does is interpreted as gay. But that focus shifts as these sons grow older and have more expansive social networks and begin to pursue their own interests. As autonomy develops, many no longer see themselves as the son of a gay father but rather as the son of a man who happens to be gay. Their father's sexuality becomes secondary. Some sons form friendships with their fathers and forgive them for the abuse and neglect they may have endured. Others form bonds with them not based on any particular interest or similarity. Still other sons continue a pragmatic relationship with them, valuing the bond for what it is.

After incorporating the homosexuality of their fathers into their picture of them, many expand their tolerance of difference to the world at large. Although some fathers in these stories mirror the development of their sons—integrating their gayness into their self-concept, their maleness, and their fatherhood—some fathers never reach that point, remaining as closeted as ever.

Based on my own research, a few differences between sons and daughters of gay fathers highlight the unique experience of sons. Although daughters share many of the sons' concerns, they deal with them differently. Similar to sons, they too suffer from a fear of peer rejection but often find a best friend with whom to share. Sons typically do not tell peers. They cope in isolation. As with their counterparts, daughters appear to have the most difficult time as teenagers, although they express it differently. Although they may feel angry and hurt, daughters can still empathize with their fathers' struggle.

Daughters, too, yearn for a father, but not in the same way as sons might, appearing more often to follow their fathers' wishes in order to please them, while sons may simply want to bond. Some girls engage in activities with their fathers more easily than do boys. The sexual overtones that sometimes complicate a heterosexual father-daughter

relationship as the girl enters adolescence simply do not exist. Unlike boys, daughters are not mistaken to be gay—the primal fear of many young men.

The unique patterns of the sons' experience are charted in the last section of this book: early relationship with their fathers, possible suspicions that their fathers might be homosexual, the fathers' disclosure, and the impact of knowing their fathers are gay—all afford a framework that helps to structure this complex and fluid son-father dynamic. Through this lens, we see how the sons experience their lives, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, making a fitting conclusion to a remarkable study that may lead to a greater understanding of children of gay parents and perhaps more effective ways to help them cope and mature.

Amity Pierce Buxton, PhD
Author, The Other Side of the Closet:
The Coming-Out Crisis
for Straight Spouses and Families
San Francisco, California

Preface and Acknowledgments

I conceived the idea for the present study shortly after completing *Out of the Twilight: Fathers of Gay Men Speak* (2000). What piqued my interest was the interview I did with Daniel, a gay father. He told me that he thought he had been useful to his homosexual son Charles as well as to his heterosexual son Todd, referring specifically to the attitude he thinks he strongly communicated to each of them that it was acceptable to “make mistakes” and “take chances” in life, ideas which Daniel seems to feel emanate from the fact that he is gay. Confident in his belief, I wanted to know if, in fact, his sons might feel the same way. Had his being gay been a good thing for them? Had they benefited from *his* mistakes, *his* chance taking? How would the Charleses and Todds of the world answer that? So a companion study, one exploring the ways in which sons have experienced their gay fathers, took hold of me. This book is the result.

Sons Talk About Their Gay Fathers: Life Curves is a storybook, an extended narrative moved along but not overshadowed by psychoanalytic theory. And, as do all stories, it unfolds. The “Introduction” briefly reviews more recent writings of the fathering experience as told by gay men themselves, setting the stage for [Chapter 1](#), “Father to Child.” Here I look at the father as seen through the ever-shifting eyes of his son at different phases of the life cycle, making him appear a complex, multidimensional, Janus-faced figure. [Chapter 2](#), “The Quest for the Real Father,” examines the son’s responses to his father’s homosexuality as captured through film, fiction, nonfiction, television, and the psychological literature. [Chapter 3](#), “Methodology,” explains the research process. [Chapter 4](#), “The Stories,” is an anthology of narratives that were constructed based on the interview material, painting an intimate portrait of each son as I saw him and as he saw himself. [Chapter 5](#), “Findings,” is a categorical analysis. [Chapter 6](#), “Discussion,” casts all the preceding material in a theoretical perspective, highlighting implications for future research and clinical practice.

I cannot emphasize enough that an undertaking such as this completely hinges on others in so many ways—those who lead you to subjects, the subjects themselves, and those who publish your work. Without them, a writer, a researcher, a clinician *has* no book. We are indebted to and reliant on those whom we have never met before, would probably have never met otherwise, and, in many cases, will never meet again. Like Blanche DuBois, we depend on the kindness of strangers.

So, in that spirit, I wish to thank those who led me to some of my subjects. In no particular order, they are Felicia Park-Rogers, Executive Director of COLAGE; Wayne Steinman of Center Kids in New York City; journalist Jesse Green; Bill Brown; and Michael Symons. I wish to acknowledge my colleagues Maurice Engler, for staging a valiant campaign to root out subjects; Kim Sarasohn, for applying her quick intelligence and editorial skills to the reading of my manuscript; Lisa Perera, my auditor, for her empathy, her warmth, and her sharp eye; Dr. Mary Ann Jones, my consultant, for her availability and willingness to consider some of my unique research dilemmas; and Dr. Amity Pierce Buxton, for writing the Foreword.

I would also like to thank my brother Paul Gottlieb, my sister-in-law Karyn Hollis, my aunt Elayne Bressler, as well as my friend Ed Musselman, for all of their continued support and understanding over the years.

Very special thanks goes out to all of the staff of The Haworth Press, beginning with John P. DeCecco, Editor in Chief, and Bill Palmer, Publications Director, for their willingness to, once again, see the possibilities in me and in this project, as well as to the administrative and editorial team, including Rebecca Browne, Jason Wint, Amy Rentner, Peg Marr, Jennifer Durgan, Anissa Harper, Dawn Krisko, Margaret Tatich, Patricia Sas, Marie Spencer, Joshua Ribakove, and my favorite Haworth pen pal, Niki Escott.

In the end, this study could not have been written without the cooperation of those brave young men who voluntarily shared their stories with me so that I could, in turn, share them with the world.

So, to all of my colleagues, friends, relatives, and contributors alike, I give a very warm and heartfelt thank you.

Introduction

Gay Fatherhood: A Contradiction in Terms?

[Q]ueers are not fathers.

Jack

Jack

In Oscar Wilde's (1888/1991) fairy tale *The Selfish Giant*, our protagonist has been away for seven years. In his absence, the village children have been playing in his garden. Upon his return, the giant orders them out: "My own garden is my own garden" (n.p.), he says, forbidding them to play there ever again. So nature rebels. The garden then became a place of eternal winter, in which "birds did not care to sing . . . and the trees forgot to blossom." The giant could not understand why spring would never come. Only after the children sneak in through a hole in the wall does the garden return to life; only then does the giant realize how selfish he has been, vowing that the "garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever." However, at one corner of the garden it is still winter. There stands a lonely boy needing help. He is crying. The giant rescues him, lifting him up into the tree. So grateful is the boy that he kisses the giant. They become friends. The boy disappears.

One morning many years later, the giant, now aged and feeble, looks out of his window and sees the boy standing under a tree that is "covered with lovely white blossoms" (n.p.), an odd sight in winter. As he approaches, the giant observes that the boy has been impaled with nails in both his hands and feet. The giant threatens to "slay" the perpetrator, but the boy exclaims, "these are the wounds of Love." The giant wonders, "Who art thou?" The boy smiles and says, "You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise." Later that afternoon, when the children

return, they find the giant “dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms.”

Poet, playwright, novelist, “notorious . . . for being himself” (Samuelson, Samuelson, and Gilbert, 1998), Wilde was imprisoned for two years on charges of gross indecency, stemming from his relationship with Bosie—Lord Alfred Douglas. Their relationship had absorbed Wilde, taking him away from the relationship with his wife, Constance, and their two boys. Perhaps the tale of *The Selfish Giant* reflects Wilde’s ambivalence about his relationship with his sons. In the story the children seem, on one hand, to represent a symbol of life. It was only after *their* return to the garden that it began to thrive; it was only through *their* presence that the giant began to experience himself as a person capable of loving and giving. On the other hand, the boy at the end, although a symbol of everlasting life, is also a symbol of death. Perhaps the presence of children in Wilde’s life kept him tied down—dead, in a way—and unable to fully devote himself exclusively to Bosie or to his own art, always guilt-ridden about leaving the children and what that might mean for his own future and for theirs.

Psychologist Don Clark (1979) wrote two letters to his children, Vicki and Andy, the last one when they were eleven and twelve years old, expressing the reasons that necessitated his being openly gay, reflecting on the possible effects this has already had and might continue to have on all of them individually and on their family as a whole. His quest to be himself, he hopes, will prove “a model” (p. 65) for his children in their quests to be *themselves* in whatever form that takes. He writes: “You must follow your path and I must follow mine and we must keep alive the love and mutual caring that makes us so eager to follow one another’s progress along those paths” (pp. 73-74). Clark’s hope is that being able and willing to live his life as a gay man and a gay father has provided opportunities for all of them to go beyond conformity toward finding their own individual, inevitable truths—ideas that Wilde might have thought and felt but could never have uttered to his children in quite that way. Clark (1979) surmises that his children are “glad to have a gay father” (p. 75), but how do we know that? How do his children feel? We know only what Clark hopes to be true. We do not hear from his children themselves. After Wilde’s release from prison, he was not permitted to see his children again. They were raised under assumed names, reflecting the state of