

# A PAINFUL DISCOVERY

After 25 years together, my husband and I faced our biggest obstacle—my homosexuality

BY CARREN STROCK

**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO MY HUSBAND AND I ATTENDED THE 50th-birthday party for one of our oldest friends. Everyone was sharing anecdotes about the guest of honor, Jeff, as he stood arm in arm with his wife, Sherry. She looked at him lovingly; suddenly my eyes filled with tears and I fled the room. This simple scene had stirred painful reminders of my old world, now gone.

Until I was 43, I had lived a comfortably settled lifestyle that I thought would last forever. My universe revolved around my husband and two children. My home was filled with friends and good neighbors. I was active with the PTA, community-service organizations and our temple. I enjoyed working with my hands, and, equally skilled with a paintbrush, camera or needle and thread, I exhibited regularly at arts-and-crafts shows, winning awards for my work. I would have said with absolute certainty, "I know exactly who and what I am."

One year later, during my 25th year of marriage, I fell in love with my best friend. One day while we were talking, I looked at this woman I had known for two years and suddenly my heart began to race. My world became a terrifying place filled with anguish and turmoil.

While I had always been able to accept people who were different, now I was one of them. I felt like an outcast. At home, with great difficulty, I functioned as though nothing had happened. If my husband or children saw any changes in my behavior, they never acknowledged them. Privately, in great pain, I mourned the loss of my friend. My confession to her had destroyed our friendship. Now I had to contend not only with that, but also with the shocking discovery of my new sexuality. There was no one to offer comfort, no one with whom to share my sorrow. I lay awake night after night, replaying all that had happened. I began walking for hours at a time, trying to force myself into exhausted sleep.

For the first two years of my discovery, I cried more than I had in my entire lifetime. My tears were for many things: the tremendous void caused by the loss of my best friend, the isolation my silence condemned me to, my own internalized homophobia. And most painful, after 25 years of marriage, the realization that I had betrayed my husband and children and was living a lie.

Secretly skimming money off the food budget to pay for it, I went into therapy. My therapist would look at me and I'd grab a handful of tissues. I joined a consciousness-raising group, and, regardless of the topic, tears would flow. The few women I confided in needed only to say, "How are you," and more tears would come.

My journey from denial to understanding and acceptance was not easy. Just saying the word lesbian aloud for the first time was

so difficult that even though I was alone in the house, I turned on the television, radio and water faucet because someone in the street might hear me say it. I haunted libraries looking for books that might offer help, or at least understanding, but there were none to be found. I ventured into a women's bookstore and, to my dismay, found the lesbian section right in front! My discomfort was so great that I grabbed the first book I saw with the word lesbian on it and thrust it on the counter with a \$20 bill. Had the clerk bagged the book first, I would have left without my change. But she painstakingly counted out coins as I stood frozen, eyes glued to the ground, face turning deep red. This incident was the first of many equally horrifying ones.

Eventually I found women to talk to. We shared our stories, and they led me to friends and friends of friends, all with stories of their own. I found that many women have remained in their marriages: some living a dual life, others coming out to their families and coexisting with their spouses in redefined relationships.

I also found that the phenomenon—married women loving women—was not as uncommon as I had believed. And no woman, single or married, is automatically exempt from the frightening possibility that she,



too, might one day realize a dormant same-sex disposition.

While my journey initially was painful, it became cathartic and, after a while, exciting. Over a period of time, I discovered the real me, came to terms with my sexuality and reached a new level of growth and understanding. I learned that if anyone has an issue with who or what I am, the issue is theirs, not mine.

Coming out to my husband was extremely difficult for both of us. The day I told him, we cried, then sat together on the couch long into the night, neither of us moving to turn on a light. We were on the brink of parting several times, but something deep down kept reminding me what a nice guy he was, and I became determined to try to find some way to make my marriage work in a more realistic light.

It was at Jeff's party that I realized we had changed and would never again share the picture-perfect relationship our friends did. Still, we found our own special place. Together, my husband and I have weathered good and bad years. We've been through job losses, moves, family illnesses and deaths, and we raised a couple of wonderful kids. Once I identified myself, we began to grow separately rather than as a couple. Initially, there were days of anger and frustration, but the history we shared and his growing willingness to accept the changed me has enabled us to stay together and forge a supportive friendship and create a more equal partnership in our marriage.

Four years ago, when our 30th anniversary arrived, we shared it with family members. Around the table in our favorite restaurant, we acknowledged the difficult times we had gone through and thanked our loved ones for their support, for not choosing sides and for not abandoning us during our struggle. We raised our glasses to the new friendship that much talk and open communication had helped us to establish. It was a landmark occasion and deserved to be celebrated.

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