

Every Bisexual an Educator

By David Meadow, Marketing Chair, L.A. Bi Task Force

For Bi Health Month, we're taking stock of where we've been and where we're going as a community. When you take stock, do you ever note how you're treated as a bi+ person and think, "Oh, yeah, this must be what it was like to be gay or lesbian, fifteen or twenty years ago, in this particular location"?

I don't know about you, but it sure seems that way to me. I won't go on and on about the stubborn disbelief, the obtuseness, the outright hostility that most of us have encountered at some point or another, occasionally violent, but usually just compromising our mental health to the point where it can manifest physically. There are plenty of good statistics about life and health outcomes, but, *anecdotally*, we all kind of know that biphobia is pervasive, even in the most civilized parts of the world.

Now, I'm a teacher by trade. I see it as a life calling – even if it's not paid, like my actual teaching gigs are – to eradicate biphobia through education. I also believe that with privilege comes responsibility, and, if you're as privileged as I am overall, and have plenty of patience and bandwidth to spare after your particular day of dealing with the world, you have that much more responsibility to educate others. After all, this may be your one chance to educate a particular person for a long time – or, at any rate, *their* one chance to get educated without getting brutally mocked or scolded in the bargain. Granted, the *emotional release* of mocking and scolding may well have an important place in the health of the mockers and scolders, and indeed their approach may set good boundaries in the short term, by getting people to shut up and leave them alone. However, none of this, in itself, *educates* – it doesn't change hearts and minds – and changing hearts and minds is what really creates deep, sustainable change in the long term.

There are many forms education can take, but, in terms of who needs to *do* it, I believe in the honor system: if you can, do. If you can't, I'll take you at your word, and it's okay to fall back and call upon allies (like me) to step in for you.

Here are some general principles I've come across. Everyone has to find their own rhythm, but these should get you started.

1) Cultivate relationships with people who don't share your immediate interests, but who respect your opinion.

Really, this is how a society finds its coherence anyway. Venturing outside is particularly crucial in an age when we're all cloistered into so many mutually-suspicious micro-tribes. It's been said before, but it's as true as ever: you can learn all kinds of things from people outside your immediate circle. They're the ones who are going to ask the awkward, clueless, curveball – or, as we say in social-justice circles, *problematic* – questions, not to be jerks, but because *they* genuinely want to learn from *you*. Many social-change theorists will tell you not to "teach or preach," which basically means don't

act high and mighty or drone on in an overly-didactic, technical way with lots of jargon. (I think the idea that you're not *teaching* says more about our narrow concept of teaching than anything else, but that's its own essay. As far as I'm concerned, any advocate for change is, by definition, teaching. You just have to have a light touch).

And for God's sake, if you're going to bother to do it, do it kindly. That's hard in some ways and incredibly easy in others. People constantly tell me that I'm "kind" and "sweet," and I don't consider myself all that "sweet," but then again it's amazing what passes for sweet in this world of cliques and gotcha games and one-upmanship. (I mean the whole world, by the way). Just being kind and open works wonders. If you don't have too many models of how to be kind, learn what *not* to do from your passive-aggressive boss, your blowhard uncle who takes up all of the airtime, and, yes, your messianically certain social-justice buddies.

You might not believe how many people intimate to me that they're bi, or might have bi tendencies, once I'm already out to them, and have already talked about my experience of the world matter-of-factly and non-confrontationally. Harvey Milk was really onto something with his mantra of "Come out, come out, wherever you are." People want a safe place to undergo any change in their understanding of the world, and that goes double or triple if it's a change in understanding themselves. The language about being a safe person may sound a little "kumbaya" to someone who's not used to engaging in this manner, but it really does make a difference.

2) Get comfortable deploying a few different metaphors that almost anyone will understand, and that will use something familiar to *them* to explain the unfamiliar.

One of my favorite metaphors is food. I've had a few interactions where someone of civility and good intentions (i.e., someone worth the effort) has said something along the lines of, "I just don't get the whole 'bisexual' thing. How can that possibly work?"

I'll typically respond, "Well, do you like Italian food?" When they (usually) say, "Yes," I'll continue, "So you probably don't like Chinese food, do you?"

If they haven't yet figured out where I'm going with this, I keep it up until I've hit two cuisines they really like. (Believe me, if you hit the above two *plus* Mexican and Thai, you'll almost certainly get your two "likes"). Then I say, playing dumb, "Wait a minute... you like Italian AND Thai [or whatever]? How's that possible? They're so *different!*"

One guy saw my argument coming about two questions in, which is fine. One lady held out until the "punchline" and then winced at me balefully and muttered "Fuck youuuu...." in a tone that suggested a grudging acceptance of defeat, though of course this wasn't about *defeating* her. These were very different situations, but, in each, the person seemed to be letting their guard down and edging toward an admission that things weren't as they had always believed.

Remember: almost no one likes changing their model of reality. Therefore, it's almost never just one conversation. It's multiple conversations, or foiled assumptions, or other encounters, which keep adding up, and finally make the new reality undeniable.

3) Always have some go-to information on hand, at least mentally: the name of a favorite blog, the name of a battle-tested activist, the name of an (ideally) slim volume that lays out the issues with a clarity that still inspires you.

This information will prop up your message when you yourself are knocked sideways, or when you're a generally articulate, indulgent person who's just had it up to here on this particular day. Some years ago, I was in New York looking for a job, and got knocked a little sideways myself at a supposedly "LGBT" career fair. I knew, of course, to take that description with a grain of salt going in. For most of the day, people treated me just fine, but then biphobia reared its ugly head. It happened when I sat down with one of the professional career coaches who were giving free one-on-one consultations. I was glad to avail myself, and it's interesting to note that the coach I talked to (I assume he was gay) started off on a really holistic, personal note. He wanted to know what I was trying to accomplish in life right now, generally. What were some big dreams? Was I dating? I had never had straight career coaches broach the dating question before, but I went gamely along with it.

"Oh, I'm on Tinder, and...."

"*Tinder?* Wait, are you straight?" (This hiccup alone testifies a little bit to that coach's out-of-itness, because I assure you that people of plenty of different orientations were already on Tinder at the time).

"Oh, I'm actually bi."

Here he smiled a smug little smile and said, "Ah, okay. I've noticed that, when men tell me they're bi, typically they're conflicted about something."

Thinking I was on point, but apparently walking right into a trap, I gave him a knowing look and said, "Oh, *no*, are we really going to have this conversation again about bisexuals being confused?"

"Well, I didn't say *confused*," he countered; "I said *conflicted*."

Dammit. What kind of game was he playing here? Had he just maneuvered me into protesting too much? Then he flashed his credentials as a marriage and family therapist, assuring me that he knew the best and latest in mental health. He clearly didn't... but, well, who was I to tell him?

I'll admit, I got flustered – flustered, more than anything else, at the constant cheesy little parlor tricks people pull to avoid coming to terms with a change in their world – but, somehow or other, I managed to write down RJ Aguiar's Twitter handle on one of this coach's cards and hand it back to him, urging that he just check out some of the content

when he got a chance. Did any of this settle and stick in his mind? I don't know, and truthfully one rarely knows. But the habit of *preparation* put info at right at my fingertips that I'm sure will stick in plenty of minds, eventually, as a great enough number of these exchanges happens.

The health of a community – be it bi+ people, LGBTQ+ people, cosplayers, or bricklayers – is always profoundly affected by the health of the larger society it's a part of. That society's health, in turn, owes a great deal to how that society is educated. Are textbooks getting more inclusive, and workplaces getting better data, and relationships getting a more humane vocabulary to work with? Sure. But there is only so much the hetero- or monosexual majority will ever be able to do to, or even get a *notion* to do, to educate themselves and each other about *us*. That's where we come in.

Yes, it's daunting to educate your neighbor. But we have resources we don't always acknowledge. Though education means explaining things different ways, bi/pan/fluid people are already used to approaching situations from different angles. Though education can require an unusual comparison, we've already been down that road in our internal monologues about whether it's "appropriate" to put chicken satay and enchiladas on the same plate. Though educators have to carefully suss out when it's time to take a break because the student is getting overwhelmed, we bi, pan, and fluid people have automatic empathy about being overwhelmed, since we face a plethora of potential choices – in love, lust, community, or elsewhere – and the task of convincing those choices that we aren't always choosing one over the other.

Now go out there and educate. Try out a sports metaphor on your co-worker. Model compassion and non-judgment to someone in your knitting circle who reveals a deeply personal struggle. Tell your aunt that that Amandla Stenberg, who took her breath away on the big screen, is also on the small screen of YouTube and the pages of *Teen Vogue*, explaining how her pansexuality fits together with other big issues of our time.

You've got this.