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Growing Up a Gay Latino: Musings

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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Growing up as a gay individual within the context of a Mexican/Mexican-American/Chicano/Hispanic/Latino household has proven to be challenging but enjoyable, for me.

I was born twenty-one Gregorian calendar years ago in 1987. I have grown up as the second of four children to a two parent family. We can be categorized in many ways as a hard-working, entrepreneur or blue-collar, working class or lower/middle class family, who also happen to be practicing Roman Catholic and first/second generation Americans from Mexico. To this laundry list of labels I add homosexual or gay in my case, with all the different connotations it implies.

My family has many theories about how someone becomes a homosexual, many of them shared by society at large. There is the theory of homosexuality by osmosis, by simply socializing too frequently and for too long of a time with homosexuals. There is also the theory that homosexuality may be due to a lack of male/masculine influence in a young boy’s life, hence too much female/feminine influence. The only theory not given attention is that of simply being born as a homosexual, and perhaps being due to genetics. Thus, they would seem to agree with Ramirez who is a constructionist, and explains in his book, What It Means To Be a Man, that homosexuality is not an innate characteristic.

For my family in particular that last theory would seem to have credibility, considering that I am only one of at least five or six other known homosexual family members (coincidentally all on my mother’s side). My mother’s own sister has “come out” to us as a lesbian, though not until after she was married with two children of her own. There are also at least three male cousins, my age and older, that are also known as homosexuals. Though we may all share our heritage, each of us has had a different experience.

My older male cousins, for example, who are now in their thirties, have had the most difficult time. The time frame of thirty years is important here, because my family has only been in the United States since the 1960s; that is only 48 years worth of time and two American born generations for the acculturation processes to take place in. Had my family never left our village in Mexico (population one thousand, approx.), apart from the possibility of never being born, I highly doubt that any of us would have come out. Still though, even in this country my cousins have not been able to express themselves fully within our family; not that “coming out” is something that should be aspired too, but here I mean being able to participate fully in family functions. For instance, upon being able to move out, they did so and moved far away. They almost never come by, but when they do it is almost always alone and not with their partners.

My aunt has had her own difficulties. She grew up in a tougher situation than the rest of us. My mother’s sibilings were raised in a dilapidated home that often lacked a utility or three, had plenty of domestic problems, and she lived basically in poverty. My aunt was always a “tomboy,” she ran around with the neighborhood female gangs, dropped out of high school, became a teenage mother, married and divorced later. Had it not been for her two daughters, I think my family would have been less supportive of her through the divorce.

Finally, my second cousin and I who are of the same age have had our own difficulties but we have still managed to be somewhat well adjusted. Being the sons of first cousins, we are somewhat more distantly related, but share the same social circles within the family due to our age. Growing up we played with both action figures and Barbie dolls, we played cops and robbers as well as hop-skotch, we played up the mischievous boy roles as fire starters, but also the seen but not heard girl roles of our female cousins.

Our parents responded to our cross gender activities by disciplining up. They taught us not to play with girl toys, to only...
play with boy toys, to not spend so much time with the girls in
general and spend more time with each other. Though we never
did so, as we were more interested in participating in the larger
group activities than any activity that would only occupy the two
of us. Our mothers accused our fathers of not taking is out to play
sports; though even if they had, I am sure we would have had a
terrible time.

Later on, as we grew and entered middle school and even high
school, our parents were their harshest. In his book, What It
Means to be a Man, Ramirez discusses how being labeled as
socially deviant has great implications upon the individuals “self-
estem,” “acceptance of their sexuality,” and “relations with the
same or opposite sex.” This could not be more true, as once we
were past the age of childhood where we may have been permitted
more leisure to explore, now that we were in our pubescent stages,
we were pressured to exhibit very masculine qualities and were
expected to begin showing romantic or sexual interest in girls.
This may have caused us the most pain, as we were unable to
“produce” a girlfriend for our families and we continued being
chastised for being so feminine.

Unbeknown to our parents, we each began participating in our
own same sex relationships with other young men we met at our
Gay Straight Alliances at school or Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and
Transgender youth groups in the neighborhood. We also used the
internet to meet friends and learn about youth dances held
specifically for young gay adolescents.

We both reached our individual critical points with our families
when we decided to “come out” to our parents and bring home
boyfriends. We caused uproars, shouting machines, physical fights,
days, weeks, months of anguish. There was even a period of time
when we were sent to see psychologists, to “change” us and keep us
away from bad “influences.” For instance, we were not allowed to
have access to the internet, attend our support groups, take calls
from friends, see those friends in person, we were not even
allowed to see each other; it was quite extreme.

This time passed too, and eventually we were allowed to
participate in all of those once banned activities. Our relationships
with our families have improved dramatically. We operated
independently of what our families wish; I mean to say that we
participate in same sex relationships, even bring boyfriends home.
Though we have learned to play by some rules that help facilitate
easier relations, such as not introducing the boyfriend as what he
is, and instead calling him a friend.

This is a semblance of an open relationship, one which I am
happy to have and not entirely interested in pushing any further at
this point. It may not be what western cultures consider to be an
“open” and completely “out of the closet” type of relationship.
There is a level of silence, but really it is only an omission, and
even then only omissions to certain individuals. On the whole, I
am open with all those people closet to me, those who matter

most; for me, this is the most important measure of being able to
express myself as a gay man.

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