

# BORN GAY



*Images and Reflections of an Ordinary Lesbian*

Jan Phillips

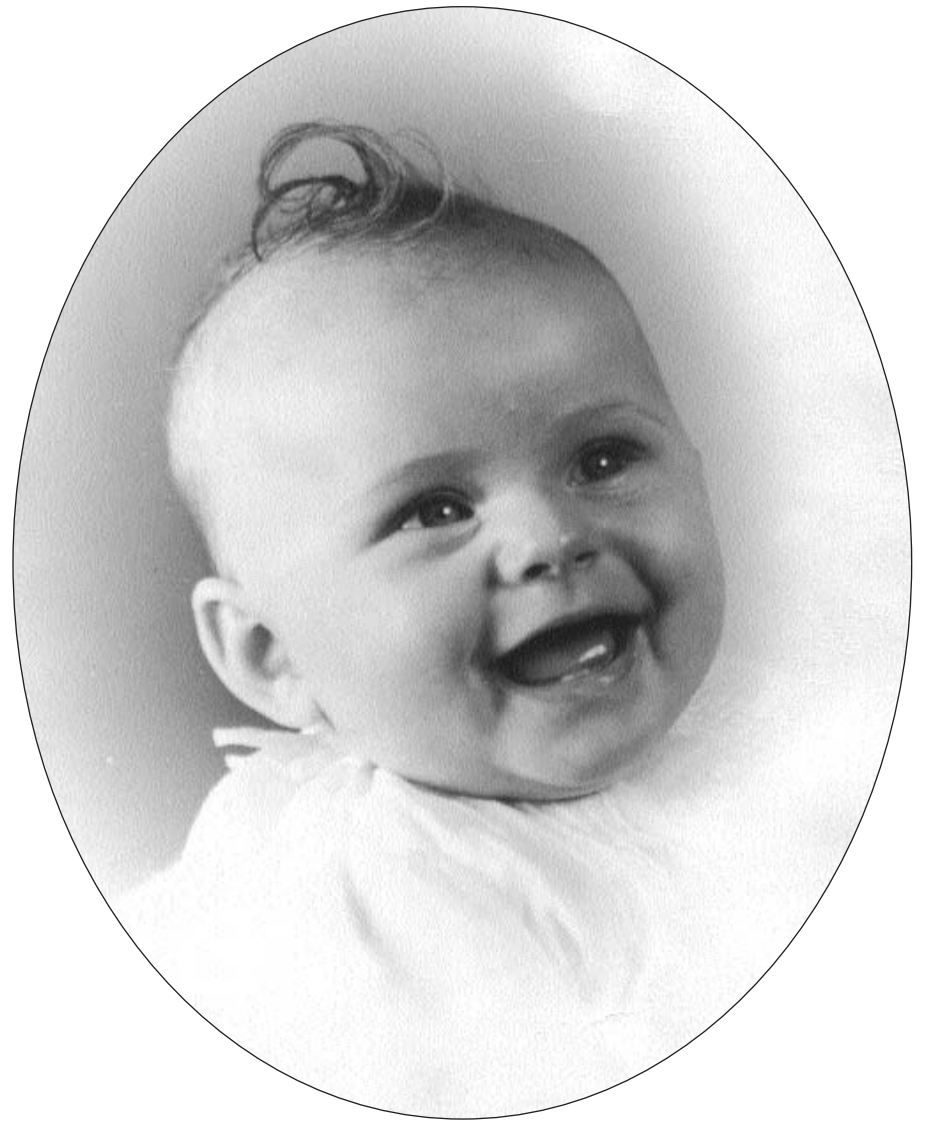
Copyright 2007 by Jan Phillips

<http://www.janphillips.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without permission from the author.

This work was originally produced as a photographic exhibition for Gay Pride Month. The panels are 18x24 inches and the exhibit is available for rental from the author. The author is also available for speaking engagements.

This is one story about growing up gay in American culture in the twentieth century. There are millions more waiting to be told.



I was born gay.  
1949



At least it always felt that way. I don't have any memories of feeling heterosexual. I never had romantic attractions to boys although I always loved being around them because it was more adventurous than being around girls.

In the realm of feelings and emotions, though, it was always girls who took my heart. There is no mistaking that for a moment. I was in seventh heaven when my Mom's Home Bureau class met at our house and all those women would pick me up, press me into their bosom, rub my head and call me adorable. I've had a weakness for older women ever since.

1952



Here I am at four years and I already have a crush on my sister's third grade teacher, Miss Mahon. I swooned over her blissfully, with no sense that there was anything unusual about that.

My fantasies were pretty simple— Miss Mahon and I would be walking hand in hand down some country road, or maybe she'd come to my house and tell my Mom she loved me and wanted to be my babysitter. Sometimes I'd be sitting in the front row in her classroom and she'd just look at me lovingly. It didn't take much to move my little heart.

1953



Ricky Woods

Daryll's hand

Ricky Woods was my first boyfriend, which in real life meant my favorite playmate. We built forts together, made rafts that always sunk in the creek behind his house, rode our bicycles miles and miles together. We never kissed or anything. He just let me call him my boyfriend because we both knew I was supposed to have one.

See the one with her hand on my shoulder? I loved that. Her name was Daryll Graves and I always loved being close to her. Something tingly happened in my heart when she was around. She was so pretty, I thought. I used to stare at this picture and imagine her having her arm around me while we were watching TV or something. She probably would have flipped out if she ever knew I thought about her like that. I was only six, but I had vivid fantasies of being loved.

1955



By the time I graduated from kindergarten, I was already sick of being called a tomboy. It was one of the worst names I could think of being called, but people always said that about me and then everyone had this way of laughing in response to it. It always made me feel like a freak.

So what if I liked boys' games better than girls' games? Who wouldn't? It didn't mean I wanted to be a boy. It was their freedom I wanted, not their sex.

1954



I had a love/hate relationship with this dress my Mom made. What I loved is that she put my initials (JIP) over my heart. But I hated the puffy sleeves. They just weren't me.

I had a strong sense of identity and hated wearing things or getting things that weren't in tune with that identity. Like the year I got a doll from my Aunt Beulah. I started to cry when I opened it up, and ran out of the crowded room in tears.

My Mom came out to console me and I remember sobbing into her ear, "How could she *do* this to me? Doesn't she know anything about who I am?"

Things like this made me aware of how different I was from other girls. That was a hard one to deal with.

1956



By the time I was in fifth grade, we had moved to Syracuse from from Adams and I was enrolled in St. Anthony's School on the south side. I had a crush on Sr. Grace and Sr. Rose Eileen, but I was too busy with my new friend Bonnie McHale to spend much time on romantic fantasies.

Bonnie was as different as I was, so being around her made me feel normal. The boys wouldn't let us play with them because we were better than them in so many sports, so we spent hours playing ball, swimming, riding bikes, and skating, just the two of us together. We were blood sisters, soul sisters, and about as close as any two kids could be. For the first time in my life, I'd found a girl who would be my best friend.

1959

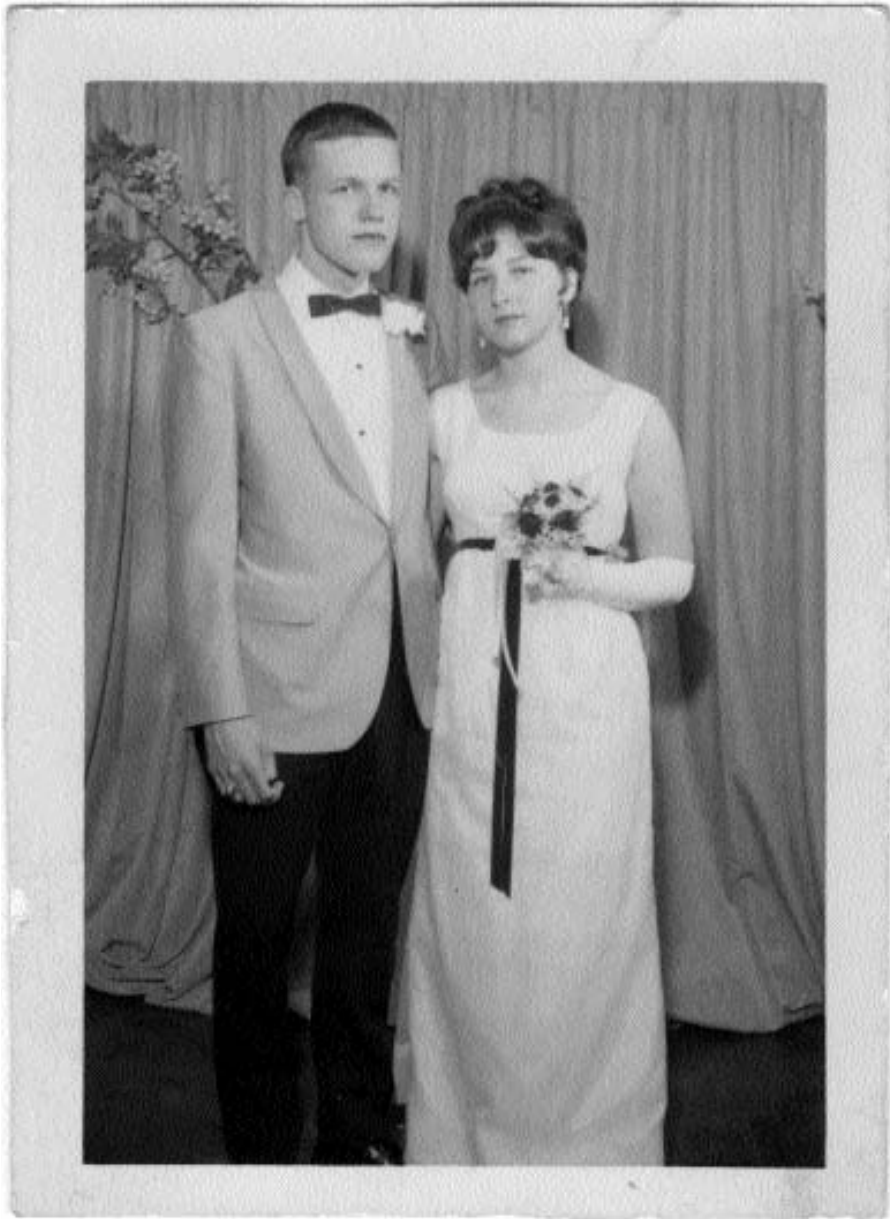


This is Bonnie and me in high school after I'd gotten a black eye in a girls' basketball game. By this time, we were presidents of our sororities and leaders in our school. We had taught ourselves guitar, outgrown our lack of confidence, outshone most others in sports, and remained the closest of friends until something happened that ripped us apart: I thought she might be queer.

By the time I was seventeen, after eight years in a Catholic school, what I knew about homosexuals was that they were perverted, immoral and dangerous. If Bonnie was a lesbian, something had to be done about it. I organized secret and dramatic meetings behind her back, confiding my suspicions to several of our friends. With a fervent righteousness, we subjected her to the cruelest interrogation, all because of my fear and internalized hatred. She didn't have a gay bone in her body.

How ironic and tragic that I put so much energy into combatting in her the very force I was suppressing and denying in my own life. Who would teach us such things that one would turn against the other like this? And turn against one's self? What is the source of this fear and hatred?

1966



You can see how happy I wasn't with my boyfriend of three years. We didn't really like each other at all. He called me "Horse" whenever the guys were around. He was constantly hurting my feelings and getting angry at me for not letting him "go far enough." But I just wasn't that attracted to him. He was like Ricky Woods—a make-believe boyfriend because I was trying to do it right. Trying to squeeze into a box that wasn't made for me.

Here I was in love with half my sorority sisters, going to them for all the comfort, encouragement and emotional support I needed, and barely able to tolerate the guy I called my boyfriend. Go figure.

1967



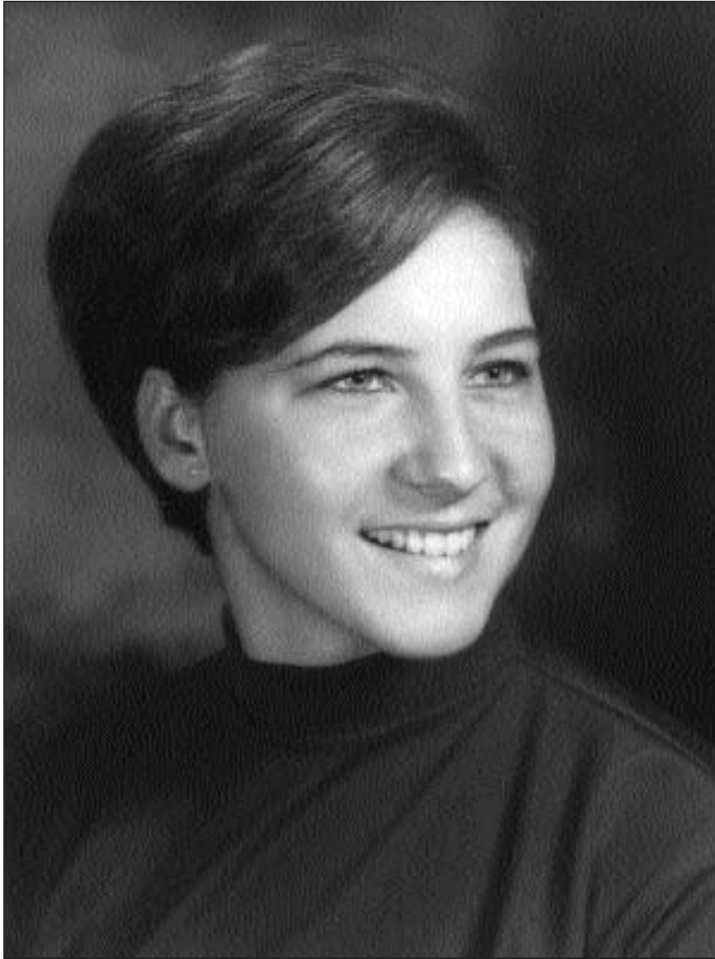
I entered the Sisters of St. Joseph community in 1967 at the age of 18. They had given us a barrage of psychological tests to weed out potential “problem cases,” but somehow I passed. By the end of the second year, however, my superior felt that I was getting too close to some of the sisters and forbade me to speak or make eye contact with them. They had this fear about “particular friendships,” afraid some emotion would creep into the relationships we were building.

I did, in fact, have a kissing relationship with one of the novices, and knew of several other novices involved in similar relationships. And that was one tiny aspect of a very busy life filled with prayer, study, work, and service. Of course I had emotional relationships. I was so much in love with my life, it was the only way I knew to share my joy.

On the evening of June 6, 1969, I was dismissed from the convent. It happened suddenly and was a total surprise. My superior took me to a room in the basement, said I would not be continuing my novitiate, and asked for my veil. I asked if I could say goodbye to anyone, but she said if would be better if no one saw me. When my parents arrived, we were ushered through a back stairway and out to their car. I can’t remember a thing about the long drive home, except that I was afraid to cry—afraid if I started I could never stop.

I lived for months in a trance, thinking they would send a letter any day saying to come back, they had made a mistake. But it never came. Ten years later when I wrote and asked why they had dismissed me, they sent a short quote from my file. It said I did not have a religious disposition because of my “excessive and exclusive relationships.”

1969



I had no idea what to do after leaving the convent. It was too painful to stay at home, so I went to California just to keep moving. After months of looking for work, I got a job as a clerk typist for the Bank of America. It was the worst time of my life. I kept trying to be straight, wondering why it never felt right.

I went out with so many guys and it was always the same, an awkward struggle about why I didn't want to sleep with them. I was so hungry for a loving relationship, so lonely for the sisters I left behind. And I was still years away from knowing I was gay.

1970



Here I am with Margaret, the first real love of my life. She was formerly Sr. Robert Joseph and she taught me high school English for three years. I had a crush on her, of course, but it never occurred to me anything would come of it. How could it? I knew I couldn't be queer. I loved God too much. I was too normal. I didn't have that "look" that lesbians had. But one night in Albany we told the truth to each other: that for the past eight years we had loved each other all along. We became lovers in my 23rd year.

I was still in denial about being gay, knowing nothing more about that way of being than what I had been told. But Margaret had a brother who was gay and one day we went with him to a Gay Pride Parade in Albany. That was the first time in my life I really understood what gay meant. I could accept it then because I found reflections of myself in all the speeches and in the thousands of people who were gathered around me. I didn't find evil, perversion, immorality. I found compassion, beauty and pride. In that green park on that proud day, I finally came home to myself.

1972



Brother, Jim. Mostly he was mad because he thought he didn't know me anymore. Like if I was a queer, I'd have to be all those other weird things that he knew queers were. He was afraid he'd lost his favorite sister and it took him years to discover I was there all along.

Sister, Marni. She said that it was a sin to be gay and that I was totally selfish and wrong to be talking about it. "Just shut up and stop thinking about yourself for a change. You don't know how much you're hurting all of us."

Mom. When I came out to her, she was heartbroken and furious. Why couldn't I just keep this to myself till I was over it? She prayed to God about it and God told her she should be thankful, at least I wasn't crippled.

Dad. Mom begged me not to tell him. She thought he'd have a heart attack or disown me. Besides, she said, he already knew "in his own way," and he "couldn't bear to hear anymore about it." He died anyway, and we never had one conversation about it.

1973



After I came out to my sister, she said she didn't want me to be around my nieces anymore. I adored them and that loss was one of the most difficult to endure. We had always had so much fun together and suddenly Aunt Jan never came around anymore. They were as sad as I was, but there was nothing we could do about it till Marni changed her mind. That happened within a year, once she left the Pentecostalist Church that had her convinced I was a sinner and a threat to her children.

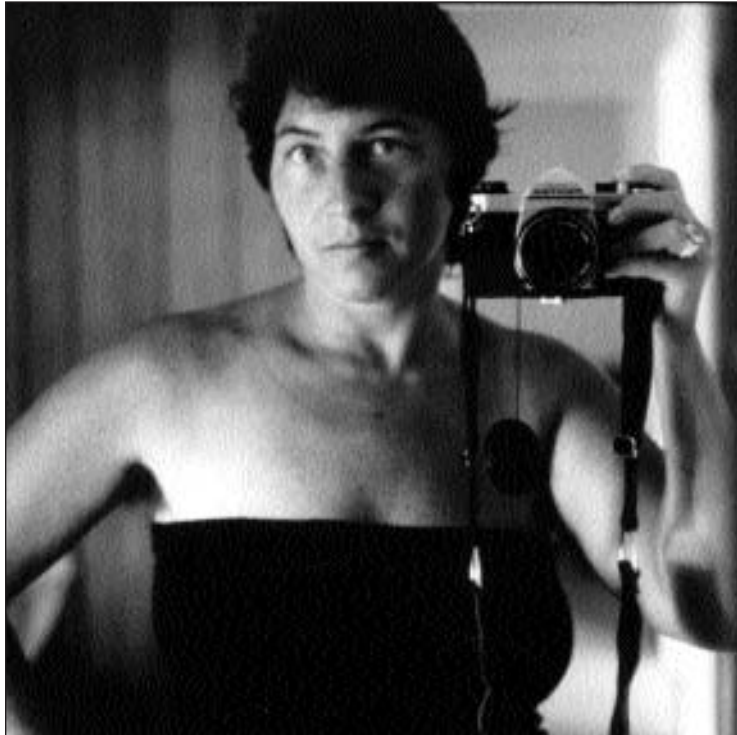
1975



I had a great job as a Student Personnel Director for a Vocational School in Syracuse. I loved being there and had a good relationship with all the students. My boss was very affirming and often told me that I was doing a ship-shape job. After I'd been there about six months, I had lunch with one of the secretaries I'd grown close to. When the subject came up about who I was dating, I decided not to lie. I told her that I'd been in a relationship with a woman for three years and that we were real happy together.

Two weeks from then, I was fired from my job. My boss seemed apologetic about it, but only shrugged his shoulders and murmured something about consolidation of services when I asked why I was being fired. I never asked that secretary about it, but I always figured I'd still be there if I'd kept my mouth shut.

1976

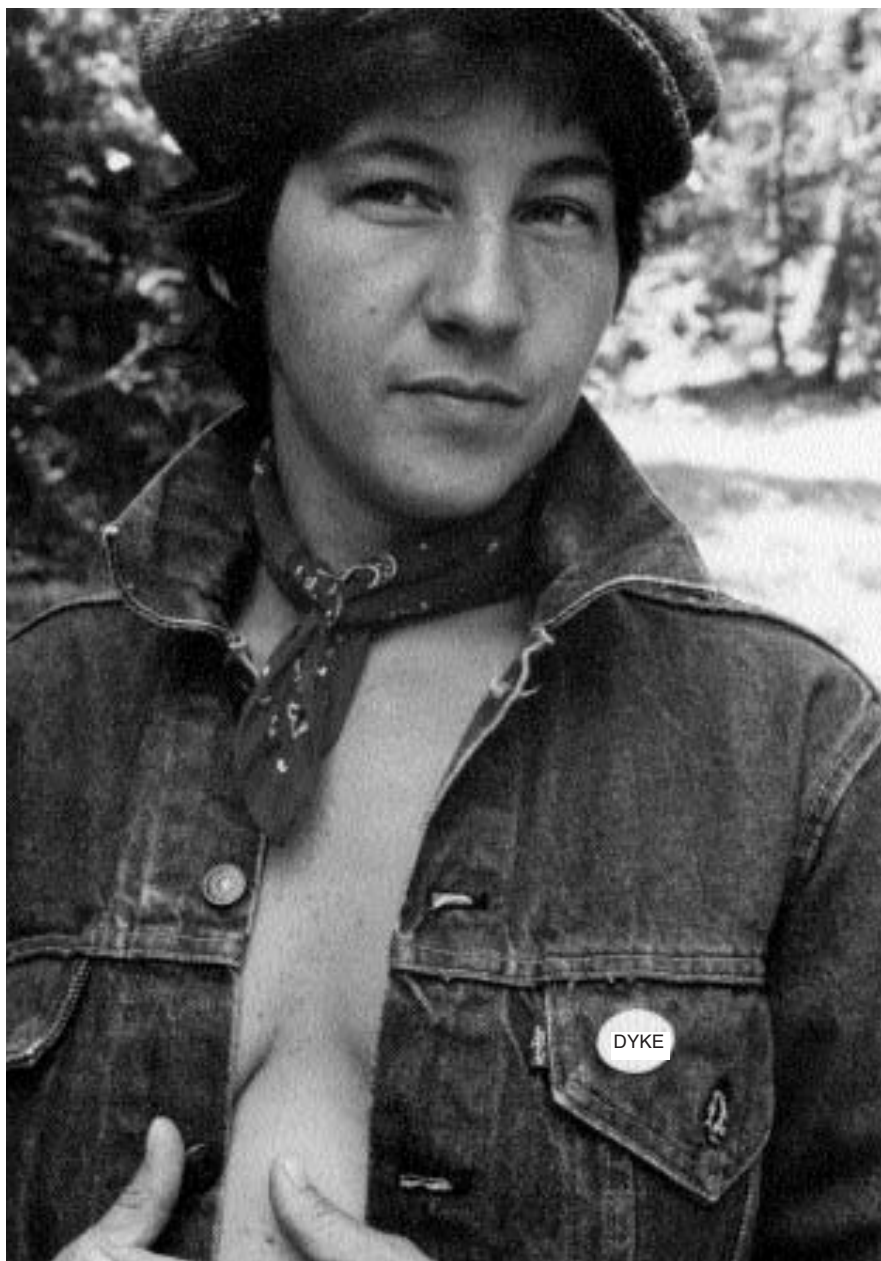


For years I kept traveling back and forth across the country trying to find a place I would fit in. I went back to school and took a photography class where we learned how to put together a two-projector slide show with music and images. At the end of the semester, our assignment was to present our show to the class. By this time I was pretty active in the women's movement and had tons of pictures of women together, so I did a show called "Woman to Woman" with music by Cris Williamson.

It was obvious that there were lesbians in the show, but none of the images were sexually explicit or erotic. They were just pictures of women being with women, working together, dancing, singing, being family together. I thought the show was great, but when I showed it to the class, there was silence at the end. Two people walked out of the room during the show and no one said a word to me after.

I felt so shunned. I remember how mad the professor was. He called it homosexual propaganda and gave me a lousy mark. I dropped out of school that year and became a gay activist.

1977



I went through a militant-dyke-separatist phase for three years after I became an activist. I had already been dismissed from the convent, but there was still a church, more jobs, parts of my family, and several friends yet to lose.

I rode a Honda 400 across the country and joined my first consciousness raising group. It was in that circle that I learned not to blame myself for the losses I was accumulating. I began to understand that some people are afraid of gays because they think we're so different.

Instead of working to find a commonness with us, it's easier to just get rid of us— fire us, disown us, ostracize us, kill us. And then they ask: why don't those queers keep it to themselves?

1978



I didn't think I'd ever get my family back. Every time I went to visit any of them, it always ended up in some big fight. I was so insistent on bringing it up all the time, like I was looking for some kind of approval that I couldn't give to myself. And all they wanted to do was ignore the whole subject and pretend it wasn't happening—that their sister and daughter wasn't really homosexual, but just going through some phase.

My Mom was a nervous wreck whenever I flew in from California, afraid I would blurt out the whole perverted story to my father who'd keel over in a minute. She was into this Charismatic Catholic phase herself and that didn't help my case one bit. Although it didn't seem as righteous and judgmental as my sister's fundamentalist church, there was a definite intolerance of any behavior that didn't fit into their black and white ideas. No shades of gray there.

My Mom and sister were as closed as could be to the idea of my lifestyle being OK with God. They were sure I was involved in something sinful and they prayed and prayed for something to change. I don't know what it was that changed, but eventually my gayness stopped being an issue for me as well as them. I stopped pushing, they stopped resisting, and we started being a family again after years of troubled times.

1975



I own my own business now, so no one can fire me for who I am or what I believe, but every day I live with the question: “What will be the consequences of my coming out?”

I’d love to be as carefree as everyone other straight person talking about my partner, but the fact is, once I say I’m a lesbian, every other thing I do and say gets filtered through that screen.

Some people don’t see Jan Phillips the person anymore. They see Jan Phillips the sexual being, and all those images they associate with the word lesbian crop up and get in the way of our communication.

I get to be defined by a sexual act that takes up so little time in my life it’s nearly inconsequential. To me, being a lesbian is about so much more than sex. It’s about loving and being true to myself. It’s about living from my soul, following my instincts, daring to be real. And it’s knowing what it’s like to be marginal in this world, to be despised by people even before they know you.

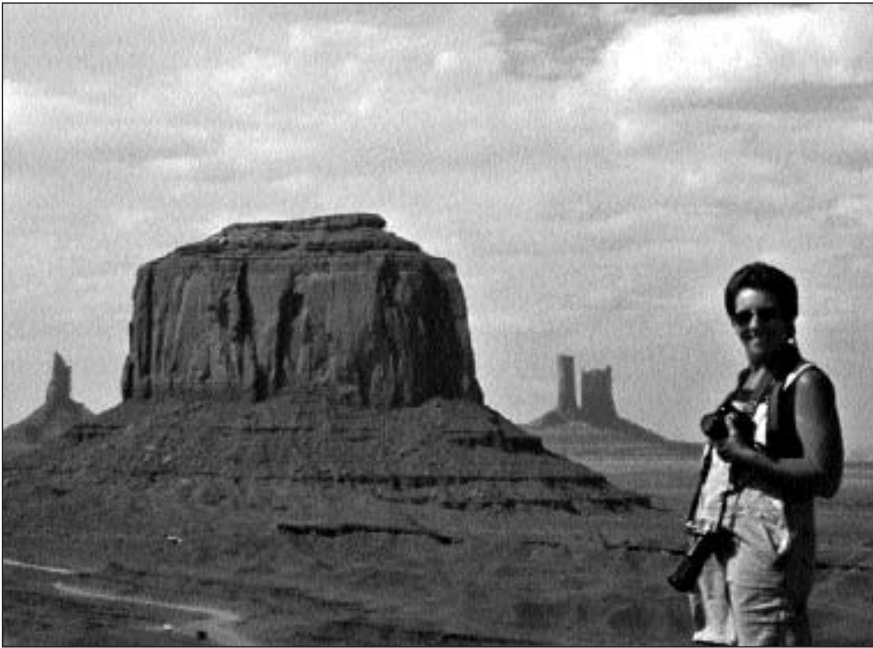
1990

And here I am at 54, wanting to live in a safe and free world. Whatever I was going to lose as a result of being gay, I've already lost, so I can afford to come out like this and throw some light on a shrouded subject.

I have friends who have lost their children and their homes for doing as much. One was subjected to electroshock therapy when she came out to her parents as a teen, and now she has no memories of her childhood. Another was clubbed to death by a gang of teenagers who thought it would be fun to beat up a faggot. Last week, a woman told me that her eleven year old daughter can no longer play with her best friend because her mother found out she is a lesbian and doesn't want their children associating anymore. It goes on.

Coming out is never a casual act. It is an act of faith. A commitment to authenticity. A personal risk and political act. If things are to change, it will be because we have dared to be true to ourselves. If every one of us woke up one morning and announced ourselves to the world, the planet would tremble with the force of that courage. Yes, we may be risking our lives, our families, our friends, our jobs—but what is served by our silence? How can we bear this absence of intimacy? How will things ever change if we do not change them?

The future is in our hands, our voices, our minds. We are co-creating this culture, shaping the contours of each day with our thoughts, actions, and passions. To me, the greatest challenge of our lives is to be true— to ourselves and to the journey we have come here to make. Godspeed to us all.



---

We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation and that always seems fraught with danger. We fear the very visibility without which we also cannot truly live...and that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which is also the source of our greatest strength.

Audre Lorde, *Sinister Wisdom* #7

---



*“No matter what our attempts to inform, it is our ability to inspire that will turn the tides.”*

Jan Phillips

JAN PHILLIPS is an award-winning writer, multi-media artist and workshop director. She is the author of *The Art of Original Thinking*, *God Is at Eye Level - Photography as a Healing Art*, *Marry Your Muse - Making a Lasting Commitment to Your Creativity*, *Making Peace - One Woman's Journey Around the World*, and editor of *A Waist is a Terrible Thing to Mind*

Jan conducts workshops in original thinking, creativity, and cultural change throughout the year. She has a CD of original music, *All the Way to Heaven*, and Sounds True Audio has released a 6 tape series of her *Marry Your Muse Workshop*.

Jan is a co-founder of Syracuse Cultural Workers, publishers and distributors of art-work for peace and justice.

As an artist/activist, Jan's commitment to spiritual healing and global consciousness resonates in her work. She weaves music, humor, imagery, and stories into presentations that inspire and inform her audiences.

Visit [www.janphillips.com](http://www.janphillips.com) for information on her programs and performances.