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270 Interweave Sermon
Interweave Worship
Your Daughter's a WHAT?!

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Interweave Sermon Award

From the reading I shared with you, it's obvious I really have enjoyed being a mother. I have SO many memories of our daughters' childhoods. But what I don't remember is ever considering the possibility that one of my daughters might be a lesbian. I thought a lot about what their interests would be, where they would go to college, their careers, where they would live, and, of course, what men they would choose for their husbands. I wondered what their weddings would be like and whether they would have children and enjoy them as much as I have. But never, never did I wonder about what sort of woman one might marry or whether I'd have grandchildren who have two mommies instead of a mom and dad.

Today, you've given me a chance to talk about my experiences as the mother of a lesbian. I'm honored to tell you how proud I am just to say, "I am the mother of a lesbian." I want to point out that I'm not an expert on psychology or sociology or family dynamics. I didn't come to talk to you about statistics or theories. What I do know is what is in my heart. On that, I am an expert. And so, I've come to share with you what's in my heart.

I am a mother. Most of all, I am a mother. What the heck, I even used to have a bumper sticker which read, "Mothering -- A Proud Profession." Now I have a rainbow bumper sticker ... and I'm proud of that, too. I sometimes say, "I have three daughters-one is gay and two are not."

I never expected to have a lesbian daughter. I never even thought about the possibility, which in itself is kind of interesting now that I look back on it. I think I was typical of many mothers ... I didn't realize I knew any lesbians. I didn't "see" a whole group of women who were being pressured to be invisible. I was confident that my daughters would be traditionally feminine like me. After all, in the back of my mind, I knew what made people gay -- it was having a bad mother! I was a good mother and so, of course, I would not make my child gay. I'd have "normal" daughters.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned from motherhood is how much our children teach us. I thought it was my responsibility to teach them. And, indeed, it was . . . and still is. I know we teach more by how we live than by what we say. But I never realized how much our children teach us.

I remember the first time I vividly realized the girls were teaching me something. I must confess that I had a very bad attitude about going to museums. I grew up in a family that traveled a lot. My parents were both teachers and they taught us every step of the way. They loved to stop at museums where they read every word of every display. As an adult, I realize how much they really enjoyed doing that, but as a child, I thought it was boring. And I grew to really hate museums -- deadly dull, boring, dusty places.

Then, the summer of 1975, there we were in London while Bob taught summer school in Iran. I had little children eager to get out and see everything and anything that there was to see or do. I didn't want to prejudice them against museums, so I took them to some of the most famous. Suddenly I was confronted with seeing museums through the eyes of little girls -- and they loved it! They dashed from exhibit to exhibit. They wanted to show me everything! "Look, Mom, at this funny animal." "Over here, Mom. See this old dress?!" Their curiosity and excitement were contagious. We dashed through museums at a hundred miles an hour with excited chatter carrying us from one display to the next. Forget about being bored. Forget about reading ANYTHING. Just enjoy! Yes, they taught me to enjoy it. I could never have taught them to enjoy museums the way they taught me.

And that's how it is about lots of life. Our children can teach us more than we ever imagined. They do it best of all just by being who they are.

Our daughter, Yvonne, came out to us in 1989 soon, after she went away to college. I remember the phone call in the same way we all remember important life events. She telephoned because we had some sort of miscommunication and she thought we were going to be in Richmond that night and could have dinner together. It turned out that she had planned to tell us at dinner, but decided to do it by phone because she had already decided that would be the night to tell us. I remember the words, "I've realized I'm gay."

Friends have asked me, "How did you feel?" What I remember most clearly is not how I felt, but what I thought. I thought-- "This is a biggie. I've got to be really careful not to say the wrong thing now and totally blow it." I remember choosing my words carefully, although I don't remember exactly what I did say. Into my mind popped the memory of Yvonne telling me sometime a couple of years earlier that she had thought in junior high that she might be gay, but as soon as she confided in a friend, she knew it wasn't true. So I know I said something about, "You wondered that one other time." And she agreed, but said now she knows it's true.

She began telling me about going to a meeting of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Student Alliance on campus, walking in and feeling immediately "at home." She said that once she really understood what it means to be a lesbian, she knew absolutely that she was one. And what I realized was, I knew it, too. I believed her. I knew it "fit" with who she seemed to be. I knew that the hope and glimmers of happiness I heard in her voice were new.

Over the coming weeks, I saw in her the happiest Yvonne I had ever seen! She was just so happy. She made it pretty easy for us to accept because her happiness was so wonderful to behold. Her sisters felt the same way. They said that they hadn't considered the possibility that she was gay, but as soon as they heard, they realized that they weren't surprised.

I don't want to sound like this was a snap, although I know it was easier than it is for many families. Yvonne recommended that we read a book, *Now That You Know*. And I did. I thought about it a lot, but not with the kind of overwhelming grief that some parents seem to feel. For me, instead, it was more a time of puzzlement, wondering what this would mean for our family in the future, wondering what sort of life she would live and whether she would find someone to love and to share her life, wondering whether she would be safe or if she would be in danger. I

had lots of concerns and worries. And it just plain took awhile to get used to the idea. I could say to myself, and later out loud, "Yvonne is gay," long before I could say, "Yvonne is a lesbian." That took awhile longer. But I grew into it.

Now I can say it as easily as I say other things about our family. Yvonne is a lesbian. Only now I'm more likely to say, "Yvonne is an out and proud lesbian." Because she is.

So what has having lesbian daughter taught me about the world?

First of all, that lesbians ARE "normal" daughters. I truly believe Yvonne was born lesbian. She told me that she was attracted to other females for as long as she can remember. Her first love was Elizabeth, her best friend in first grade, and she dreamed that maybe someday they'd be married. That's simply who she is, as simply and completely as I am who I am.

It has always seemed obvious to me that people come in many varieties. But when I used to think of variations, I thought of nationality or age, physical abilities or careers, race or religion. All those seemed quite natural and obvious to me -- many differences, but without particular intrinsic worth or value attached to them. Occasionally, I thought about the problems of racial or ethnic prejudices, but I don't remember thinking about differences in sexual orientation. I remember the tasteless jokes in high school, but I didn't give much thought to someone honestly and truly being gay. How could I have not known?

It seems to me that our culture needs to help us grown up and stretch our ideas of what's OK and what's not. As a La Leche League leader for 20 years, I helped thousands of women and babies have good breastfeeding experiences. It's a strange paradox that in our culture which glamorizes women's breasts and exploits them as sexual and commercial objects, that people are offended by the use of breasts to nourish babies. Similarly, how can so many people laugh at jokes which denigrate gays, but remain blind to the genuine love that gay couples share?

For love is what it's really about, isn't it? In a world that struggles with too little love and kindness and human warmth, shouldn't we cherish the love that comes woman to woman or man to man as much as we cherish the love that grows between a man and a woman? We certainly don't have such an abundance of love around that we can just throw it away!

Stories of love are everywhere in our films, literature and music, Until Yvonne introduced me to some of the novels she reads and the music she likes, I never thought of romantic stories as anything other than heterosexual. And then, "Bing!" the light bulb went off. Wow! Of course, if you're a lesbian, you want the woman in that story to fall in love with another woman. It was SO obvious! After all, we enjoy stories of romance because we identify with them. Would I enjoy romantic stories if the women always fell in love with other women? Not likely. Why had I never thought of that?

What I've learned that saddens me the most is the realization of how much hatred exists. I've thought so often about a girl who was my cabinmate at camp one summer, I don't remember her name, but I do remember her. We were both 14 that summer. My home was a small college town in Illinois; hers was a big city in Ohio. I was a white girl who had never known anyone my age

who wasn't white. She was black. One night as several of us sat talking about our lives, she told us about reading in the newspaper a quote from a man who said, "All black people should be thrown together on a big fire and burned." I listened in horror as she sobbed and asked, "How can anybody think that? How can anybody hate me that much? He doesn't even know me." My heart still aches when I think of her that night. I was so shocked.

And now, when I think of hatred, I think of her and I realize, with a sick heart, that some people hate my daughter in the same way that she was hated. It was a sickening feeling when I realized, when I knew, really knew, that some people hate gays and lesbians with that same blind vengeance and cruelty. And I want to say, as she did, "How can anybody think like that? How can anybody hate her that much? They don't even know her." And to my great sorrow, I know it's true, There really are people out there who wish Yvonne harm, who would like to hurt her. There are even those who wish her dead without ever even meeting her and having a chance to see what a wonderful young woman she is.

And now that I know that -- really, truly know that -- I know I can no longer be silent. I've learned that there really are some awful things in the world, but having a lesbian daughter certainly isn't one of them. I know that fundamentalist religion has caused an immeasurable amount of suffering by voicing hatred and condemnation. But "religion" isn't the only basis. There are many others whose hatred comes from a myriad of sources. But regardless of the cause, I know that the dangers of hatred are very real and that my dear daughter could, indeed, be attacked.

I understand when I see some of her gay or lesbian friends who are very angry and distrustful. They are sometimes reacting, not to me, but to parents who wound and cannot be trusted.

Years ago when I was a young mother, spanking as a common tool of parenting was just going out and so I was learning new ways of disciplining. Old habits die hard and I remember an older woman whom I admired used to say, "Those of us who don't believe in spanking tend to spank a lot less." Our catch phrase was, "Children are not for hitting." Now sometimes I wish I could shout, "Children are not for throwing away." For, tragically, some parents choose to "throw out" their gay children, throwing them away from the life of the family.

If I step back and look objectively, it's a rather stupid choice. Do you know how much goes into raising a child? There are the endless nights of babyhood, toilet training, teaching language and spelling and manners, sitting up with them when they're sick, tooth fairies and Santa Claus and birthday parties, driving them to endless activities and then teaching them to drive, paying for everything from scout uniforms to nutritious food to braces for their teeth and prom dresses, sending them through college and out into the world. Do you know how much work and worry goes into a child? Do you know how much they cost? Does it make sense to throw them away if they don't turn out just exactly the way we had pictured?

Not that there's any comparable investment, but if there were, would it make sense to pour that much of yourself and your resources into something and then simply throw it away? If it's your child you're discarding in anger, everyone loses. The child loses most of all, but the parent does,

too. And we all lose, because that kind of anguish hurts all of us. It isn't "just" a family problem. It's a problem of our human family and we all feel the pain.

Oppression, no matter what its target, oppresses us all. We cannot be truly free unless we are all free. I never pictured myself as someone who fights oppression. That fits a little more into the idealistic, angry protestor mold than I've ever seen myself. It's not that I didn't feel strongly about principles. But . . . well, during the segregation protests, I was in college. During Vietnam, I was at home raising babies. Now I guess my time has come. It's time for me to speak up and speak out against oppression.

I'm learning that I don't have to stand on the front line of a protest rally or risk being jailed for civil disobedience in order to do my part. It's just that I cannot be silent. I must speak up and tell the world that I have a lesbian daughter and that she's wonderful. I must keep finding ways to be heard, if only by a few people, if only by taking advantage of what opportunities arise. It may be something as simple as saying, "Oh, I have a lesbian daughter," just as somebody starts telling a demeaning joke. Or it may be just saying, "Yvonne and her partner, Ann" in our holiday letters. Or answering the question, "Are all of your daughters married?" with "One is married, one is divorced and one has a partner."

It's easy for me to speak up in our UU congregation because I know everyone is supposed to be supportive. That doesn't mean they are, but it means I can take the position of assuming they are! Actually, that's a position I take whenever I speak about Yvonne, whether it's at church or elsewhere. I realize that I don't "invite" others to have a problem with her sexuality. Nor do. I communicate that I have a problem with it, because I don't. That's something I hope I convey simply by how I talk about her. I think they realize that IF they have a problem with it, I'm not interested in hearing about it!

A couple of years ago, I led a summer discussion service on the topic of gay issues. To my knowledge, that was only the second time it had been a topic at our fellowship and yet, afterward, one member said to me, "I don't understand why we always have to talk about this stuff." Always? Well, we talk about "this stuff" because we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

I'm proud of our denomination for its stand on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights. I wish I could have had our entire congregation in the audience at General Assembly, 1996, when UUA President John Buehrens called to the front all of the same gender couples who are in committed relationships and they just kept coming forward --- no longer invisible, not second class citizens, but cherished and honored by us who are Unitarian Universalists. I stood up and clapped and cheered with tears rolling down my cheeks because I knew in my heart, yes!, this is what religion is supposed to do -- care about people, support them in who they really are, raise our awareness of prejudice and our responsibility to support freedom from oppression. And I wished that Yvonne and Ann could have been there to be honored, too.

I want to keep reminding our congregation that our principles are what we live. That we can't say we honor everyone's inherent worth and dignity if, in the back of our minds, we're saying, "except gays and lesbians." I think perhaps I have a somewhat unusual opportunity to be heard. That's

because I don't look like a radical! I don't look like anyone's stereotype of a gay activist, whatever that looks like. Some people will hear what I have to say simply because they aren't "turned off" before I speak. I catch them unawares! And I look just so normal ... just a mom. I realize in sort of a humorous way that it's my "secret weapon". . and it's my responsibility to use it.

So I jumped to my feet during Joys & Concerns the week that the same sex marriage law passed in Hawaii. I said that my daughter is a lesbian who is in a committed relationship and planning to have a wedding someday, and that I'm so happy to know that maybe their commitment can be a legal marriage. And I shared why it's more than just good news for our family, but a time of joy for our whole congregation -- because if we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, it's something for all of us to celebrate. .(And, as I recall, I threw in that we'd even be willing to go to Hawaii for the wedding, if that's necessary.)

What would I be missing if I didn't have a lesbian daughter?

Well, for one, I wouldn't know some of you! Because of her, I've developed a lot of very dear friendships. I wouldn't have sought you out. I wouldn't have come looking for people who could teach me more about my daughter's life and help me understand her better. I'm really glad I know you. I've become aware that most of the people I know within the gay/lesbian community and their heterosexual allies are very kind and caring and compassionate people. They're the kind of people I want to be with. They share my values. They cherish people and human warmth and kindness. I would have missed a lot if I hadn't become part of that community.

I wouldn't have gone to the March on Washington. What an amazing experience that was! I'll always remember walking down that aisle at All Soul's, Yvonne and I carrying our fellowship banner together. I'll remember that sunny afternoon sitting around with my UU friends, waiting hours for our time to march. I'll remember being yelled at by a lesbian crowd on one corner who spotted me and shouted, "We see a flamin' heterosexual!" What a life event that was and, of course, without Yvonne, I would have missed it.

I wouldn't have spoken out about the local "Diversity Enriches" billboard being destroyed. And I wouldn't have written this letter to the editor which was printed in the Roanoke Times:

"Diversity enriches; hatred, divides. How strange that many who call themselves Christians, righteous and proud, practice a religion that teaches love and compassion by voicing hatred and condemnation. Surely, Christ would weep -- not because of gays, but because of those who hate them."

I wouldn't have stood up in our fellowship and given a pulpit editorial about why we should ALL care about that billboard and its message, why heterosexuals need to be allies.

What would I tell other parents of gays if I had a chance? Cherish your children. They are your children and they are life's most precious blessing. Listen to your children because they have much to tell you. Believe your children because they speak a truth that you do not know. Dare to grow and learn and struggle as a parent and speak out for justice and liberation. Know that you

are not alone, that there are so very many other parents out there. With our children's permission and blessing, we need to come out of the closet, too. For how shall we all grow if each of us remains silent?

I've been told, "Yvonne is very lucky to have you for her mom." Occasionally, I'm tempted to say, "Yeah, she is!" But to speak truly from my heart, I must say that it's a toss up as to who is lucky to have whom. She has taught me so much. I'm very lucky to have her as my daughter.