Gay Shmay! Just Don't Be Alone -
Throughout Our Culture We Need Strong Mentors

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Webster’s New World Dictionary defines culture as the
“ideas, skills, arts of a people communicated or passed
along to succeeding generations.

"The Jewish culture was passed onto me mostly by my
bubbie. Although not a formally educated woman, my
bubbie knows quite a bit of Jewish religion and culture
and has been obedient and loyal to it throughout her
life.

As I write this, I am reminded that she wanted (no,
insisted!) that I use her name in my articles.

“Yusella,” she says, “I notice when
you mention me in your articles you
don’t say my name…why?”

“Bubbie,” I respond, “I did not
know you had a name until I was a
 teenager...everyone calls you
bubbie, even your friends!”.

I had quite a bit of contact with
Bubbie growing up because she
helped my mother raise me. She
taught me the reasons and meanings
behind lighting candles for the Sabbath, keeping kosher
(as a child I was always so upset that she would never
know the taste of a cheeseburger or pizza with
pepperoni in her life!) and observing the High
Holidays. I witnessed a woman who was full of religious
morality, spirituality and holiness. She is always filled
with joy whenever she gets a chance to be a part of a
Jewish experience. I can listen to her stories for hours
about her experiences as a little girl coming to America
from Russia with all the other Jews. In fact, I have
videotaped her telling them so I will never forget not
only her words but her way of telling these stories.

Unfortunately, not only did she teach me spirituality
she taught me superstition as well. Admittedly, to avoid
bad luck, when I accidentally spill the salt, I shake it
over my left shoulder three times (or is it my right
shoulder?...I can never remember so I always to both
just in case); if I sneeze while I am talking about
someone who has passed away, I lift both my ears; and
if it seems like someone is giving me the evil eye I say
"tooh-tooh-tooh" through my index and middle finger
over and over again.

But I did not have anyone to teach me the gay way of
life. As a gay little boy and gay teen, and now a gay
adult. There were no gay bobbies to teach about gay
culture.

So, in the gay and lesbian culture,
our identity is formed in adulthood
and we mentor each other and
ourselves. Some very wonderful
things characterize our culture. One
is that we are not bound by gender
roles. This is a freeing experience so
that when partnered, stereo-typical
expectations do not exist.

Everything has to be negotiated.
Imagine two men partnered in
which both have been groomed to
be breadwinners and providers as
men usually are. Someone has to take care of the home.
Or two women partnered, having been raised to be
nurturers and home based. Someone has to go out and
work. So we get to decide what works best for us and
not what we are expected to do.

We also have more freedom around sexuality that other
cultures. This is largely due to heterosexuals having
defined lesbians and gays mostly by our sexual desire
so we explore and examine our sexual nature more
openly.
I think the best feature of our culture as gays and lesbians is our overall level of courage and honesty. It takes bravery and sincerity to come out of the closet in this anti-gay society in which we live. When closeted, we dishonestly present a false self to others because of fear of hate and rejection. To come out is an act of assertiveness and affirmation in a society that would rather we stay dishonest and passive.

The honesty it takes to come out is so profound that when others learn about our gayness, they become honest with us as well. It forces truthfulness to the forefront for all.

This was best illustrated in the movie In and Out in which Kevin Kline portrays a gay man who comes out. There is a scene in which his mother and her girlfriends are sitting around talking about this “outing” and they decide to take risks and be honest with each other and “come out” about their own deep dark secrets. It is done very appropriately and best shows what actually happens to us and those around us when we tell our truth.

As I said, there are no Bubbie’s in the lesbian and gay culture. There are still very few gay mentors who can or will come forward and be available to gay and lesbian youth. There are many people who will not allow it also.

I am always filled with grief when a man older than I am, in his 40’s, 50’s, 60’s and even 70’s, comes to me because I am out and asks me what it is like to be gay and to teach him the gay culture. It should be the other way around.

I long for a bubbie-like presence in our culture to nurture me and teach me the kinds of things about what it means to be a gay man as I was taught about what it means to be a Jew.

I will end with the most healing words that were ever said to me in my whole life. When I told Bubbie I was gay at age 23, she looked at me and said, “Gay Shmay, Yusselah, just don’t be alone!”