

PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH GAYS AND LESBIANS FROM IRAN

The twelfth annual LAGPA (“Lesbian and Gay Psychotherapy Association of Southern California”) conference was held on June 24th, 2006 at the Village at Ed Gould Plaza, Hollywood. I am glad to report this conference had many useful workshops. I conducted one of the workshops which dealt with issues relevant to gays and lesbians from Iran and their struggle to come out. During my workshop, I discussed the following topics: Iranian family dynamic, Middle East as a dumping ground for the United States (“U.S.”) shadow, overt homophobia in Iran vs. covert homophobia in the U.S., Sufism from a gay perspective, and life after the closet for gays and lesbians from Iran. In this paper I will summarize the main points of my presentation at the LAGPA Conference.

Since Iran’s 1979 revolution, many gay and lesbian Iranians have moved to Southern California due to atrocities being done to them in Iran. The fundamentalist position in Iran has strengthened due to Bush’s foreign policy and his attack on Iraq. Most Iranians do not want their country tormented by war and their citizens indefinitely tortured and detained in such prisons as Guantanamo. The fear of a U.S. attack has forced many Iranians to support the hardliners in Iran. Religious bigots in Iran are taking advantage of this situation and imposing their primitive laws against gays and lesbians. These laws have led to executions of many gays and lesbians in Iran. On behalf of Gay and Lesbian Health Care Providers, I wrote the following statement regarding the recent execution of two gay teens in Iran:

Dear Editors:

Words cannot describe our outrage about the recent execution of two gay teens in Iran. As gay doctors from Iran, we hope someday our people will be free from oppression. In the name of Islam, many atrocities have been done to gay and lesbian people in Iran. Religion has often been misused in this regard. The founders of Islam and Christianity never advocated hatred toward same sex lovers. No homosexuals ever were punished while these prophets were alive. In fact, Islam has made it okay for men to have sex with their male servants while traveling away from their wives. I like your readers to know that neither Islam nor the Persian culture advocates such hateful acts. In fact, a great deal of Persian literature is based on homosexuality. When we need validation of gay love, we read love poems by Sadi, Hafiz, Rumi, and other Persian poets. They have written hundreds of love poems on same sex desire.

The execution of the two gay teens in Iran made us feel as angry as when we learned about Matthew Shepard's murder. The gay community needs to work harder to end hatred everywhere on the planet. As a community, we should not stop our struggle for equal rights. The same thing that is happening in Iran can take place right here in the United States if we let down our guard. All fundamentalists have one thing in common: wanting to eliminate gay and lesbian people.

Sincerely,

Payam Ghassemlou, Ph.D.

IranianGayDoctors

<http://www.iraniangaydoctors.com/>

Many gay (gay here refers to both male and female homosexuals) Iranians in Southern California are enjoying a level of self expression that they can never do in Iran. The hostile climate in Iran makes it very scary for gay people to be out and live a free life. The situation of gay people in Iran can be compared to a dysfunctional family with overt violence. Like a dysfunctional family with a great deal of violence, Iran's overt homophobia is easy to recognize, and a visible enemy is easier to recognize than an invisible one. The homophobia in the U.S. is covert and harder to recognize. It can be compared to a dysfunctional family with great deal of neglect. Unlike overt physical abuse, neglect is more difficult to recognize. Generally, neglect is about damage through omission and failure to provide optimal conditions for the development of the children by their care givers. The U.S. government, like a neglectful parent, humiliates its gay citizens by denying them certain equal rights. This covert humiliation impacts how a gay person feels about himself or herself. Sometimes private pain of our gay people can reveal its public meaning. For example, self-destructive behaviors such as suicide, drug addiction, unprotected anonymous sex, and domestic violence can be partly a result of the neglectful homophobic policies of the Bush administration. Any forms of homophobia (overt or covert) impact how a person treats himself or herself. A caring and responsible government should not neglect the needs of its gay community.

Psychotherapy with Gay Iranians

A therapist who is non Iranian and providing psychotherapy for this population needs to be aware of his or her negative assumptions about this population. Many therapists' understanding about Iranians or Muslims in general can be negatively impacted by watching main stream corporate owned media such as FOX news or news provided by Clear Channel Communications. These news agencies often portray negative images about people from the Middle East. Therapists need to be aware that Al-Qaida's violent actions have nothing to do with peace-loving Muslim people from the Middle East.

In my clinical practice, I have encountered different groups of gay Iranians in relation to their willingness to be out. All of them have one experience in common, and that is they grew up in heterosexist and homophobic families which denied their gay essence. Growing up they were all given an imposed identity of heterosexuality which was in conflict with their natural gay essence. In addition, many of them suffered a great deal as a result of coming across "different" during their adolescence. Most of the gay Iranians that I worked with grew up in Iranian families where they could not have an identity outside their family units. They were taught the family is everything, and one should sacrifice his or her personal needs in order to remain part of this system. How the family looks to outsiders is more important. What people (mardom) are saying is more of a concern for many Iranian parents than how their child might benefit from coming out. Individuals in such Iranian family systems exist in order to maintain heterosexual values and should never question the system. Coming out to Iranian families is viewed as bringing shame on the family. Iranian parents feel betrayed by their children coming out because they think their children have a choice to be gay or not. Certainly being gay is not a choice since one is born that way and not understanding this fact can make parents feel hurt and betrayed.

In order for a gay individual to come out to his family, he needs to be able to separate and

individuate from his traditional and patriarchal family unit. Without being able to create an identity outside one's family unit external coming out can be very difficult. Being gay is about having a perspective on oneself and being able to understand one's gayness. Closeted individuals who are part of enmeshed family systems will not be able to access their authentic gay essence. It is important to get help with coming out. As Hafiz stated, "Do not take a step on the path of love without a guide. I have tried it one hundred times and failed." Psychotherapists can play an important role in helping gay Iranians to come out.

Many gay Iranians have stated the following reason to choose a closeted life:

- 1) No one will marry my sister if people find out she has a gay brother.
- 2) My coming out will worsen my father's heart condition which can lead to his death.
- 3) I cannot handle witnessing my mother's suffering as a result of my coming out.
- 4) I plan to return to Iran, and I could face persecution.
- 5) I will lose my family inheritance.
- 6) Nobody needs to know what I do in my bedroom.
- 7) My family will kill me.
- 8) I am a known physician/lawyer in the community, and I will lose business.
- 9) I can get fired from my job.
- 10) If I come out, I will lose custody of my children.

Psychotherapists need to be non judgmental about these reasons and not pressure their clients to make choices around coming out. The decision to come out ultimately is up to the client.

Life After the Closet

Gay Iranians who have done the emotional labor of tearing down the closet door and coming out often report feeling more liberated. Life after the closet gives them more choices, and they are no longer bound by the limitations of a closeted life. The following few paragraphs are part of an article I wrote on this topic:

"Life after the closet is more exciting now because of all the choices that are available to me. When I was in the closet, I was so blinded by my internalized homophobia and my need for family approval that I did not have any understanding of my purpose in life. My family, like most Iranian families, centered on worrying about people's judgment. I learned from my family that my purpose of life was to earn people's respect by becoming educated and successful. Provoking envy in people meant I was on the right track. I feel a sense of grief for spending many years living in the prison of my Iranian family values, which denied my gay essence. I have come along way since then, and, now, I stop and ponder what is the true meaning of my gay life.

When I speak of my gayness or gay life, I am not solely referring to my sexuality. My gay essence has many dimensions, and sexuality is only one of them. I don't define people by their extroverted sexual behaviors. For example, I don't consider a celibate gay man no longer gay because he has stopped having sex. Being gay is an evolving process which has to do more with self-realization, and sex can be part of this self-realization. Coming out which is essential part of self-

realization starts with a response to a call from within which is unique to gay individuals. For me, this calling initially manifested as certain feelings of longing that I would experience in the presence of handsome men. The calling reminds me of one of Jalal-ud-Din Rumi's (1207-1273 A.D.) poems which translated by Coleman Barks,

“You have been a prisoner of a little pond.
I am the ocean with a turbulent flood.
Come merge with me . . .”

In this poem being prisoner of a little pond can be metaphor of being stuck in the closet, and there is an intense calling to dive into the ocean. The ocean is a metaphor for the unconscious in which homoerotic feelings reside and need to be conscious. Understanding these homoerotic feelings as longing for a union with the Beloved has helped me to honor them as part of my journey of self-realization. By diving into the ocean of my unconscious, I have been struggling to redeem the pearl of my gay essence.

Psychological injuries that were inflicted on me as result of growing up gay in a homophobic world needed to be addressed after my coming out. I was made to feel ashamed by a heterosexual society for being different. As a kid, each time I heard the word fag it left a scar on my soul. This homophobic mistreatment led me to develop feelings of inferiority. The seed of internalized homophobia was planted inside me each time I was being picked on for being different. My life after the closet included coming out inside and becoming aware of my hurt and rage around this homophobic mistreatment. Coming out inside is about approaching my unconscious and understanding my complexes. Approaching my unconscious has been the most important part of the journey of my self-realization, and having guides in this process is essential. As Rumi portrays this, ‘O seeker without the shadow of a pir (teacher) the clamor of the beast will torment you.’ I have turned to individuals, including psychotherapists and psychoanalysts, for guidance who have been involved on their own path of self-realization. They have provided me with positive self affirming experiences and psychological tools. For example, dream work, sandplay, active imagination, writing personal essays, and having empathy for my repressed feelings from childhood by personifying them as my gay inner children have been important psychological tools that I have been given.”

Sufism From a Gay Perspective

For therapists who attempt to help gay Iranians having knowledge about Sufism and Sufi stories can make the process more helpful. Sufism is a mystical path that was brought to the West in the early 20th century by a Sufi master named Inayat Khan. To Sufis, spiritual life is a love affair you have with Allah or the Beloved. Sufism is not an organized religion. In fact, Sufis say why listen to second-hand reports when you can hear the Beloved speak himself? Through dance, meditation, prayer, and experiencing the physical form of the Beloved through his beautiful creations, Sufis seek ecstatic union with God (Beloved). Polishing the heart is a Sufi term for inner work. From a Sufi perspective we are here to polish our hearts through psychological inner work. We polish our hearts so that the Beloved’s reflection can be seen. As it stated in the Koran, “God said I was a hidden

treasure. I wanted to be known so I created the universe in order to be known.” The following story by Rumi reveals more about this:

“A small group of Chinese and Greek artists quarreled before a certain Sultan Shoeb, as to which group has superior artistic abilities. The Chinese insisted that their skills were greater, and the Greeks claimed that they had mastered art. To settle the dispute, the Sultan decided to put them both to the test. On the top of a hill near the palace, stood two empty houses. The Sultan assigned each group a house to paint. The Chinese asked the Sultan for a hundred colors, while the Greeks, said they did not need any colors. After the Chinese finished their work, they beat drums and danced in celebration. They invited the Sultan to judge their house. He was extremely impressed, as they had painted their house elaborately with every color imaginable. The Greeks used no colors at all. They cleaned the walls of their house till they were clear and bright. The Sultan was amazed to see the colors of the Chinese house reflected on the walls of the Greek house covering a wide variety of shades and hues.”

The Greek artists are good examples of people with polished hearts. As Rumi tried to convey, our polished hearts, like mirrors, can reflect the Beloved’s beauty. Coming out clears the homophobic dust from our hearts which is an example of polishing the heart.

During my research and talking to others about Sufism, I realized there were dervishes from around the 9th century named qalandar. They were not bounded by tradition or any Sufi sect and that reflected in the way they loved and danced. Many of them experienced divine ecstasy in relation to other men. These men shaved their heads, wore colorful clothes, and spent many years dancing their way from city to city (similar to circuit parties without the crystal meth). Qalandars were border less people with a queer spirit. Rumi described them in one of his poems as such:

“ There are wild wandering Sufis called qalandars,
who are constantly tickled with life.
It’s a scandalous how they love and laugh
at any small event.
People gossip about them,
and that makes them deft
in their cunning, but really
a great God-wrestling goes on
inside these wanderers, a flood of sunlight
that’s drunk with the whole thing . . .”

For some Sufis, God reveals himself through his beautiful creations, and for others through an inner union. As Rumi puts it, “The minute I heard my first love story I started looking for you,

not knowing how blind that was. Lovers don't finally meet somewhere. They are in each other all along."

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If you have any comments, please e-mail Dr. Payam at DrPayam1@aol.com.