

Living feminism in a queer family

by

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In this paper, Amy Ralfs describes how her experiences of growing up and living in a queer family have contributed to the development of a particular feminism. This feminism has certain themes which are explained here: 'Your body is your own', 'The personal is political', 'Girls can do anything' & 'Difference can be different'. This paper was originally delivered as a keynote at the 5th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference, in Liverpool in July 2003.

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Years ago I wrote my story about growing up as the daughter of a lesbian mother, and how this had impacted my experiences of education (Ralfs 1995). As a thirteen-year-old who'd just started high school, this was a pretty scary thing to do, but the responses I received from those who read my writing were really significant in helping me to embrace my own story. It has taken me time to get to a place of celebration of my family. The sharing of stories – giving and receiving – has been a big part of this for me.

Growing up in a queer family has meant many things. It has meant being parented by two of the strongest, most intelligent, opinionated and loving women I know. It has meant being seen as an only child, but having known many as brothers and sisters and being surrounded by more children than most of my sibling-ed friends. It has meant challenges and joys, worries and laughter, conflicts and incredible loving connectedness. But above all else, I think my queer family has offered me the chance to work out just who Amy Ralfs is. Part of this journey has been about being a young woman and working out what it means to be a woman in our world.

I didn't grow up believing I was a feminist. I had experienced the world in a way that made me unquestioningly believe in my ability to be every bit as good as anyone else in the world. It has been a growing realisation for me that this isn't a simple fact, but something that women across the

world have and continue to struggle for. This has led me to look closer at what I do believe and where my beliefs come from. What is my version of feminism?

Thinking about this, I came up with some of the basic principles of my feminism and found – not coincidentally – that these beliefs have a solid basis in my experiences of family. I would like to share with you these beliefs, and the stories behind them.

Your body is your own

When I was eighteen months old, I was diagnosed with severe juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and at age two had to undergo a series of very invasive tests. My Mum told me that I could say when I wanted these tests to stop. I started the test series three times before I completed them. This infuriated all the doctors treating me – that my mother could allow a two-year-old child to dictate what medical treatment she received. How could she possibly know what was best for her? But Mum felt that one of the greatest things she could do for me was to give me the knowledge that I had power over my body. She taught me that your body is your own. This never seemed like a great epiphany to me – who else would my body belong to? – but as I have gotten older, I have learned that this is an important feminist belief and that in teaching

me this, my Mum was acting on her own feminist principles. It was a frightening realisation for me that many women – in my own world as well as anywhere else – do not experience the world as having much respect for this principle. In the past few years, my best friend has been raped and I have learnt that another close friend has suffered years of serious abuse. The anger I have felt at discovering these violations – of people close to me – has been heightened by the contrast with my own experiences of having such control over my body. I have scarcely felt such anger as I did on learning that these beautiful, vibrant and strong young women that I love have not only been violated, but have also been left with anything other than a complete conviction that this was unspeakably wrong. I am learning what a gift my mother gave me in allowing me to stop those doctors. And I know that this will be something I will teach my children: sons and daughters.

The personal is political

My first outing as a three-week-old child was to a peace march (where I got sunburnt, much to my grandmother's displeasure), so you can see that political action is something that's been in my life for some time. Family has been a place that I have been actively engaged – not always to my liking – in the politics of our lives, in both word and in action. From dinner table conversations about the environment – which often perplexed friends over for tea (do your family always talk about *issues* at dinner?) – to international women's day marches and anti-nuclear protests, my family has provided me with an awareness of the way our lives are shaped by our political framework. There has always been active involvement of the young people within our community about these things. Although it must be said that we haven't always been entirely grateful for this inclusion (why *can't* I wear Nikes? Why does *everything* have to be SO political?), I've grown up noticing how not only does the world shape us, but we also shape our world. I believe not only in my – and others – ability to change that world, but in fact our responsibility to do so. We have a magnet on our fridge, which is my daily reminder of how personally we need to take our politics. It is a Mahatma Ghandi quote that says 'Be the change you wish to see in the world'.

Girls can do anything

As a small child, I had a wooden plaque in my bedroom, made for me by a friend. It said 'girls can do anything'. This is a statement that pretty accurately reflects

my reality. I have experienced women who can, do and excel at everything from music to politics, witchcraft to law. I have been raised by a collective of strong determined and committed women who have made a big impact on the world. At my eighteenth birthday celebration, my uncle said that it takes a village to raise a child. The thing about villages is that they have specialists – musicians, healers, teachers – different people who offer different things to the children. This is a fundamentally different conception of raising children to the nuclear family model and it has given me the utter conviction that girls truly can – and indeed should – be only limited by the scope of their imagination. So it has always come as a shock for me to come up against opinions that say I can't do something because I am a girl. Similarly, the more I operate as an adult in the world, the more I notice that a lot of women in the world didn't grow up with that kind of plaque in their bedrooms and don't believe that they are capable of doing anything and everything – from teaching maths to being Prime Minister. I do believe that girls can do anything.

Alongside this however, girls being able to do anything is not at the expense of having men in our lives. There have been some very significant men in my life – who have been key people in my village, who have supported and believed the concept that girls can do anything. One of the gifts of being around this idea is that I get to know some lovely men. I grew up with a young man who was very much like a brother to me. Tom is now twenty-four and one of the most beautiful young men I know.

Names are powerful things

When I spoke in Adelaide at the first International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference (Ralfs 1999), I talked about the difficulties I had experienced with the labels that many people seemed to need to be able to give my family. In the last couple of years though, I have discovered there is an incredible power in finding the names that work for me. And, not only that, but if you can give a name to something people seem to be less likely to feel the need to find a label. I have learnt this most strongly through my relationship with two very amazing young women, Roxanne and Emma – who really are every bit the sisters that I name them to be, even though not a drop of the same blood runs through our veins. I have taken delight in having sisters, and doing all those stereotypical things that sisters do – laughing, helping each other out, arguing, shopping and getting dressed up together, to name but a few. But one of the greatest things for me has actually been people's reactions to us calling each other sisters. I love saying, 'this is my sister' or 'I'm going to my sister's house'. It's

amazing how much status this gives my relationships with these young women. I have always wanted to have a sister, but never thought that I would, so it has been amazing for me to realise that –like with so many of my other family members – it isn't the blood that makes us sisters, but the relationship. This is still something I'm working on, because finding the right names can be hard. Suzy, my mother's partner of fourteen years, and I are still trying to find the name that acknowledges our autonomous relationship, but doesn't invisibilise her relationship with my mother. I think that these have been significant lessons for me in learning that having the power to choose names that work for relationships in our own world is something that stands against the desire for the mainstream to dictate what we should and shouldn't have in our lives and our families. Chosen names are a lot nicer than imposed labels.

Difference can be different

Last year, I had an experience of difference which has led to much reflection. It was a seemingly ordinary event – I went to a big suburban shopping mall with two friends, Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad and Elsa Almaas. And yet, because Esben Esther is bi-gendered (see Benestad 2001) and on this day was dressed as an elegant woman, it was amazing – and hilarious – to see all these middle-class white shoppers trying to deal with this beautiful statuesque woman, who was quite obviously something completely out of the realm of their experience. This got me thinking about difference and about how there are different kinds of difference. Parts of Esben Esther's difference are immediately visible. With me however, outwardly I don't appear particularly unusual. It's a bit further in, after people have made a decision to get to know me, they discover that things are more complex than they might have seemed. This is confronting in another way to Esben Esther's difference. It is about challenging assumptions. I spent many years maintaining an outward semblance of 'normality'. I kept my family a secret because it was something I could hide. It wasn't until I believed that this concept of normality actually didn't exist and that everyone is an individual and that that's about as normal as it gets that I could be more open about my version of difference. It is exciting to learn that difference is everywhere. That there are an infinite number of versions of family, that no-one's values and beliefs are identical. That my version of feminism is my own. Growing up in a feminist household hasn't been about living a carbon copy of my Mum or Suzy's feminism – rather it has been about being able to be walk my own way within a family that welcomes difference. I have my own beliefs, but what I have been given is a taste of the multiplicity of things

in the world – the amazing diversity that exists. This is something I am very glad of, because it has taught me the power in listening for the marginalised voices in society.

Before I close, I would like to acknowledge how much it has meant for me to have the opportunity to find supportive witnesses to the gift of my queer family. It's not to say that there haven't been things that I have struggled with and times I've wished I had a 'normal' family – but because my family *is* queer, there are many people who are very quick to pick up on any difficulties, very willing to say what I call family is wrong, immoral or damaging for a child. So I would like to thank particularly the Dulwich Centre, for being a part of helping me to receive support to celebrate the wonderful, special and enlightening aspects of my family. So while I don't wish to pretend that being a queer family means that we are free of our share of challenges, I do believe that the practices of making and doing family give us the strength to find respectful ways through our difficulties.

I have no doubt that we are shaped by our family. While we differ in how we respond and judge our experiences of family relationships, family is a strong source of values and beliefs about the world. Being a part of a big, loving, challenging and eye-opening, anti-nuclear family has been many things for me. In so many ways it feels a blessing, not the least because it has helped me a long way on my journey of working out who I am and what I want my story to be. I am Amy Joan Ralfs. I am a young (for now!), middle-class, white Australian woman. I am, I have learnt, a feminist, in a world where feminism is not a reality – or even a possibility – for many women. And I want my story to be one of embracing and celebrating all the parts of my family and of sharing stories of different ways of being. Because, these are the stories that make me glow.

Note

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Summer School of Narrative Practice !!

17th-20th NOVEMBER 2004
Adelaide, South Australia

Due to the unexpected enthusiasm shown for our inaugural summer school, we are now busily planning a follow-up event for 2004!

Over 4 days and evenings (Wednesday-Saturday) we are planning a smorgasbord of skills-based narrative therapy practice sessions.

A range of international presenters will join Dulwich Centre Faculty members in creating a context for the exploration and practice of therapeutic skills.

We aim to begin each day with a practice-based keynote before participants select whole day practice seminars on a range of different themes. Throughout the day there will also be opportunities for practitioners to consult faculty members for individual and group supervision sessions; to meet with publishers and writers over ways of representing their work in a written form; and to watch and reflect with others on videotapes of therapy sessions by a range of respected narrative therapists. We hope also to set up a room in which participants can video themselves in role plays and conversations in order to more specifically reflect on their therapeutic styles and practices. In the evenings, apart from gathering over South Australian wines and revelling in the summer atmosphere, we will also be arranging evening talks on broader themes which are nonetheless related to narrative practice, practice, practice!

We are really looking forward to this summer school and a chance to have Dulwich Centre filled with practitioners dedicated to talking about the nitty-gritty of therapeutic practice and ways of further developing skills.

Prior to and in conjunction with the summer school, Michael White will be holding a special 5-day intensive training event. This one-week training event will take place in Adelaide and will involve Michael sharing a range of innovative approaches, stretching participants' understandings of narrative practice. Featuring new examples of narrative therapy and community practice, this workshop will be suitable both for those who have not attended training with Michael in the past, and also those who have been to previous intensive trainings. In order to accommodate the interest that we believe will be shown in this event, a larger number of places will be made available than is usually the case for intensive workshops.

We recommend that participants attend both these events to make the most of their stay in Adelaide.

More information about the summer school and about the special training event with Michael White will soon be placed on our website:

www.dulwichcentre.com.au