

Letter to Uncle Jay

by Sherree Clark

Dans une lettre à son oncle, l'auteure explique le processus de découverte d'une spiritualité qui accepte sa sexualité.

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Dear Uncle Jay:

I've wanted to write you this letter for a while. You asked me when I came to say good-bye to Gramma as she lay dying, "Who do you pray to?" Let me explain.

When I was eight Mom took me to a few churches so that I could decide on which church I liked. I chose one that had beautiful singing and wonderful stories. At that age, that was all that I understood. I was "adopted" by a wonderful "grandmother"-type woman who made stuffed animals for charitable foundations and the church. I thought I was the luckiest kid because I had a friend who gave me the best stuffed animals I had ever seen. Was this God?

One day I asked Mom about her beliefs. She told me she was an atheist. She had let me choose a church because she had not wanted to influence my spiritual needs. I began to study the teachings of my church more closely. I became disillusioned by it's references to the "virgin" mother, the patriarchal hierarchy, and by the fact, that as an adolescent becoming an independent and sexual woman, Christianity offered me little information about who I was to become as a person. For me, there were no strong and assertive woman that I could identify with. The women

I read about were never depicted as strong in their sexuality or confident of their bodies. I was taught women were evil, bled because they were bad, and were to devote themselves solely to God, their husbands, and their children. Mom was divorced, single, strong, independent, and never "virgin-like." She was forthright about the pleasures of sex and the importance of asking for what you wanted sexually.

Mom believed woman were equal to men, women should never repress sexual strength with a partner, and that they should show pride in their desires. She taught me to choose partners who respected me for my strengths and beliefs. My mother's attitudes were not represented in the church or the stories I was taught, nor did I see that similar ideas about sexuality would be welcomed. I could not support a religion that did not include my mother and her life. And I found myself desiring women lovers and so became an outcast.

Mom went on to become a devout Christian. She struggled with her spirituality and her beliefs as she lay dying and alone in her pain. I know she was terrified, that for many years she fought to overcome these fears and seek a better understanding of life. Mom was angry about losing her breasts and her life to cancer. She wanted to live and would fight anyone that got in her way. It is only in the last few years of my own crippling arthritis do I begin to understand her rage, her drive to live life fully and completely, even in the face of acute pain. As I grow older, nearer to her young age of dying, I too want to find something that makes me believe that my struggles, as well as my family's struggles have not all been for nothing.

In Mom and gramma's dying I have found a greater respect for life and the living.

I do not believe in one God or the Bible's God. The God of the Old Testament was cruel, vindictive, unforgiving, a white man who said that woman were only strong in providing for their families. Fearing god is not my idea of how to love myself or others. I love the First Nations stories, stories of Jesus and of Buddha, because to me they are teachings that include self-love, self-respect, and insight into human struggles. I also love the stories that tell me that the earth needs respect and that we are only "borrowing her" from our grandchildren. These stories provide a foundation from which to build on one's strengths and sense of self. For these stories I will always be grateful.

I am a lesbian who is misunderstood and considered a "sinner"—not welcome in many churches. In many parts of the world, people are put in prison or put to death for loving the same sex. To judge someone because they love another; to not invite into a congregation people that are different, is not how I see the church or God. I cannot believe in a God that says only the chosen shall be invited to eat at the table of the Lord. How is it that the Bible can be so interpreted, as if some people have a special channel to the spiritual world, and know everything the great life force has to say? The stories of Jesus at least support the invitation to all "children" and support the variety of humans and the differences they show. Jesus taught that respect and love of one another, not power over another, was the way to love oneself. Jesus did not judge Mary Magdalene for her body or her needs, but welcomed her as an equal. Why was I not taught to idolize her or even Lilith? I celebrate my partner's female body and our lives together. I want that love to be

respected for what it has to teach and what it has to offer. It is not the only way, but it is one way to love that should not be denied.

Mom told me her stories and gave me the strength to tell mine. Gramma told me stories too. These stories give me the courage to go forward and learn new lessons. My spirituality and beliefs run deep. I do not name my God/dess, because there is no name for all the energies within us that collide or gently flow into one another on a daily basis. My God/dess is within me and the Earth, and gives me strength and conviction in my art and writing. I have no right to hurt or condemn others for who they are. As a human I have my opinions, my ideals, and goals. I make mistakes always and through my ignorance and anger have hurt others. From these failings I have learned about my own strengths and limitations. To me life is like a large piece of fabric that gets stitched together based on all experiences. This vibrant fabric has no pre-determined design or plan, but simply exists on the basis of positive energy and the love of one another.

You may say this is Christianity or

Buddhism or paganism. To me a name is not as important as the faith and self-conviction one has in leading their own life. In loving my lesbian partner and myself, I am more loving and happy with others. In dispelling my own and other hurtful myths about homosexuality, I have opened my doors a little wider to make room for others with stories and beliefs.

I have shared my "story" with you so that you will know that I love you. My fear in telling you of my life and my lover, was that I would lose you because of your Christian faith, and that you would judge me based on the myths about homosexuality and my need to love another woman. I was willing to lose you, but I was not willing to lie to you anymore.

Know that I love you, your Niece.

Sherree Clark is a writer, an artist, a therapist, and a disabled lesbian who has loved her partner deeply for almost five years. This piece is dedicated to her mother, a woman who was vibrant, sexual, funny, and brave. And to her mother's mother, a woman who struggled against the confines of being a good prairie wife and found freedom at last.



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SANDRA WOOLFREY

When I Think of You

When I think of you
I don't imagine us in acts of
love
Or doing things that lovers do

I see
wild grapes
deeply blue
sweetened
by
frost

The Heart of Love

You split my heart open.
Red rose petals flutter,
fall from acorn fullness,
reveal ripe red fruit.
Does the chestnut feel
such happiness when
spring rains split
carapace and the
stately tree first
nudges moist earth?

Night Poem

In this night of stars
and crickets and the gentle
hum of the universe
my body spills into yours
your pulse, my thigh
the unity so complete
I wonder whose dream
you are dreaming, mine
or yours and which of us
writes the poem, the poem that
silently spells I love you
or is the poem the tangle
of our bodies asleep on the bed.

Sandra Woolfrey is the Director of Wilfrid Laurier University Press and an artist. She has won the Dorothy Shoemaker Literary Award for Poetry (1990) and has been short-listed for the CBC Poetry Contest (1991 and 1992).