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The Journal of Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International, Inc. January 2006 Vol. 30 No. 1



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Who we are...

Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International, Inc. (Kinship) is a non-profit support organization which ministers to the spiritual, emotional, social, and physical well-being of Seventh-day Adventist lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and intersex individuals and their families and friends. Kinship facilitates and promotes the understanding and affirmation of LGBTI Adventists among themselves and within the Seventh-day Adventist community through education, advocacy, and reconciliation. Kinship is an organization which supports the advance of human rights for all people.

Founded in 1976, the organization was incorporated in 1981 and is recognized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the US. Kinship has a board of up to 15 officers and 13 regional coordinators. The current list of members and friends includes several thousand people in 43 countries.

SDA Kinship believes the Bible does not condemn, or even mention, homosexuality as a sexual orientation. Ellen G. White does not parallel any of the Bible texts, which are often used to condemn homosexuals. Most of the anguish imposed upon God's children who grow up as LGBT has its roots in a misunderstanding of what the Bible says.

Support Kinship

Kinship operates solely on contributions from its members and friends. Help us reach out to more LGBT Adventists by making a tax-deductible donation to SDA Kinship International. Please send your check or money order to the address below. (You can also donate, using your Visa or Master Card, by contacting Karen Wetherell at treasurer@sdakinship.org. She will phone you so that you can give your credit card information in a safe manner.)

SDA Kinship, P.O. Box 49375, Sarasota, FL 34230-6375, or call toll-free in the U.S. 866-732-5677 or toll from outside the U.S. 01 (941) 371-7606, or visit SDA Kinship's Web Site at: www.sdakinship.org

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Begin

Romilda Wilder - Washington DC, USA

New Year's Resolutions can be depressing. I think I actually kept one clear into February once. Maybe. Anyway, I stopped making them. I can't break them if I don't make them. Every year at work we each do an Individual Development Plan. We write down both short-term and long-range plans and goals. The online classes I plan to take can be spread out over more than a year. Maybe I could do the same thing with some New Year's Resolutions – make them things that are a stretch, but realistic.

January. Begin.

We cannot deny the past. After all, it is the past which has woven us into who we are today. But we don't need to live in it. I'm going to try to live in the present as much as I can. When I find myself falling back into the past, I'll acknowledge that the past happened, but I'll remind myself that I've chosen to live in the present, to be present in the now.

February. Begin.

Everything these days seems to be on the computer. Cyber everything. But first class mail, aka snail mail, has its place also. It's something you can carry in your pocket or purse, it's something actually touched. This year I want to send more snail mail. I will send at least one snail mail letter or card per month.

March. Begin.

My niece is married, and they plan to have children once they're finished with grad school. My arthritis is getting worse – who knows how long I'll be able to knit. This year I'll knit at least one thing for a baby yet to be born.

April. Begin.

My dear partner of 22+ years, Lynn, has been begging me to finish knitting a pair of socks I started for her several years ago. They should be finished by the end of May when she has a birthday!

May. Begin.

For a long time I kept a journal. Hardly a day went by that I didn't write in it. This year I'll keep it on the

end table in a drawer, and will write in it at least once a month.

June. Begin.

There are two books I really, really want to read. I own them. I've started them. Before the end of summer I will finish reading both of these books.

July. Begin.

I'd like to lose some weight this year. About 15 or 20 pounds. Before the end of the year.

August. Begin.

I just remembered another book I want to read. Hmmm. Can I read three books this year? (This from the person who had to go to the library every other day as a kid because she read the limit in that amount of time!!!) Sure. I can do it! Yes. Absolutely.

September. Begin.

In 2004 I made Advent calendars for the Greats (Lynn's great nieces and nephews). They loved them. This year I didn't get them done. For 2006 I will have their Advent calendars ready before the end of October.

October. Begin.

Time to give up more unnecessary things. Too much stuff. Way too much. Before Thanksgiving I will have gotten rid of at least 5 boxes of things ~ things I have but don't need. YES!

November. Begin.

Every year I wish I'd begun making some special Christmas cards earlier so they can be sent out in time to arrive before Christmas. I will have these done before December 1.

December. Begin.

It is time to review my plan for 2006 and make plans for 2007. Much better to have short-term AND long-terms goals. This way I haven't set myself up for failure.

January. Begin!!!!

2005: A Spiritual Journey

By Andrew Strong: Moscow, Russia

Yura called me up on a Sunday night in October to warn me that Alyosha had been sleeping with a man who was HIV-positive.

Alyosha -- a 19-year-old whom

I had been seeing on and off for the past year -- had just spent the night two days earlier. The news grew more horrifying. Yura said three other friends had also had sex with this man. I asked Yura if he was sure. Yura explained how he had learned about the flings a week earlier and had been asking around. Three mutual acquaintances had confirmed that the man had contracted the virus. The man himself, though, had denied any such thing and had flashed a negative blood test -- which can be bought at nearly any Russian hospital or clinic for a few rubles.

Here's what I knew about HIV: tests, tests and more tests. In 1993, when I was 19 and lived in Illinois, I had taken an anonymous test after a wrong one-night stand. The next test came in 1995, when I applied for a year-long visa to study in Russia. Then I started getting tested every year. I worked in Russia. I was never particularly worried about the results. Russia, after all, remained rather isolated from the rest of the world, even years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. HIV rates stayed remarkably low throughout the 1990s, and the virus mainly affected drug users. International health specialists started warning about an HIV crisis in Russia two years ago, but the virus continues to affect only about 1 percent of the population. Those numbers flashed into my mind when Yura called. My fears multiplied a few days later when the United Nations released a new report about the HIV growth rate in Russia. The report detected a surge

in sexually transmitted infections: While sexual contact accounted for only 7 percent of new infections in 2001, the percentage skyrocketed to 35 percent in 2005. I realized that safety from HIV no longer meant living in Russia.

Moreover, I knew I deserved to be infected. Just a month earlier, in September, I had experienced mysterious chest pains and felt a lump in my left breast. Panicking, I prayed desperately for a second chance. God must have been surprised to hear from me, a son of missionaries who had not attended a church service, opened a Bible or even prayed over a meal in about a decade. After a week of prayer and worry, I underwent an examination at the Russian Foreign Ministry's hospital, one of the best in the country. The doctor also detected a lump in my breast. But a battery of tests failed to find anything, and I was sent home with a clean bill of health. I promptly forgot my anxiety and prayer and celebrated my new-found health by inviting over two young men. One of them was Alyosha.

My first thought after Yura called that Sunday night was to get tested. Knowledge is power, after all. I made a flurry of phone calls, but no hospital or clinic would give me an anonymous test. "We require a passport for HIV tests. It's the law," nurse after nurse told me. I called a friend in the United States, and he advised leaving Russia to get tested. "That will give you more options to plan your future should the results come back positive," he said. That meant living in uncertainty for several more months. I did not know what to pray to God, or whether I should even bother trying. I remembered that I had prayed one other time earlier in the year, when I had tried

to stop smoking in April. After gaining 20 pounds in three weeks, I gave up on God and a smoke-free lifestyle.

No more bargaining with God, I decided. Whether or not I tested positive, I knew one thing: I could no longer follow my current way of life. If I was positive, I needed to re-establish a relationship with God. If I was negative, I still needed to re-establish a relationship to realize my childhood dream -- walking with Jesus and a cuddly lion in heaven. My philosophy since the age of 14, however, had been to live each day as if it were my last. That way, I figured, I would be able to look back on a life well-spent with no regrets. Regrets were now piling up fast. I wondered what I had really accomplished that had any meaning. I questioned -- for the millionth time in 32 years -- whether it was a sin to be gay. I thought for the first time about having a family and raising my own children. I felt lost. I did not know what to do. I hoped an answer would be waiting for me in church.

It turned out that I did not have to wait until Sabbath. When I told my mother about my plans to go to church and expressed some reservations about my future, she enthusiastically shared a Bible verse: "I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for." (Jeremiah 29:11 Today's English Version). After I hung up the phone, I opened a Bible to Jeremiah and read on: "Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 'I

will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.' (29:12-14 NIV) The verses seemed to be written just for me. I could pray. I could put my fears about the future in God's hands, since He already had a plan for me. Furthermore, where was I if not in exile in Russia?

I read and reread the verses and then noticed an annotation next to the word "plans" in verse 11. I wondered whether I would learn more about God's plans if I followed the reference, which pointed to Psalms 40:5. I debated whether I would be taking God for granted by expecting to find

something meaningful in Psalms. Finally I decided to read the verse. It was nice, but Psalms 40:8 just below it caught my eye. "I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart," it said. My eyes widened and my breathing quickened. The verse answered The Question: Is it wrong to be gay? I know both sides of the argument, and many shades of gray in between. The verse, however, said to me that I did not need to worry about who was right in their interpretation of the Bible: I already knew right from wrong in my heart.

Feeling like an enormous weight had been lifted, I went to church on Sabbath, and I have returned every week since. I am amazed that the Sabbath School lessons and sermons are now

interesting and personal. I am keeping the Sabbath, from sundown to sundown, although it initially took me a while to figure out how to get everything done before the sun set at 3:30 p.m. God spoke to me three times over the year in an attempt to awaken me from my lethargy -- in April, September and then October. I only heard Him the third time, when He stopped whispering and picked up a bullhorn. I am glad He kept persisting, and I hope He will continue. I still have trouble remembering to pray before I eat.

As a footnote, Yura called exactly six weeks after my last contact with Alyosha to say he had found a clinic offering anonymous testing. The results came back negative.



Our Selves, Our Gift

By Marcos Apolonio Brazil/USA

Biological characteristics and life experience make us distinct from each other. We have unique perceptions and abilities. However, we live in a crowded society where we create patterns to classify people in an attempt to make life more practical, identifications faster, and perhaps, control easier. There are advantages in finding things made on a large scale, for a reasonable cost, in all sizes, so everybody can use them. Yet when ideas that dictate behavior are inflexible we can have our development limited or jeopardized. Uniqueness becomes deviant instead of treasured.

Television commercials encourage sameness in what we wear, eat, drive, where we are housed, and where we travel. Most school systems are structured to teach and evaluate in standardized ways. Variations in learning styles are often not taken into account. In many bureaucracies, systems are

more valued than people, goals more important than the personnel. Churches, the most conservative of systems, are often places where we have difficulty expressing our personal questions or developing particular abilities. This can be especially difficult when we crave a community in which to use our talents and our gifts and where we will not be pressured to "conform or leave". The many people who leave religious organizations or communities are those whose life stories are different from most of the congregation; stories that would require more understanding. Seventh Day Adventist communities are still



learning to include single parents, divorced people, homosexuals, and those dealing with addictions and social disadvantages. These are the people who have the most difficulty valuing themselves.

As we build our Kinship community I would like us to encourage each other to review our unique features and value our specialness. I want us to remember to take into consideration all the people who have lived in different times and places. I want us to remember that no one has never existed with our hair texture, tone of voice, fingerprints or iris of the eye. Each of us is a unique gift to ourselves and to our community. We are blessed in that. Without a good dose of self-love we cannot love others. Without that love, we are at risk of being exploited and manipulated. Without that love we may never believe we are able to live up to our capabilities and dreams. ▼

Update: Waiting on Baby's Arrival

Elena Davis-Stenhouse: Colorado, USA

December 22, 2005

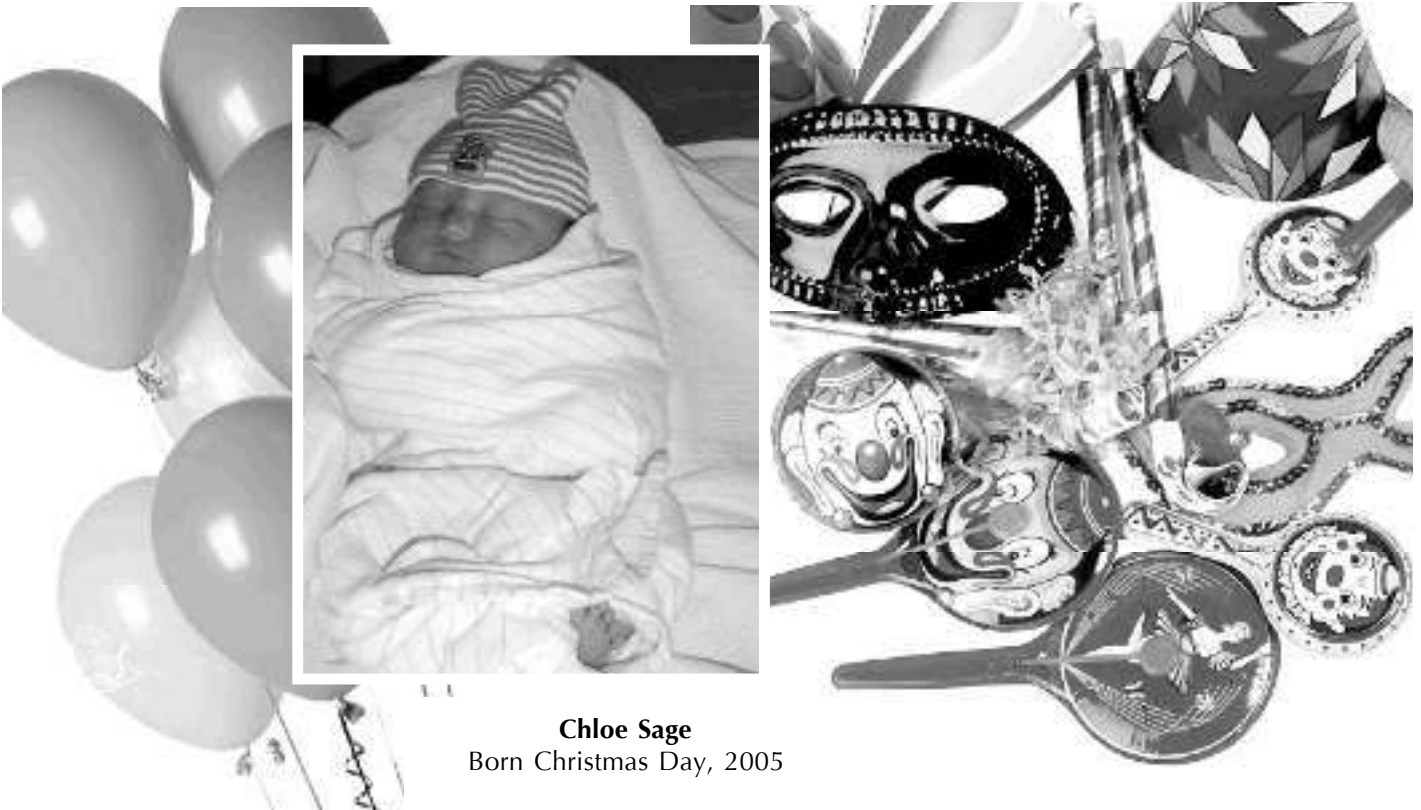
With only 11 days until our "due date", there are so many emotions racing through our hearts! Excitement, anxiety, worry, glee! We're now at weekly doctor's appointments: they measure my belly, check the heartbeat (there is no sweeter sound!), and check all my vitals. I have been blessed with an exceedingly easy pregnancy and still feel relatively well, with only minor symptoms (e.g., puffy ankles, intense itchiness, tiredness, and now a silly waddling gait). Baby and I are healthy and all signs point toward a smooth, easy birth.

As Erin and I prepare for the biggest miracle of all (the birth of our first baby), it's an incredibly bizarre feeling – so unreal -- and yet so tangible as we feel our baby wiggling about in my womb. We're thrilled to meet our new son or daughter – and yet nervous and



anxious about how in the world we will take care of this tiny, fragile newborn. It feels good to have the baby safe and protected in

my womb – it will be a loss to physically separate from the tiny baby who is fully sustained and nurtured in my body. I know the coming months will bring many trials and tribulations as we adapt to life with a newborn. We hear all the horror stories of becoming completely sleep deprived, stresses on our relationship, colicky babies who won't stop screaming, and the horror of late night fevers and illness. While it's scary to think on all this, I know that we are ready and that we will be able to survive and adapt to whatever happens. It was a two year process to conceive of this baby, nine more months to grow this baby, and now as we reach the pinnacle of all our hopes and dreams we're ready to begin this new lifetime of parenting adventures! We ask that our Kinship family keep us in your thoughts and prayers as our miracle unfolds! ▼



Chloe Sage
Born Christmas Day, 2005

Advertising Sexualities

Michele O'mara

Many gay men and women refer to their partners as "friends" or "roommates." Frequently I hear these beliefs explained with things like "Heterosexuals don't advertise their relationships, why should I?" The bottom line as I see it is that everyone is assumed to be heterosexual unless it is suggested (or in some cases "proven") otherwise. The need to "advertise" one's heterosexuality is redundant. It's unnecessary. The advertising is already in place everywhere, all of the time.

Heterosexuality is like Coca-cola. Both have been around so long and each is so visible and widely known that automatic assumptions are made about them. In many regions of the country if a beverage is dark and carbonated, it's a Coke, no matter what brand it is. The same is true for humanity. If someone is human, they are assumed to be heterosexual. I realize this is not true in all regions. Some areas refer to refreshing cola beverages as "pop" or "soda" or even "soda pop." And the same is true about sexuality. Though in more progressive environments and diverse communities not everyone is assumed to be heterosexual.

Anyone who does not identify as heterosexual must say so for anyone to know. Mind you, "saying so" is often done indirectly be it a gay flag on one's car, a stereotypical hair cut, dress, mannerism, hobbies, etc...and as many of you may have learned already, relying on these unspoken messages can be dangerous. The point is, people won't assume you are gay unless given a reason to do so. They just won't. Well, my partner might differ with this - she would say that I assume everyone is gay unless proven otherwise. So perhaps there are others like me out there, but I'd venture to guess we are a minority.

As a result, any gay man or woman who wants to be visible MUST work to be seen. And sometimes it's more work than you might imagine. Take for example the lesbian couple that has lived together for 6 years, celebrated all holidays together, taken vacations together and even purchased a house together. Add to this picture one of the lesbian's mother trying to find dates for her daughter's partner because she believes her daughter and her live-in, long-term partner and she are just friends. People have an amazing ability to see what they want to, rather than what is real.

While doing a workshop on coming out issues, I once had a woman stand up and share a true, personal story. She explained that after 9 years together, her partner left her. She was devastated and heart-broken and though unusual for her, she sought support from her family whom she had come out to many years

earlier. In talking with her brother about how upset she was, she explained how hurt she was feeling. She said he seemed very baffled, saying things like, "you've got other friends, it will be okay - you can get a new roommate," etc... When she realized he was responding as if they were friends and not partners she stopped, looked him square in the eyes and said, "You know I'm gay, don't you?" To which he gasped and replied, "Well my God, you didn't tell her that, did you? No wonder she left!"

In most cases, a heterosexual is unlikely to announce their sexual orientation unless they are being perceived as gay. In cases where the assumption is made that they are gay, I have observed a wide variety of responses, some more impressive than others. As rare as it might be for most heterosexuals to be assumed gay, when it does happen, you will most commonly see a correction of this misunderstanding. How the correction plays out varies in style, grace and convincingness.

The worst I've seen is the adamant or even a defensive, "I'm not gay" with a hint of "how dare you" to it. Next there is the more politically correct group, who knows what to say, or thinks they do. It may sound like this: "No man, I'm not gay, but I've got gay friends so it's cool. I don't have a problem with it." More impressive still, but not the best I've seen, is the enlightened heterosexual who may simply say "I'm flattered, but not gay."

Rarer yet are those who feel no need to correct the mis-assumption at all. Instead they are comfortable and secure in their ability to simply be themselves, regardless of the assumptions made. They will mention in a natural conversation their heterosexual relationship if it applies, or share stories that naturally fit into conversation that reveal their heterosexuality.

So let's try this on for size.

Upon being assumed heterosexual we could respond with something like: "Pleeeaaaase! I'm not heterosexual. Come on, give me a break!" Or we could drop some of the defensiveness and say: "I'm not heterosexual, but I don't have a problem with people who are. In fact, I've got a lot of heterosexual friends." Better yet, we could say, "I'm flattered, but not heterosexual." Or best of all, I like this: we correct the mis-assumption by living our truth. We simply talk about our lives, naturally, just as heterosexuals do. We live our truth by going about our life and our relationships without censorship.

Instead of saying to the coworker who asks about your weekend, "I went to a movie with a friend," you

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Advertising Sexualities...

can say "My partner and I went to a movie." They then have the opportunity to clarify, or to ignore. "How long have you been dating him?" They may ask. To which you can reply, "Sally and I have been together five years now." Suddenly the responsibility is on the co-worker, not you, for dealing with this information. They have made assumptions. You have subtly and respectfully corrected them. The ball is in their court. If they are uncomfortable, it is for them to work out. You are no longer bearing the responsibility of protecting them from your truth. And all you have done is lived your truth. You corrected the assumption that your partner is a "he" while keeping the focus on the question "how long have you been dating."

Of course there are some situations that require a more direct correction if you have been actively misleading family or friends to think you are heterosexual. It may require more finesse and sensitivity to communicate your sexual orientation in these situations than in the one above with the new coworker, John. And of course there are also situations where this kind of disclosure poses real threats to our safety, employment and life. Many people hide their shame behind these fears. A teacher faces much greater threat of job loss for example, than an employee of a company with protections for sexual orientation written into their policies. The key is to be honest, to live in truth, not deception.

The bottom line as I see it is, you can not simultaneously diminish the importance of your partner ("this is my friend" - a blatant minimization of the importance he has in your life) and validate or own

your relationship as something worthy and good. Or it would be better to say, "this is Sally" than to say this is my "good friend Sally" because the former does not devalue Sally, it simply leaves the possibilities of who s/he is to you open, without breaching your comfort. You do not owe anyone an explanation about who Sally is to you. She is simply Sally.

I have all of the compassion and understanding in the world for people who feel shame about their sexual orientation, or feel fearful about their safety or job security, or those who worry about being rejected by friends and family. I've been there. That is real, and unfortunately, for some that is what happens upon coming out. Fearing for our safety and our relationships is a symptom though. The real issue, the issue we must begin to face, is how we really feel about who we are. Facing our truth, dealing with ourselves honestly and finding ways to honor who we are, not diminish who we are is essential.

I believe that we teach people how to treat us. If you prioritize the feelings of everyone in your life over yourself then you can rest assured that everyone in your life is going to feel better than you. If we don't accept ourselves, whatever it is that makes us different, then we invite others to also reject us.

You are exactly who you were designed to be. And you are perfect, flaws and all. Live your truth - whatever that is.

Michele O'Mara was one of our guest speakers during the 2005 St. Louis Kampmeeting. She is a therapist in the Indianapolis, Indiana area whose specialty is strengthening GLBTI couples and families.



Kinship Calendar

January 12-14 - Workshop on Homosexuality and the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Ontario, California.

January 13 - Region 2 Vespers Meeting

January 14- Region 8 meeting in San Francisco at Peter's Home. During January there will also be a field trip to the DeYoung Museum.

January 28 - Region 2 Social

February 4 - Region 2 Vespers

February 11 - Region 1 meeting at Bob Bouchard's home in New York City - Region 8 Meeting in Oakland

February 25 - Region 2 Social

March 3 - Region 1 Meeting in Boston at Sean's home.

March 10 - Region 2 Vespers

March 11 - Region 8 Meeting in Oakland

March 17-19 - SDA Kinship International Board Meeting; Redlands, California

March 25 - Region 2 Social

April 1,2 - Kinship Africa Kampmeeting

April 14 - Region 2 Vespers

April 21-23 - Region 2 sponsored Mini Kampmeeting in Rehoboth Beach Delaware

April ? - Kinship Germany Weekend Meeting

May 12 - Region 2 Vespers
Tentative Kinship Europe Weekend Gathering

May 28 - Region 2 Social

June 30-July2 -SDA Kinship Women and Children First - Orlando, Florida

July 2-9 - SDA Kinship International Kampmeeting

July 14-16 - Kinship Europe Meeting Sweden

July 17-22 - Kinship Europe Holiday gathering

September 30 - October 2: Australian Kampmeeting

November 3-5: - Region 1 Mini Kampmeeting. Windsor, Vermont. ▼

HIV and the Holiday Mix

Thor Montgomery- Massachusetts, USA

Living with both HIV and the holidays has unique stressors. The winter festivities can be a break from the mundane life of pharmacies, doctors, and other health-related issues. However, HIV status often accentuates the depression LGBTI people feel when isolated from family supports. This is especially true with the many families who are ignorant about HIV issues. They forget that survival is our day-to-day basic issue. Many of us are afraid that family members will take away our choice about when and to whom we disclose our HIV status. Many of us have to deal with family reactions to the unfounded belief that HIV can be passed on by simple, casual contact.

Along with many who suffer difficult experiences in their lives, those of us with HIV feel the pressure to pretend to be happy and celebratory during the holidays, even though we might be depressed or even feel suicidal. After the gift-giving and shared time with families and friends, returning to normal life can appear almost unbearable. It is not helpful to hear those pat phrases "We should just be happy we're alive another year.", even from others with HIV/AIDS. In principle this is a good thought. To someone who's depressed, it's a bit like pouring alcohol on an open wound. Sometimes we feel like screaming back, "Yes, but you don't have to live with my particular issues."

I am a great believer in psycho-therapy. I know, from personal experience, that it's a helpful way to get these feelings off our mind and, in a way, transfer them to someone else's brain to digest. A good therapist or listener can reflect our feelings and experiences back to us in a way which is easier to process. I believe that we build both our strength and self-sufficiency when we go for counseling. While any therapist should know how to deal with depression issues, I strongly suggest a

referral from your infectious disease specialist. They often know of mental health professionals who specialize in HIV-related psychological issues. There are people for whom being in a support group of other HIV positive individuals is very important. Many areas have groups for long-time survivors as well as for people who are newly diagnosed. You can be referred to them by your local HIV/AIDS agencies or through your infectious disease physician. We deserve support to help us become our own best advocates. Many of us have found that being on antidepressant medication can help with long-term depression. Most government drug programs recognize that people with HIV often need psychotherapeutic drug therapy. Don't be afraid to see a psychiatrist if you're depressed continuously for over 6 weeks. Symptoms can include unintended weight gain or loss, sleeping too much or insomnia. As we live with HIV, it is critical to be proactive with our psychological health.

HIV/AIDS is a life threatening illness. But, when you think about it, life can be shortened by any number of things. When I first tested positive at 19 years old, people were constantly asking me, "Aren't you afraid you'll die soon?" My response has not changed; "No. Anyone could step off the curb tomorrow and get hit by a bus." That may over-simplify it for some, but it has certainly helped me get through my fifteen years of being HIV positive and my twelve years with AIDS. Psychotherapy has been a great help. I still see a therapist once every couple months to work out issues before they get too big to handle.

In my next article I am planning to share some spiritual ways to deal with winter and post holiday issues. I have found that the love and grace of our Savior can give us hope for our very existence. ▼



From Kinship's Older Adult Coordinator
Virginia Reynolds.

I would like to recommend the following URLs: <http://www.lavenderseniors.org/> and http://www.asaging.org/networks/LGAIN/outword_online/current/index.cfm

The Fig Tree in the Vineyard

Mike Lewis - Perthshire, Scotland

Jesus told them this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but found none. He said to the vine-dresser, 'For the last three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down. Why should it go on taking goodness from the soil?' But he replied, 'Leave it, sir, for this one year, while I dig round it and manure it. And if it bears next season, well and good; if not, you shall have it down.'" (Luke 13:6–9 Revised English Bible)

In the Bible figs and vines often seem to go together. Moses in Deuteronomy 8:7-8 says, "The Lord your God is bringing you to a good land ... vines, fig trees, and pomegranates, a land with olive oil and honey." The author of the 105th Psalm talks about the Egyptians oppression: "He blasted their vines and their fig trees..." In Biblical times the fig tree was a highly prized plant, and often a sign of prosperity. 1 Kings 4:25 says "Solomon ruled over all the kingdomsAll through his reign the people ... lived in peace ...under his own vine and his own fig tree." Figs were and are as a medicine. Isaiah 38 tells the story of King Hezekiah's boil, and how he was told to put a poultice of figs on it. The Bible also refers to the fig tree as a sign of stability: Micah 4:4 says "each man will sit under his own vine or his own fig tree, with none to cause alarm."

In this parable Jesus is telling his audience about a fig tree in the corner of a vineyard. Most people in Jesus' audience that day would have seen immediately that the story he was telling was relevant. Everyone had a vineyard, and many had a fig tree. But, what was a fig tree doing in a vineyard? Surely a vineyard is a place for growing grapes. What was the fig tree doing there where it wasn't supposed to be? Had it been planted there deliberately? Or was it growing there by accident? Maybe it was there as a result of a bird dropping a seed, and that seed germinating and growing; growing slowly over a number of years until it was a mature tree? Maybe the landowner planted it there deliberately, and had been waiting for years for it to bear fruit. That's just where he wanted it to grow for his own unexplained reasons. At the end of the day we do not know the reason why it was growing just there.

I wonder what the vines said about the fig tree. "What an ugly set of leaves. Why doesn't it have nice leaves like I do... What a nuisance that fig tree is: hiding the sun, taking all the moisture out of the soil: I wish the gardener would chop it down... What use is it? Doesn't produce any fruit. What a waste of space... All the birds that come and settle on its branches just

come and spoil my grapes." I imagine the vines thoroughly resented the fig tree that was growing there quietly in the corner of the vineyard.

One day the farmer comes looking for fruit, and doesn't find any. He too, wants to be rid of it. But the gardener says "No, wait a while longer". Fig trees will not bear fruit unless the ground is cultivated. They both know this, and it is the gardener who says he is willing, even wanting to spend time cultivating this special plant. He wants to dig around it and fertilize it, encourage it, prune it a bit, clear the weeds away from around the trunk, and let some air get to it. Perhaps the gardener also wants to cut back the vines that are encroaching on the space that the fig tree needs. It's going to be a painful business for all concerned. We can perhaps imagine what the reaction of some of the plants might have been: "Oy! Mind where you're putting that spade....That's my root you're cutting through...Be careful where you put that fork...That's so much more comfortable now you've taken that big boulder away...Can't you leave those pretty dandelions; after all, they're not doing any harm. 'Surely you're not going to put all that smelly stuff for me to stand in...Ouch, that water's cold.!"

I'm sure we want to assume a happy ending to the story. The fig tree benefits from the ordeal and produces a bumper crop of fruit the following year. And probably the vines that are growing nearby benefit also, and they too produce a good crop of grapes the next autumn. And of course both the gardener and the landowner are delighted, and everyone lives happily ever after. Whether Jesus was referring only to the condition of the nation of Israel at the time I don't know, but I think we can find an LGBTI application in this story.

Am I a vine or a fig tree?

Am I just an ordinary plant growing in God's garden, wanting to be left alone to produce a crop of grapes each autumn, or am I a special plant which God has placed deliberately in this particular corner of His garden? Whether we see ourselves as a vine or a fig tree, God has planted us where we are for His sublime purpose. God has made us as we are: human, and yet with a spark of the divine set alight within each of our souls.

Each one of us is different from the other, and, we are all loved extravagantly by God our Maker and Jesus our Saviour. Maybe we are happy with what we are, maybe we would prefer to be something else. God has made us as we are and put us where we are, we are special in His eyes, and He is going to come and dig around us. That action of the Deity will probably make us feel a bit uncomfortable. None of us like being disturbed. We

don't like the spade and the fork interfering with our roots, loosening us, discomforting us. We don't always like being fed. For most of us, we don't like cold water being poured on our feet. But these processes are necessary for us if we are to grow and flourish. These are the times to remember that we are all special in God's sight.

God tells us in His Word that we are the apple of His eye. He takes delight in us. He made us and we are His. What wonderful reassurance these words should be to us. God sees each one of us as so special that He gave Himself for each one of us. Gave up Heaven for 30 years. Came and lived with us because He wanted to be close to us. Everyone of us is special and precious to Him. So special that He even died for us. How much more special could we be?

In this parable of the fig tree in the vineyard I see a God who looks after the usual and the unusual, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the LGBTI people and the straight ones. I see a God who cares for and nurtures all the plants that grow in His garden.

Do you realize that you're special? Do you accept that you're special? Do you feel special? If you do there's an associated health warning: "Being special means getting special treatment" And special treatment doesn't always mean extra helpings of chocolate ice cream. Special treatment is when God comes and starts digging around your roots. Special treatment can be disturbing and sometimes very painful. Perhaps there should be a health warning: "Beware, when God calls you special it can cause severe pain". But just as physiotherapy can be painful, and dieting can be painful and the daily routine of work can be painful, all of these are necessary parts of our existence. And belonging to God is no different. Perhaps "Special" and "Pain" will always go together in this world.

Special and pain certainly went

connection

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Member of the Gay and Lesbian Press Association.

Letter to the Editor

December 16, 2005

Dear Catherine,

I am not usually one to read newsletters, but I must tell you that I truly look forward to receiving and reading the Kinship newsletter like never before, since you have taken over. I think the main reason for my enjoying it so much is being able to put faces with names, and I love reading about our people's lives instead of all the politics.

Kinship is like a family to me, and I love knowing what is going on with my family and experiencing the growth, the problems and the issues. Not being able to attend Kampmeeting for the past few years I love seeing all of the fresh blood that is coming in, and all genders being included.

Thank you for all the work that you do to keep the newsletter fresh.
(Now print this!)

Lovingly,
Jesse L. Martin
Los Angeles, California

hand in hand 2000 years ago. The most Special person ever to be joined with the human race underwent the most intense pain than anyone could ever face. We will never be called to face such

pain as Jesus faced. But it's because of what He endured that we can be called Special, whether we're grapes or figs.





NO ONE LIKE YOU CELEBRATING UNIQUENESS

27th Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship Kampmeeting, Orlando 2006

"In this next Kampmeeting I would like us to celebrate our personal value and self worth.

This experience is rare and we have a great opportunity to be really glad and thankful for who we are. We have talents and gifts combined in a way that no one else has, our individual interpretation of the world is singular and unique.

In fact, even the combination of our biological characteristics can not be found in anybody else. The recognition of our rich uniqueness guides us to the perception that our neighbor is as valuable as we are. This is why I want to hold hands with you,

my brothers and sisters, and celebrate that there is
no one like you or me."



Check the Kampmeeting site, San Pedro Center, at
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