

You're Gay? I'm Not Surprised. But Thanks For Telling Me!

by Roz Warren

When I was young, my mother told me that J. Edgar Hoover was a homosexual. I don't remember exactly when or why she shared this tidbit with me. This was, after all, fifty years ago. But Mom wasn't a homophobe, so I'm guessing that what intrigued her about Hoover's sexual orientation was how obsessed he was with policing others, given what a closet case he was himself.

Mom also told me that both Rock Hudson and Cary Grant were gay, which I also accepted without question.

It never occurred to me to wonder exactly how a 1960s Detroit housewife came to know these factoids. And now that I do wonder, I can't ask her. She died in 1979.

Mom might have learned about Hudson and Grant from gossip magazines, although I never saw her reading one. And her brother, an army Colonel who lived and worked in elite Washington circles during World War II, could have told her about Hoover.

Or it could just be that Mom had great gaydar.

Gaydar, according to Merriam-Webster, is "the ability to recognize homosexuals, through observation or intuition."

Why would a straight Jewish housewife possess great gaydar?

Well, why not?

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I have terrific gaydar myself, and I'm straight. When Ellen, and then Rosie, came out, I was surprised -- not that they were gay, but that their sexual orientation hadn't been obvious to everyone. It couldn't have been clearer to me.

When we were freshman at the University of Chicago, I was the first person to whom my friend Sam came out. It took him months to muster the courage. When he finally said, "I'm gay," he expected me to flip out.

I merely replied, "I'm not surprised. But thanks for telling me."

Sam was floored. This was 1972, just three years after Stonewall. He'd been afraid he might lose me as a friend. At the very least, he'd expected more drama.

"I wonder if it's going to be this easy coming out to everyone," Sam said. (It wasn't.)

When my son was growing up, I ran a small press that published humor by women. As a result, Tom, at eight, knew more lesbian cartoonists than most suburban kids.

Entering third grade, he was placed in the class of Ms. Summer, who was controversial because she believed that teaching kids to treat each other with respect and to communicate honestly was just as important as teaching them to ace standardized tests. I wasn't among the parents who disapproved. I was thrilled that Tom was in her class.

On the first day, as her students sat around the "sharing circle," Ms Summer said, "You may have heard your parents or friends talk about me or about this class. Would you like to share what you've heard so that we can discuss it?"

The kids went around the circle. "My older brother says you don't allow bullying."

"I've heard that you're an easy grader."

When they got to my son, Tom said, "My mom says you're a lesbian."

It was, as they say, a "teachable moment."

It's not as if my son "outed" his third grade teacher. Her being out was one of the things some some parents disapproved of. But her sexual orientation wasn't a topic she'd addressed in her classroom. Until my son reached third grade.

Denial being what it is, I often knew that the children of my friends were gay before their parents did. I kept this information to myself. When Valerie confided, "Billy is a junior in college and he's never had a girlfriend. Maybe he's just waiting for the right girl?" I didn't say, "Open your eyes, Val. There will never be a right girl for Billy."

I often wonder about my grandmother. After her husband died when she was in her forties, she never remarried. Instead, she moved in with a woman we all called "Elsie Z," an energetic, chain-smoking, deep-voiced single gal.

Who, really, was Elsie Z? And what exactly was the nature of her relationship with my grandmother? Could my Orthodox Jewish grandma possibly have been a closeted lesbian?

If Grandma was a secret dyke, had she always been that way? A married but deeply closeted Jewish housewife, raising four kids within a traditional Orthodox community? That would have been quite a trip.

Perhaps she was arrow straight all her life, and Elsie Z was just a good pal.

Maybe my grandmother “switched teams” late in life.

I'll never know. But this could explain my own gaydar. Maybe I'm not as straight as I think I am. Perhaps I too am a latent lesbian. It could be that one day I'm going to wake up and find that I'm gay myself.

If so, it won't take me long to figure it out. I'll know the minute I look in the mirror.

