Despite this lack of publicity the 'coming out' phenomenon has left a very real and lasting legacy amongst gay people (particularly young people) – that it is something that one must endure, much like graduation from school, before they can become a legitimate gay person and take their place in society.

COMING OUT...OR SIMPLY BEING OUT

The hysteria over 'coming out' has died down somewhat over the last couple of years – and I guess it will stay that way until someone particularly interesting comes under suspicion for being gay. Justin Timberlake maybe? No longer do we see the dramatic 'outing' of famous (or infamous) homosexuals as traitors to their kind for not owning up to their own sexuality. The llegacy amongst gay people (particularly young people) – that it is something that one must endure, much like graduation from school, before they can become a legitimate gay person and take their place in society. 'Coming out' has even taken it's place in the lexicon of popular terminology to define a sort of developmental life stage – but sadly it's often nothing more than a declaration of sexuality.

Why does my sexuality as a gay man engender so much more scrutiny than a straight person, and why I must declare my sexuality just as I might legitimately be required to give my date of birth and address?

Interestingly I can recall few, in fact no, 'outings' of heterosexuals. Are the heterosexuals simply not exotic enough or is their sexuality simply not a part of the general public's voyeuristic diet. Today that diet seems to be adequately catered for by the outing of paedophiles and the mountain of titillating trivia relating to the lives of a bewildering array of celebrities.

The truth is that heterosexuals do not have anything to 'come out' from – and neither do gay people – they simply are gay. I believe homosexuality is a natural form of sexuality – hard-wired into our biological make-up and as such we should be able to live our lives 'being out' rather than 'coming out'. But if we want to 'come out' that should be our choice as individuals.

The cultural ascendancy of 'coming out'. . .

What has elevated 'coming out' to cultural phenomenon in the Western World is multi-faceted. Coming out is first and foremost an artificial construct – a fad created by those that have a financial or political self-interest in its perpetuation as a mythical coming- of-age. Sadly it is an artificial construct that has evolved into something of a cultural reality for many.

The media can shoulder much of the blame for 'coming out's' cultural ascendancy. They took to it like flies around shit and made a sensation out of something that is not sensational – but is simply someone's sexual orientation. It does sell papers though!

Gay activists can also share some of the blame for peddling the view that individuals should be ashamed to keep their sexuality a private matter – 'queer pressure' as opposed to peer pressure if you like. They can be as extreme and aggressive in their radicalism as the most fearful feminist. Politicising sexuality like this may go some way to improving the rights of gay people – but it does so at the expense of individual rights. I wonder too if activists would have the same view if they were gay and were living in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia.

Then there are the powerful and privileged role models whose life has miraculously changed for the better since they declared their sexuality to the world. Wow – if life worked like that, we'd all be shouting our sexuality from the rooftops before you could say 'Priscilla Queen of the Desert'.

We're all different and we all have choices

I acknowledge however that for some gay people 'being out' or 'coming out' is not a black and white issue. Apart from our sexuality we are all different in so many ways – our religious and spiritual beliefs, our upbringing, our strength of character, our emotional maturity, our ability to accept criticism, our fight-or-flight responses, our physical strength and our ability to stand up to abuse – to mention but a few. All of these factors influence our ability, or lack of ability to 'be out' or 'come out'.

 Some gay people are compelled to 'come out', much like others are compelled to have children, parachute from planes, climb impossible mountains or wear lycra – and that's fine. Others live in fear of 'coming out'. Fear of losing friends, estranging families or contradicting a firmly held belief system – that's not fine – but it is legitimate.

 That's why 'coming out' must be a personal choice, not something that is forced upon an individual. That choice may not be easy – but you are the best judge of that and at least it is your choice.

 I prefer to live my life simply 'being out' without any cheering and fireworks and to stand up for my rights as an individual just as anyone would. I'm fortunate because doing this has not compromised my happiness, my career or my security. That's not to say my life or the lives of others wouldn't be compromised if they were to suddenly 'come out'. But it all comes back to choice – we make our choices and we live with the consequences – good or bad.

I will get up and openly declare my sexuality IF I want to – but I will not be forced or intimidated into doing so. I will also 'come out' IF I want to - because I choose to – because I have the strength to – and NOT because someone says I have to.

Steve

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