

**Pushing On:
Appalachian Resiliency in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People**

A research paper by Carrie Nobel Kline, M.A.
Rockefeller Scholar in Residence

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Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Gender in Appalachia
Marshall University
400 Hal Greer Boulevard
Huntington, West Virginia 25755

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The story of any . . . group, as viewed by its people, is worthy of being recorded, for it can serve as a historical record in those areas where written accounts have not been preserved (Montell 1970).

I figure that one of the most important things we can do is tell our stories, because that makes us human in the eyes of people, rather than some abstract nebulous clump called homosexuals. When people sit down and they hear somebody tell their story it puts a face and a name and experiences and feelings in blood and flesh and bone. And suddenly they are a person first and foremost (Anonymous #3).

The use of . . . census and . . . other . . . generalized data . . . does not make it possible to consider the people as a living force (Montell 1970).

In their stories, as in their cultural dramas, they witnessed themselves, and thus knew who they were, serving as subject and object all at once (Meyerhoff 1978).

I tell my story, not to change your mind, but just to let people know I'm a normal person. I still have values. I still have goals (Anonymous #6).

Homo narrans, humankind as storyteller, is a human constant (Meyerhoff 1978).

And in this area where storytelling is still important, my Appalachian ethnicity is rising to the surface, because I like nothing better than telling a good story (Anonymous #3).

Pitied or admired by sexual minorities in urban enclaves as well as by many heterosexually-identified Appalachians, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Appalachians are often considered to be a minority so small or so far beyond the realm of experience as to be a source of either revulsion or fascination.

I have devoted the past six months to conducting qualitative research with a population whose stories are rarely heard. In this pilot project I have gathered qualitative data with a dozen sexual minorities, eleven of whom were born and raised in West Virginia, a state that is not entirely, but largely rural. The one interviewee born, raised and living outside of the region provides a useful perspective. While her experiences with sexuality and upbringing did not differ dramatically from the Appalachian experience, she now has opportunities to prosper as a transgendered professional, chances not readily available to those living in the mountain South. While some of those I interviewed live in cities now, most came from rural areas.

It is more common to consider gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people as living in large cities such as Boston, New York, Chicago, the Bay Area or Los Angeles. Sexual minorities are still often thought of as an anomaly in the Southern mountains of Appalachia, as if only urban areas could spawn such a phenomenon. Those who were not repulsed by the subject of my research (and no one exhibited any sort of disapproval in my presence) seemed unduly excited by the topic, leading me to feel that they expected a great mystery to be unraveled through my findings. Did they perceive a

sexual mystique waiting to be revealed, or was it just a desire, like my own, to understand how people continue to thrive in the face of marginalization and rebuke?

My own interest in the subject came from several realms. First was a drive to hear the stories of people tenacious enough to be themselves with little support or encouragement. Beyond this was a conviction that as a region and as a society we will progress toward sustainable community economic development when everyone's voice and experience is included in the discussion. While some sexual minorities are active participants in Appalachian communities, their sexuality and gender identity are rarely addressed. How much more could they contribute if they did not have to devote themselves to hiding or largely ignoring a central component of their being? Our unwillingness as a society to affirm the value of sexual and gender diversity hampers creativity. If we are going to pull through these decades of the 21st Century, we will need to harness the full creative powers of all members of society.

In some senses gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Appalachians who are not closeted have become ambassadors for all sexual minorities. This can be effective, but it is unjust and inefficient to leave all of the educating and awakening to those most intimately involved. Although some of us are more personally engaged in issues surrounding alternative perspectives of gender and sexual identity, we are all drawn in. We are all constricted by a set of mores.

The Old Testament contains passages condemning left-handed people. Throughout Greek and Roman times as well as the Middle Ages fear of the evil left hand prevailed. Lasting evidence of this folklore is evidenced in expressions such as the left-

handed compliment. On average, throughout the world, one of every ten people is born left-handed (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988).

Does this sound like a familiar ratio? Social scientists commonly agree that conservatively one out of ten people born anywhere in the world has a propensity to be gay or lesbian. If we add bisexuals into the mix, and the rest of the population that cannot fit into one clear category of sexual and affectional expression, the numbers increase.

This analysis rests on a widely though not universally accepted premise that gender and sexual orientation are determined genetically or in early childhood. Quantitative and qualitative research substantiates this more and more. The reader may find a compilation of articles on this subject located on the GLBT Education website (<http://www.virtualcity.com/youthsuicide//links4a.htm#biology>). In the words of one individual quoted in the Washington Post,

Believe me, [being gay] is not a choice. . . . Would you choose it? . . . Yes. I think I'd like to be in a minority and have people beat me up or want to kill me, have my children taken away, have my job taken away from me, and my housing. Yeah. I'd like that (Mundy 2001:17).

The parallel between left-handedness and issues of gender and sexual identity is that in both cases society assigns meaning and morality to seemingly value-neutral personal characteristics. Political theorist Herbert Marcuse questioned the need for what he termed “surplus repression” (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988:14). The thrust of this phrase is that not all rules are necessary. Some may be products of another historical period, others a result of factual error. An excess of rules may be as disastrous for a society as an absence of any regulation. One adverse effect of surplus repression is the

stifling of creativity at a time when all creative forces are needed in order to come up with more successful means of operating as a society.

An example of a view that has outlived its relevance may be found in the case of the early Hebrews who may have emphasized heterosexual behavior because they were under pressure from competing faiths and cultures and saw a need to procreate for the continuance of their society.

Examples of factual errors may arise from misconceptions of gender identity. Social researchers list three components of gender identity relative to a given society. The first involves a person's biological sex as defined by one's combination of chromosomes. This includes clear cases of being male or female, as well as hermaphrodites (from Greek mythology in which the son of Hermes and Aphrodite became united in one body with the nymph Salmacis) and androgynes (andros meaning man and gyne woman). The second component of gender identity is one's innermost concept of self as male and/or female, as defined by the culture. The third component of gender identity revolves around sexual orientation, whereby a person is erotosexually attracted to people of the same sex, the other sex, neither sex, or both sexes.

Each individual adheres to or varies from existing definitions of male and female within each of the components of gender identity. Therefore the permutations in identity are vast. With all the different manifestations in thought, feeling and expression, it would be difficult to dispute transgendered author Riki Anne Wilchins' assessment that, "Everyone's gender is equally queer." (1997:24)

Take for example a woman interviewed who began her life to most appearances as a male. She has always been and continues to be attracted to women. Formally

married, any future sexual relations with women will be of a lesbian nature. She is clear about the distinction between sex, sexuality and gender as one's self-concept.

This whole transgenderism has nothing to do with my sexuality. It has nothing to do with sex. It's my gender. See, sex is between your legs and gender is between your ears. That's pretty well accepted anymore (Anonymous #6).

Transgenderism is to some a disturbing anomaly and to others an exciting departure from gender norms and roles. To the distress of many transgendered people, they are a group oft studied but rarely supported.

No one's studying the pain and abuse of trans lives, just the phenomenon of the condition . . . as if one could analyze any ghetto in complete isolation from the conditions and forces that create and maintain it (Wilchins 1997:24-5).

In the words of another transgendered author,

Nobody really knows why some children, boys and girls, discover in themselves the inexpungeable belief that, despite all the physical evidence, they are really of the opposite sex. It happens at a very early age. Often there are signs of it when the child is still a baby, and it is generally profoundly ingrained by the 4th or 5th year (Morris 1974:7).

As with all sexual orientation, transgenderism is something which people must either confront or deny, but cannot negate.

If it's in you, it's in you, and it's not going to go away. Some people learn to hold it in longer (Anonymous #6).

Another transgendered interviewee described his experience in the following way.

I would like to dress and live the female role. It's just something I want. And truthfully I must want it pretty bad, or I wouldn't go to all the extremes that I do to do it and to take all the chances that I do with the usual ridicule and stuff from being in a redneck area (Anonymous #8).

As discussed earlier, both sexuality and gender identity are often established and privately recognized at an early age.

About the age of five I put on my first dress. It was red velvet. It was my sister's. She was younger. Of course when I got it on I couldn't get it off. It was

stuck, because I'm a little bit bigger. I put lipstick on. I just didn't feel like I was in the right body. I felt that I should be a girl, but I wasn't attracted to guys (Anonymous #6).

People seek to attune the disparate components of their identity.

[The transgender] conundrum is a quest for unity . . . a dilemma of the spirit. . . . I was living a falsehood. . . . I was in masquerade, my female reality, which I had no words to define, clothed in a male pretense (Morris 1974:9-11).

Some of those I interviewed actively sought to harmonize the discordant elements of their being.

I wanted to become what I always felt I was. So I started taking hormones when I was forty-two, and then surgery was just eleven months ago. I don't think [my male self] ever really did exist in a sense. He was just playing the role. He was a figment of everybody's imagination. And I finally got tired of that, and I had to become real. To become real, I had to be [Jennifer] (name changed) (Anonymous #6).

For many people, transgendered and otherwise, gender and its conglomerate of assigned roles serve as a confine into which they must fit or break out of. Riki Anne Wilchins articulates,

I have begun speaking of gender as a name for that system that punishes bodies for how they look, who they love, or how they feel (Wilchins 1997:16).

Novelist Lillian Smith describes divisions based on race relations as “the dance that cripples the human spirit.” The same could be said of gender roles. Today’s psychoanalytic formulations about gayness, and the notions that trickle down from them to the general populous, are rooted largely in discarded hypotheses from Social Darwinism (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988:55). Recalling the findings of anthropologist Margaret Mead may broaden our thinking beyond the confines of Darwin’s teachings. Mead writes,

While every culture has in some way institutionalized the roles of men and women, it has not necessarily been in terms of contrast between the prescribed

personalities of the two sexes, nor in terms of dominance and submission (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988:58).

Some societies do not view men and women as temperamentally different. In fact, there is little proof that the psychological differences commonly attributed to each sex are truly inherent. Thus the term “the other sex” is more appropriate than “the opposite sex,” since males and females are not very different innately and individuals of both sexes contain elements of both genders.

Rather than be bound by the restrictions of acting either masculine or feminine, one can choose an androgynous gender role, integrating masculinity and femininity. Studies of college students found that the more androgynous the person is, scoring high on both feminine and masculine traits, the higher one’s level of self-esteem tends to be. Carl Jung believed that all humans contain both a feminine aspect (*anima*) and a masculine aspect (*animus*), and that to be fully adjusted one must recognize and integrate both.

Rosey Grier, a 290-pound professional football player, once made it known that doing needlepoint helped him to relax. Upon hearing this example of gender upheaval, a reporter asked the underlying American question, “Aren’t you afraid people will think you’re a sissy?” (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988:43-5).

Although many sexual minorities are led to evaluate notions of sexuality and gender identity more carefully than heterosexually identified people, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people were also taught behavioral codes of gender norms at an early age. It is revealing to examine the range of thinking that the qualitative data disclosed. Often the same person expressed freedom from gender norms in one instance

and bondage to them at another point in the interview. A lesbian discussed her efforts to address “both sides” of her being.

Actually, even today, I am probably in a more male role, in the world of the men, because of the business. I've been working on the emotional side of interacting with women. I don't know, I think there's both sides of everybody. I was raised a tomboy and now that I'm older, I'm turning a lot femmer. It's nice. I can see both sides (Anonymous #7).

I was inspired by moments in the interviews when transgendered people admitted to having reached a point where they will do what needs to be done, whether it is a construction job or tree maintenance, regardless of whether the outward manifestations of their behavior appear masculine or feminine (Anonymous #6 & #8).

Transgendered people described conducting informal yet almost anthropological studies in order to adopt mannerisms appropriate for the gender to which they belong psychologically. In addition, those interviewed have analyzed the psycho-socio elements of that gender. One transgendered interviewee said, “I try to understand and relate to how women feel, how they are treated in this society (Anonymous #8).”

One man spoke of the process of reevaluating gender constructs in keeping with his sexual orientation.

I had to come up with a whole new definition of what it is to be a man and also a gay man. I think masculinity is a much more fragile construct than femininity in this society, which is why gay bashers tend to be male, not female (Anonymous #2).

When I asked a transgendered man how it feels to be in his female persona he described a freedom he experiences when dressed as a woman, as he grants himself permission to exhibit what he perceives as a woman's behavior.

I guess inside I'm still the same person I always was, but this way I give myself license to act feminine and do what I consider feminine things. I don't have to do this masculine thing. I think men in this society are expected pretty much to be self-sufficient and not ask for help.

One interviewee has tried to free himself from the confines of gender roles.

I learned from the gay community there's a kind of androgyny of skills. . . . That is, men and women who are self-reliant and confident in a wide range of skills, some of which are considered male and some of which are considered female. I learned from my lesbian friends that it's more important to be self-reliant than to be concerned with whether your learning is male or female.

Not everyone has become free of the bounds of gender conformity. The guise of feminine clothing gives this transgendered person a freedom he cannot otherwise allow himself.

From what I have been able to figure out, women are supposed to be able to depend more on each other and not have to go it alone. I can relax and let other people--. Since I'm basically a very private person, as you might have guessed by now and don't open up very well--. Actually this interview would have probably gone easier if I had been dressed as [my female persona], because she rattles on. Me not being her, Mr. X as you might want to call me, is kind of quiet, shy and backward. As a matter of fact, if you've noticed, I haven't looked you in the eye but about twice, right? OK. If I were dressed as [my female persona] I'd be sitting here moving, talking, looking you straight in the eye, just like a woman would, because it's something that I give myself liberty to do when I'm dressed like that. I feel freer to relate to people that way than I do in my repressed male personality side (Anonymous #8).

In 1935 Margaret Mead published *Sex and Temperament* describing her research in three New Guinea cultures and concluding that it is not biological sex so much as social conditioning that determines the development of gender identity. Likewise, gendered behavior is conditioned. Notions of normalcy run the gamut.

A transgendered author refers to "the grand and comforting truth that there is no norm." (Morris 1974:12) Or as an older black woman in the crowd said to me at a rally and vigil for a hate crime murder in July, 2000 of J.R. Warren, a black gay man in West Virginia, "Honey, I've been around a long time, and let me tell you, normal ain't that normal."

Another notion which has gained support since the first statistics appeared sixty years ago is that of a spectrum of sexuality. Both qualitative and quantitative research over the past fifty years has shown that most people are attracted to one another in diverse ways for a variety of reasons. The evidence seems to point to the fact that if not for the social stigma, many or most people would be bisexual.

Same gender loving and transgendered people are well-positioned to benefit the whole of society as examiners of gender roles. Heinz Heger refers to “the softening of the gender division that homosexuality invariably involves when it is allowed to express itself freely.” (Grahn 1990:294). Put succinctly by a poet at a 1986 conference on gay spirituality, “A gay person cannot live an unexamined life (Boyd 1987:79).” Episcopal priest Malcolm Boyd quotes Edward Carpenter on the societal benefit provided by those with alternative gender leanings.

The real significance of the homosexual temperament is that “the nonwarlike man and the nondomestic woman . . . sought new outlets for their energies . . . different occupations (Boyd 1987:79).”

A gay man I interviewed discusses his own refusal to stereotype gender roles, suggesting instead that people assess and adopt those characteristics which are useful and positive.

I say you go through all of that which has been received about sex roles and choose some qualities that you would like to keep. Sometimes I talk about courage, not wanting to be a coward. And that's one of those qualities that I grew up on, all these tales of the Greek and Roman Warriors, and then the Confederate Warriors. Then I think about all my Amazons, all these wonderful women that I've known. And I see these very same qualities in them.

So those are some of the qualities that some people would consider masculine, that I admire, that I hope to be able to retain and to develop further, because I think that courage is something that you develop over a lifetime. You have to have it to be openly gay--. . . .

I admire compassion. Some people would regard that as a female quality. That's absurd. I know compassionate men. I think of it as just human traits (Anonymous #2).

Such poise and eloquence make me view many of those I interviewed as ambassadors for others with alternative sexuality and gender constructs. Although these “forerunners,” as one lesbian identifies herself (Anonymous #7), did not choose this role, most people with whom I spoke embraced it as necessary work which they took seriously. As one man expressed it,

My mother always said, be the best that you can be. It doesn’t matter who or what you are, but be the best you can. I’ve tried to apply that to living as a gay man, to be an example (Anonymous #5).

Another narrator described the experience humanizing transgendered people in the eyes of her associates.

When I was leaving my job, some people came up to me and said I had changed their impressions about transgendered people, because the only exposure that most people will have is talk shows, where the intent is to titillate, to create sort of a circus atmosphere (Anonymous #1).

The ambassadors perform the task of introducing the general populace to elements of gay subculture, educating colleagues that sexual minorities are not as different or as much in a minority as the uninformed might imagine. In addition to the spectrum of human sexuality, many types of insects and reptiles, almost all species of mammals, and many types of birds engage in some form of homosexual practice. Homosexuality is condoned in several traditional societies. Sigmund Freud, not generally considered a friend to those with alternate gender constructs, wrote in his classic work, Civilization and Its Discontents,

The requirement that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone disregards the dissimilarities, whether innate or acquired, in the sexual constitution of human beings; it cuts off a fair number of them from sexual enjoyment, and so becomes the source of serious injustice (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988:381).

It is this serious injustice, so often turned inward in the form of self-condemnation, that I wish to examine. More than the wrong done, I want to explore the

ways in which people cope with this depth of oppression and develop into fairly healthy, functioning individuals. What are the sources of their strength? What forms has social capital taken in the lives of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people? A transgendered interviewee describes the process of accessing the strengths of one's indigenous culture.

Sometimes it's hard for a person to . . . recognize how much of the grittiness of their own culture or background . . . plays a role in their ability to cope, but it's absolutely the case. In sociology we often refer to it as social capital. It's very similar to economic capital, you know, resources that you have to call to your control in dealing with a situation. In the case of social capital you have the ability to take your early socialization, you know, the tools that you're given, and use them to your benefit (Anonymous #1).

I will first explore stigma and identity management and the external and internalized oppression in the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. Later in this paper I will examine regional and specifically Appalachian qualities in the social capital of those interviewed, comparing their experiences with the resiliency of same gender loving people from other regions and with heterosexually identified Appalachians, who are themselves a marginalized constituency practiced at managing stigma.

Stigma is a term first used by the Greeks. It refers to a mark or stamp indicating a public perception of the wearer's low social status. The stigmatized element of one's behavior often becomes a defining element, both for the stigmatized and in the public perception. One is stigmatized for deviating from society's rules and sanctions. The deviant then alters her self-concept to incorporate herself as somehow outside of the bounds of normalcy and acceptability.

Some of the stigmatized can monitor the information flow to shield their deviance. Others cannot. An already "discredited" person has visible stigma, such as a

person of color in a racist civilization, or a visibly “effeminate” male or “butch” female in a homophobic world. Ironically, sexual minorities may see themselves as discreditable but already be discredited, holding one or even several “marked” characteristics from gait, to body language, to having been spotted with a partner. Conversely, one may think they are discredited, that “everyone must know,” that their inner desires are somehow transparent, when in fact they remain undetected by many.

In a recent Washington Post story on the gay community in Roanoke, Virginia, one man envisioned the difficulties of being obviously gay in his region of the country.

“I’ve often thought,” said the ex-football player. “And this is not making any disparaging remark against men that are a little more effeminate than I am. But if we had been that type, we could never have lasted up here. . . . In a redneck climate they’ll test you (Mundy 2001:16).”

One could say that women as a whole are discredited, holding the visible stigma of their sex. This may have been born out in my difficulty in securing interviews with lesbians. Sherry Becker-Gorby had initial difficulties as well in finding participants for her in-depth study on Identity Management in Lesbian Women (1983). I surmised that it might have been an overlaying of stigmas that heightened the distrust among my pool of potential interviewees, such as being a woman and lesbian or bisexual, or the combination of African-American and gay. It was difficult to find African-Americans of any sex to interview, and I connect this to African-American stigma management and a generational history of betrayal. I was sent to interview a black man who the referrer claimed was openly gay. But the individual refused to identify himself as such in my presence, or perhaps in the presence of my tape recorder, even when shut off. Instead he said,

It would be stupid to go out on the street and say, “I’m gay.” A black person would never use a label like that. What for? For someone to come up and kill

you for it? . . . I am against labels. I don't like them. And I don't use them
(Anonymous #11).

In the short time span of my initial research I did not succeed in finding any African-American women to interview. I only found one bisexual to interview, and she was Caucasian. I had access to fewer lesbians willing to be interviewed than gay men.

Others have had similar experiences in being refused interviews by lesbians. An author of a book on young gays and lesbians writes in her introduction,

Some turned me down of course-almost always lesbians. And it was the lesbians that were certain I should interview someone with a better story. . . . Clearly being lesbian does not exempt one from the lack of self-esteem that plagues women (Due 1995:xviii).

One West Virginia lesbian refused to grant me an interview and then suggested that I interview her partner from New York. Could this indicate that her stigma or teachings as an Appalachian made the added deviance of lesbianism too dangerous in her public position as a health professional? Without further evidence one can only speculate.

As a researcher born and raised outside the region, there is a way in which I perceive some of those I've interviewed as walking on eggs, so comfortable with these motions as to be graceful. Reared as I was, a Jewish New Yorker, a cultural minority in the United States and the world, yet a member of the majority in New York City, I was taught to speak up loudly against injustice, so as to be considered neither invisible nor complicit. I have to reorient my thinking time and time again to try to imagine how my behavioral choices might differ if I was a minority, and a sexual minority at that, in a very small community.

Some interviewees and other contacts young and old have told me that their sexuality is not an issue to themselves or to their neighbors. They say that they are

treated well, but don't want to flaunt or offend. Many Appalachian sexual minorities are proficient at making their own existence comfortable for those around them.

This may make life more agreeable for heterosexually identified people and even for sexual minorities who have ample connections with others. Yet I am concerned that the willingness to keep alternate sexuality or gender identity out of sight increases isolation for people who are other than straight and cannot find a community of people like themselves where they live. It may be difficult or impossible for young or fearful sexual minorities to access others nearby if clues are kept largely beneath the surface. Yes, the Internet may keep hope alive for some, but a virtual community lacks the warmth of physicality.

Others in West Virginia share this concern. A man I interviewed describes his involvement in West Virginia's first gay pride march, a public effort to let gay youth know they are not alone.

That was sort of my doing. . . . I had been to the Columbus pride parade once or twice before then and said, "Why can't we do it here?" . . . I found there were six of us that believed that it could be done.

So we started meeting and organizing and doing what we had to do. Reserve the capitol, get the money together, get the permits, get the police, have their escort and --.

Didn't seem like the gay people themselves wanted . . . this type of exposure. They didn't want the press, and we wanted it. A parade has to be public, and the press will be there, particularly a gay pride parade in West Virginia.

This woman that teaches in one of the elementary schools here in town had an 11-year-old student that the kids was picking on terribly for being gay. . . . He was feeling that pressure, and he was thinking, 11 years old, and thinking about committing suicide. And she was concerned about it.

Then we sort of took --. The committee took that as our theme. We would do this, be visible, to him and anybody else that was gay. Hopefully, they would see the parade and see at least six people . . . marching down the street and . . . realize at least there was six people like us, like I am.

Like I said, the isolation is probably the greatest thing that a young gay person has to overcome. I'm the only one, I'm strange, I'm deviant, I'm a mistake, and this type of thing. . . . Guess how many showed up? 375 people for the first parade (Anonymous #4).

Some come out, while others protect themselves by efforts to be inoffensive if not invisible.

I know [the boss] knows I'm [cross-dressing], but as long as I don't rub it in his face he doesn't say anything. And I would n't dare go down to the main office dressed like that. I don't know if I would get fired, but I don't want to push the envelope (Anonymous #8).

Journalist Liz Mundy wrote of the matter this way.

Eventually I realized that many people in Roanoke are not closeted out of shame as much as out of a kind of Southern decorum, a sense of modesty and privacy-an unwillingness to make straight people uncomfortable, to create any kind of social ruckus. "You don't want to throw it in people's faces," was how [one gay man] put it to me, explaining why he often takes a woman, rather than his partner, to tony [high tone] social functions (Mundy 2001:17).

Keeping family members and neighbors at ease can certainly be a wise coping mechanism.

Especially back when I was young there was no way to [cross-dress] in public at all. I mean now I can do it in public, but I just don't do it around where I live because . . . people might be a little bit hostile. . . . Most of the neighbors know about and a lot of my family I think. . . . I don't know what all of the neighbors know about it, but since I don't flaunt it out in public nobody says anything about it (Anonymous #8).

Sitting comfortably in a marriage with someone of the other sex, I cannot fault people who find successful ways to survive and thrive in or near their home communities. Yet I can use my protective armor as a married researcher to press the issue where it may not be safe for those unclothed by my layers of privilege. I will not lay bare anyone's cover. But I will seek ways to give voice to those whose stories can debunk the mythology of heterosexual predominance.

Let's continue to look at those who live with a precarious invisibility, always within the bounds of perilous discovery. The "discreditable" are secret deviants. They

can hide their stigma but live with the constant possibility of discovery. They must always monitor their behavior: their dress, their speech, their gait.

The individual who must hide of necessity learns to interact on the basis of deceit governed by the fear of discovery (Herrick 1987:35).

Gay, bisexual and transgendered West Virginians spoke of juggling complex fictitious relationships to couch their realities. Here is an example of denying the truth to one's mother and possibly to oneself.

Even when I was like pre-teens . . . I used to be fascinated with make-up. And of course being a fat little kid in a redneck community I deliberately went to the opposite extreme to say that I hated it. I didn't like mom's make-up when she wore it, and keep that stuff away from me and all--. You know, everything just opposite that, so no one would know what I really would like to do, have, or be into (Anonymous #8).

Readers may observe that all my references to transgendered people interviewed are to those born into the male sex. Why was it so difficult to find transgendered people born into the female sex? A transsexual woman put it best, reminding me that, "Everything's harder for a woman," including the difficulty of a female to male sex change operation itself (Anonymous #6). And those who have gone through this may be less likely to come out and divulge all to a social researcher.

The discreditable hide deviance for the sake of both psychological ease and physical safety.

When I'm not dressed female I try to act male, in other words male mannerisms and that sort of thing. But when I'm dressed female I try not to get out of the persona. . . . It's a protective thing as much as anything else . . . because from all I've read and learned and from some of the ridicule I had in the early times of going out in public where I didn't pass really all that well, I learned that I needed to perfect the mannerisms and all that. . . . It was just a protective thing so people wouldn't see through me. . . (Anonymous #8).

This interviewee continues to be intrigued by the concept of undergoing surgery, dreaming of a day when he might not have to either hide or prove his identity, but simply be accepted.

The only reason I really care about getting the operation would be that it would make me legally free to dress like that all the time. Of course, that wouldn't stop the local rednecks from harassing me once they knew about it, but maybe they wouldn't so much if I actually had the sex change operation. They would pretty much either have to accept it or at least tolerate it. They'd say, "Well maybe he/she is so serious about it that maybe I better at least tolerate her as a human. Him/her, whatever (Anonymous #8).

Yet he lays out the difficulties, inextricably linked with fears of detection of deviance.

My uncle left me enough to have gotten a sex change operation, but then I would have probably had to have moved away. It's customary that you are required to cross-live as a woman, or a man if you are going the other way, for at least a year to prove that you can do it. But being that this was about 7 or 8 years ago and the social climate was still pretty repressive, I figured there's no way I'm going to get by with living a year cross-dressed, especially in this redneck area. . .

Suppose I'm driving down the road cross-dressed, get stopped for speeding, whip out my driver's license, says male, has my male picture. Sheriff Buford here might just haul me off to the local poky, and I can just imagine being thrown in with a bunch of rednecks. They'd have a lot of fun with me while the Sheriff's back was turned. So I thought, "Well nah (Anonymous #8)."

Another interviewee suggests a tact of stigma confrontation.

I just tell everybody, "If you ever get pulled over, just tell them the truth. Don't try to lie, because if he catches you in one lie, he thinks you're trying to hide more than just that." I made a card up and carried it with me for a long time. And I put on the card, "I am transgendered. The name on the operator's is correct. I cross-dress." And told it right up front. I said, "I pose no threat to you (Anonymous #6)."

The individual who fears a night in jail while cross-dressed considered going to great lengths, such as leaving the United States, before ultimately serving four years in the Navy during the Vietnam Era. He reflects that for psychological reasons he never considered an approach that could have saved him the prospect of fleeing to Canada.

The one thing I didn't think about was something I probably could have done, but it would have had me ostracized at the time, would have been to tell them that I was gay, and showed up in a dress or something. They would have probably disqualified me at the draft board, but at the time it didn't enter into my mind. I didn't have nerve enough to try to--. I wasn't willing to fly in the face of society's conventions enough to do that at that time. I was afraid to, and the, shall we say "the social climate," wasn't right? I didn't really want the hell beat out of me, if you want to put it in blunt terms. And I didn't want to hurt my family (Anonymous #8).

Why do people imagine and actually suffer the effects of such hatred? Civil rights attorney Morris Dees claims that hate is based on people's fear of losing something (2001). Audre Lorde defines heterosexism as "the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance. Homophobia," she says, "is the fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others (1984:45)." So if homophobes, like so many along the human spectrum, love members of their own sex, they may fear the loss of the secret of their own deviance, kept tightly from themselves in a heterosexist culture.

A psychotherapist in West Virginia places the discussion of homophobia in the context of threats to a patriarchal society.

I think we perceive homophobia often as being a sexual issue, or having to do with sexual orientation. And I don't think that's accurate at all. . . . When somebody calls me gay or a faggot . . . they . . . do it because they . . . see me behaving in some nontraditional way for males in our culture.

They're not going to accuse me of being gay because they see me having sex on the street. I just don't do that. And most of us don't do that. But in some ways I'm going to be nontraditional, either because I'm more active in peace issues, or I talk about racism, or I study dance, or whatever. But in some ways I don't fit into that traditional mold. . . . which tells us that it's about power . . . not sexuality. And if you think about it, that makes a lot of sense. . . .

If you see two women or two men taking care of each other emotionally, financially, spiritually, that really does a lot to our traditional belief system, which plays itself out economically, politically . . . religiously, which says that we need a heterosexual relationship where the man is in charge. We need males retaining more of the power in all areas of life. . . . That means that those of us who are gay or lesbian . . . are very dangerous to an entire system. We are challenging entire systems. And I think that's frightening for many people (Wheeling 1995).

Those I interviewed, while important for society in the same regard that Thomas Jefferson encouraged citizens to revamp the status quo on a regular basis, nonetheless constitute a minority. They fit the definition of a minority as “a group that suffers from unjustified action by the dominant group.” (Hetrick 1987:26) They have had to deal with the threat of or actual encounters with antilocutions, discrimination and violence. Antilocutions are the rhetoric of prejudice. They are negative statements and beliefs anywhere along the spectrum from derogatory terms to elaborate pseudo-scientific theories.

It is pertinent to observe that social discrimination can have devastating effects on one’s self-worth and self-esteem. Consider that the catalyst of the black Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s was not a lynching or an act of economic discrimination, but a source of humiliation and erosion of self-respect. In a planned or spontaneous move, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, tired after a long day, and the Movement was catapulted into being. Denial of self-respect can cause profound damage to individual members of a minority group. Fear of humiliation was found to be greater than the fear of violence among gay youth studied. Gay adolescents can internalize antilocutions due to a lack of accurate information or appropriate role models (Hetrick, 1987:27-9).

Linnea Due, a lesbian author of a book on growing up gay and lesbian in the 1990s, bemoans the fact that adult gays, in reacting to taunts of “recruiting” youth, often abandon young gays who, she says, “need to see us as real people, not as newspaper figures heaped with scorn, shaking with fury, or ravaged by disease (Due 1995:xxv).” Adult gays have left the younger generation to bear “the brunt of much of the violence,

ostracism, and pain that are visited upon the stigmatized in this society.” (Due 1995:xxv)

As expressed by a bisexual woman in my study,

Of course I got ridiculed at school. Everybody called us the lesbians. . . . And I guess I just thought we were. . . . It's such an awkward age when you're an adolescent anyway. You're just trying to develop your sexuality. You're confused about everything. Your hormones are in high gear. And then to have it just all laid out in front of God and everybody was horrible (Anonymous #12).

Violence against gays, especially males, and chiefly adolescents, is endemic.

Young gays must deal with the constant threat of violence, sexual assault and rape. The violence of homophobia is “a grim underside to the process of coming out (Lindhorst 1997:6).”

Perhaps the most severe impact of hate crimes is the terror it instills in whole communities beyond the individuals involved. Most of the men interviewed in Kate Black and Mark Rhorer’s study on Appalachian gays and lesbians feared physical violence, which has been brutal. The women feared physical and psychological violence, such as being expelled from one’s family and community (1995). A bisexual woman I interviewed illustrates this fear.

I guess I was scared to be ostracized, because my father disowned my sister when I was 10 because she came out to him. And I didn’t want to lose my family and everybody that I loved. And I guess that’s what I thought would happen if everybody found out I was a lesbian (Anonymous #12).

Being ostracized and isolated is a major issue for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth and can result in suicide. Twenty percent of the clients at the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth, Inc. had attempted suicide or had strong ideations, a study revealed (Hetrick 1987:33). This Institute was in a major urban center where one might imagine same gender loving people to be less isolated than in rural Appalachia. But there may be ameliorating factors in the mountain South. There has not been enough research

conducted, if there has been any at all, to examine qualitatively or quantitatively the levels of acceptance and affirmation of sexual and gender diversity in the southern mountains. There has been much documented on the southern mountaineer's appreciation for independence and respect for individuality. This will be chronicled later.

Resuming our discussion of stigma, it is crucial to reference HIV and AIDS, which forced many people out into the open. Their new, multiply stigmatized identity included having a fatal illness. Often lesbians were caregivers to gay male friends. Now gays and lesbians are burdened by the impact of grief and multiple losses on their own mental well-being. Cogent discussions of resiliency among not only AIDS patients and their loved ones but also their gay and straight physicians may be found in Ron Bayer and Gerald Oppenheimer's recent work of oral history entitled *AIDS Doctors: Voices From the Epidemic* (2000).

According to Millie Charles, who has worked in social work education and administration for over forty years, the news is not encouraging.

Our society is growing more intolerant and repressive of individuals and groups whose behaviors do not conform to what is perceived as societal norms (Smith and Mancose 1997:xiii-xiv).

This being the case, stigma confrontation and stigma evasion are both viable forms of stigma management. Becker-Gorby found in her research that many of the women surveyed "felt that it was essential for their economic survival to mesh with the host society and not to cause friction (1983:50)."

Fears of economic reprisals are well founded, as are fears of losing custody battles and sometimes any access to one's children. One transgendered person interviewed has been completely cut off from her children by her ex-wife in a decision reinforced by the courts. Unfortunately the legal system continues to mandate child support payments,

regardless of the financial well being of the custodial and non-custodial parents, and regardless of whether both parents are allowed access to the children (Anonymous #1).

Becker-Gorby's subjects expressed concerns over denial of access to children. "I fear a custody fight. I also fear he (ex-husband) would poison my teen-age son against me (1983:66)."

The wife of one of my transgendered interviewees did indeed "poison" the children against their father, leading to a complete denial of visits. A lesbian I interviewed echoed the fear over losing custody, describing her own ensuing control of condemning information.

It was real hard. I had a daughter, and I used to think back then that I might lose her. So you did this front. It was like a mask, a charade. You know, if someone asked you if you were gay, you would say, "No." My daughter came one time when she was about 12 and asked me. And I told her, "No." I told her that I just loved the lady that we were living with and that that's all it was (Anonymous #7).

Does stigmatization and harassment result in shame, anxiety and depression, or do lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people recast the discriminatory treatment as homophobia, society's problem, not a deficiency of their own? My research shows that people expressed both tendencies in the course of a single interview. One outspoken gay activist repeatedly harkened back to a sense of guilt and personal responsibility.

Well, I felt guilty for many years about breaking up the family, because we had a good family, you know, nice home and a son and a stepson. And we had lots of friends . . . It was an ideal marriage, except I realized my sexual orientation was different. And I had to discover that. And so I broke up the family, and slowly (Anonymous #4).

Another outlook might have been to regard himself and the rest of his family as victims of circumstance whose lives might be enhanced by honest exchanges around the subjects of gender and sexuality.

Age and generation seemed to have a bearing on whether people leaned more toward evasion or confrontation of stigma. Through the circumstance of who I was able to connect with in the span of a four month project, the youth I encountered needed to be more closeted from their parents and had less mobility. So the youngest people I interviewed were in their twenties, in college and graduate school. The views of these students were in line with the contentions of my graduate assistant Samuel Raymie White, past president and current staffer of the Marshall University Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Organization (conversation April 9, 2001) and with the findings of researcher Andrew Anderson (1998) that youth tend to confront and recast stigma, adopting the term “queer” as an inner city young black man might adopt the use of the term “nigger” for affectionate use with contemporaries.

My qualitative research showed that those who grew up in the 1940s, '50s and '60s tended to grow more accepting of themselves as they aged and sometimes changed the circumstances of their lives, such as their jobs, to allow room to confront or disregard the stigma more than before. The same woman who had denied her sexuality to her daughter went on to say,

And then when [my daughter] was in college we spoke of it for the first time. As I got stronger within myself, it all sort of mellowed out and just went away. Then after a while, it just came to the point if they'd ask if I was gay, I could say, “Yes.” And after a while I realized that it was more important to be who I needed to be than to worry about all those things (Anonymous #7).

The other course involves succumbing to shame, manifested in statements of self-condemnation, such as people experienced in their earlier years.

“Oh I basically thought I was a weird freak,” said one (Anonymous #8).
“I just thought I was a genetic fluke or something,” another man said
(Anonymous #10).

Self-derogation abounded when young people's alternative sexual and gender identities came face to face with the church.

Most of the time I felt bad about myself. It wasn't something you heard people sit around and talk about. "Boy, if I ever run across a transsexual, you know, I'm going to --." So my condemnation basically come from myself. I must be unworthy for God, even though I kept going to church. I had to deal with being an abomination (Anonymous #6).

It wasn't until some people heard pejorative language used to describe their identity that they began to notice a moral code attached to their feelings.

I didn't know what the hell to call it, but I can remember having crushes on little boys in 3rd grade, 4th grade. And until I found out there was something wrong with it I didn't think anything about it. But when I started figuring out that words like faggot and queer referred to me, then I felt isolated. And at one point I can remember thinking to myself, "I must be the only person in the world like this (Anonymous #3)."

One young man learned how others viewed his identity after sharing a classic with a friend.

When I was in Junior High, my aunt showed me a copy of Leaves of Grass. I ended up getting into a lot of trouble with that book, suspended from Junior High for a friend of mine reading all of the dirty parts aloud in the hallway to a big crowd of kids. The school principal told me that that homosexual filth was not to be read aloud in his school building. So it became pretty clear that such writing was not generally accepted, at least within our smaller community. And this made me feel like my personal identity might not be very acceptable (Anonymous # 10).

Another man has been drawn to political action after recalling his own awakening to the harshness of familial views.

I can remember a conversation in my mom and dad's living room, and I can't remember who all was there. I know my dad was and some other men folk. And somehow the subject of homosexuality came up. And I can remember I think it was an uncle of mine saying something along the lines of, "They should all be rounded up, put on an island, and shot." I can remember thinking to myself, "You're talking about me."

And so I've thought a lot about that as I've grown older, thinking to myself, "Kids are hearing this garbage from people who are supposed to be their protectors and the people who love them. And that is one of the reasons that I dedicated my whole life to activism in one way or another (Anonymous #3).

It takes time, often a lifetime, for people to work through feelings of self-condemnation and profound isolation. American attitudes and laws run the gamut from support to denigration, and, more often than one might imagine, these two poles coexist in the same community, even in the same psyche (Benkov 1998:116).

We move now to a focus on expressions of psychological resiliency. This can be seen in peoples' avowal or affirmation of their stigma. Becker-Gorby reminds us that breaking through isolation into a sense of community identity inspires lesbians to turn societal condemnation into the labeler's problem.

Increased ventures with normalization (such as a women's music festival) intensifies a lesbian's feelings of "rightness of choice." There is relief in the discovery of others (1983:100).

Meeting others like oneself can provide a great respite, although for most rural West Virginians this release comes from refreshing but rare sojourns into urban centers. Exceptions to this were communities of women "back to the landers" living in West Virginia primarily in the 1970s and '80s. Beyond these years and perhaps a few lasting rural or small town enclaves, community is found largely in urban bars.

Years later, I found out that there were clubs and bars that cross-dressers and gay people could safely go to. I went out in all my finest finery and finally started hitting the bars. . . . During one visit to a gay bar I happened to walk in on a meeting of cross-dressers. They get together like once a month and socialize. They were all having a good time. . . . It let me know that there were more people around than--. I mean intellectually I already knew from what I read that there were a lot of us out there, but it was nice to see a whole bunch in one place. . . . There was a little bit of solidarity to it too (Anonymous #8).

The bisexual woman I interviewed bemoans the fact that there are fewer support systems in place to normalize the experience for young bisexuals.

We have quite a few support groups in the area for lesbians and gays. There's nothing for bisexual people. I think it would be a good idea, especially for

adolescents, because I know how confused I was as a teenager, having to deal with those feelings. You just want to be normal, but you're always told to be yourself. "Be yourself. People will like you." Then when you're yourself, "You're gross and disgusting." It's just a constant mixed message as an adolescent (Anonymous #12).

Bisexuals are often overlooked by both gays and straights in discussions of alternative sexuality. An article by Megan Morrison addresses the issue of oppression of bisexuals by gays.

Bisexuality . . . is a valid sexual preference. While many gays have experienced bisexuality as a stage in reaching their present identity, this should not invalidate the experience of people for whom sexual and affectional desire is not limited by gender. For in fact many bisexuals experience . . . homosexuality as a stage in reaching their sexual identification (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1993:314).

Regardless of one's orientation to sexuality and gender, it is in reaching an awareness of a community of people like oneself that one establishes an identity. People in rural areas and small towns gain access to information in diverse ways. Witness this account of a family interaction.

There was a man that lived not far from my house that I found out when I was about 12 was a homosexual. And I never really knew him. I mean he was really reclusive. But just discovering that all homosexuals didn't live in San Francisco was a big thing, just finding out that it was wider spread than that. It was when I really came into an identity, because it's hard for me to say that I could base my identity on simply a desire. To establish my identity as a homosexual took actually seeing that there were others.

Interviewer: How did you find out about this man?

#10: My step-dad was repairing this guy's porch, and my parents were just talking about the fact that he was gay and that he refused to date men in the area, because he had more respect for his parents than that, which, looking back, is a horrendous thing to say, but that's the way they looked at it. And just hearing that was kind of fascinating for me to know that A) there was a homosexual living down the street, and that B) there were homosexuals in the area for him to be dating (Anonymous #10).

The concept of group membership, whether contacts are remote or within physical reach, can bolster people. And members are often proud to hold a culture of their own, not accessible to avowed heterosexuals.

What gives any group of people distinction and dignity is its culture. This includes remembrance of the past and a setting of itself in a world context whereby the group can see who it is relative to everyone else (Grahn 1990:xiii-xiv).

Initiation into the culture of sexual minorities is often harder to come by than entering into a racial minority whereby parents or elders have suffered stigmatization and enjoyed membership in a vibrant subculture and can school their young accordingly. In adolescence, difference is often suspect regardless of its roots. At a time when young people are already dealing with their emerging sexuality, diverse orientations tend to be viewed as threatening. We commit a disservice to young people when we assume first off that they are too young to have sexual feelings and secondly that their tendencies will be toward attraction to the other sex. Qualitative and quantitative research, including but not limited to my own, substantiates that people can be aware of attraction to the same sex at a very early age, perhaps, five, six or seven years old (Anderson 1998). The denial of latitude to express love when and how one is naturally inclined to can cause dangerous subversions manifesting themselves as hatred and sometimes violence toward self and others, particularly those most like oneself.

Despite the presence of adversity, however, qualitative and quantitative studies have shown that gay youths can thrive by drawing on the strengths of early teachings and through avowal of stigma. As opposed to commonly held notions, research has shown young gay males to have reasonably high self-esteem. Those whose parents were supportive during their youngster's formative years showed higher degrees of self-esteem. Young gay males were found to develop strengths that enabled them to cope with the realities of their lives.

In a study published in 1993, youth of color were found to cope well with gay oppression due to their history of experience with racism (Anderson 1998:67). Perhaps they have been socialized by elders to survive and protect themselves. A black urban gay youth quoted in another study describes a role model who instilled a sense of power in him.

I respected a cook, Mrs. Norma, as my adoptive mother. . . . She was like . . . “If you let people in here walk on you, no matter what, the world is going to walk on you (1997:24).”

This instilling of pride and autonomy is echoed by some of those in my research sample. An older black man with whom I spoke said this.

Mom was the most lovable, plain, independent person I know. And she conveyed that to me. I, right now, class myself as the most fiercely independent person on this earth. I learned, even before the Army stole that slogan, be the best you can be. My mom taught me that a LONG time ago, that if anything is important enough for you to be involved in, do the best you can with it, or DON’T be involved in it (Anonymous #11).

The Appalachian elders of many interviewees taught their young to survive on their own. Observe this statement from a gay West Virginian in his thirties.

The independent, fierce part of my personality probably comes from my mother. . . . My mother taught me . . . to be completely independent. And little did I know that . . . when I came out, and everybody pretty much . . . backed off, that I would need it (Anonymous #3).

West Virginia lesbians also had strong people in their lives pushing them ahead. Those I interviewed were thankful for the women in their lives.

I used to have an English teacher that knew more about me as a kid than I even knew about myself. She would always make me read books like, It's Good to Be Alive by Roy Campanella. It was always books of courage and overcoming. I owe a lot to that English teacher. I think she knew the ones who would make it and the ones that wouldn't. The ones that she thought probably wouldn't, she handed these books to [laughs]. “Here read this.” She planted some seeds about just how to get tough and how to survive. (Anonymous #7).

These were not women who were showered with good fortune. These role models were people who made the most of their circumstances.

My grandmother always wanted to own her own restaurant, but her circumstances really didn't leave her that option entirely. But yet she was able to own a bar, make a living, buy a home, take care of the family while my grandfather basically wasn't able to work because of his drinking. So she still made the best of it and went on with her life. Despite difficulties in one's life, you go on (Anonymous #9).

Gay Appalachian-born author Fenton Johnson credits his early teachings and experience with marginalization with helping him to thrive.

...my innate stubbornness-and my parents' wisdom in instilling that stubbornness in me-began to triumph, and I began to realize that having a background that was different could be . . . quite an advantage (Creadick 1995:164).

Do other Appalachian sexual minorities draw strength from their upbringing?

Even if they do, we cannot prove that any particular mode of child rearing is Appalachian. If the southern mountains were ever isolated culturally they are not now. The influences on parents and children from other regions and cultures are disparate and vast. Even when transportation and outside communication were more remote than today, there is no reason to assume that because one lives in a region one will raise children a certain way. Perhaps a mother will raise her first children in a certain manner and later children differently. Siblings in large, or even small families, often note differences in how they were each raised in terms of degrees of leniency, resources available to the family, whether the family moved during child rearing, and an extensive array of other determinants.

Beyond regional factors are individual traits and characteristics. Different people are remarkable in different ways. So we cannot prove that any mode of child rearing is definitively Appalachian. We can, however, examine the socio-economic facts of

peoples' lives over generations in the Appalachian region and surmise that parents may have taught their young to survive difficulty.

Contemporary Appalachian Studies scholars debunk the mythology of a monolithic regional culture. Social researcher Henry Shapiro helped foster this reexamination of Appalachian identity with his groundbreaking study, Appalachia on Our Mind (1978). Shapiro maintains that it was those living outside of the region and wishing to capitalize from the natural resources available in the mountains who marginalized or "othered" Appalachians and began to depict a sense of regional identity. It was through generalizing, stereotyping and dehumanizing Appalachian people that outside investors could most comfortably avail themselves of rich mineral deposits and deep forests. If one could assign a host of personality traits to people living in the mountains, it would not be difficult to create, in the minds of both Appalachians and spectators, the notion of a particular breed of people living outside of the modern era and not desiring all the material goods coveted by Americans elsewhere (Shapiro 1978).

It would be erroneous to assume that Appalachians have one or even a few ways of behaving and raising children. Yet it is plausible that there could be a characteristic array of behavior evolving from past generations' responses to common circumstances of coming to and living in this region. For example, some adults, in response to invasive and exploitative practices by coal companies and other extractive entities, have schooled their young in the value of autonomy, independence and even willful resistance to local institutions (Lewis, Kobak and Johnson 1978:131-2).

Scholar and editor Stephen Fisher calls for an inclusion of the cultural dimension of Appalachian lives.

Many activists and scholars have shied away from discussions of “culture” in Appalachia because of previous pejorative, romanticized, or contrived notions of cultural forces and values in the Appalachian mountains. But the authors who have contributed to [this book] . . . argue that the study of resistance in Appalachia should involve examinations of regional culture as a force that informs the construction of class consciousness, gender relations, regional identity, and community life (1993:10).

Author Shirley Abbott, in sweeping brush strokes, paints vivid images of a people arriving in the mountains centuries ago with a background of running from oppressive authorities.

The Scotch-Irish, for certain, fled from civilization. They had already had enough of it. The forces that drove them from Ireland to America, and the odds they faced as pioneers in the South, formed the temperament and the attitudes of a certain class of backwoods Southerner for generations. To keep to themselves, they'd have gone almost off the edge of the earth. They and their parents had grown up in a place where law and order was something that worked against poor people (1983).

If black gay youths are capitalizing on elders' hard-earned experience regarding stigma management, why could not the same transference of skills apply to marginalized Appalachians? A gay West Virginian reminds us that Appalachians are well versed with stigma. “They've been looked down upon themselves, you know, ‘hillbillies’ and things like that (Anonymous #4).

Just as some Appalachians, proud of their mountain heritage, joyfully adopt the term “hillbilly,” some sexual minorities from the mountains affirm and adulate their own brand of stigmatized identity. A lesbian interviewed is only too willing to confront stigma and stereotypes.

Oh yes, my license plate says, “I am, are you?” I mean everyone in that town knows. I've been out for like 15 years now. They don't care. If someone wants to talk to me about it and I feel they're being respectful, I'll talk about it. If someone's wanting to be like trashy about it, I just look at them and say, “Pardon me, you must have mistaken who I am.” And they just sort of like back off (Anonymous #7).

She goes on to proclaim, “When I come back in my next life I’m coming back gay.”

“How come you’re coming back gay again?” I asked.

Oh. I won this time. Why not? It would be easier next time. I’ve already done the fore work. I didn’t like being straight. It just isn’t me. It just isn’t who I am. (Anonymous #7).

A transsexual makes the most of the publicity surrounding her decisions, adulating the condemned behavior, showing resiliency by shifting the gawking to focus on her own humanity, not so different from that of onlookers.’

I had to change like fifty things when I had my name changed. It took me forever to get this done. At the court hearing for the name change we somehow got on the docket to be there like a week and a half before we was really scheduled to. So when we went in the Judge said,

“I’m sorry. You’ll have to come back on the original hearing date,” because you have to advertise in the paper that you’re changing your name and that way it gives people a chance to appear in court the day of your hearing in case you’re trying to hide from bills or debtors or whatever. So when it was all over, the Judge said,

“I grant you your petition to change your name.” And he said,

“I want to apologize to you again for bringing you into court a second time.” And I said,

“That’s okay, Judge. I got to wear a different outfit this time.” And that court just went crazy. Because people was intentionally standing in the doorways watching for me, which I didn’t care. I’ve never cared for anybody to know. I’ll answer any question. I just always had this attitude, “This is me. If you want to know about me, I’ll be glad to talk about it.” I mean you could see them peeking in, because they wanted to see what this person looked like, because there’s not a lot of people change their names to female in West Virginia (Anonymous #6).

Are sexual minorities capitalizing on the early implantation of values carried down over generations? Perhaps so. We can certainly say that a legacy of fortitude and determination has prevailed in these rugged mountains since the earliest inhabitants. Black and Rhorer wondered in the course of their research whether those they interviewed would identify themselves as both gay and Appalachian. They write,

While everyone identified themselves as gay or lesbian, we found that many people seemed to avoid directly addressing their Appalachian identities. . . . Some of the interviewees had not resolved their conflict over being from the

mountains. . . . The one participant who has continued to live in Eastern Kentucky readily identified herself as Appalachian. . . . One man . . . expressed conflict over wanting to move back to the mountains, but was not sure it was possible for him (Black and Rhorer 1995:21).

Chatman Neely studies gay males from West Virginia. He examines the dual development of Appalachian and gay identities and the interplay of the two over a lifetime. Some of his informants have found that moving to an urban center may not provide the liberation they seek. His interviewees have described dealing with more profound condemnation as a “hillbilly” than experienced for being gay in West Virginia (Neely, telephone conversation, 12 April 2001). If urbanites do accept West Virginians, it is hard for some born and raised in cities to visualize sexual minorities in the mountains. One gay West Virginian living in Boston relayed to me a conversation in which a gay Bostonian told him uniformly that, “There are no gays in West Virginia (Abe Rybeck, telephone conversation, 8 February 2000).”

In a society where stereotypes and categorization abound, it is difficult to house all of one’s diverse identities in one locality and in one body. An interviewee articulates his own determination to face this difficulty.

In the last 10 years I’ve had to come to terms with myself as an Appalachian. Before that, I think I had come to terms with myself as a Southerner, but Southerners are not as denigrated as Appalachians. . . . I’ve realized the ways in which I’m Appalachian, that a lot of what I am I am due to that culture. So it’s been odd to retain hold of all those identities and refuse for the sake of simplicity to sort of shuck one. A lot of gay people, I think that they . . . slough off their regional identity, because it’s easier . . . to have just one nice pigeonhole rather than . . . juggle all these different identities (Anonymous #2).

This individual draws upon a concept described by a noted Appalachian Studies scholar.

Helen Lewis says something in one of her essays about how Appalachians are bi-cultural, that they can be part of mainstream culture and also part of an Appalachian subculture. So, I say . . . I’m just tri-cultural . . . gay, and Appalachian, and mainstream culture too.

It's a juggling act, but . . . I think that's a lot better than just sort of truncating your identity for the sake of simplicity, which again is what I think a lot of gay people do. They grow up in some region of the country, and they feel out of place in that region because they're gay, and it's just easier to turn your back on the region and run off to the city, which is what so many gay people do if they have that option. Just forget about that little town. You know, they live in the city and they immerse themselves in . . . urban gay culture, and they make jokes about that little piss ant town they came from back in Nebraska, or West Virginia, or Florida, wherever (Anonymous #2).

My qualitative research was with people born and raised in West Virginia who continue to live in the Mountain State. I asked each of them to discuss their relationship to the state and region and, more specifically, why they choose to remain.

"Why do you stay here, as lonely as you say it is?" I asked one lesbian, riding in her jeep from her family farm of three generations to the business she owns and operates in town.

"Where am I supposed to go?" she replied. "Beam me up, Scottie?" I laughed.

"Pittsburgh. New York City. California," I persevered.

"Oh," she said. "I'm a woods hick. My mission is here (conversation with anonymous #7)." And this woman does seem to have a mission. Oddly perhaps, parents bring her their children when they wish they would behave heterosexually. When the parents leave, the real heart to heart conversations begin. Local gay teenagers know they may call her at any hour of the day or night. After her own positive use of what some might call a very bad hand dealt in childhood, she becomes secretly exasperated with youth who are so willing to give up and end it all. This is a woman who has decided that a horrendous upbringing has indeed provided her with an educative dose of social capital.

I just came up on the rough side of the street. . . . I was raised with toughness and discipline. I thought it was abuse at the time, but it's helped me out now (Anonymous #7).

She has leaned heavily on examples set by early Appalachian “frontiersmen,” as she calls them, from whom she is descended.

When I used to feel like giving up, I would go for a ride and come back in the woods here and sit by a tree, because you knew if you were just in the same hollow that your grandpa was and he survived it, that you would too. I used to go up to the cemetery where he was buried and just talk to him and say, “If you can do it, I can do it (Anonymous #7).”

Some informants, like the one described above, articulated a loyalty to the people of the region. Others exhibited a connection to land that has been in their families, upon which they themselves have built shops and important structures for work, recreation and habitation, but verbalized no claim on the mountains.

West Virginia is irrelevant to me. . . . I’m sorry. I know that’s heretical in this state. I’m just here because it’s convenient and because, oh I don’t know. I’m from here, but that doesn’t mean anything. I was in the Service for four years. When I got out I could just as easily have stayed in Hawaii where I got out, or I could have come back here. I just happened to choose to come back here, and then I got into . . . taking care of my family when they got old and sick, so. Then it just seems like I started getting stuck here more or less, and even though I swore I wouldn’t set down roots, once I inherited the property that I live on, that’s even more roots. So unless [an] unlikely . . . thing would happen . . . I imagine that I’ll end up being stuck right here (Anonymous #8).

Regardless of other opportunities, this individual did not remain in Hawaii. He returned home. Relationships with West Virginia develop not only by a desire to be in this state. Attachments arise from the circumstances of people’s lives.

Another man interviewed addresses a likely root of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people’s efforts to distance themselves physically and psychologically from their native land.

There’s no regional pride there, because . . . they connect their home region with all those shits that bothered them in high school and the preachers that intimidated them and so on and so forth. . . . And I understand that, because I have. . . . In the mid ’80s . . . I went to [*name of city*] and lived for a semester. That’s when I really realized how much I was an Appalachian (Anonymous #2).

Coal miners have often said that mining gets in the blood. One's relationship with the southern mountains is perhaps akin to this, an association not necessarily solicited, but powerful nonetheless. The mountains are not generally considered a safe haven for sexual minorities, but still people are attached to West Virginia homes and families. The interplay of sexual minorities with their native communities can reveal personal strength.

One informant describes an ongoing conflict between an ingrained rootedness to the mountain South and a yearning for a freer existence.

I lived two years in [*name of city*] and decided that I needed my mountains and came back. There is such a connection to the land and the people, yet you want to get away so you can live to be who you are . . . where you don't constantly either have to be in the closet or on your guard. . . . And I think there is a conflict that develops: Do I stay? Do I go? I know that's exactly what's going on with me right now, because I would like to go and get my [degree] at a particular university out in California . . . but that is just way too far from my family, family of choice and family of origin. And it's too far from my mountains (Anonymous #3).

One narrator left the region for a period and describes his disappointment with urban America.

. . . until you leave, all you can see is the bad stuff, especially if you're a gay kid. Because there is this whole myth of the big city and the gay world waiting for you if you can just get out of this piss ant little town.

If you're like me, you get to the city, and you go, "Well hell, this is obnoxious, all these people and cars." You begin to think about that little town, or Appalachia, or the South, then your family. You begin to think, "Well hell, it wasn't that bad."

. . . Part of the big maxim is, if you leave, you'll be back. That's quite often true, in that so many Appalachians have that yearning for home and that sense of place. Even when you leave . . . there is that tug back to the mountains. My grandmother used to say that the worst pain of all is homesickness. . . . It wasn't until I moved to [*name of city*] that I realized how much I disliked the city, despite all of the gay options. I realized how much I was a mountain person. I felt that homesickness (Anonymous #2).

Perhaps, as one individual maintains, the conflict exists on at least an unconscious level for most if not all Appalachian sexual minorities.

If you talk to every gay male, every lesbian, every bisexual, or every transgendered person in Appalachia I don't know that they can even vocalize [it], but I think when you really start poking and prodding and get right down to it you can find that there is this really strong connection. And there is a conflict at some point that that person fights or continues to fight, whether to leave or whether to stay (Anonymous #3).

Earlier I cited instances in which people made an effort not to offend, not to "throw" their sexuality in people's faces. Yet many sexual minorities are quite outspoken and out front with their identity, confronting the issue at every turn, well aware that this presents threats in some of the more rural areas.

And then there is the whole concept of being "out" in this area. I mean I'm about as out as you can get. I have bumper stickers on my car, the whole nine yards, and tend not to, knock on wood, to have problems. But I also wouldn't want to move with my partner to certain parts of [name omitted] County, because we'd probably be burned out. . . . They'd probably burn the damn house down and run us out. So it's an odd place (Anonymous #3).

Physical features of the earth seem to draw Appalachians close to home, intensifying the conflict between the quest for a community of people who share their sexual orientation and gender identity, and attachment to a familiar landscape.

And then there comes the whole question of land. . . . These mountains cannot be mimicked or copied anywhere else in this country. And I mean I've been out West, and I've been in--. Lord, I've been in the Midwest where it is so flat. I couldn't stand that. . . . I like my mountains. I feel safe. I feel connected. And literally when I cross the border . . . into West Virginia, I'm home. If I'm in San Francisco and I run into someone from West Virginia, there is an immediate dialogue that can begin, because it's kind of like we are related in some strange way. . . . It's like we're related (Anonymous #3).

Another informant speaks of the attractive elements of small town living, coupled with a disturbing small-mindedness that keeps him from always feeling welcome in the mountain South.

Well part of it is an attachment to the landscape and nature, which is something you pretty much have to give up if you're going to rush off to the urban gay ghetto. . . . But . . . I want to stay in this area for many reasons, one of which is that I like many of the values of Appalachia in the same way that I don't like the homophobia of small towns, needless to say. But I like the friendliness; I like the closeness to the natural world

I grew up in a town where I was not accustomed to crowds and traffic and noise, and to this day . . . I'm not willing to tolerate large doses of any of that in my life. So part of being an Appalachian and a Southerner for me is to retain some sort of connection to rural living (Anonymous #2).

Appalachian heritage may be compelling and too valuable to shuck off, although years of pain and misunderstanding might prompt one to do so. Black and Rhorer conclude from their study of gay and lesbian Appalachians that all of the nine people interviewed,

exhibited courage in many aspects of their lives. They have overcome a multitude of obstacles in their paths and have emerged to lead positive lives that are a reflection of their true selves. . . . The pain and the desire seemed to produce this incredible resistance to the ever-lurking and pressing homophobia and heterosexism (1995:26-27).

I too noted people's outstanding determination to persevere toward reaching fulfillment of their sexual and gender identity, often coupled with a love for home too powerful to conquer. One strong and forthright man I interviewed was quite honest, however, regarding what he termed his "paranoia" left over from assaults in his younger days.

I have a siege mentality really. . . . There's always a little paranoia in me in some gay context. . . . I still remember that small town, and I remember the potential for violence. . . . There is kind of a caution . . . which . . . is partially small town boy and partially gay person. . . . It's hard to get rid of those high school insecurities. You know, it's odd. You're an adult, and even all those years later some of that remnant is still there in you. I guess I still sometimes think of myself as that little person in high school everyone knew was queer, and whose

ass might get kicked if he wasn't careful. I walk down the street, and it's not as if I have a T-shirt on that says, "Kick me, I'm Queer." But that paranoia from high school is still there (Anonymous #2).

All of those interviewed, while refusing to dwell on the negative, had inevitably experienced or feared violence or hostility. Black and Rhorer quote Foucault, stating that, "Where there is power there is resistance (1995:27)." It seems to me that in many, many cases, where there are Appalachians there is determination and power.

An interviewee discusses his new found insistence on harnessing the power of his regional culture and the psychological disjointedness of trying to compartmentalize the elements of one's personality.

I didn't want to give up that regional culture. I wanted to keep--. I wanted to have it all. I wanted to be part of gay culture and part of Southern culture and part of Appalachian culture. I've managed it. I'm glad that I have, because again, simplicity is--. It's like amputating parts of yourself for the sake of ease in living. It reminds me of the Cinderella sisters, you know, in the original Grimm Brothers story, where one of them cuts off her toe to try to fit her foot into the slipper, and the other one cuts off her heel to try to fit her foot into the slipper. Amputation is not something I want to do, to myself (Anonymous #2).

Appalachian scholar David Whisnant reminds us that Appalachian culture is . . . a web of both resistance and complicity. . . . Those involved in cultural work should search through the regional culture to locate its most humane, progressive, and transformative elements and look for ways to link these transformative elements to a larger human agenda for change (1993:11).

It is sometimes said that despite fundamentalist Christian views denouncing alternative sexual orientation and gender identity, there is room in the mountain South to be oneself with a premium placed on the right to be an individual. A Washington Post reporter writes, "The mountains . . . nurture a sort of . . . progressivism: The libertarian, leave-me-alone ideal is not the exclusive purview of gun-amassing militia movements (Mundy 2001:15)."

One man interviewed discusses a Southern mountain style of tolerance he sees in his home state.

[My partner] used to come here when he was a young man and whitewater raft. And . . . he found the people to be accepting of people and their differences. And I've sort of found that too here. . . . We have had pride parades for four years now, and we never have the protest like Columbus. . . .

Interviewer: Are you saying being from a rural state is part of that?

#4: Well no, it just seems like West Virginians are tolerant, not only of homosexuality, but of hippies and various other people that are different. . . .

Interviewer: Where do you suppose it comes from for West Virginians to be somewhat accepting of difference?

#4: Well . . . *they* were sort of different. Mountaineers, you know they have been called hillbillies. Then the hippies came in, and they were pretty much accepted and then the various other groups that have come in. Then you have the gays. I'm not saying they accept the homosexuality; they just seem to accept people. That's just our feelings. West Virginia seems to be more accepting than what you find in other states (Anonymous #4).

This defense of the right to be different without an outright acceptance of gayness, bisexuality and transgenderism may have been easier to carry out before a diversity of sexual and gender identity was prevalent in the media. One narrator articulates the difficulties of remaining in the closet in this modern era of sexually explicit mass media.

. . . when people can turn on the television, and Will and Grace is on, that's going to make it . . . more difficult for straight folk to ignore. They are going to be suspicious of . . . situations that they might otherwise just have been able to ignore. . . . It's a television . . . sitcom. It's pretty popular, and it's about a gay man and a straight woman . . . and their friendship. Quite a few of the plot lines have to do with gay culture and gay jokes, and the . . . close friend of this main character is a very flamboyant gay guy, and it's terribly funny. But it's become a part of mainstream culture. . . .

The secretaries [where I work] . . . come in, and they're talking about . . . how they've seen Will and Grace, and what a funny--. And these two guys kissed and--. The media is giving them images of gay people that they would not have run across 10 years ago. So when you live in a society that presents that as an option, on something as easily seen by millions of people as a sitcom on NBC, people are going to be less likely to deny and more likely to say, "Oh, I wonder if they're like this Will and Grace character." That's going to make it . . . very difficult for gay people who want to stay in the closet, because . . . instead of being ignored, people are going to be suspicious. If they want to stay in the closet, then it's going to be terrifying to them. If you're open, who cares? . . . But if you were trying to hide that would be very, very scary to live in a society that is sensitized to the issue by mass media (Anonymous #2).

In documenting the life stories of Appalachian sexual minorities one can see elements of a regional culture unfolding in their lives. Examine, for instance, the continued role of extended families, not so different from those cited by social observers of Appalachian life in the 19th Century, families that lived in enclaves and served as mutual aid societies. Perhaps this need for a social network is as rural, or as human, as it is Appalachian, but it is being carried along today in the lives I chronicled.

In the following passage, a gay man expresses some of the nuances of his relationship with the beloved grandmother who raised him. Ultimately, kinship seems here to be valued above all.

My grandmother, she has a religious concern. But pretty much we agree to disagree, and it's not usually brought up. And now she's become so familiar with . . . my family of choice that when I talk to her she usually asks about people that I know, friends of mine (Anonymous #3).

Another narrator analyses the role of Appalachian kinship relative to sexual minorities.

Family is very strong, and there's a loyalty to the family regardless if they are different. You still love them and accept who they are. . . . Like my . . . family, they don't understand it, and they believe it's wrong. But there's love there and respect for me that they have. They may not understand me, but they know what type of person that I am. I think that's sort of what you get here in West Virginia: a lot of close family ties, and they love the individual, but they don't understand everything (Anonymous #4).

Scholars have described life in 19th Century Appalachia as one which stressed both independence and cooperation. The family and also the individuals (both men and women) needed to be self-sufficient and independent and must not depend on others for help (Lewis, Kobak and Johnson 1978:115). Certainly all of those I interviewed are independent spirits and many discuss their ability to provide for themselves and a desire to protect other sexual minorities.

There may be an Appalachian brand of resistance, one that exists elsewhere, but is strong and apparent in the Southern mountains. It may be rooted in the kind of juggling of obstacles and identities with which marginalized people are generally accustomed, a mode of both hiding and utilizing stigma.

The family encourages bi-culturalism. . . . Mountain children are taught early to act properly in public and be hillbilly at home. . . . The mountain person is taught how to use the hillbilly stereotype for his [or her] own protection and to confound, aggravate, harass. . . . (Lewis, Kobak and Johnson 1978:134).

These are skills that were developed out of necessity to survive generations of exploitation in the Old World and New. Writer Shirley Abbot portrays the Scots-Irish who arrived in the mountains in the early decades of the 18th Century as “the hottest tempered, hardest-to-kill, toughest people in the South (1983:32).”

Gay Appalachian author Fenton Johnson seems to expect that some of the behavior observed in other Appalachians ought to carry over into a freedom of expression among Appalachian sexual minorities.

. . . there have always been brave people in rural America who have fulfilled and honored their sexuality and, more to the point . . . their right to love who it is that they want to love. There have always been those people everywhere, I would like to think, but especially in Appalachia, with its tradition of dogged, stubborn, wonderfully, marvelously mule -headed people (Creadick, 1995:167).

Yes, there is a legacy of a stubborn, willful determination to survive when it would be easier for those who have other designs on Appalachian land and resources if the inhabitants would shrivel up and disappear. Take for example the early decades of the 20th Century. When the amount of federally owned land increased, such as that taken for the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Smoky National Park, the resentment and resistance among local people grew as well. Residents vented their frustration against

government land seizures, often seeking revenge by setting fire to homelands they were forced to leave.

Historian Ron Eller describes the fostering of a legacy of resistance. “Some families sold willingly; others resisted and passed on to their children a strong bitterness toward the federal agency involved (Eller 1982:240).”

The individual and collective resistance to exploitation of land and people has carried on through organizing and protecting unions, fighting for black lung benefits, efforts to retain to potable water, and active resistance to strip mining and more recently to mountaintop removal mining.

It may be that these fights for survival take another form but have the same origins when manifested in a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered Appalachian’s drive to “keep on keeping on and pushing on (Anonymous #8).”

It is possible that, due to several factors, some Appalachians have been able to retain a degree of independence. Eller maintains that traditional cultural patterns remained into the modern era. Transportation networks such as the railroad lines still left many places isolated. There were relatively few chances for education or urbanization. Mining and timbering were more like agricultural work than factory work in that laborers still toiled out of doors or underground with products of the earth. This yielded the worker a greater degree of autonomy and physical distance from the boss than one could have derived laboring beneath the ever present factory foreman. Workers out of doors or in coal mines may have had more physical space to think and talk amongst themselves.

Close kinship networks survived through the transition into the modern era. Families retained great emotional importance in the lives of mountain people, and do to

this day. This can be both positive and negative for same gender loving people. It can be particularly difficult to be a sexual minority in a rural region where families are the primary social structure. Some people I interviewed have lost access to parents, siblings and children. Others have recently regained or struggled to hold onto familial ties. In any case, same gender loving people who have not raised children have often found themselves on the outskirts of family and church gatherings. Many people have developed powerful networks of “families of choice,” providing many levels of support.

Second only to the family, organized religion provides the central social structure in rural areas. It is easy to assume that because there is no room in many churches for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered identity, that there is conversely no interest in organized religion among sexual minorities. Many of these Appalachians have grown up deeply rooted in the same fundamental Baptist churches that condemn the concept of same gender loving, if not the people who practice it.

There is no relationship more curious than the one that exists between gay people and organized religion, for they have been among its greatest sufferers and saints (Thompson 1987:78).

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Appalachians often continue to hunger for religious affiliation so central to their upbringing. Reverend Catherine Houchins, Pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church, all of whose branches welcome sexual minorities, was herself surprised upon arrival in Roanoke.

I hadn't reckoned on . . . the profound religiosity of most of the gay men and lesbians I met in Roanoke, the desire to go to church, and the need to believe that they are loved by God, and that they, too, are made in God's image (Mundy 2001:22).

One wonders about the background of this pastor, given how inter-connected Appalachians tend to be with their churches. The majority of those I interviewed still

consider themselves Christian. I am told by my graduate assistant, Samuel Raymie White, that had I gathered data from younger people this would not have been the case (conversation April 9, 2001). Most people I interviewed grew up with a strong involvement in the church and have continued to be active members of churches which will accept them for who they are. One lesbian who is on a non-Christian spiritual path still slips into the back of the Baptist church now and again to hear her favorite old hymns.

Many narrators sought help from the church, praying for deliverance from difference. The following quotations represent a sampling of these stories.

I started going to church and of course found out that they think it's gross too. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm just gross. I'm this gross person, and I can't help it." So I again tried to stifle my feelings (Anonymous #12).

My ex-wife and I went to Assembly of God, Pentecostal. I had the church pray for me, even though they didn't know what I was requesting. I said that I just had a deep issue in my life that I wanted God to take care of. So the church prayed, and we fasted, and we cried. And but never ever no solution (Anonymous # 6).

Sometimes the self-imposition of this surplus repression through religion ultimately made for stronger, more resolute sexual minorities, some of whom will no longer set foot inside a church for any reason. One informant chronicles his path from the church to the gay clubs.

I had had some sexual activity late in high school, but dear Lord, the price was horrible guilt. I tried to--. I went through this whole process of, you know, getting religion in my life so I could get right with God and get this all taken care of. And that lasted about a year. It was at that point that it all broke loose, and when I came out I am here to tell you I came out! Within one week I was out going to the gay bars, and at the end of that week I had booked my first drag show (Anonymous #3).

When churches and fervent prayer couldn't straighten them out, many Appalachian gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people have sought ways to reconcile with difference in their own religious or spiritual context.

At one point I was into a fundamentalist puritanical church. And that didn't do too much for my reconciling this cross-dressing business. It took me a long time to just say the hell with some of the things that they thought about that. I'm still Christian, but I just don't accept the extremist right wing views of the fundamentalist people. As far as I'm concerned, Christianity isn't necessarily believing every word, chapter, verse, and doctrine. To me it's believing in Christ and the divinity of Christ. The rest of it was written down by a bunch of fanatical monks about a thousand years ago (Anonymous #8).

Some of those I interviewed have had to research The Bible for themselves to understand how they fit in, continuing to be Christians.

There is one place in The Bible that says it's an abomination to wear a dress if you're a male and to wear men's clothes if you're female. That's Deuteronomy 22:5. There's a lot of background to why this statement is said. There were men going into the tents of the women and having sex with them, and that was forbidden. So they would dress as women to get past. But if you read just a few verses past that there's a lot of other things that it says are abominations. You're supposed to stone your children if they disobey. You've got to do the whole study, look at the big picture, because the modern-day church forgets that these are translations and that translations don't always translate exactly word for word.

My bottom line for religion and God is, it's how I treat you and how I love God. Everything else will fall in line. Love your neighbors, yourself, and love God with all your heart, soul, and mind (Anonymous #6).

It is certainly not only Appalachians who strive for an ongoing relationship with their Creator. A young black urban gay man expressed it in this manner.

One of the school teachers, she was very religious. . . . She was like, "It's a sin." And I told her long as God happy, I'm happy, so if He knows I'm happy, He's happy. I know there's a God. . . . So long as He happy, I'm happy (DeBeau 1997:23).

It is liberating to hear people reaching a point of self-love and feeling loved by God. As one lesbian articulates,

I really believe God made me this way. He loves me this way. I'll die this way. And I don't have a problem between God and I (Anonymous #7).

A bisexual West Virginian states,

Finally I just thought, “I tried to not be this way, but I can’t help the way I am. So if God made every human being, then I think God loves me for me.”

Many people describe their path to becoming one with their pre-ordained identity as a highly spiritual evolution. A transgendered author writes, “I felt I was aiming . . . at a more divine condition, an inner reconciliation (Morris 1974:11).” It can be exhilarating to move closer to a state of contentment with one’s identity or identities. As a transgendered West Virginian articulates,

I was on this journey, and it was God-ordained. I just knew that God was leading me down this road (Anonymous #6).

A lesbian expresses a conviction that she has moved in the right direction.

I know what I want. I know what I like. And I know who I am. It’s really not about sexuality. I think it’s about spirituality and finding yourself and becoming who you need to be. It’s just where I found love. That’s where I found myself at, and that’s where I found life at. So, I don’t really look at as the sexuality as much as the spiritual side of just a human life becoming (Anonymous #7).

The people included in this study have found the strength to be themselves, some more publicly than others, some overcoming greater obstacles than others, but all against enormous pressures to conform, all driven by a determination for inner reconciliation and happiness. Some would call their behavior courageous. Others would call it necessary.

“You seem to have a lot of stamina,” I said to one transgendered man.

“Well I got to,” he replied smiling.

“A girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do (Anonymous #8).”

Another transgendered informant assessed her behavior this way.

Someone said, “You have a lot of courage.” And I said, “To me, it’s a matter of survival. I’m just doing what I have to do.” But that is the definition of courage I guess (Anonymous #6).

The circumstances of Appalachian gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people are distinct from what one would find in urban areas where sexual minorities are not such anomalies. A study of urban lesbians has shown a positive correlation between self-perceived visibility and risk-taking behavior (Becker-Gorby 1983:88). In a rural area, the risks for being sexual minorities are probably greater. People die of suicides and murders. They really do lose jobs, homes and family.

In large cities, a gay man in Roanoke says, “The revolution has already happened.” (Mundy 2001:14) Not so in small town and rural America, where today’s sexual minorities are 21st Century incarnates of the Confederate Warriors and Greek Amazons. Their lives are still cannon fodder for a society on edge. Clients in need of mental health services often live far from clinics or have concerns about confidentiality in their own small communities. Social service providers in these areas may have little or no expertise in dealing with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund’s listing of laws pertaining to gay and lesbian parenting shows that the states with more intolerant laws tend to be rural and Southern. Research has shown that “. . . rural areas are often much more condemning of deviant behavior, and more likely to enforce social norms that focus on maintaining social order.” (Lindhorst 1997:4-5) This may or may not be the case in Appalachia, with a cultural antecedent of allowing for individualism. Still this tendency in rural America certainly intermingles with the Appalachian context.

Based on the realities of the lives of Appalachian sexual minorities, instances of resiliency are both remarkable and inspirational. The struggle is ongoing, in no way over, and by no means easy, whether one is born into the younger generation or has

seemingly reached a degree of peace with age. The same people who tell humorous, admirable, pride-filled stories continue to suffer with bouts of depression. The same people whose eyes are bright with an aura of self-love and connection to the Divine continue to be plagued by a desperate loneliness. The young who are outspoken and adamant about rejecting institutions that condemn them still struggle with the agony of wondering where and when they might fit in.

Many sojourners have found a level of peace, at least for now, and long for a day when social researchers will no longer turn to them as experts on one particular aspect of their human identity. Yet for the sake of the young and those still in acute pain, they dredge up the old stories of doubt, of threats, of violence and humiliation, of a path to self-respect and reconciliation, hoping some young person may see a day where sexual minorities can be visible and accepted, a day when diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity will be appreciated and humankind will unify around more significant issues of its own survival.

Meanwhile, the Appalachian warriors continue the fight, with all the vigor they can muster, and on good days, they value themselves along the way.

I'm finally starting to love me. I never did before. It's been a very long, long battle. I didn't love me until a few years ago. And when I realized I loved me, I looked in the mirror; I cried. And that was a big awakening, because I had finally reached that point. I looked, I stopped, and I cried. And then I just kind of smiled. And for the first time I knew what it was like to finally start liking me (Anonymous #6).