

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Life's Memorable Experiences

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For some of us who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, it was the first time we kissed another man, or another woman. We will never forget the experience. For a transgender person, it might be the first time he or she presented themselves in public as the other gender. It also may have been the time in third grade when the teacher humiliated us in front of our classmates, or the time we saw our father cry, or our mother die. They are not always pleasant memories that we carry with us throughout our lives, but a handful of events leave lasting impressions on us all. They are in the scrapbooks of our souls.

I had such an experience last night.

Shortly after returning home from the hospital, where I needed not to cry when I saw Ray in the Intensive Care Unit following nine hours of intricate spine surgery, I was in bed reading *War and Peace* when I caught something in my peripheral vision. I was emotionally exhausted, and the house was dark except for the lights in my room, so I might have been imagining it.

But peeking around the base of a table was my dear friend, Deb Dagit, a giant among global, corporate directors of diversity, but physically a little person. Deb and her husband Dan, also a little person, were staying with us until they could get a flight back to the snow and ice-encrusted Northeast.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said quietly, "but I couldn't go to sleep without seeing how you were doing."

Patting the bed as a sign for her to join me, I closed my Kindle, and tried to make logical sense of what was happening. Deb's husband was short because he's a dwarf. Deb is short-statured because she was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or Brittle Bone Disease. Every bone in Deb's small body can break with ease. The most innocuous bump or fall can send her to the hospital for a serious operation. An inflated air bag can cause death.

"How did you get up here?" I asked with confusion, knowing that she needs a cane to walk on flat surfaces, and that she had used our elevator all week to get from our first floor to their bedroom on the second floor.

"I sat on the steps, and took one at a time," she replied with a smile as she managed to climb on top of the raised, king size bed that was only slightly lower than the top of her head.

"Why did you do that? Why didn't you take the elevator?" I asked in horror.

"I didn't want to wake you if you were asleep," she said. "And besides, that's the way I always went up and down stairs as a kid. I scootched. How are you doing?"

"I want to cry," I said. "Ray looked horrible. It scared me how bad he looked. His whole body was puffy and pale. His hands were cold. He was in so much pain, and there was nothing I could do but hold his hand and kiss him. I kept telling him the worst was over, and that now he would be pain free, and able to do the things he couldn't do before. But I felt so sad. When I got home, I couldn't think of who to call or write."

"I know," said Deb, having adopted three four-year-olds with special needs from Russia. "I've spent a lot of time in hospitals, both in beds, and beside them. That's why I wanted to see how you're doing. I know how it feels."

With hands held, we lay there for 10 or 15 minutes, looking into each other's eyes, and talking about the heartache of watching those we love suffer. There was a beautiful, most memorable moment of intimacy in our soul-to-soul talk, a gay man and a little person, friends for years who have always known they danced to the same music.

Then we kissed "good night," and Deb carefully climbed down the bed, walked without her cane across the bedroom floor, and descended the 20 steps in the dark one scootch at a time.

When you're feeling vulnerable as I have been, with Ray's chronic pain and subsequent series of surgeries, and as Deb feels daily, it offers you the opportunity for moments of indelible awareness. Although the experiences in my life that have graffitied my soul with Magic Marker have not always been as beautiful and happy as my time with Deb, I nevertheless claim them as my own. They are my slideshow.

What we all know and often forget is that everyone carries memories in their hearts of significant moments in their lives. Regardless of our height, sexual orientation, or any other distinguishing characteristic, the human heart feels very vulnerable at times, and never forgets a powerful experience. A challenge we all face is not playing a negative role in the indelible memories of others. It is better to be remembered as the first person who lovingly kissed another, than as the person who scarred another with our bad behavior or cruel words.