

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Hello and Goodbye

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Thirty-five years ago today I said, "Hello" to Ray for the first time. It was in Boston. I was moving into his apartment with my Irish setter Jeremy, a small U-Haul of possessions, and no intention of entering another long-term relationship. Ray got into my red Opel wagon to guide me home. He did indeed.

A couple of weeks ago, I sat with a friend at Starbucks who spoke with fear that he would cry as he described his life without his recently departed life partner. He's no longer able to play the music they loved, nor banter with his employees. He wears his lover's T-shirts to bed to feel close, and to be able to sleep. When he said, "Goodbye," he thought he was prepared to let go of his ailing soul mate, but he wasn't. "I talk to him," he confided with embarrassment. "That's what you should be doing," I affirmed.

Ray's anniversary card to me has a drawing of a tandem bike with hearts on each seat. On the front cover it says, "Better Together." Inside, Ray wrote, "I'll pedal, you steer. It has been a profound journey and I cherish every step."

My friend with whom I sat at Starbucks told me he didn't know how to handle the most simple daily routines: eating breakfast, reading the paper, having dinner, and watching television at night. These were things he shared daily with his partner for over half of his life. How was he now to focus on anything when all he can think about is that his beloved is gone, and won't be coming back?

My card to Ray asked, "Would you ever have imagined we would have found such contentment in life? You are my best friend, my spouse, my advocate, my love, my inspiration, and my inexhaustible source of joy. Thank you for sharing your life with me." It gets more and more difficult for me to come up with unique ways to say to Ray, "I love you," and "Thank you."

I recommended to my grieving and inconsolable friend that he change all of his routines until the pain subsides. Instead of sitting alone at the breakfast table first thing in the morning, why not take a cup of coffee on a walk to a park where he might sit and look at the water, and listen to the birds? Instead of sitting in the evening at home alone in the room with the television off, why not go to a movie, buy a bag of popcorn, and get lost for two hours in other people's dramas?

When I came downstairs this morning, with my anniversary card in my hand, I found a wrapped package next to my chair. Before I sat down with Ray, I ate the half banana he left for me, and swallowed the handful of vitamins and medications he had organized next to my glass of water. I have no idea what I'm taking but I trust that he is taking good care of me. My gift from him was a box of BBC programs, including the original *Upstairs Downstairs* series. These we will watch together with delight for many nights to come. His gift is a bouquet of either peonies or sunflowers,

whichever Maghi, our local florist, is able to get. She knows, after many years, the pink peonies are Ray's favorite flower.

My friend and his departed husband had spent many hours each day sharing with each other what they were feeling and thinking. One of them might say, "I had the strangest dream last night." And the other would respond, "Oh, tell me about it." When your best friend leaves you, who do you tell your dreams to? I suggested that my grieving friend write his boyfriend a letter each morning and each night. "The first thing you do when you get to work," I said, "is write him a letter to tell him everything that you're feeling and doing. At the end of the day, do the same." He liked the idea very much.

Ray is painfully making his way home at this minute after meeting a friend for coffee. The young man who jumped into my car 35 years ago now has six titanium rods, eight screws, and several inches of crushed cadaver bone holding his lower back together. He feels very frustrated that he's unable to do the things around the house that in the past gave him great satisfaction. He can't bend or twist ever again.

"Here's to 35 more years," Ray said this morning.

"I don't think so, honey," I replied. "I'd be happy for 12."

"You'd only be 75," he protested.

As we went back and forth about how long we each wanted to live, we had in the back of our minds that one of us will one day need to say, "Goodbye" to the other. Unless we die together, the day will come, sooner than we expect or want, when one of us will have to figure out how to enjoy living without the other. There is no fighting it. It is the way of life. We say, "Hello" and open ourselves up to extraordinary joy, but doing so requires us to also say, "Goodbye," and that is very painful.

Speaking of, I need to say, "Goodbye" to you, the generous reader of my column/blog, as I take several weeks off to spend more time playing with Ray, and the other people in my life I cherish. I'll be back in the fall.