

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

There are No Cooties in the Garden of Eden

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The Garden of Eden is not a mythological place like heaven and hell. It is located in our own zip codes, on our own streets, in our own homes. But there are no cooties allowed in the Garden of Eden, nor shame. If you think you have cooties, or you are ashamed of who and what you are, you'll never find it no matter how hard you search.

The Garden of Eden is bliss, or, if you prefer, great happiness. It is a moveable feast that travels with you to school, work, and recreation. It is there when people love you and when they hate you. It is there when you are considered a failure and when you are considered a success. You can feel it in the White House and in jail. But you can't feel it if you have cooties, or are ashamed of who you are.

Children tell each other that they have cooties, with the intention of causing shame. But children first learn of cooties at home. Cooties are things that other people find disgusting. A guest at lunch yesterday told us that because she had polio as a child, her mother told her, "God gave me five normal children. What happened to you?" Polio is cooties. If you believe you have cooties, you feel shame. If you feel shame, you can never experience bliss. If you can't experience bliss, you can't be in the Garden of Eden.

While taking friends through the "Our Stars" exhibition at the Stonewall National Museum, one spotted the poster for *Making Love*, the 1982 commercially released film in which actors Harry Hamlin and Michael Ontkean kiss passionately.

"When I saw it," he said, "people in the audience gasped in disgust." Men who kiss men have cooties. If you believe that, you feel shame.

When I was a child, the black woman my mother hired to babysit for us asked for a drink of my pop (I'm from Michigan.) I said, "Eew, no, you have germs." It was a response I had learned to give to everyone. I was shocked when the woman got angry and said, "I don't have no special germs." Way back in the late 1950s, she was letting me know that she didn't have cooties just because she was black. I suspect she entered the Garden of Eden long before I did as a gay man who squirmed in fear in response to the expressions of disgust at *Making Love*.

Fundamentalists Christians can get quite smug when they announce that "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." They want gay men and women to accept that we have cooties and no place in the Garden of Eden. We shouldn't expect to join them in the place they call heaven. I've come to believe that there is no personal God who creates, guides, and judges humans, and that people who try to create hell for others will never experience bliss in this world. The gates to the Garden of Eden are closed to them as long as they attempt to make others feel less than perfect.

Ray and I remind ourselves and each other on a daily basis that we are in heaven. It's true not because we enjoy a very privileged lifestyle, but because neither of us feels as if we have cooties, and neither of us feels shame. And it's not just the cooties of homosexuality that we have rejected as false, but also the cooties of being unworthy of other people's respect and love on any basis. Perhaps it's our age, but we don't care any longer if others approve of us. We don't apologize for being white, male, able-bodied, American, privileged, agnostics, Buddhists, non-drinkers, early diners, early risers, controlling, passionate, old, or any other characteristic for which others might want to make us feel shame.

It breaks my heart when I look at anyone who feels shame about who they are, or who feels they need to offer excuses for their existence. Perfection is an illusion. People who tell us that we have cooties, or who make signs of disgust about our personhood, are not happy people, and they don't want us to be happy either. When we participate in any way to make others feel as if they have cooties—for whatever reason—we are seeking to shame them, and we lose that moment's opportunity for bliss.

If you want to be happy, regardless of your race, sex, faith, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, disability, or any other factor, be happy because of your race, sex, faith, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or any other factor. They're not cooties. They're beauties. That's the key to the gate at the Garden of Eden.