



Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.

Misplaced Sympathy – at best

I was washing windows when Mona burst into the house, "Poppy I'm home." In our kitchen, we have new windows, the kind that snap out and flip, so you can wash the outside while still standing inside, or, if it's a particularly nice day, wash the inside while standing outside – I guess. Mona grabbed a snack, poured some milk and proceeded to tell me that the ADAPEP teacher (Alcohol-Drug Abuse Prevention Education Program) was in her class today. She taught the girls about puberty while the boys played in the gym. Then the girls played in the gym while the boys had their lesson.

I was reminded of my own indoctrination, but, unlike Mona, I wasn't a fifth grader. At Saint Mary Gate of Heaven Elementary School, in 1963, I had to wait until I was in eighth grade to get the official ecclesiastical scoop on puberty. Father Cunningham spoke to the boys. I don't remember where the girls were. I don't think they were allowed to go through puberty. Every time Father Cunningham spoke, I was distracted by his green teeth, so I heard very little of the instruction. I do, however, remember that he warned us about the dangers of taking long showers and to never look at our reflections in the bathroom tile, something that up until that lesson none of us had thought of doing, but we all experimented with afterward. More disturbing, was Father Cunningham's warning about seeing immoral movies. Catholic children were not allowed to see movies that had received less than an A-1 rating from the Legion of Decency. My hand flew up immediately, "But Father, what if we're fans of the actors and actresses in a movie that got a bad rating?" I'm sure all kinds of bells and whistles went off in Father Cunningham's head.

Mona clearly wanted to talk about her lesson, so I gave up washing windows and joined her at the kitchen table. Truth be told, it doesn't take much for me to postpone any kind of housecleaning, including window flipping. Mona was quite animated, "The teacher talked about girls developing breasts and getting their periods." Off course most of the learning took place after the lesson - in the gym when the girls ran around asking who had gotten her period; breast development was obvious.

Mona said that she didn't like the movie shown and that some of the girls were laughing, probably out of embarrassment. "The movie showed pictures of a vagina and ovaries!" Mona, like many of the girls if not all of them, was probably curious, but hesitant about the subject matter. Now I didn't want to say that it's foolish to be embarrassed, but, being a product of the sexual revolution, I couldn't let this moment pass without further reflection. So in my best parent voice I mused aloud, "I wonder what it is that makes a person less uncomfortable with some parts of her body than others." Mona looked at me like here we go again .

I persisted, "Suppose the movie showed a picture of a nose and nasal cavities, do you think that the kids would have been embarrassed?" Mona appeared dumfounded. She replied, "Well, if I had a cold, I'd be fine telling someone I have a stuffy nose, but I don't think I'd ever tell anyone I have a stuffy vagina." As usual, Mona's insight eclipsed my parental wisdom. Some body parts and functions are just more private than others.

Mona also mentioned that the teacher said that the girls might feel more comfortable talking to women rather than men about these issues. I thought this was odd considering that the female teacher's next challenge was to speak to a group of boys about puberty. Regardless, I reminded Mona that she has many women in her life that she is close to. She agreed, but said, "The teacher assumes we should just talk to women. She's just trying to put in our heads that we shouldn't talk to men about puberty." Mona also shared that one of the little girls in her class said that she felt sorry for Mona because Mona has to talk to a man about puberty. Mona's response was an emphatic, "There's nothing to feel sorry about." Mona and I discussed the little girl's motives and agreed that they were a bit suspect.

Mona, like many little girls and boys her age, is rapidly approaching some dramatic changes: physical and emotional. I don't assume that Jack and I will have all the answers, or will be Mona's sole source of support. But it's not like we've just been cruising along, and now we're suddenly encountering uncharted territory. From day one, and before, our journey has been predominantly uncharted.

I remember when Mona discovered her first breast bud. I called a pediatrician friend who explained that this was merely the beginning of Mona's breast development. At least half of the women I mentioned this to afterward had no idea what a breast bud was. One friend, a lesbian mom, shared that when she discovered a similar lump on her daughter's chest, she drove to her pediatrician in tears. There are many ways Jack and I will not have first-hand knowledge of our daughter's life experiences. But the three of us don't live in a bubble. Mona has a very rich life where she enjoys close and loving relationships with children and other adults. I echo Mona's sentiments, "There's nothing to feel sorry about."