Psychiatry Not As Advanced As Claimed

To the Editor:

Lawrence D. Mass’s triumphalist interview of psychiatrist Mark J. Blechner in the September-October ’09 issue is most ironically misleading. It trumpets the American Psychiatric Society’s decriminalization of homosexuality as a mental disorder as equal in importance to the Stonewall Riots, while Mass declares that “post-declassification was the touchstone of my own gay activism.” Here my concern is that Dr. Mass is attaching too much importance to a system of categories that is arbitrary at best, dangerously whimsical at its worst.

A second concern arises with this statement: “Also, it is wrong to presume that because psychoanalysis in 1950’s America was so reactionary, that it was always that way.” As evidence, Blechner cites an earlier American psychologist, Harry Stack Sullivan, the revolutionary of the 1920’s who was “way ahead of the norm in society, then and even today.” Hooray! Blechner traces the roots of medical homophobia to the Old Testament’s “be fruitful and multiply,” allowing that “even Freud defined perversion as any sexual act that didn’t quickly move to penis-in-vagina intercourse.”

The reality is that in the U.S.—which is where Freud’s outlook really took hold—most Freudians treated gays terribly from the outset. (They, in turn, as German Jews, were viewed with suspicion by many Americans, which could help explain their homophobia.) Blechner views psychiatry’s low point as the 1950’s to the 70’s, which were bad years, to be sure, so I won’t quibble. And who could disagree that we can learn from that mistreatment how to treat “other sexual minorities today, such as heterosexual cross-dressers, voyeurs, exhibitionists, and transgendered people”? Right on!

Missing from this list of sexual outliers that deserve our compassion are “pedos,” those attracted to teenagers, as well as pedophiles, those attracted to children, who are condemned by psychiatrists and psychologists and relegated to the criminal justice system. As luck would have it, Harry Stack Sullivan, Blechner’s hero, lived for thirty years with a male companion that he had rescued as a teenager from the streets. Should Sullivan have been locked up? What’s more, it is simply not the case, as Blechner acknowledges elsewhere, that the APA has found enlightenment regarding all sexual minorities. The DSM still lists “gender identity disorder” and “transvestic fetishism” as psychological disorders, after all.

Then, too, it was the psychiatric establishment that legitimated the daycare center panic less than a generation ago, in which many innocent men and women were convicted through “recovered memory syndrome” and highly leading cross-examination of small children. But that’s another story. What it reminds is that we—GLBT people in particular—should approach the APA and its classification schemes with skepticism and recognize that they reflect the social prejudices and superstitions of the day. To this extent, psychoanalysis remains a pseudoscience whose diagnoses and cures shift with the sands of public opinion.

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