

Sapphire and Sappho

Allies in Authenticity

Brenda J. Allen

University of Colorado, Boulder

I expected to like Anna even before I met her. She had applied for an instructor position in the Department of Communication where I had recently been hired as an assistant professor. A graduate student, one of her former students who really admired her, asked me to be sure to consider Anna's application. Based on that recommendation and Anna's clear qualifications for the job, I voted along with my colleagues to hire her. Since that time over six years ago, Anna and I have evolved from colleagues to best friends. From the beginning Anna seemed to be a pleasant person and we would exchange cordial greetings as we passed one another in the university halls. Students liked and respected her and I heard many comments about her excellence in teaching. Because I enjoy a similar reputation as a teacher, I felt a sort of kinship with Anna. In addition, she dressed with a certain flair that I appreciated because in the public housing development (a.k.a. "the projects") where I grew up, we black people took a special pride in how we looked. I admired how Anna, a white woman, knew how to coordinate her clothes and jewelry. After we grew friendlier she introduced me to her mother, and I then understood Anna's care with her appearance. To use a phrase from my childhood, her mother was "as clean as the Board of Health." The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, they say.

Anna and I didn't really get to know one another until after our department was relo-

cated to less than desirable quarters. The faculty was cramped together in an open space separated only by partitions. As luck would have it, Anna and I were assigned adjacent desks. As a result of such proximity, I couldn't help but hear how she interacted with her students. I often teased her about her den-mother approach to their problems. She began to do the same with me and we would laugh at ourselves but feel good about our mutual concerns for students' welfare. Anna and I also discussed plans to teach a critical thinking course and found that we had similar ideas about issues, activities, and improvements on our own critical thinking skills in the classroom.

We soon discovered that we had much more in common than our teaching philosophies. We were both baby boomers from the Midwest, only months apart in age. We also came from lower-class families, and religion played a strong role in our childhoods. Anna's father was a Fundamentalist Evangelist preacher so she was not allowed to listen to music or dance. My mother, on the other hand, allowed me to explore many religious faiths and I grew to be very independent, free to dance my way through the whole Motown era. Despite the differences in how we experienced religion, we were both spiritually grounded and sometimes prayed together.

I was raised in Youngstown, Ohio, the eldest of three children in a single-parent home in the projects. Fortunately I grew up in a stimulating, warm community and my life was richly textured. Anna, as a beloved only child and a preacher's daughter, experienced a much more reserved upbringing. But we were both raised to be caring and nurturing. As a result, we often suffer from giving too much and overextending ourselves to others. Early in our relationship, I began to appreciate the strong sense of reciprocity that I felt with Anna because she often gave me what I would usually give to others yet rarely receive in return.

About a year into our friendship, a major turning point occurred in our relationship. Anna invited me to lunch offcampus, and when I met her at the restaurant she seemed somber. "I have something that I must tell you because our friendship is important to me."

She took a deep breath and told me that she was a lesbian.¹ After my initial surprise I thanked her for sharing something so personal and assured her that it would never negatively affect our friendship.

To the contrary we have grown closer. As a heterosexual I had never before given much thought to sexual orientation or gays "coming out of the closet." Thanks to Anna, I have become far more sensitive and enlightened. When she first invited me to her home, she showed me the room that had become her bedroom when family members visited because only a few people knew that she and her "roommate" were partners. I was amazed by the extent of the masquerade that she felt compelled to perform to maintain a facade of being straight. Anna has since related many stories about the effort that she and other members of her gay community have to exert to maintain a heterosexual image. For instance, she described a communication move that she terms "sanitizing," in which a person uses a noun or pronoun to reflect either gender neutrality or a heterosexual connotation. For example, while discussing her weekend a lesbian might say to a coworker, "my friend and I went dancing" or even "my boyfriend and I went dancing," when in fact she had really gone out with her lesbian partner. Anna also told me about "gaydar," the ability to spot another gay or lesbian person in a social environment: If the other person also has gaydar, the two of them might discreetly acknowledge one another with a simple nod or a smile. Anna noted that this should not be construed as flirting behavior but rather as a validating message that says "you're not the only one."²

The idea of passing as heterosexual intrigued me. Certainly I had heard about light-skinned blacks masquerading as whites but I had never considered that members of other traditionally oppressed groups would pretend to be like people in mainstream society. Anna and I have talked about how she has the option to hide this aspect of her identity to avoid discrimination, while I do not.

Once after we had gone to see a movie, Anna told me how angry she was about a

scene that ridiculed homosexuals. I had *not* even noticed it. Now I am more alert and sometimes consult Anna for her impression of certain media depictions of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Because of Anna I also feel more responsible regarding sexuality issues in the classroom. During a course in critical thinking, I asked students to read an article with the author's name removed and speculate about the writer's identity. One student snickered and said, "It was probably some lesbian." In the past I probably would have breezed past the remark to avoid conflict. This time I responded to it without demeaning my student and managed to open up a discussion on the matter.

I tend to be a private person with a clear demarcation between my work and my personal life. Nonetheless, after Anna opened up to me about her personal life I began to reciprocate. We now discuss every aspect of our relationships with family, friends, significant others, colleagues, and students. Whenever I meet a prospective mate, Anna is usually the first and often the only person I will tell. Once the relationship fizzles, she is always there to help me to get back out there in my quest for a significant other. I have often been pleasantly surprised by the similarities of issues that confront us both as we try to develop and maintain positive, intimate relationships.

I have grown comfortable enough with Anna to let her in on the "black" ways of communicating that stem from my background. When I tell her that someone or something is "workin' my last nerve" (i.e., aggravating me), she knows exactly what I mean. I find myself calling her "Girl," an affectionate appellation that I normally reserve for African American sisters. I also have discussed my enjoyment of and pride in the colorful, expressive ways that many black people communicate and Anna shares my sense of wonder.

One day an African American student was talking with us about her graduation. When I made the teasing comment, "if you graduate," the student (who up to that moment had been speaking "proper" English) assumed a haughty stance and shot back a flippant response in an unmistakably

"black" style. Anna and I marveled at this great example of "code switching," when people sometimes revert to their own cultural way of speaking during moments of high emotion.

When I moved from a predominantly white area to a racially mixed neighborhood, Anna understood why I felt more at home in my new surroundings. She has felt the same way in settings with a majority of gays and lesbians (e.g., Evangelicals Concerned³ events, Gay Pride parades, etc.). We both seem to enjoy a similar sense of validation and contentment that differs from how we feel at work, where I am the only person of color and she is the only lesbian on the faculty.

Anna and I laugh a great deal, often at each other, as well as cry together about personal trials and tribulations and the plight of our world. We talk with each other in supportive ways regarding world events, particularly those having to do with oppression against people of color and members of gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities, and can openly discuss any sensitive topic related to race-ethnicity or sexuality. For instance, when someone in my department tried to compliment me by saying that she didn't notice my skin color, I was insulted. (This is a complicated issue that I won't attempt to explain here; see Houston (1994) for a discussion of this topic.) Fortunately, Anna was there to help me process my feelings.

At work and in our private lives each of us is actively addressing issues that concern us about the socially constructed elements of our identity, in Anna's case sexual orientation and religious background, in mine race-ethnicity and gender. We are both committed to effecting change and always resist the temptation to take on the status of "victim." We swap stories and perspectives on the socially constructed aspects of our identity for which society would condemn us, and we find beauty and awe in our differences. We collaborate with one another. We report to one another. We share challenges, victories, and failures together.

When Anna spoke at a Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG) event, I was proud to be there to give her sup-

port. Impressed by her speech, I knew that she was passionate about and committed to shedding light on gay issues, but I had no idea of the power and impact she could express. By the same token, when I was working on a community fundraiser for the Judie Davis Marrow Donor Recruitment Program (a group seeking to increase the number of persons of color registered to donate bone marrow), Anna immediately bought a ticket and attended our jazz brunch. She was the only colleague who volunteered to come without my asking, and I deeply appreciated her support.

During a faculty meeting about our department's diversity plan, I asked how we planned to evaluate our activities. Someone responded, "Well, as long as you and Anna are here, we won't have to worry." I resented the glibness of the comment and the idea that as members of "minority" groups, Anna and I were expected to carry the weight. However, my colleague was absolutely right. As long as we are part of this faculty, we will continue to address issues related to oppression and domination in its many guises at our university.

Although we are particularly concerned about women, students of color, and gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, we also care about students in general and how the "system" treats them. We do not consider ourselves either radical or passive and our alliance has made us stronger. I feel accountable to Anna, which motivates me to sometimes speak out on an issue even when I would rather not take on the burden of explaining my views to my other white colleagues. Anna feels the same way. In a sense we are both each other's back-up.

Until 1995, few of our colleagues knew that Anna was a lesbian. Our relationship reached a new turning point when I asked her to write and present a paper about passing as a heterosexual. A graduate student and I were developing a proposal for a panel on feminist standpoints on organizational communication to be presented at the national convention of the Speech Communication Association (SCA). It was suggested that I invite Anna to share her viewpoint. I knew that this was going to be a difficult

request: Anna would have to “come out” to a national group of her peers. However, I firmly believed that her story would provide a critical and important perspective on organizational communication processes which probably had never been aired before and that her contribution would strengthen the panel. As Anna’s friend I felt that if she did this, she would make significant progress toward liberating herself.

So I asked her, “Whew,” she responded. I said, “I know.” “This is major,” she said. “I know,” I replied. Finally she announced, “I’ll do it.”

Our proposal was accepted. Anna began to work on her paper⁴ and I started mine.⁵ In a conscientious move to negate the status of victim or stigmatized other, I focused on positive as well as negative aspects of being black and female. During this time Anna shared with me some of her fears about exposing herself to members of our field, as well as to faculty and graduate students in our department. As I wrote my paper, I occasionally hesitated to share some of my experiences and feelings because I knew that most of my colleagues would not have a clue about the pain I have endured or the pride I feel about my black womanhood. Yet whenever I thought of the monumental risks that Anna was taking, I would dismiss my reservations and press on.

We scheduled a “preview” of our SCA panel for the university community. Anna was late coming to work that day, having had a difficult night with little sleep. She was extremely anxious about doing her presentation but she came anyway. As we sat in front of a room filled with colleagues and students, Anna credited me for her being there and then she introduced her partner who was seated in the audience. The rest of the audience was visibly moved by Anna’s presentation. When she concluded, they sat in stunned silence for a moment, then applauded her at length. Since that time, Anna has placed a photograph of her partner on her desk, something that heterosexuals do routinely but that often engenders great risk for some gays and lesbians.

As I review my friendship with Anna, an interracial relationship that is much more

than that, I notice that it contains many elements of the classic model of interpersonal attraction. Despite our similarities in personal style and background, Anna and I would probably not have become such good friends if she were straight. Because of her sexual orientation she can be empathetic with me in ways that my other white, straight friends cannot. Thus, I believe that our marginalized positions in society and academia have been a major factor in forming the center of our friendship.

In regard to the title of this essay, Sappho⁶ was a black female character in the old radio and television series *Amos 'n Andy*.⁷ She was sassy, verbose, and intensely expressive. Sappho was a Greek poet (circa 600 B.C.) from the isle of Lesbos who wrote about romantic love between women. Each of these characters personifies one aspect of the multifaceted identities that Anna and I rarely allow others to see. Because we trust and respect one another, we are comfortable being our authentic selves—in all their complexities—with one another. We will continue to work toward helping our society become a place where members of traditionally oppressed groups can be themselves without feeling ashamed, afraid, or defensive.

Notes

1. Anna has granted me full permission to tell this story, having read and approved the essay in its entirety.
2. For a compelling discussion of examples of communication behaviors enacted in “don’t ask, don’t tell” environments, see Spradlin, A.L. (1998). The price of “passing:” A lesbian perspective on authenticity in organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 11, 590–605.
3. A support network for gays and lesbians from Evangelical Fundamentalist church backgrounds; see Taylor, B., and Spradlin, A. (Eds.) (1998). *Speaking out: Faith stories of evangelical gays and lesbians*. (2nd Ed.). Denver, CO: Evangelicals Concerned Western Region.
4. Spradlin, Anna (1998), op. cit.

Allen, B.J. (1998). Black womanhood and feminist standpoints. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 11, 575-586.

Much has been written about Sapphire, a controversial fictional character. Many consider her to be an extremely negative stereotype (e.g., a shrew or "mammy") of African American women. My reference is intended to refer only to her in-your-face style of communicating. For another perspective, see Chapter 8.

See Ely, M.P. (1991). *The adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A social history of an American phenomenon*. New York: Free Press.

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