

*Mary Lou Lemon delivered the following speech to the Perryton, Texas Toastmasters Club on May 31, 1996. Text courtesy of the Lemon family.*

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## **WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?**

This morning I need the courage that Betty had last week as she talked about a subject that has a stigma attached to it because of myths, lack of knowledge and lack of understanding – a carry over from the “flat earth, pre-scientific” days. (Betty talked about mental illness). I am going to talk about a subject that also has a stigma attached to it because of the carry over of that same “pre-scientific, flat earth” misunderstanding. A subject that is now being debated all over our land. A subject that has long been falsified by baseless myths and distortions. Distortions that have caused fear and hatred, to say nothing of abuse and deaths.

First of all come along with me as I recall the lives of some children who grew up in our community.

Jane, we’ll call her, grew up in Perryton and went through Perryton schools. She was an individual with special gifts. She loved sport – tennis, basket ball, volley ball, etc. She had dreams of being a coach or a teacher. She loved her church, cared about people, believed in Jesus and prayed to God. She was an active leader in the youth groups as well as being highly respected by her peers and adults.

Something is very strange – she has not been home for a very long time – not for class reunions, holidays, nothing.

Bill, we’ll call him, grew up, graduated from Perryton High School, was known in town as was his family. He was a fine young man in every way and was loved by his family. Bill came home but no one knew he was home or that he was ill. He came home to die with his family, but society and the church seemed not to make it clear enough that love and acceptance is unconditional so the family was terribly alone in their desperate time of need.

John, we’ll call him, was highly intelligent, very successful in his profession. He was raised here and loved by his family. John chose not to come home to die. His family would have accepted him but he felt closer to his friends. So his family had to travel far to be with their son and brother and watch him die.

Jack, we’ll call him, attended, part of his school days in Perryton. His parents divorced and Jack moved away. I saw Jack, at church one Sunday. The first time he had been back in a long time. I had taught him in Sunday school but I was really surprised when he spoke to me first and called me by name.

A couple months after I saw him, he killed himself. His family cannot imagine why or at least can’t say why. And the whys come up over and over and the pain is unbearable.

These four young people had one thing in common. They were born gay. They didn't ask to be born, but they were born, and they were born gay.

Statistics tell us at least 10% of the people in the United States are gay. One out of every ten people is gay. This means that "they" are in everyone's family somewhere, "they" are in every work place somewhere, "they" are in every church, every Synagogue and every school, somewhere. This means that there are many family members who know, have known and still know that certain family member.

Remember, every gay person is born into a heterosexual family. That child was born gay just as people are born left or right handed, with certain natures, certain colored eyes etc. the scientific world readily acknowledges that. Keep in mind we are no longer "pre-scientific, flat earth" people. And remember that mother and father did not teach some of their children to be gay and the others to be heterosexual.

Statistics also tell us that 1/3 of all teenage suicides are by gay teenagers who cannot handle being told they are disgusting, abnormal, queer, and being called ugly names.

My friend, Dr. Fred Craddock, tells us a reporter once asked Carl Sandberg "Mr. Sandberg, you are a man of music and a man of poetry. You're a man of scholarship and a man of many words. In your judgment, what is the ugliest word in the English language?" Old Mr. Sandberg said "The ugliest word, the ugliest word, ah the ugliest word, the ugliest word. The ugliest word is EXCLUSIVE".

Gay teenagers who take their own lives can no longer stand the exclusion, the hate, the ostracism, and rejection perpetuated by the people that should love them the most.

Listen to the diary of Bobby Griffith in this book "Prayers For Bobby" by Leroy Aarons. Bobby's super religious mother found and read Bobby's diary after his death.

"I can't ever let anyone find out that I'm not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me. They might even want to beat me up. And my family? I've overheard them... They've said they hate gays, and even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad, and God sends bad people to hell. It really scares me when they talk that way because now they are talking about me." – from Bobby Griffith's diary

Unable to reconcile his gay sexual orientation with his family's religious and moral beliefs, Bobby leaped to his death from a freeway bridge.

Let's stop and ask ourselves – why would any child, teenager or grownup, for that matter, choose to live a life of exclusion, contempt, loneliness, being hated, being vilified, being ridiculed, being different?

Let's imagine for a moment, what it might be like to be a teenager who happens to be gay.

Let's ask ourselves – if I had been a gay teenager, who would have been my role model? Who could I have turned to in my desperate struggle? With whom would I have dared discuss the strange feelings I was experiencing during my puberty years? I had heard enough dirty words on the school ground – fag, queer, fairy, weird, the snickers, intended for some person who was “different”. I had seen the graffiti in the rest rooms. I had heard enough by the time I was 11 or 12 to know my feelings were not like my friends!

I had heard enough to know my feelings were “bad” “disgusting” “sinful” “wrong”. But who could I have shared with? Not my parents – they too by their actions and words had conveyed the same hateful message – that it was wrong to be different. Not my pastor – he preaches about sin and that I am doomed to hell because of feelings I have no control over. There is no teacher I can confide in because I cannot trust that teacher not to have a “duty” to tell the superintendent or the school board.

There are not even any books I can check out of the school or public library and for sure, if I did, I would have to hide them and how could I keep the librarian from knowing I was reading such bad books?

A secret is a terrible and frightening thing to be burdened with. How long can I live with such a secret, how long can I live pretending things that I don't feel? How long can I live a lie? How long can I be isolated without loving another person and having that love reciprocated? I saw a cute person that I really liked but dare not let my feelings be known – that person might not be like I am. Why has God deserted me?

Doesn't God hear my prayers over and over and over and over to make it go away? How can I tell my parents?

The late Dr. Howard Brown, New York City's first Health Services Administrator writes of a Baptist minister's son in a small Midwestern town. Upon finding out that his son was gay, the minister told him daily that he would go to hell for committing an abomination. During the boy's senior year in high school, his father ordered him to eat his meals in his room, away from the rest of the family. Although he was an outstanding musician and had won state and national music contests, he was told he could not play the church piano and, indeed, was not to attend the church at all. On graduation day, the father sent the boy's brothers and sisters out of the house and handed the young man his “gift”. It was an envelope containing a small amount of spending money and a one-way train ticket to New York. His mother was sad, but could only say that she thought it was “best for the family.”

In another case described by Dr. Brown, a mother put her arm around her son's shoulders after learning that he was gay – which he took to be a sign that she was going to accept him. Then she spoke, saying she had made only one mistake in her life. “What do you mean?” he asked, whereupon his mother told him that she should have had an abortion twenty-two years earlier. Since that conversation she has been telling everyone that her son is dead.

A few parents do react differently.

Andrew Sullivan, editor of the NEW REPUBLIC MAGAZINE tells of going back to England to tell his parents he was gay. He did that because he wanted his parents back and because secrets separate people.

He said to his parents, "I am gay". His mother said, "What does that mean?" He repeated, "I am gay, I always have been". His mother's reaction was typically British and she said "Oh my God, I must get a cup of tea!" And she did.

His father's reaction was different. His father wept. Andrew asked, "Why are you doing this? I am O.K." His father replied, "Because I wasn't there for you."

How many fathers have not been there for their sons?

Gay people are people just like we are. They have emotional integrity as worthy as ours, and, just as we, they have great gifts but also weaknesses. They want just what you and I want. They want jobs, homes, people to love and people to love them. They want families to love and care for and they want to be able to provide for their life mate in the same way you and I want to do. They want just what every American wants and they want to pursue the American dream just as every other American wants to do.

In becoming acquainted with these people we will learn that they love this country and are willing to make great sacrifices to build and keep it better for all people. They want to serve this country, just as we do, and they want freedom and justice for all people just as you and I do. They are willing to share their gifts, talents and possessions just as all of us are to help others and to have self-esteem and pride.

My purpose in talking about this subject this morning is to help each of us think honestly about our prejudices, analyze what we think, read books by intelligent gay people, hear their stories and the stories of their families. We have to break down our walls of prejudice.

And especially we have to love one another – accept one another with all of our differences – for after all – who is my neighbor? I am to love my neighbor as myself.

Jesus was asked "Who is my neighbor?". And the reply came through loud and clear – "The one who is in need. The one who is lonely, frightened, isolated, desperate, abused."

**THAT IS MY NEIGHBOR!**

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**For more about Mary Lou Lemon and the film, *Inlaws & Outlaws*, visit:**

<http://www.inlawsandoutlawsfilm.com>

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