

# Dykes FORUM

When I told a straight male friend the title of this diary, he was shocked. "Are you not afraid of offending people?", he asked. To heterosexuals, and indeed many gay and lesbian women, the word 'dyke' is a term of disparagement, and a symptom of our oppression. This was illustrated to me when a friend who, on introducing herself as a dyke to an older lesbian, was frowned upon and made to feel very unwelcome in the company.

Did you know that the Oxford Concise Dictionary defines dyke as "a masculine lesbian", managing to make it sound like a double negative.

"What's in a name?", you ask. A lot, is the reply, and it's interesting to look at the unique personal, social and cultural forces that shaped us in choosing how we name ourselves. This is what *Dyke Diary* will look at. Like the word dyke. I think I acted as a dyke long before I knew I was gay or lesbian.

Judy Grahn, an American lesbian poet, unearthed the pre-patriarchal roots of the word dyke in her book *Another Mother Tongue*. She claims that there is evidence that the word dyke has both Greek and Celtic origins. According to Grahn, Dike was old Gaia's grand-daughter, and a Greek goddess, whose name means the way, the path. Her social function was "the keeping of the balance of forces". She was a storm goddess, and in times when men were challenging, the old women re-orientated traditions. Dike was a warrior-avenger. She was also, according to Grahn, called Natural Justice, and was seen in the company of her close woman companion (lover), Alethea, also called Truth. In this fascinating book Grahn also associates the words 'dyke' and 'bull dyke' with the Celtic warrior queen Boudica, who, she claims, was a priestess and woman warrior of her Celtic culture. The word 'dyke', she says, passed down through slang where it was preserved and used to describe the independent, strong and rebellious lesbian who, by way of dress, mannerisms, and general way of being in the world, conveys the message 'I cross over', 'I belong to more than one world', or 'there are many ways of being a woman'. In refusing to inhabit the narrow women's role, the dyke, as in ancient Greek times, is still balancing the forces by asserting her right to be different.

I remember the first dyke I ever saw. To my childish eyes she was a colossus. The biggest woman I had ever seen. Between the ages of five and ten I was brought on regular shopping trips, by my mother, to the

local town - an elaborate socialisation ritual whereby a young girl learns the complexity of what stocks in shops later become slops in pots. This woman stood out among the women in the main street. She carried no shopping bag, always dressed the same - double breasted grey suit, shirt and tie, with pleated skirt - bobbed grey hair, parted at the side, brown horn-rimmed glasses, and what in those days I thought of as men's shoes. Whenever we walked passed her, my mother respectfully nodded and called her 'Doctor'. I was awe-struck, eyes rivetted on the shirt and tie, and also vaguely fearful. There were four doctors in the town, she was the only woman. Many years passed before I was able to find, in my adult life, a meaning to put on these childhood impressions. It's only later, comfortably settled in a life loving women, that I can appreciate the full significance of her existence for me. She was a doctor. She wasn't married. To my childish eye she was dressed for work like a man, but she was a woman. If a woman, then like my mother - but also so unlike my mother. My mother's life was full of shopping bags. The time was spent cooking, cleaning, confined inside the house. At the young age of five I already knew that that was not the kind of life I wanted. I wanted a shirt and tie life, an outside life.

She was the first woman to come into my world who did not take it for granted that women had babies. My mother often quoted this doctor as saying "if a woman had the first child and the man the second, there would be no third". Her phrase registered in my mind and stayed there, along with the knowledge of another way. So it was that at five or six, I demanded to wear a shirt and tie to our uniformed, national school. There are photographs of me: round, smiling face atop a rounder body, hands straight at my sides, chest proudly protruding, to display my red tie. A cute dyke.

I don't know if the doctor ever had a sexual relationship with another woman (I hope she was happy), but she was a dyke in the Judy Grahn sense of the word - that is, balancing the forces. Certainly, in terms of her significance to me, she became the archetypal dyke, and so my first dykish act was to demand to wear a shirt and tie to first class. Out of the core of my young self I knew with certainty what I wanted. My mother laughs when she remembers how I simply refused to go to school unless dressed, as I saw, appropriately.

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