

## **Introspection : Being Bi in Community**

by Raj

Article from Bi Lines On Line, The Electronic Newsletter of the Richmond Bisexual Network (ROBIN)

In October and November 2001, I interviewed several self-described bisexual members of Twin Oaks Community about bisexuality as it relates to living at Twin Oaks. Twin Oaks is a 100-person intentional community in central Virginia that practices income-sharing, nonviolence, and egalitarianism. One of the largest and most successful intentional communities in North America, Twin Oaks is committed to building a feminist, queer-friendly, and environmentally sustainable culture. Twin Oaks welcomes scheduled visitors. For more on Twin Oaks, check out [www.twinoaks.org](http://www.twinoaks.org) or call (540) 894-5126.

### **Raj: How is it different being bi at Twin Oaks versus in the "mainstream" world? At Twin Oaks versus wherever you were before?**

Valerie (33, 9 years at Twin Oaks): I find sexuality to be very fluid at TO. However people have previously identified themselves, here they are free to begin anew, to open themselves up to other possibilities, and in fact this does happen to people when they move here. Part of the reason this occurs is that in the mainstream, "minority" sexualities are struggling against the huge dominant cultural paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality, and so in order to survive, and keep strong in their identity, they tend to join closely with others who identify similarly. Once they move to a society/culture (Twin Oaks) where compulsory heterosexuality is not the dominant paradigm, there is less of a reason to cling so tenaciously to the "minority" identity. Another reason is that behavior at Twin Oaks is freer from mainstream influences. The culture here tends to support people acting as who they really feel themselves to be instead of according to traditional gender stereotypes (in types of work, in dress styles, in who they are intimate with, etc.). In a way, sexual identity is irrelevant at Twin Oaks.

Mary (28, 1 year at Twin Oaks): Being Bi/Queer seem seamless in the Twin Oaks culture. It's just one more way of being, and lots of folks here are at least open to Bi experiences if they don't identify as queer. Because we spend most of our time here we don't need to deal with homophobia as much. At my last community I had an outside job teaching school where I had to be closeted but came home to a queer-friendly environment. Here I am almost always in a queer-friendly environment.

Frodo (25, 1 year at Twin Oaks): It's way more connected to the lives of the other people I live with. When I went to college in Germany, I lived with one set of people, studied with another set, and worked with still another. Parties were somewhat anonymous. Here, we share all aspects of life. We have a lot of great dance parties here for Twin Oaks' members and guests, and sure enough, people see who I dance with.

Val (37, 14 years at Twin Oaks): There's no need to hide it at all—no kind of social censure of having same-sex relationships. I can walk around hand-in-hand or making out with a woman and nobody will think twice about it, except for those people who don't like PDAs. As far as out there—I haven't had that many relationships with women, so I haven't experienced that much out there, except obviously you can't show it unless you're real brave. I've kissed woman openly "out there," but in another country. It's dangerous to be "out" in the world.

Lee (48, 1 year at Twin Oaks): It's much easier to be open about it here. That's the biggest thing. There's fewer prospects here.

Valerie: When I came out to family as bi in my early 20's, they couldn't wrap their minds around it. All they heard was "lesbian" and didn't even get the bisexual part. Their homophobia overwhelmed any understanding of the "bi" part of bisexuality. Obviously here, people

understand.

Mary: In the mainstream world I was verbally attacked many times for being queer. In reaction, I did tons of activism. I don't seem to need to do activism here; my social needs are being met in other ways and oppression here is not queer-related. I'd like to report that there is no oppression here, but even we admit that this is not Utopia.

**Raj: What's good and bad about being bi at Twin Oaks? What are the challenges, the advantages?**

Valerie: I like not needing to even think about being in the closet for fear of job loss, social awkwardness, and roommates.

Mary: Being Bi is a challenge to me; I was an out dyke activist for 9 years. I don't want folks to assume I'm straight or only a dyke—I don't want labels, but I don't want my queerness to be invisible. There isn't the need to talk about oppression of queers here like in the outside world—so my queerness doesn't come up a lot. It's hard because it was a huge part of my identity for 9 years. I'm redefining myself—finding myself. They are good challenges; much better than on the outside.

Frodo: The dark side of sharing everything is that it's a public life, especially for more "colorful" people. Everybody adds their two cents to your story. So I figured I might as well publicly post an essay entitled "My Sex Life"-- that was fun, and settled it for a while. And a lot of people were being very positive about that, especially the polyamorous crowd. Polyamory isn't as big as it was in the '70s here, but it's a respected choice. For me personally, I see a lot of overlap between the world of bisexuality and the world of polyamory -- in fact, I often wish such labels were less divisive between what I think of as both queer cultures. Val: I haven't been "practicing" that actively since I've been here. Anything I could imagine would be theoretical, like breaking up and still having to live together. That issue has come up for me more with men.

Lee: When I got together with Val, she was also involved with someone else. It raised some eyebrows. You're living in a fishbowl, then add a relationship; you've got a built-in audience for everything. That's far more problematic than being bi here.

**Raj: Is the community supportive? Not supportive? How?**

Valerie: The community is supportive in the sense that we tend to support individuals' free choices in many areas of life--sexuality, spirituality, diet . . . In general, Twin Oaks supports our members empowering ourselves by making choices that we feel will best serve us in this world and in our lives. This is an extremely supportive environment for anyone making any significant life choice. Also, Twin Oaks culture does not overtly value any lifestyle choice over another. There are no social or economic rewards for choosing to marry a member of the other gender, as is true in the mainstream.

Val: There's an acceptance factor here. One woman came here from a strong outcast community and it was hard for her to come here and have no peer culture. There's no separate subculture here because no one's oppressing you. I never had that kind of community so I don't miss it.

Frodo: There seems to be a wide margin -- especially at parties -- for everybody to be physical to some extent with each other -- particularly less homophobia than in Babylon [term jokingly used at Twin Oaks to mean "the mainstream world"--Raj]. Puppy piles are frequent and widely appreciated.

Mary: The community's very supportive. It is simply not okay to be homophobic here. We support queer causes, go in groups to queer activities and actions, and have queer or queer-friendly

gatherings here. Lee: Being bi is a non-issue here. Being with Val, I can be completely open with her -- and with the whole community. In that aspect it's a great relationship. There's a common understanding between us.

**Raj: Have you ever been put down for being bi at Twin Oaks?**

Lee: Absolutely not. There's been quite a few people surprised [that I'm bi] because I don't appear or act that way. There's been times people said they were glad I was bi and out -- a person like me who doesn't look stereotypically gay, you might say.

Mary: At Twin Oaks, the worst -- and this is not bad -- is the running joke about how lesbians come here and end up with men. It's true and funny, but I don't like being the norm. It's not offensive. The other, which isn't bad either, is the joke about how few "real queers" there are. I guess at times I feel like I let my lesbian community down. Mostly I don't though.

Valerie: The only time I've felt anything like "put down" here are occasional joking discussions/comments about "you say you're bi but you haven't had a relationship with a woman here, are you sure you're really bi?" This has happened to various people I know here over the years.

Val: [The "queer women going straight" phenomenon] has been known to happen here. The queer pool is so much smaller so unless you're gonna go fishing elsewhere this is who you have. But it makes about as much sense to oppress someone for being bi as for being gay...so what if someone turns gay, straight, asexual, bi?!...I have to admit, though, I teased [a queer woman here] about that when she started going with a guy.

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