

The Psychology of the Closet: Governor McGreevey's New Clothes

by Jack Drescher, M.D.

NEW YORK, Aug. 27 (AScribe Newswire) -- Following is an editorial by Jack Drescher, M.D., Training and Supervising Analyst at the William Alanson White Institute in New York. A gender and sexuality expert, he serves as Chairman of the Committee on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Concerns of the American Psychiatric Association. He is the author of *Psychoanalytic Therapy and the Gay Man* (1998).

When New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey declared, "I am a gay American," a shock wave rippled across the nation. After all, a 47-year-old man married to his second wife, with a child from each marriage, is not most people's idea of being gay.

By "coming out of the closet," which in gay culture means admitting his homosexuality to himself and disclosing it to others, McGreevey was forever changing his public persona and his own self-image as well. While some may regard the Governor's secrecy about his homosexuality as a simple matter of deception, being "in the closet" is psychologically complex.

Many gay men and lesbians spend long periods of their lives unable to acknowledge their homosexuality, either to themselves or to others. Most children who grow up to be gay routinely pretend to be heterosexual. Why? Beginning in childhood and throughout adolescence, even suspicion of being gay can lead to teasing, ridicule, family censure and even violence. Consequently, many young gay people come to regard their homosexuality as an unpleasant fact they would rather not know about themselves, let alone admit to others. The psychological means by which they avoid thinking about their sexual orientation is called dissociation.

Dissociation, of course, is not limited to gay men and lesbians. Most people are capable of pushing unwanted knowledge about themselves out of mind. Given some of the consequences of being openly gay, however -- estrangement from family, loss of employment, loss of home, loss of child custody, loss of opportunity, loss of status and even blackmail -- dissociation may seem a viable option for survival. Indeed, some closeted gay people marry and, on the surface at least, live their lives as if they were typical heterosexuals. While some do not act on their homosexual feelings, others enter into secret sexual lives that may involve one-time trysts, sporadic affairs, or even, in extreme cases, living full-fledged second lives. In fact, through dissociation, people can live double lives for months or years and never admit they're doing so, not even to themselves.

Psychological efforts to solve one problem, however, inevitably create others. It is painful to continuously hide significant aspects of the self, or to try to keep different aspects of the self separate from one another. Constant hiding takes its toll, particularly since the mental effort needed to maintain a double life often leads to errors in judgment that can further add to one's stress. Maintaining a heterosexual identity while engaging in secret homosexual activity may lead a closeted individual into a life characterized by lies and subterfuge.

Those who find this psychological split untenable may "come out of the closet" as either gay or lesbian. Coming out involves articulating the feelings and ideas that previously had no acceptable form of open expression. But calling oneself "gay" or "lesbian" involves more than simply revealing oneself to others; it is also an effort to

reach some measure of self-acceptance by acknowledging previously unacceptable homosexual feelings or desires as part of one's self.

Coming out is fraught with danger because of the social stigma attached to homosexuality and anti-homosexual attitudes in the culture. For example, under the federal government's current "don't ask, don't tell" policy, coming out while in military service can lead to discharge. By the same token, gay people are often denied child custody. Given such difficulties, it seems a wonder that anyone comes out at all.

Why do gay people come out? Those who come out of their own accord describe the experience positively, as "a switch being turned on," "coming home" or "discovering who I really am." For others, whose admission of homosexuality is precipitated by an act of malice, it can be devastating. In cases of "outing," a hidden homosexual identity is exposed by those seeking revenge, political advantage or financial gain.

Based on news reports of Governor McGreevey's situation, the threat of being outed in a sexual harassment lawsuit led to his decision to come on his own. Whether he has made the best choice for himself, his family and his constituents is still an open question. In any case, his coming out has not ended with the public revelation that he is gay. Still ahead lies the challenging psychological task of integrating his previously dissociated homosexual identity into a new public persona.