

The Peacemaker

One Woman's Battle in the Church's War on Homosexuality

First Clues: Barbie and Cher

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Some of my first clues about my sexual identity came from the daily sources of childhood entertainment. Barbie, goddess of the doll world, made her appearance in the early sixties dressed to the nines, and I was among her congregation of worshipers. Barbie was not just another doll; she was the gift of choice for little girls everywhere who adored the synthetic high priestess of fashion. I was proud of my collection of nine shapely blondes, brunettes, and redheads, a bevy of beauties that no little girl in the neighborhood could rival. I had no control over the growing population; Barbie seemed to multiply with every birthday and Christmas. And no self-respecting six-year-old girl could be without a carrying case, or three, full of accessories and drawers stuffed with the latest fashions. I spent hours posing Barbie in front of her aluminum foil mirror, admiring her well-put-together ensembles.

Yet even though my closet looked like a shrine to Mattel, I wasn't big on playing with dolls. I liked the clothes and the creativity of putting the outfits together, but after that I wasn't quite sure what to do with the Barbies. Their weird tippy-toe feet were perplexing, looking to me like a form of torture. I spent hours pondering those feet shaped like flesh-colored deformed birds, wondering if Barbie had stock in a large high heel manufacturer.

Ken, Barbie's boyfriend, was a nonentity to me. While my girlfriends would dress him and walk him down the aisle with Barbie, enacting their imaginary wedding day, I ignored him, keeping him in the carrying case rather than making him part of my play. I didn't dislike Ken or entertain thoughts of banning him from the harem; I just could never seem to fit him into the context of the glamorous life Barbie led. His black pants, white shirt, and occasional

sweater were not enough to hold my interest. Ken seemed like that quiet, plastic type, boring and not worth the time, while Barbie, built like a top-heavy and curvaceous supermodel, held my attention. Even at six I enjoyed the beauty of the female body. This was not sexual; it was purely aesthetic. Her slender arms and tiny waist made my young mind conclude that women must be the pinnacle of God's creation.

In the 1970s when I was thirteen, the TV event called *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* also drew my attention and gave me the first glimpse into who I might be. This musical variety hour was America's introduction to the pop-rock culture. Sonny and Cher were introduced as a couple but were so oddly paired that most viewers could not understand their mutual attraction. Sonny was a long-haired hippy type complete with John Lennon wannabe glasses and shaggy sheepskin vests, while Cher was a raven-haired beauty who wore gorgeous gowns and owned the stage. Hand in hand they walked toward the camera, illuminated by sweeping spotlights. Cher gracefully glided forward, her hair flowing in perfect rhythm to the rippling of her silky form-fitting floor-length gown as she towered over Sonny by six inches. She seemed to be a perfect mixture of Morticia Addams and Joan Baez, possessing beauty, strength, mystery, and a killer voice.

Each Tuesday night I felt a rush as the beauty swished her black shiny hair back over each slender shoulder. With every set change, her wardrobe became tighter and more revealing. Nothing could have pulled me out of my trance as I sat fixated on that sixteen-inch screen wishing 9:00 pm and the end of another evening with Cher would never come. I had no words for what I was feeling; all I knew was Tuesday was my favorite day of the week.

While most Americans were enjoying this new phenomenon, my household was caught between enjoyment and guilt. My parents, Don and Mary, had just joined a conservative, fundamentalist Baptist church, but they weren't sure yet how they felt about all the rules and opinions the church imposed on members. As regular attendees, they had found out quickly that Baptists did not make a habit of watching *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*, having been told by pastors that it went too far in the direction of the pot-smoking, sit-in folks we were seeing in the news. If we accepted such behavior on television, they said, it would be the beginning of the end for our morals. There might have been some truth in those statements, but there was no denying that *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* gave me an important piece of information about myself that would take me quite some time to digest. Like most thirteen-year-olds at the time, I was not thinking about my sexual orientation. All I remember thinking was wow!

Still, I kept everything I was feeling to myself. I certainly did not want my parents to think I was being lured by the show's sensual content, knowing that if I expressed too much excitement about the show they would turn it off. I realized that for me Cher was the real attraction, and, although the word *homosexual* had never been used in our house, somehow I instinctively knew that being attracted to someone of the same sex was viewed as seriously wrong. Although I knew I could not confess my feelings, nothing about this attraction seemed strange to me. On the contrary, I felt only mind-blowing excitement. Most adolescents have felt a similar rush—if not for Cher, then for the Beatles, Greg Brady, Farrah Fawcett, Justin Bieber, or Katy Perry. It is a star-struck giddy excitement that makes eyes pop, hearts race, the adrenaline flow, and dreams of meeting them rush through the head. The thrill that comes naturally to any young boy in his

room or any screaming dreamy-eyed girl at a concert is just as innate to gay people.

While my friends spoke endlessly about their latest boy crushes, I kept silent about my passion for the high-fashion pop star with the killer voice. Upon seeing pictures of male celebrities plastered on their bedroom walls, I tried to play along but could never muster up desire for the boys who held them captive. As my friends swooned over David Cassidy on the Partridge Family poster, my eyes took in the beautiful windblown silky hair of Susan Dey, right beside him. I was not trying to be different and yet I knew I *was* different.