

VIEWPOINT

When the family wants you home alone



by BARBARA J. RUBIN

Whatever personal meaning this holiday season brings with it, many of us can derive satisfaction that the time is spent with family or friends. For others, the season brings with it periods of anticipated conflict.

The holiday season does not have to be a source of stress. We have choices in how we respond to the chaos that surrounds this busy time of year spent with friends and family.

Whether affected by homophobia or transphobia, families may not be accepting of us discussing personal aspects of our lives or even bringing a date or partner home to celebrate the holidays together, telling us by their verbal or non-verbal expression to clearly "lay low," stay invisible, be silent so as not to rock the boat.

We may be asked to make choices that seem outrageous to us, forced to make decisions between acknowledging who we are and becoming invisible "in front of the family." We also struggle with asking our date or partner to oblige the family in this charade they insist take place.

If you are asked to be someone you're not, or asked to do something you don't want to do, respond honestly.

You may hear, "Gee, we're so looking forward to seeing you at Christmas, Gerry, but we'd prefer that you came without Larry. You know how the family is about that sort of thing."

Remember, first and foremost, to

breathe. Then, recognize you have choices in the ways you may respond. You can either make sensible choices that respectfully represent your feelings or create a family feud that will likely topple a holiday time that is already stressful.

You could choose to respond: "It would be great to see you, too, but we won't be able to come now. Either Larry and I are both welcome together or we won't be attending at all. I wish you would reconsider your decision. Please let me know if you do, and we'd be happy to join all of you."

Remember to stay realistic in what you hope to accomplish in your responses. Speaking in this way helps you achieve three simple yet critical goals: remaining respectfully assertive, validating your relationship to you, Larry and your family, and allowing you to act responsibly by telling the truth.

You may also choose an alternative response, depending on how important family celebration has historically been for you. You could say, "I appreciate the invitation to be together again this year. Given your decision, though, I'm left with no other choice but to remind you that my relationship with Larry is important to me. As a result, I will only stay with you for a few hours this year. Larry and I will be celebrating together."

Again, you have asserted yourself clearly, reminded them what is important to you, and you have told the truth and made choices consistent with that.

You will need to speak with your significant other to make certain you have made the right choices for you. For some,

a family gathering that already declines to validate who you are as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person, may not deserve your presence at all.

For others, it may feel valid to simply limit the time there to only a brief visit, and create special holiday time with your date or partner as the priority this year.

Igniting a family riot by the way you respond to their request may sever any hope of them learning from you how narrow their views have been, and giving all of you the opportunity to play active roles in each others' lives again.

Does it feel fair to be put in such a painfully awkward place of being invalidated by your own family? Of course not. But given this reality, we have to choose the best response to get the result we really hope for. It is the rare individual who really *wants* to create more drama at a holiday time.

Responding in this fashion is a powerful event in and of itself for *you* first and your family second. Certainly, we hope they will change their minds and include you and whomever you choose at the holidays. But whether family members ever alter their behavior over time is almost irrelevant. What you have done is provide validation for yourself and realized finally you can feel entitled to do so even at an emotional time of year when we seem to try more than ever to please everyone.

Barbara J. Rubin, Psy. D., is a licensed psychologist specializing in individual and couple's therapy for members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community.