

Billye Talmadge (1929-): Some Kind of Courage

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Times of crisis often cause courage to be drawn from unexpected places. During wartime, unimposing individuals can demonstrate capacities far beyond what seems possible. During natural catastrophes, ordinary citizens often behave with astonishing self-sacrifice. When commended for their actions later, they often say, "I just did what had to be done." The struggle for sexual freedom and liberation certainly continues in this new millennium, despite years of effort by countless numbers of individuals. The toll of the struggle is rarely tallied, except among those closest to the fray, because the battlefield does not exist in real space but in the interior landscapes of millions of people. For many, the rivers there run red from injury, denial, defiance, confusion, and every form of abuse. For Billye Talmadge, each and every casualty of that invisible conflict was and is a personal affront.

Plain-spoken, straightforward, and dedicated to personal and sexual freedom, Billye has always called herself a teacher. It might be more correct to say that she has made a career of taming wild animals. By the age of thirteen she had no less than seventeen stray dogs depending on her at her mother's house in (then) rural Bethany, Oklahoma. She frequently refers to the people who find their way to her as "one of my little foxes," referring to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's story *The Little Prince*. During the mid-1950s and early 1960s she made it her business to learn the law and to educate others like herself—lesbian women—so that they could live with dignity in a society that did not want to admit their right to exist.

Born December 7, 1929, Billye Talmadge grew up in Bethany and for a time in Joplin, Missouri. Her parents were separated before she was born and she did not know her father. Growing up in Oklahoma posed unique challenges: Billye found that she could not agree with her family's position on race and many other issues. At age sixteen she set out on her own. Intellectually precocious, Billye completed her educational training a year early and began teaching eighth-grade English at the age of twenty-one. The short-lived foray into conventional academe left her emotionally bruised and dissatisfied. For six years she worked other jobs in Takoma, Seattle, and Oakland before finally finding her true calling teaching special education.

During her college years, on a brief visit home in 1949, one of Billye's closest friends told her that she was in love with a roommate at a local girls' school. Billye was dumbfounded. Never shy about asking for help, she took her confusion to the dean of women at her university, who provided her with materials on the subject, including *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radclyffe Hall. Reading it was "like coming home." She knew the course her life would run.

Five years later, when she became deeply involved in the Daughters of Bilitis, Billye would contribute to a publication that would serve the same purpose. *The Ladder*, for many women of the era, was a lifeline that reminded them that they were not alone, not crazy, and that there was nothing wrong with them. Its circulation grew to be worldwide. As a dedicated member, officer, volunteer, and peer counselor with the Daughters of Bilitis, Billye touched the lives of thousands of women and many men. She had an eye for the strays, the lost souls, the rebels, and the abused. Over time she accumulated a suite of tools and expertise which allowed her to help the people who came to her to find their way to wholeness.

In tandem with this work, she gave her unique love and encouragement to many youngsters as a special education teacher with the California school system. Noting bluntly that she enjoyed being able to teach without anyone else telling her what to do, Billye experimented, innovated, and introduced new methods. For more than twenty years Billye was not only a teacher but a healer to many physically or mentally handicapped children. The state saluted her efforts with recognition as Teacher of the Year in 1971.

When she became conscious in the late 1940s of her love and affection for other women, she suddenly realized that she probably would not be settling down with a husband and a crop of children as so many of her peers had. Billye took a characteristic choice, i.e., the direct approach: not knowing, really, what to do, even though she knew her preferences, she shadowed "the biggest butch on campus" for a week before getting up the courage to ask for some direction. "I asked her name, to make sure she was the right person, and then I said, 'Are you a lesbian? Because I think I am and I need to know what this is all about.'" As was to be the case so often in the future, Billye was well rewarded. The woman answered every question and treated her with thoughtful consideration. It is doubtful that, had this woman been interested in taking advantage of the situation, Billye would have succumbed without a fight.

Even before she became involved in the Daughters of Bilitis, Billye found herself counseling and caring for others. To begin, she was an inveterate matchmaker with a sure eye. She had suggested to an acquaintance from Oakland that she might enjoy meeting a woman Billye knew in Seattle. The two met, and the Seattle friend, Bonita, wrote to Billye for advice. Billye

wrote back while she was at work, putting her response on the letterhead of the company she was working for at the time. Bonita read the letter and, in a hurry to leave, accidentally dropped it outside her door. Her postman found it, read it, and proceeded to blackmail her, threatening to expose Billye.

The risks were enormous. To be exposed as a "deviant" could cost a person one's job, often one's career. Billye recalls reading about a raid on a place in San Jose—a men's room in a bus station. Police arrested about forty, and the newspaper listed all of their names in a story with huge headlines. Included in those listed as arrested was a man who had been using the pay toilet without paying for it. He had had no small change in his pocket and had simply crawled under the door. In Billye's word, he was "tagged, snagged, and fired." He did fight the charges and eventually won, but it took him a long time and a lot of money—and although he got his job back, the public exposure remained. "He had the balls and the means to fight, whereas most women did not."

When Billye found out about the attempted blackmail, she was consumed with rage, and got in touch with authorities in Oakland who directed her to the post office inspector general's office. Because the laws about pornography were as yet very vague, the inspector general first asked Billye if there were anything in the letter "that my sixteen-year-old daughter should not read." She replied that there was counseling but nothing untoward. "I was too angry to be afraid. I had been violated, threatened, blackmailed, and my friends had been involved, and I was just furious." About a year later she learned that the postman had been arrested, had lost his job, was fined, and had spent two years in jail.

Billye came to believe that many gay people had built-in guilt about their sexuality which made them victims of intimidation when they had done nothing illegal. Thus her primary purpose became to educate not only the gay community but society at large. In spite of the very real potential cost of public exposure, Billye participated in conferences, was interviewed on the radio, and was never very secretive simply because, in her own words, she "didn't have sense enough to be afraid."

The Daughters of Bilitis had been organized in 1954. By the time Billye arrived all the founding members had moved on except for Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who were thinking about throwing in the towel unless things turned around. Billye and her friend Jaye Bell, affectionately known as "Shorty," attended a meeting with the two women, along with another couple. The six women talked through the night and into the morning and succeeded in initiating a new beginning for the DOB. Billye remained involved for five or six years until the time when "the Daughters had pretty well accomplished what it needed to do."

Billye believes that the DOB represented her greatest contribution to the movement; Del and Phyllis report that Billye was "very sensitive about people. . . . She was intuitive about somebody who might have a problem." Not only that, "She was fun to have around," they said. Some of the women who came to the "Gab'n'Javas" that Billye organized through the Daughters were truly troubled and had been victims of abuse; these were the ones that Billye was there for. "It was not unusual to get a call at 3 a.m. saying that we had somebody who was trying to commit suicide," she recalls.

Realizing that in many cases they were out of their league, the DOB leadership sought professional psychiatrists to help with some of the severe cases. They found one, a man, who was willing to help, but he turned out to be a lemon. His "therapy" consisted of curing a lesbian by attempting to seduce and rape her. Eventually, they found an excellent female psychologist who put Del and Phyllis and Billye through rigorous training in counseling and crisis management. As with so many things in Billye's life, the training was not taken for its own sake but because it was dearly needed to meet the challenge of so many people who were in pain.

Things were changing slowly. One of the turning points that eventually sparked the rise of gay electoral power was the mayor's race in San Francisco in 1959. Incumbent mayor Christopher was being challenged by a city official named Wolden. By this time, word had gotten around that San Francisco was something of a haven for gay men and women. In fact, at a meeting of the Mattachine Society in Denver, Colorado, the San Francisco Police Department had asked for, and received, a resolution commending it for its tolerant response to the gay community. Most people ignored the resolution even though it was printed on the inside pages of the local newspapers—but not Mr. Wolden, who believed he saw an issue that would define him as the clear choice for the mayor's office. He accused Mayor Christopher of allowing the city to become a hotbed of deviants.

It was one of those crisis moments that defines a movement. Afraid that their membership would take to the hills, DOB put together an emergency meeting to determine how to respond. It was a question, Billye says, of either "stand up and fight for being gay, and for your right to be gay, or hide—hide for the rest of your life." The group voted to fight and did so by organizing politically. "We got people registered to vote who hadn't voted in their lives," Billye recalls. The strategy was simple: vote as you please, but abstain from voting for mayor. The idea was to defeat the antigay candidate without explicitly supporting the incumbent. Herb Caen, one of the most influential columnists in San Francisco, picked up on the idea and plugged it in his column. "In that particular election, for the city, it was a tremendous number that came out to vote—and the number who abstained was just fantastic. . . ." Suddenly, the political world was forced to sit up and take notice

of a new voting bloc. "From that moment on, any politician out of San Francisco really wooed the gay vote. It was not too long after that that they got an openly gay person on the council, Harvey Milk," Billye recalls.

Yet the atmosphere was far from tolerant. She remembers that DOB then had a couple of members who while walking down the street in Chicago in the late 1950s had been picked up for impersonating men. They had been dressed in fly-front jeans. Planning for a national convention DOB and with this Chicago experience in mind, DOB wrote in a requirement that every woman in attendance wear a skirt. "One woman hadn't been in a skirt in seventeen years, but she bought a skirt for the convention! That's how much they believed in what we were doing."

Then there was Halloween. In the 1960s October 31 was always the drag queen's big night out, but laws about impersonating a person of the opposite gender were still on the books and still enforced at the time. So planners for the big Halloween ball made arrangements for taxis bringing the men in drag to the hotel to deliver them close enough to a door that they could step directly from the cab to the hotel, a private establishment, without "being on the street."

Hair-splitting tactics such as these—successful ones—came from knowing the law and, in knowing the law, finding power. These people needed all the help they could get from whatever loophole they could find. The law was not imposed with any consistency. Billye asserts that,

a lot depended on the arresting officer, how much he hated queers. We had one of our members who was picked up drunk, and she was drunk. But she was dressed butch, and the officer damn near beat her to death. He kept calling her a dyke, and a queer, and a son of a bitch, all this type of stuff. I was called and I went down and bailed her out. . . . I could hardly recognize her she was so badly beaten.

These events happened many decades before suing police departments became a viable option for anyone and, frankly, a queer didn't stand a chance. "She'd just be marked by every cop in the joint. So there was all that fear that you had to help people go through. It was justifiable fear; it wasn't like they were being paranoid."

Much more needed to be done, and to do it gay leaders knew they needed help. The goal was to get homosexuality out of the domain of the criminal justice system. With that in mind, in the mid-1960s, the Daughters conducted an informal survey of members and their relationship with their religion. They found that once a woman discovered she was gay it was difficult to reconcile herself with church beliefs. Rather than fight it, many dropped away from their faith. "That doesn't mean they she dropped away from God," Billye is

quick to point out. "[A woman] ceased going to church because they would not accept her as the homosexual she was, or the lifestyle she had."

According to the survey the ones who had the most difficulty were Mormons. In that faith

the woman was not considered a whole person—nor even to have a soul—unless she were consummated in marriage. So, you lay that on top of being gay . . . It was a heavy trip. The Catholics had it easy because they could be reconciled and forgiven [in confession] and do their penance. . . . There was a priest over in Fresno that most of the gay guys went to because he was an understanding person who would give them absolution so that they could participate in the sacraments of the faith. . . . The Jewish woman had it the easiest because as long as she fulfilled her responsibilities as a woman, which were wife, mother, or sister, she had no problem. Plus, it was the Jewish belief that it was the man whose sin was spilling his seed on the ground; the woman didn't have any seed to waste.

To deal with this problem, the Glide Urban Center organized a three-day weekend retreat that included ten gay men, five lesbian women, and fifteen clergymen from many different religious organizations. A remote Marin County location was chosen specifically to make it impossible for anyone to leave. "The first night we had absolute segregation: the men here, the women there, and the ministers over yonder. Bit by bit by bit the divisions broke down. Out of this meeting came the Council on Religion and the Homosexual." With ministers behind them, DOB and others began to see some success in changing the laws and moving the issue of homosexuality out of the criminal justice domain.

At the end of the conference we took these ministers on a tour of the gay bars, from the god-awfulest, filthiest dive to some of your better restaurants. We said, "because of the laws this is what we have to go through to meet and congregate." We had to work like crazy, but we accomplished it.

Part of the work was building bridges between gay men and gay women.

When I first came out [during the late 1940s and early 1950s], gay men and gay women were miles apart—it was as unusual as can be for a gay woman to have a friend who was a gay man . . . [mostly] out of sheer ignorance. Through a great deal of work we were able to break down some of those barriers.

This included inviting two gay men to a women's discussion group. They were "bombarded with hostility, questions." Billye had told the men what they would be up against and they were prepared. Little by little, distrust and suspicion were replaced by mutual respect and friendship.

In some ways, discrimination helped to forge the movement. Certain beer distributors, for example, refused to service gay bars. The owners of the men's and women's establishments got together and formed the Gay Tavern Guild and started cooperating. They boycotted the brands involved and made a significant economic impact, which added to the growing political clout of the group.

During these years, Billye volunteered uncounted hours while working a full-time job teaching in Berkeley. She would drive over to the city after her classes. During a typical week she would open and handle communications with the many women who wrote or called DOB from around the world. A great deal of the correspondence came from teenagers. Responses had to be very carefully thought out because one wrong word could put the Daughters in court faced with charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

It is a simple fact that great movements are born of long, tedious hours that are given freely from the hearts of individuals who care deeply about the issue. No matter how events may be dramatized later, the core of the movement can be found in the hearts of individuals, and in the willingness of these individuals to work together despite their intrinsic differences. "We were all of us a bunch of rebels," Billye says. But there was a cause, a reason, a goal, and an aim.

We had disagreements—not on the major issues. Our disagreements were always about the means. Sandy [Helen Sandoz] and I went head to head lots of times but never on the goal. I was always for the educational approach; Sandy was always for the political approach. They were simply two ways of achieving the same goal.

Politically, the Daughters of Bilitis made good neighbors. After the Denver meeting of the Mattachine Society, when the issue of "deviants" started to heat up again, the San Francisco police checked out the DOB office by interviewing the landlord. He simply stated that they were good, quiet tenants who paid their rent on time. "We blundered along," although as Billye admits, "sometimes it was scary." One raid had picked up about ninety-seven people, including four women. Del and Phyllis felt DOB should be involved and called Billye, who agreed. They arranged for a lawyer for the women, who advised them to plead innocent and ask for a jury trial. All the men ahead of them had pled guilty and were each fined eleven dollars. Only later

did these men realize that pleading guilty to being in a house of ill repute gave them a police record. The four women, who pled not guilty, soon found their charges dismissed and no mark added to their records. This incident forcibly reminded Billye that most gays and lesbians did not know their rights.

Other groups also became involved in the struggle. The closing of "Mary's First and Last Chance," a gay club in Oakland, attracted the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union in the late 1960s. The ACLU filed a suit which found its way to the California Supreme Court. The Court found that laws prohibiting public establishments based on the character of their clientele violated the constitutional right of people "to peaceably assemble."

This revolutionary period, from 1959 to 1969, saw great strides in the decriminalization of homosexuality. "It became part of the medical domain," Billye notes. "Now we had to be cured, but at least we were not criminals anymore." In 1959, San Francisco's Mayor Christopher could not even bring himself to use the word "homosexual" in political discourse. Ten years later the seeds of what would become a strong gay pride movement were well planted. The dedication required to accomplish these gains had costs. "It was rough on relationships sometimes, because a couple would meet us and one would become very interested while the other was not," but Billye believes, "the rift had to be there to begin with."

We had many couples who were clearly a couple and went through everything together as a couple. We didn't make too many glaring errors. We were very good about talking things over and trying to figure out which was the best way to try to approach something. We worked very hard to have a membership vote—not just those of us who were the leaders.

Does Billye have any regrets? "None, I really don't. I think the Daughters just sort of dissipated because the need for it had been met." Gay women, she believes, had begun a movement that others would carry into the mainstream as "women's liberation," a movement that would transform the face of American society and lead to a new identification for men as well. Gradually Billye moved on to other things.

While still in the Daughters she had met women associated with a group called The Prosperos. As she explored this new organization, she found that many of its goals vis-à-vis education spoke to her ever-present interest in social change. From 1965 until 1979 Billye dedicated herself to helping people of all kinds—gay, straight, man, woman, old, young—to strip away the conditioned roles that imprisoned them. The Prosperos was dedicated to "revealing the true identity of man as consciousness." Due largely to the in-

sight and erudition of the school's founder, Thane Walker, several of the leaders in the lesbian movement found themselves involved in this new project. Helen Sandoz and Stella Rush became very involved, as did Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who maintained cordial and cooperative relations over many years. The Prosperos' fundamental idea, drawn strongly from the philosophy of Aristotle, held that the spiritual identity of every person is beingness, or essence, and that beingness is male and female. In their view, every person has access to both sets of capacities and cannot be separated from either. This viewpoint was, at the time, unique in according a spiritual justification for any person's sexual preference. To put it perhaps too simply: God as male and female beingness was present in and as every person, and it really didn't matter which set of plumbing was involved in a social or sexual encounter. "The Prosperos had wooed us from the Daughters," Billye relates. "It was an educational group, primarily. Sexuality was one of major topics. I got involved and became a teacher, with the goal of helping people to find themselves: not what I want them to be, but to find themselves and to express whatever that self is."

By the late 1970s, Billye came to believe that she had made whatever contribution she could to The Prosperos and turned her energies to her relationship with Marcia Herndon, which began in 1974. Marcia was a professor of ethnomusicology, and Billye put in many hours editing, typing, and organizing materials for Marcia's seven books, two of which are still in use as instructional texts. The twenty-three-year relationship did not alter her commitment to being there for others. Her involvement in the gay community

diminished in numbers but not in intensity. Marcia was a healer in her own right, and we each drew to us people who needed our help. We were different in so many ways, but when it came to counseling or teaching we could end each other's sentences.

Before Marcia's death in 1997 Billye had begun gathering materials for a book of her own, a work of fiction. She is just now rekindling her efforts in that direction. She stated, "I'm rereading my ideal writer, Rita Mae Brown; I love her humor. I'm not sure I can sustain my energies for a book, but I can for short stories." Billye has not tried to build up her counseling practice again, although she feels she has a lot to say. Perhaps that will be done through the written word.

After all that has happened, what she hopes for most is that Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon are recognized in a different way.

They are [already recognized] in many ways, but I would like to see them recognized as the steadfast friends they have proved to be to me and to others. . . . In some ways they have been idealized as a couple, but in other ways the trueness of their friendship has not really been touched.

Billye Talmadge could be described as the antithesis of the "quiet desperation" that so many are said to be living. She has reached out with both hands and grasped her life, striving to solve its puzzles and sharing the fruits of her insights willingly with anyone interested. She cannot stand the sight of any creature experiencing pain. Faced with the pain of others, she struggled, found help where she could, and made mistakes, but always she was there. Her unique courage surfaces and raises great indignation when human beings act in ways that bring pain upon others. She is vigorously spiritual and refreshingly earthy. She does not suffer fools lightly; yet her advocacy has always been tempered with compassion.

One can almost imagine that after a long and event-filled life, on the verge of entering the next world, Billye will look at some close friend and say, "Is that some kind of spot on your forehead? Promise me you'll get that looked at." After which she will move on to another place, another challenge, and a plenitude of interesting times. Today, on her own again after Marcia's death, Billye maintains her connection with life through the several feral cats and numerous woodland critters that crowd the deck of her rural Maryland home each night for dinner at Chez Talmadge. She remains ebullient and optimistic, a relentless advocate for the disadvantaged.

REFERENCES

This chapter is based on a series of interviews with Billye that took place in July and August 2000. There was also a telephone interview with Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in August 2000.