

COMING OUT and BEING OUT: What You May Need to Think About

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prepared by

Allies, Counseling and Testing Services, Division of Equity and Diversity,
and Friends of the UNT Ally Program

INTRODUCTION

Keith Boykin, graduate of Harvard Law School and author of *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America and Respecting the Soul, Daily Reflections for Black Lesbians and Gays*, shares these thoughts on understanding coming out and being out.....

I would say that coming out is not about issuing a press release, wearing a pink triangle, and marching in a gay pride parade. For me, coming out is much simpler. It just means being open and honest about myself with others. I also think that being out is much easier than coming out. Being out just means integrating your sexual orientation into the other aspects of your life, while coming out often involves the drama of sitting someone down and going through many motions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The coming out process is something all members of the “gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning community” (GLBTQ) are faced with at some point in time. Acceptance of your sexuality may come slowly, may come in stages, and for some, never comes at all. Remember, you are not alone, although it may feel that way!

Throughout the discussion being shared with you, it is important to realize that through the years different terms have been used to include those who are GLBTQ, such as homosexual, queer, lesbian and gay. The term gay or GLBT will be used in this resource to be inclusive of all persons in the GLBTQ community.

The coming out process can be a frightening and yet exhilarating experience. Coming out includes coming to terms with one’s own sexual orientation and eventually sharing that knowledge with others. The coming out process is very personal and happens in different ways for different people at different times in their lives. Some persons choose to never come out, while others may choose to come out to a few persons, and still others have decided to be out.

Make sure you are coming out for the right reasons. Do not come out to others for shock value or to retaliate. Carefully think about when and how you will come out, so that you are learning to take responsibility for this aspect of your life. It may not be easy, and you do not need to rely on just yourself at this time.

There are many individual and diverse variables that relate to coming out. Included are family, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, political affiliation, military experience or being differently-abled. Additional factors may stem from community, living, educational and work environments, and other experiences affecting an individual. Fortunately, in recent years, more persons are feeling safer to come out and be out, than before. Included are persons in their 30s, 40s and above, who are outing themselves for the first time. Additionally, persons that may have been oppressed due to numerous aspects of their lives, are coming out as they may be gay, a person of color, differently-abled, military veteran, former Boy Scout, HIV positive or have AIDS.

For many, it is difficult to come out because they may have heard discriminatory remarks about gays from their parents and family members, as well as from neighbors and others at school, work or church. Harassment may have been witnessed. Confronting oppression often consumes time and energy, with individuals making personal decisions about when to come out and to whom. It is understandable that it will be difficult to come out to your family members if they made discriminatory remarks directed toward gays, and possibly members of other groups, while you were growing up. This homophobic presence is unfortunate because in many families there is at least one gay family member or friend. When homophobia exists in the family, the son or daughter often believe they will never be able to share their sexual orientation and important life experiences with those they love, due to oppressive communication or actions witnessed.

The prospect of realizing you are gay, lesbian or bisexual can be so frightening or unknown that one might deny his or her sexual orientation, and this can result in lack of self-esteem and self-acceptance. On the other hand, coming out might be one of the most rewarding experiences of one's life.

An increasing number of students today are somewhat comfortable talking to parents, family members, friends, allies or counselors when they realize they have questions about their own sexual orientation. If this is your situation, you likely have an idea if talking to your family is a safe option for you at this time. Talking about your feelings with others who care and who are not judgmental may be helpful, rather than repressing questions and feelings. For this reason, it is common that students first come out to friends and counselors.

Other persons who are gay may be able to provide emotional support and share their coming out experiences with you. Although coming out is different for most everyone, the experiences of other GLBT persons can prove to be invaluable and provide insight into how others may react to your news.

Students at UNT have a unique opportunity to better understand their sexuality and sexual orientation through the many resources the university community provides. Certainly, life for the GLBT student may be more challenging, due to societal prejudices and lack of knowledge about homosexuality. Coming out requires that you develop the courage to appreciate your own experiences and trust your judgment above all else. The information being shared with you may serve as one resource in your coming out process. Talking with others, seeking support and reading may be helpful during this time.

When outing yourself to family members and others, including co-workers, friends and neighbors, you will realize there are similarities in the coming out process. As noted previously many believe coming out is a lifetime process. Another way to view your acceptance and openness about your sexuality is to consider yourself to be out.

COMING OUT TO FAMILY

Having read and thought about the information presented, students often realize they are closest to family members. Family members often think they know everything about you. When coming out, you reveal to them not just a secret, but an intimate secret.

Coming out is likely to be a more positive experience when you are clear about your own feelings. Before you come out to others you must first come out to yourself. It is important to be comfortable, secure and educated about your sexual orientation. Family members and others will have questions. The more educated you are on the issues, the easier it will be to discuss the issues in what could be an emotionally charged setting. Practice what you are going to say. Practice your responses in anticipation of how the person or persons might react.

You have made the decision to come out and you feel that sharing this part of who you are will enhance your close personal relationships. You should make the decisions - if, to whom, when and how to come

out – in your own way. Do not allow others to pressure you to come out. It is you that will have to deal with the consequences, positive or negative, of this decision.

It may be best if coming out is not a spur-of-the-moment act or a group event. Think about whom you want to tell first, when a good time will be for such a private conversation and how family member(s) might react. A family gathering or a high stress situation may not be appropriate times to come out. Select an appropriate time and place where you can give your family or friends an opportunity to express themselves and ask questions they may have.

Try to make sure you have support you can turn to. Coming out is a process. Initially, come out to the family members or friends with the least amount of risk. These family members and friends can help to explain your situation to others and may be able to share their experiences of coming to terms with your sexuality. This may become a helpful resource for you.

In coming out to family members, you hope they will show you love and support. They may actually need your support at the moment of revelation. Think about the following in advance:

- Try to foresee possible risks. Can you plan ahead to successfully handle consequences that result?
- Your family may be shocked, confused or afraid, which may show on their faces or through their words. Think back to how you felt when you first realized you were gay. How long did it take you to get used to the idea yourself? Be patient.
- Your family may wonder why you kept this secret from them. They may be saddened that you felt you could not share this information and that you did not seem to trust them. However, you are showing great courage and trust in coming out to them now. This should be the focus.
- Your family members may be sad. They may cry. They may grieve. They may grieve for a lost dream of your future - an image that started when they learned they were expecting you and then later imagined your first day of school, college, marriage and even grandchildren. These dreams may appear to be lost to them and they may need to grieve before they can build new dreams with the new information you have shared with them.
- Your family may have concerns based on religion, culture or what they have been taught. Religion is often a perceived obstacle. If you are familiar with your parents' and family members' religious beliefs, you may be able to anticipate their reactions. A point to try to understand is that we are all individuals, with our own opinions or interpretation of religious beliefs. Outside resources, including books, gay-supportive organizations and churches, will be particularly helpful to you and your family on faith-related issues. Refer to UNT ally website www.unt.edu/ally for church contact information in communities throughout Texas. Books you may find of interest are included at the end of this resource.

Family members for many gays and lesbians may be incredibly supportive from the very moment their loved one comes out to them. They may have suspected you are gay even before you suspected it yourself. If so, you may be very lucky. However, this does not mean your family will not have questions or concerns. So, read on...

- Your family may wonder if your belief that you are gay, lesbian or bisexual is just a phase or is youthful experimentation rather than your true self. Questions often relate to whether or not sexual orientation is a choice. Based on your personal experience, what can you share with them to help them understand that this is "who you are" and not "what you do?" For those who are questioning their sexual orientation, questions may be shared with a family member or members if you feel comfortable doing so.
- Your family may wonder if something they did, or something someone else did, made you gay. There was a time when professionals believed homosexuality was caused by parental behavior or other situations young persons were confronted with. These ideas are no longer founded as being true. However, many individuals had feelings they were different from a very young age.

Being able to talk about your own feelings and experiences and having access to scientific literature and resources will be helpful if these questions arise.

- Your family may suggest that you get psychological counseling. It may indeed be very helpful to you or to your family members to have an opportunity to talk about feelings and concerns with a sympathetic and knowledgeable counselor. Please note the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association state claims of “reparative” or “conversion” therapies are questionable and even unethical.
- Your family may have many fears, such as, you will not be able to get a job; you will be a victim of hate crimes; or, you will contract AIDS. Unfortunately, these might be legitimate concerns. Many laws, such as employment laws, do not protect individuals on the basis of sexual orientation. Hate crimes against GLBT persons and those perceived as being gay, are reported in the media. AIDS has not been cured. Throughout history personal, private behavior has been illegal in states with sodomy laws. On June 26, 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that sodomy laws are unconstitutional. It is important that you and your family members acknowledge reality and seek pertinent information through local, state and national organizations and available resources.
- If you come out to one or two family members, they may ask you to keep your secret a while longer. You have begun to come out of your closet so to speak, but your parents or siblings may retreat into one, while they try to figure out the influence of others - what grandma will say, what the neighbors will say or what persons at work or church will say. You may be ready to tell the world, but they may not be ready. How can you come to an agreement that honors your need to be yourself while respecting their need for time to grieve, think, gather information and move toward full acceptance?

Being in a family where you can be yourself openly and honestly and share your hopes and dreams is a wonderful gift. Remember to think through when, how and to whom you will come out and to practice what you will say. Plan answers to the questions and situations you foresee. Be prepared to say "I do not know" when that is the truth. You will not have all the answers; none of us do. As you become more comfortable with your own sexual orientation, you will be better able to answer questions in a clear and positive manner. It will also be easier to help others understand that your sexual orientation is part of who you are.

Be prepared to work with your family and those important to you, through the process of coming out and being out. This will likely be a lifetime process for you and those close to you.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is an organization that offers great support and information. PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, their families and friends through support to cope with an adverse society; education to enlighten an ill-informed public; and, advocacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. PFLAG provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity. If you or your parents are interested in finding a PFLAG Chapter, a complete list of locations and contact information for local chapters in Texas and throughout the nation is available at the PFLAG website www.pflag.org. The chapter closest to UNT is Denton County PFLAG.

You best know your family. How do your family members react to gays in the news, gays on television shows or in films? If you choose to come out to your parents, friends or peers, observe their feelings on the issues first. If parents and friends have always been hostile or negative toward gays and gay issues in the media, you might try to educate them subtly or bring up issues first to prepare them. You could start by asking what they think of issues such as gays in the military or gay student groups on campus. Their responses can help you gauge how they are going to react to your news.

Please realize that through the years, countless sons and daughters have been turned away when their family members learned they were gay or lesbian. This reaction could mean elimination of all financial support including payment of educational expenses.

At UNT, when faced with difficult situations, students often cherish the empathy and friendship received by their peers in student organizations such as the Gay and Lesbian Association of Denton (GLAD). There is also a UNT Queer Faculty and Staff Group (QFS) dedicated to serving the needs of UNT's GLBT population. You may find it empowering to know there are others like you. The opportunity to talk with counselors in Counseling and Testing Services, allies, faculty, staff, resident assistants (RA's) and peer advisors (PA's) may be helpful. Dependent on the discussion, it may be suggested that you make an appointment to see a counselor in Counseling and Testing Services. In fact, the person you are sharing information with may offer to walk with you to suite 321 in the University Union to set up the appointment.

COMING OUT TO OTHERS WHO ARE NOT GAY

Perhaps a difficult step in coming out is revealing your sexual orientation to persons who are heterosexual because at this step you may encounter additional negative consequences, many of which have been noted previously. Persons may be shocked, confused and may even reject or mistreat you.

Coming out to others is likely to be a more positive experience when you are clear about your own feelings and thus less reliant on others for a positive self-image. Because this process of clarification of feelings takes place over time, it is usually not a good idea to come out on the spur of the moment or as a reaction. You will likely be more successful with sharing a specific response important to you, while at the same time truly trying to understand where the other person is coming from. Listening and empathy are important. Think about this, and then continue to read on....

In coming out to others, you may want to consider the following:

- In many communities the climate is changing. However, loss of employment and/or housing is a possibility when coming out to others. Some laws and policies are slowly changing.
- Think about what you want to say and choose the time and place carefully.
- What will you say when those you socialize with or those you interact with at school, church or your living environment ask if you are gay or lesbian?
- Be aware of what the other person is going through. Is the time right to talk about this? Sometimes a discussion later works best, to include an appropriate environment.
- Present yourself honestly and remind the other person that you are the same individual you were yesterday. Being honest with others may help them be honest with you.
- Be prepared for an initial negative reaction from some people. Some persons will likely tell you they do not want to know about your sexual orientation and that it makes them uncomfortable.

Do not forget that it took time for you to come to terms with your sexuality. Therefore, it is important to give others the time they need. One step at a time, learn to meet others where they are.

In terms of coming out or being out with co-workers, remember you may interact with them frequently. Once you come out, there is no turning back.

You have the opportunity to help others learn to become inclusive, tolerant and accepting of the many diverse individuals we interact with throughout our lives. Consider setting the example of celebrating diversity! Be a positive and caring person to others. Being GLBT touches upon a multitude of defining groups, be it ethnicity, culture, religion and others; thus, achievement of inclusiveness is a respectable goal.

COMING OUT IS A LIFE PROCESS

Coming out to oneself and to those most important to you are merely parts of the life-long process of coming out and being out. While many gays and lesbians can name a year in which they came out, this just marks the beginning of being out, not the end of a one-time experience. There is no set pattern of

how these experiences happen, but they do happen for those in the GLBT community whether the decision is to tell or maintain silence or just let people figure it out.

Coming out and being out follow one through life as one encounters the extended family and adds to one's circle of friends and those we interact with in various situations.

The workplace provides a locale for the ongoing issue to come out or not. One of the first questions people ask the new person at work is "Are you married?" Imagine the challenge of Monday morning conversations questioning "What did you do over the weekend?" Imagine the challenges and assumptions of holiday conversations around the office. If you are not out, others may perceive you as single and try to set you up, invite you so you are not alone or assume you will be going home to family. How do you share what you did over the holidays? If you are not out, you may expend energy hiding important events and people in your life, while maintaining the illusion of this other character and life.

Every time GLBT persons face a demographic survey, they are faced with another dynamic of being out. If you are in a relationship, do you check single or married? You know what those terms really mean, yet you may feel the tension of denying your relationship if you check single. Do you write in "other?" Is that safe?

Acquiring appropriate and adequate medical care raises another coming out event. Do you tell your physician or not? When your doctor asks you if you are sexually active, what do you say? If you say yes, but do not note you are gay, it could possibly compromise the quality of your medical care.

The decision to come out or not is present when GLBT couples buy a house jointly, prepare wills and medical/durable powers of attorney, enroll their child in school and many other situations.

Remember it is the presumption that every one is heterosexual that creates these situations. The assumptions and questions of others put the GLBT person on the spot where he or she has to decide to come out or not. Others frequently accuse gays of making sexual orientation an issue. Gays are often blamed for bringing this up and throwing it in others' faces. Gays are caught in a catch 22 concerning coming out. How will you handle these types of situations? Again, this is something to think about as your life changes. What is most important to you as you face the world each day?

EXCERPT FROM SPEECH GIVEN BY TAMMY BALDWIN, D-WISCONSIN, LESBIAN AND U.S. REPRESENTATIVE, SPEAKING AT THE MILLENNIUM MARCH ON WASHINGTON, APRIL 30, 2000

If you dream of a world in which you can put your partner's picture on your desk, then put his picture on your desk and you will live in such a world. And if you dream of a world in which you can walk down the street holding your partner's hand, then hold her hand and you will live in such a world. If you dream of a world in which there are more openly gay elected officials, then run for office and you will live in such a world. And if you dream of a world in which you can take your partner to the office party, even if your office is the U.S. House of Representatives, then take her to the party. I do, and now I live in such a world. Remember, there are two things that keep us oppressed: them and us. We are half of the equation. There will not be a magic day when we wake up and it's now OK to express ourselves publicly. We must make that day ourselves, by speaking out publicly – first in small numbers, then in greater numbers, until it's simply the way things are and no one thinks twice. Never doubt that we will create this world, because, my friends, we are fortunate to live in a democracy, and in a democracy, we decide what's possible.

UNT CAMPUS RESOURCES

Ally Program – www.unt.edu/ally

At UNT the ally respects all people regardless of age, color, disability, gender, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and veteran status. All UNT employees and students are expected to be respectful of equity and diversity. The person displaying the ally identification in his/her office/work area has completed ally training and has pledged to listen and be understanding. Safe zone and ally programs are offered through educational institutions worldwide to assist gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and other persons.

The ally program website includes “GLBT Website Resources” which is a listing of local, Texas, U.S. and international websites that highlight current issues important to GLBT persons. This resource includes websites for churches, gay media sources, community centers, support organizations and counseling services.

Counseling and Testing Services (CTS) - www.unt.edu/cat

CTS is located in the University Union, suite 321, and provides free, confidential, professional psychological services to currently enrolled students. The counseling staff provides a nonjudgmental and caring environment to explore issues and concerns including sexual orientation, relationship issues, career decision-making, depression and stress management. Students may call the office at (940) 565-2741 or stop by to schedule an appointment. Crisis counseling is also available on an emergency basis during regular business hours.

Department of Housing and Residence Life – www.unt.edu/housing

Diversity programs, including ones on GLBT issues, are offered by UNT's Department of Housing and Residence Life. Resident assistants (RA's) and peer advisors (PA's) can also share helpful information. The UNT Department of Housing and Residence Life received the National Commitment to Diversity Award at a National Association of College and University Residence Halls national conference.

Division of Equity and Diversity – www.unt.edu/edo

The Division of Equity and Diversity, located in the Administration Building, room 175, is committed to executing the mission of the University as it relates to the recruitment and retention of faculty, staff and students. The primary goal of this office is to develop and maintain a supportive environment for a diverse faculty, staff and student body. The Division of Equity and Diversity provides a safe zone for all.

Gay and Lesbian Association of Denton (GLAD) – <http://orgs.unt.edu/GLAD>

GLAD is a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and straight student organization at UNT. GLAD provides emotional, political, educational and social support for members and those who attend. GLAD is dedicated to provide education and awareness to the community at large regarding GLBT issues. Questions about the organization can be e-mailed to GLAD@unt.edu. Refer to website for specific information.

North Texas Chapter of the National Coalition Building Institute (NT-NCBI) – <http://hr.unt.edu/>

The NT-NCBI program is based in UNT Human Resources, Marquis Hall, room 105. NT-NCBI is dedicated to ending the mistreatment of every group whether it stems from nationality, race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, job, or life circumstance. The mission of the organization is to cultivate community and develop leaders by promoting greater understanding and

appreciation of diversity and by building bridges of cooperation among all people. Please contact Human Resources in Marquis for more information.

Student Health and Wellness Center (SHWC) – <http://healthcenter.unt.edu>

The SHWC is located on campus at the corner of Chestnut Street and Avenue C and provides medical services for students. The Health Education office is located on the second floor and offers education and private consultation on a variety of health topics, including: HIV testing and counseling, STD consultation, women's and men's reproductive health, sexual assault education and support group, along with yoga classes, massage therapy and nutritional consultation.

UNT's Women's Center

The Women's Center, located in the University Union, room 430, works to provide a broader understanding of the diverse experiences and ideas of women and to empower women to reach their full potential. The main objective is to educate the campus community about issues that concern women by promoting a campus climate that is safe, healthy and respectful of all persons.

WILLIS LIBRARY - www.library.unt.edu

Books on GLBT topics may be found at UNT's Willis Library. Books are located on the second floor and on the left (9TH row.) The call numbers are: HQ 75, HQ 76, HQ 77, HQ 78, HQ 79. There are more than sixteen shelves on GLBT resources.

*Authors who have served as speakers at UNT.

There is more than one edition for many of the books.

**Authors who have spoken at UNT*

Acts of Disclosure, the Coming Out Process of Contemporary Gay Men (1998)
Marc E. Vargas

Beyond Acceptance, Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences (1996)
Carolyn Welch Griffin, Marian J. Wirth and Arthur G. Wirth

Beyond Coming Out, Experiences of Positive Gay Identity (2000)
Kevin Alderson

Breaking the Surface (1995)
Greg Louganis and Eric Marcus

Coming Out: An Act of Love (1990)
Rob Eichbers

Coming Out Every Day, A Gay, Bisexual or Questioning Man's Guide (1997)
Bret K. Johnson

Does Your Mama Know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories (1998)
Lisa C. Moore (Editor)

Empowering the Tribe, A Positive Guide to Gay and Lesbian Self-Esteem (1999)
Richard L. Pimental-Habib

Entiendes (1995)
Emilie L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith (Editors)

Exile and Pride, Disability, Queerness, and Liberation (1999)
Eli Clare

A Family and Friend's Guide to Sexual Orientation (1996)
Bob Powers and Alan Ellis

Family Outing (1998)
Chastity Bono and Billie Fritzpatrick

Friends and Family, True Stories of Gay America's Straight Allies (2000)
Dan Woog

The Gay and Lesbian Self-Esteem Book: A Guide to Loving Ourselves (1999)
Kimeron N. Hardin

Growing Up Gay/Growing Up Lesbian: A Literary Anthology (1994)
Bennett L. Singer (Editor)

Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology (1999)
Barbara Smith (Editor)

I'm the One That I Want (2001)
Margaret Cho*

The Intimacy Dance, A Guide to Long-Term Success in Gay and Lesbian Relationships (1996)
Betty Berzon

Is it a Choice? (1999)
Eric Marcus

Journey Out: A Guide for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Teens (1999)
Rachel Pollack

Just A Mom (2000)
Betty DeGeneres

Legal Queeries, Lesbian, Gay and Transgender Legal Studies (1998)
Leslie J. Moran, Daniel Monk and Sarah Beresford (Editors)

Love, Ellen, A Mother/Daughter Journey (1999)
Betty DeGeneres

Loving Someone Gay (1997)
Don Clark

Loving in the War Years (1983)
Cherrie Moraga*

Now That I'm Out, What Do I Do (1997)
Brian McNaught

Now That You Know, A Parents' Guide to Understanding Their Gay and Lesbian Children
(1998)
Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward

On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith, and Love (1989)
Brian McNaught

One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America (1996)
Keith Boykin*

The Original Coming Out Stories (1995)
Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (Editors)

Out on Fraternity Row: Personal Accounts of Being Gay in a College Fraternity (1998)
Shane L. Windmeyer* and Pamela W. Freeman (Editors)

Outing Yourself, How to Come Out as Lesbian or Gay to Your Family, Friends and Coworkers (1995)
Michelangelo Signorile

Permanent Partners, Building Gay and Lesbian Relationships that Last (1988)
Betty Berzon

Prayers for Bobby: A Mother's Coming to Terms With the Suicide of Her Gay Son (1995)
Leroy Aarons

The Preacher's Son (1996)
Marc Adams*

Respecting the Soul, Daily Reflections for Black Lesbians and Gays (1999)
Keith Boykin*

Restricted Access, Lesbians on Disability (1999)
Victoria A. Brownworth and Susan Raffo (Editors)

Secret Sisters: Stories of Being Lesbian and Bisexual in a College Sorority (2001)
Shane L. Windmeyer* and Pamela W. Freeman (Editors)

Setting Them Straight, You Can do Something About Bigotry and Homophobia in Your Life (1996)
Betty Berzon

Something to Tell You, Between Men – Between Women: Lesbian and Gay Studies (2000)
Gilbert Herdt, Bruce Koff and Paul Beeman

Take Back the Word, A Queer Reading of the Bible (2000)
Robert Goss* and Mona West* (Editors)

Trailblazing: The True Story of America's First Openly Gay Track Coach (2000)
Eric Anderson

Two Spirit People, American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men (1997)
Lester B. Brown (Editor)

Waiting in the Wings, Portrait of a Queer Motherhood (1997)
Cherrie Moraga*

What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality (1994)
Daniel A. Helminiak