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Paul Goodman Changed My Life

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5th November 2012

This essay discusses the film Paul Goodman Changed My Life, a 2011 documentary by Jonathan Lee about the life and times of bisexual novelist, playwright, poet, urban planner, and psychotherapist Paul Goodman.

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“He’s a pacifist, a bisexualist, a poverty cultist, an anarchist, and a few other distracting things.” These were the words William F. Buckley used to introduce Paul Goodman on his nationally televised program, *Firing Line*, in the opening minute of the film. Goodman’s response was simply, “I’m not a poverty cultist.” Denying his sexuality or his actual beliefs was simply not in Goodman’s nature. He was an openly bisexual man more than two decades before Stonewall and, as with his other unpopular beliefs, was content to live with the consequences.

Like many conservatives of his time and ours, Buckley found bisexuals to be particularly “distracting.” In a 1968 televised debate during the Democratic National Convention, he angrily called

writer Gore Vidal “you queer” and threatened to punch him in the face. In his subsequent, off-air apology, Buckley referred to Vidal as “an evangelist for bisexuality.” Buckley’s public antipathy for Gore Vidal lasted for more than 25 years. The indignities that Goodman and Vidal suffered for being openly bisexual in this era were quite common for anyone with the courage to be out of the closet.

Jonathan Lee’s documentary *Paul Goodman Changed My Life* (2011) is insightful and well researched, with commentary by numerous people who knew or were influenced by Goodman, including writer and peace activist Grace Paley, literary icon Susan Sontag, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., authors Edmund White and Studs Terkel, composer Ned Rorem, and several of Goodman’s former students. A clip from Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977) helps to establish a feel for how recognizable Paul Goodman was at that time. Also featured in the film are interviews with his second wife, Sally, and his daughters, Susan and Daisy. The documentary moves seamlessly between Goodman’s contemporaries and present-day individuals whom he has influenced. Particularly well done are the Goodman poems to his children and his lovers, which are used to bridge segments of the narrative.

Goodman was born to immigrants in New York City in 1911. His father left when he was born. He graduated first in his class at Townsend Harris High School, a magnet school for the humanities in Queens. He graduated from the City College of New York in 1932 and began his writing career with a book of short stories. By this time he was already a confirmed pacifist—a belief that would add to his difficulty in finding and maintaining employment during and after the Second World War. He also became an anarchist, which he insisted was an attitude, not a dogma. Goodman completed his doctoral work at the University of Chicago before 1940 and published his first novel, *The Grand Piano*, in 1942. Five years later, he published two books: *Kafka’s Prayer* and *Communitas*, the latter a highly influential treatise on urban planning which he coauthored with his brother Percival, an architect.

rather reclusive. He died at his farm in New Hampshire 5 years later at the young age of 60.

This film is one of several biographical pictures to take advantage of the growing nostalgia for the 1960s. Among them are three others with bisexual connections. The first is the Alfred Kinsey biography, *Kinsey* (2004) [reviewed in the *Journal of Bisexuality*, Vol. 6, Numbers 1/2]. Kinsey, of course, was the sex researcher whose hard data made bisexuality an undeniable fact of life. Next is the Phil Ochs story, *There But for Fortune* (2010). Phil is not known to have been bisexual, but his niece Robyn is a well-known bisexual activist, having been speaking and organizing for more than 30 years. Most recently, the road movie *Magic Trip* (2011) documents a cross-country trip taken by Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, some of whom were bisexual.

Three of the people who came to mind while watching this documentary were Henry David Thoreau, Howard Zinn, and Noam Chomsky. All were deep thinkers who bravely challenged the conventions of their times. It is no coincidence that, in his 1973 book *For Reasons of State*, Chomsky quoted Paul Goodman as saying, “How well they flew together side by side — the Stars and Stripes my red and white and blue and my Black Flag — the sovereignty of no man or law!” (p. 151). Goodman and his writing changed a great many lives.

REFERENCES

- Chomsky, N. (1973). *For reasons of state*. London, UK: Fontana.
- Goodman, P. (1977). The politics of being queer. In T. Stoehr (Ed.), *Nature heals: The psychological essays of Paul Goodman* (pp. 487–491). New York, NY: Free Life Editions.

A lay therapist for several years, he became one of the founders of the gestalt therapy movement in the 1950s with the publication of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (1951), which he wrote along with Fritz Perls and Ralph Hefferline. A year later he would become one of the “Group of Seven” who were the founding members of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. The therapy segment of the film includes clips of Goodman describing the basic principles of gestalt, and of Perls conducting a therapy session.

Although he continued to publish fiction, essays, plays, and poetry, Goodman’s work did not gain widespread notice until the 1960 publication of *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System*. This erudite critique of how the system was failing the current generation of young men became an unlikely best-seller that predicted and influenced the 1960s in America. In the film, writer Geoffrey Gardner said,

Paul was the first person that I knew who really stood for me as an example of moral courage. And it was so almost effortless on his part that for a long time I didn’t realize that that was what he was about.

Writer Jerl Surratt said, “Here was a man who was writing poems that dealt with homosexuality in such a frank way it was shocking to me. I felt liberated by them. They were beautiful to me.”

Like his contemporary and fellow bisexual Alfred Kinsey, Goodman’s work had a transformative effect on the following generation and, particularly, on those coming of age in the 1960s. Friends variously described Goodman as generous, difficult, hilariously funny, warm, and competitive. The FBI simply labeled him “subversive.”

Now largely forgotten, Goodman had a pervasive influence on the youth of his time. Known in the 1960s as “the philosopher of the New Left,” he would become increasingly disappointed with

young people who decided to “turn on and drop out.” Goodman felt that rather than using their newfound power to actually change things for the better, they had simply “made a mess of it.” He was, of course, staunchly and actively opposed to the war in Vietnam.

Goodman was a dedicated family man and prided himself on “always being home for dinner.” Nonetheless, he was an inveterate cruiser as well. His style was to write furiously in the morning, then go out walking the streets in the afternoon. Goodman was such an accomplished writer and had such command of his subject matter that he rarely had to make more than minor revisions. “He was no fun to cruise with. He made passes at everyone,” according to one observer. Writer Nicholas von Hoffman relates a story in which Goodman received a beating after propositioning both a soldier and his wife. Ned Rorem said, “He tried to seduce people through intellect...I just don’t know how many sailors are impressed with talking about Proust.”

In 1969, Goodman wrote an essay called *The Politics of Being Queer* (cited in Goodman, 1977)—a breakthrough piece of writing for and about Stonewall-era homosexual and bisexual men. He wrote that

on balance, I don’t know whether my choice, or compulsion, of a bisexual life has made me especially unhappy or only averagely unhappy. It is obvious that every way of life has its hang-ups, having a father or no father, being married or single, being strongly sexed or rather sexless, and so forth; but it is hard to judge what other people’s experience has been, to make a comparison. I have persistently felt that the world was not made for me, but I have had good moments. (p. 491)

He goes on to say,

The illegal and catch-as-catch-can nature of much homosexual life at present breaks down other con-

ventional attitudes. Although I wish I could have had my parties with less apprehension and more unhurriedly, yet it has been an advantage to learn that the ends of docks, the backs of trucks, back alleys, behind the stairs, abandoned bunkers on the beach, and the washrooms of trains are all adequate samples of all the space there is. For both bad and good, homosexual life retains some of the alarm and excitement of childish sexuality. It is damaging for societies to check any spontaneous vitality. Sometimes it is necessary, but rarely; and certainly not homosexual acts which, so far as I have heard, have never done any harm to anybody. (p. 491)

The candor with which Goodman wrote about his same-sex experiences was perhaps unmatched by anyone until Samuel R. Delany’s autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (1989). Goodman acknowledged that his beliefs and practices regarding sexuality would expose him to public condemnation but argued that “what is really obscene is the way our society makes us feel shameful and like criminals for doing human things that we really need.”

When asked by Studs Terkel how it was that he could write authoritatively about so many subject areas, he replied,

I might seem to have a number of divergent interests – community planning, psychotherapy, education, politics – but they are all one concern: how to make it possible to grow up as a human being into a culture without losing nature. I simply refuse to acknowledge that a sensible and honorable community does not exist.

Goodman seemed to lose interest in writing after his son Matthew died in a 1967 mountain climbing accident and became