

# If a bear's in the woods, and no one else is, does he make a sound?

by Steven Schwartz

When I was a boy I was bullied by two smaller kids. My teacher told my mother that I should just haul off and hit one of them -- then they would realize I was stronger and stop bothering me. But I didn't....

Because you don't pick on smaller people.

There are few things more frustrating than picky people at glory holes. At a sex club I frequent, if you are looking to get sucked, you can peek over the top of the stall walls and judge the person on the other side. To me this rather defeats the purpose of the glory hole. Only very rarely do the people who stop to peek over the walls at me actually stay to get blown. When they do they are almost always my size. Most people who cruse me and most that I cruse are big and fat....

Because you don't cruse smaller people.

It took me a long, long time to become comfortable in Asian markets; the narrow aisles, the people with much narrower concepts of personal space, and the fact that I felt like an outsider all combined to make me a nervous wreck half the time I was in them, trying to dance my 250-pound bulk out of the way of 90-pound Asian grandmothers who had no compunction about simply pushing past me if I didn't. So, why did I make such an effort to get out of the way, to leave gaps where they didn't need to be?

Because you don't block smaller people.

All the people I know in the fat-acceptance movement are women. I know a fair number of my fellow bears, and I've brightened up many a time at a well-meant and hearty "woof" from one of them, but that's not the same thing as working on the culture beyond the hearty gentleman. Why? Why do these big men keep themselves separate?

Bears (the animals) are, by comparison to most other animals - otters, tigers, dogs, etc. - fat. Underneath that fat bears are very, very strong. That is the image that *Bear* magazine ("Masculinity without the trappings") is after. Sure, we're furry. Sure, some of us are fat. But underneath all that, we're strong men. It was John Madden (notable fat man himself) who observed that offensive linemen tended to be smaller kids than defensive linemen, because the biggest kids were taught not to use that strength, lest they be bullies, while smaller kids with feisty attitudes were "tough." So there's strike one against the big men throwing their metaphorical weight around; they've been told often enough that they're not supposed to.

Then, add to that that we're talking about gay men here. We aren't supposed to talk about being gay, first off. (People didn't

believe I was queer because I didn't fit their stereotypes. Heck, I played football!). Some who don't fit into the mainstream of gay culture are even presumed straight at gay pride parades So bears can get used to being invisible. Strike two.

The bear communities I've known have been among the most open-armed and accepting places I've ever been; I still cherish the memory of the bear in Munich who tugged my ponytail and asked if I was from San Francisco, or the table of bears who, even though I'd shown up hideously late for dim sum, insisted that I order some more, even if they were mostly done eating. In some places (like San Francisco) it's a big enough community that you can spend most of your time there. The need to move outside it gets smaller and smaller. You've spent your life being told not to use your strength, not to use your size, and now you have found a refuge. It's a grocery store of the mind with wide, wide aisles, and enough honey and condoms to last a long time. Strike three.

Why venture out? Why not let sleeping bears lie?

The answers are many: Because we can help, because we are suffering regardless of what sanctuary we think we've found. For me, it took a swift kick in the butt from two dykes of my acquaintance, and a long familiarity with the issues. I wish I had a prescription, a plan of action, a set of guidelines. All I have are some notions, some ideas. For several years a friend and I have batted around the idea of holding a Bear Petting Zoo at one of the street fairs, as a benefit for this charity or that one; perhaps finding the right fat-acceptance organization to help with that would be a good place to begin, to make an alliance between the two communities.

What I see as the problems are twofold: getting the bear community out of its shell (talk about your mixed-species metaphors), and finding a framework within which we can work. I don't, I don't see a lot of leadership coming out of the bear community. We've been well trained not to be too noisy, except when about ourselves. The very tenacity that it takes to be part of the fat-acceptance movement has produced a generation of dykes who are quite prepared to be forceful in a way that bears have been convinced not to be, and which makes it hard for them to lead.

I hope I'm wrong on this, and that the fat-acceptance movement will be joined by a group of loud and formidable bears who've learned not to hold back too much for fear of being a little overbearing. Come on, guys, I think the rest of the movement can handle it.

