

Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual,
Transgender, Intersex and Queer People in Kansas

Kelly Barth
Oral History

Interviewed by
Tami Albin

February 5, 2008

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Narrator: Kelly Barth

Interviewer: Tami Albin

ALBIN: Okay so today is February 5, 2008 and I am here with Kelly Barth in her lovely living room. And I will start off this interview the way that I do most of them which is my initial questions of where were you born and when and then we'll just take it from there.

BARTH: Okay. I was born in Kansas City, Missouri but I lived in a little slice of the Raytown School District that was sort of—it was in Kansas City but kind of in Raytown, the much-maligned suburb of Kansas city, which I didn't realize until I left Raytown. There are lots of bowling alleys and pizza parlors and cul-de-sacs and lots of kind of boring football games. And now there are lots of apparently crack houses. But anyway, I was born in 1964 at Research Hospital.

And let's see, I am one of those people who probably knew that I was different from other people really early, I would say probably—I mean it's foggy—but probably at four or five just had a sense that I would never want to marry a man and—or marry anyone at all frankly. My sisters had bride dolls and they played with them a lot and I just wanted to take [the dolls'] clothes off.¹ But I remember standing in front of the bathroom mirror in my dad's Romeo slippers pretending to kiss fantasy women. Fell in love with my sister's college roommate. I don't even remember who she was but there were numerous college roommates that she would bring home for the weekend that I would be really smitten with. Was smitten with a little girl in the Raytown School District, little girl named Lisa. No theme developing here. She was the new girl so I was to be her little guide through the terrors of the first month of being a new kid. And she was a very physically demonstrative little kid and she was always grabbing onto me, grabbing onto my teddy bear coat. And I remember feeling so thrilled by that, just, I liked this little Lisa. And then she got a little too clingy and I remember wanting to kind of shake loose of her but it was a great little affair.

¹ Added by narrator during the review process.

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And I guess probably had numerous little crushes on teachers and other little girls until the first kind of real crush was on the pastor's daughter in, I guess that would have been seventh grade for me. It's my first youth group experience. And she was quite the wild thing, the standard preacher's kid. The church that I grew up in was pretty liberal. It was a nice mainline Presbyterian Church and she and her family moved to Kansas City or the Independence area the year that I would have gone into youth group and she was, I think, a year younger than me.² But I just thought she was fabulous. She was so wild. She was always smoking and she was just doing really wild things. And I was kind of a nerdy kid, was really impressed with her but kind of intimidated by her. But she was also again very physically demonstrative. Very—you know how little teenage girls are kind of grabby.

We used to play this game called sardines at youth group where we would hide in the—turn all the lights off in the church and two people would be designated to hide and then the rest of us would go off in small groups hunting for them. And instead of—when you found them if the rest of the group hadn't found them you would hide with them. So eventually if you were unlucky, you're just looking around for the whole group by yourself in the dark—this dark church. And she and I found each other one night during a sardines hunt and we hadn't found the other—hadn't found the other people. And we were hiding in our own little place kind of hanging onto each other, which I just—it was like the moment ah—the greatest moment. And then we decided to start looking again and it was one of those brief moments. But she continued over the three years of junior high for me—continued to be just a—oh just such a crush. I had known that there were problems with her family.³

In the church her father was the pastor. And my parents didn't reveal what the problems were, just that there were people in the church who wanted to get rid of him as pastor. We'd ask why and [my dad would say,] Oh, it was something to do with the financial situation in the church.⁴ And they had him over—he and his wife over to meet with them, have a meal and talk about it and it was always very hush-hush and—and

² Edited by narrator during the review process.

³ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁴ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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when we were on [a] mission trip [to Yellowstone,] while we were gone, her mother was along, and she was on the trip and they voted—the church voted to have him removed from the pastoral position.⁵ And it would be years before I would find out that then—this would have been probably, oh gosh, late seventies. The Presbyterian church—I don't know what the body would have been called then, United Presbyterian Church, I think then was trying to decide whether to allow gays and lesbians to be full practicing members of the church which he—this pastor approved of. And a large number of the congregational members did not approve of it—and thought he was too liberal and so they ousted him.⁶

So I wasn't to find that out until years later when I'm experiencing my own kind of struggles with the church and my sexuality. And I'm an adult at this point, early twenties. And I was able to find out that her dad—I loved the family too—that her dad had had that kind of integrity. And I've written about this in an essay that's been published someplace else that she, in a way, became—she became God to me. She became Christ to me in her behavior toward me because—I mean everybody had to have known. Everybody in this youth group had to have known because I was such a little tomboy and so uninterested in boys.⁷ She had to have known and she was just so kind and so affirming and her family was so kind and affirming. So that had a big impact on me, that family did. And then—gosh the traumas of junior high.

Yikes. I mean I can remember thinking to myself in elementary school being this sort of androgynous human being, not thinking of myself as really kind of male/female, either one, just sort of elfin or something, and realizing when all the girls started to sort of talk about boys really—sixth grade, I guess, would have been when that would have really become apparent. I thought, I can't pretend anymore. Or no, I'm going to have to start pretending. I'm going to have to start pretending that I am like all the other girls. So I tried as best I could probably because of family pressures and just—I remember sensing the culture that this was not going to be okay. In fact I can remember throughout those kind of early years I collected little memories of conversations I'd had with people. I had conversations with my sister, Kim. And one of them I just—I can

⁵ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

⁶ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁷ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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remember like it was yesterday. We were down in the family room and I said something was queer and she said, You must never use that word.

ALBIN: Wow.

BARTH: And she told me, Queer meant—this is—when people who are the same sex have sex with each other, which I wasn't even clear on at that point but I thought, Oh this is something really terrible. And then just comments that my family would make about Gay Day at Worlds of Fun, the amusement park—Heavens to Betsy they shouldn't be airing their dirty laundry in front of families, for crying out loud. So I had just sort of collected all this information, and how little kids start calling each other faggot. So I started collecting all this and started thinking, All right junior high, I've got to—so then the seventh grade picture, Oh my God. It's just like I'm in drag wearing this little flowered puffy sleeve, oh hideous shirt and just—I felt like literally I just was in the underground for three years, just try not to be seen, try not to be heard, try not to be noticed.⁸

And then of course I start collecting little friends who are also lesbian and trying not to be. And then probably high school got a little easier just with being myself. I started to become recognized for writing and so I had something that I was feeling confident about, but still had an older sister—have an older sister, extremely religious who throughout this period of time—this is Karen—was always making sure that I was becoming an official Christian. She didn't really kind of adhere to the Presbyterian—liberal Presbyterianism that my parents did.⁹ She ended up becoming a real Christian and accepting Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior and joined the Baptist Student Union and married a very conservative guy. So was concerned about my real Christianity through my whole childhood. And so she kept emphasizing to me all through junior high and high school, You really need to become a true follower of Jesus and you need to confess your sins and become a Christian. So that's kind of chewing at the back of my brain. And also chewing at the back of my brain is, Well maybe I wouldn't have to be gay if I could become a real Christian then like God would fix it and I could be okay.

⁸ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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So a woman—or a girl in, I guess I was probably a sophomore maybe—maybe sophomore or junior—invited me to a Youth for Christ Club. And I went to this Youth for Christ meeting and they could have said anything and I would have responded to the altar call. And I guess I did, at that point, really truly have kind of an internal faith experience that was my own and began this journey with—I'm writing a memoir about this experience, growing up gay and Christian—began this journey with who I now kind of associate as an elderly aunt.¹⁰ That's kind of how Christ has come to me, sort of in the form of this nurturing, elderly aunt that's sort of just kind of got in lock-step with me and helped me get through the rest of high school. But along with this Youth for Christ Club came this really conservative kind of fundamentalist church baggage.

And I tried hard to tow the line and become really Christian and really not gay and have not revealed anything to anyone about my sexuality at all. I dated a guy from church, so I did finally have a boyfriend. And oh God the first kiss was hideous. We'd gone to see *Octopussy* and he walked me up to the steps and his tongue is all over inside my mouth in like thirty seconds. He had not had much training. He left. I went inside and vomited and thought, God how long do I [have to date him.]¹¹ But I saw this as an opportunity to sort of look normal, like How long do I have to date this guy before I'll throw people off my trail?¹² They'll think, Oh she is normal. So that became kind of my dating history like, I [needed] to throw some people off the trail.¹³ So I would date people for one or two or three or four times, always looking at the watch, enjoying the free meal, the Christian conservative man pays for everything, and continued to go to—more and more conservative churches trying to do the right thing, trying to kind of live in both worlds.

Because I went to UMKC. I didn't go to a Christian school or anything, went to UMKC and met writer friends who were quite heretical as far as I was concerned but I loved them. So I'm kind of living in this intellectual contradiction. I'm learning things, I'm reading things. And yet I'm still kind of—I was so duplicitous. I have this other half of me that's trying to be this little conservative fundamentalist, but also a part of me that's

¹⁰ Kelly Barth's memoir, *My Almost Certain Imaginary Jesus* was published by Arktoi in 2012.

¹¹ Added by narrator during the review process.

¹² Edited by narrator during the review process.

¹³ Added by narrator during the review process.

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truly Christian, it's almost like [I'm] genetically Christian.¹⁴ So I started participating in a writer's group after college. A good friend of mine decided [she'd] handpick those of us she thought had some talent.¹⁵ And we started meeting at her house and then various people's houses and we could never meet at—we could never meet in Raytown because I was still living with my parents. And she started getting [pushy], Why are you still living with your parents?¹⁶ And she had me pegged as a—well she didn't say that yet. But she had a term for people who lived with their parents for too long, house homo. They were staying there because it was just easier rather than dealing with the real world.

So—but she encouraged me—after I graduated from college I got a job working as a tech writer in an engineering firm and continued to write, continued to work on things.¹⁷ And she would read short stories of mine and say, This narrator's a lesbian.¹⁸ And then I would panic and I would think, Oh God she's lifted the veil, and the whole group would kind of clear their throat. And I would do it without even knowing it. And of course the narrators were gay. So she started encouraging me, You got to get the heck out of Raytown. So she started encouraging me to enroll in writing schools, writing programs. So I kind of wanted to [muster up] my courage to do that and I just privately entered this contest and won a fairly sizeable chunk of money for a story and took that money and then applied to grad school about as far away as I could think, because I just wanted to get away from this whole kind of Raytown scene and my parents and just—so I went to the University of Montana.¹⁹ And in the process of—I remember thinking, When I go to grad school I will, as Donna requested, fall in love and I will not be shackled by my past and—

ALBIN: So you were assuming you'd fall in love with a woman at this point?

BARTH: Well yes, yes. I was assuming that I could just go—run away and become a real lesbian. But then I'm still genetically Christian and want to be so. But I've got this

¹⁴ Added by narrator during the review process.

¹⁵ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

¹⁶ Edited by narrator during the review process.

¹⁷ Edited by narrator during the review process.

¹⁸ Edited by narrator during the review process.

¹⁹ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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fundamentalist—I've got these handcuffs on. So I thought, Okay when I go away to school I'm not going to go to church. I'm going to kind of take a hiatus and—but as soon as I get there I'm lonely, I don't know anybody in Missoula and—so I immediately start going to church. I start trying to find a church, start scrambling around. And I did find a church and it was a very small church and people kept their eyes on each other and so that was not a good thing.

But I also fell helplessly in love, crush again, with a woman who—another writing school student—who was very androgynous. Her sexual orientation was always in flux. But I just—oh I just loved this woman. And I was in such angst over it. Never was able to declare anything, never was able to say anything to her. And I had grown to kind of love these dramas, these—I was living on some sort of neurochemical, this unrequited love crap. So it was a very familiar pathway. Oh I will be in angst and in silence and nothing will ever be revealed and that's all that will come of it. And—but I would keep coming back on holidays at Christmastime. And this writing friend, Donna, would—we'd meet for lunch and she'd say, Have you fallen in love? Have you fallen in love?²⁰ And I'd say, No I haven't fallen in love. And she'd say, What in the hell are you doing? I'd say, Well I just—[it's] just not happening.²¹ And finally one of these visits home she said, Are you gay? Are you a lesbian? And it was the first time anybody had ever really blown my cover that directly. And I said, I—I—I might be. And I thought, Of course. Of course. And it's something I have known. It's not as if it was news to me but it was the first time anybody had really just forced me to look at reality. This is who you've grown up to be.

ALBIN: So how old were you by this point?

BARTH: So at this point I'm probably twenty-four maybe—twenty-three, twenty-four. So I'm—so I go back and continue this tempestuous non-affair with this woman. And I—I mean, I'm being set up by church people on dates. And I remember coming back from some hideous setup with a guy who—poor thing. I just wasn't interested in him. He was a musical instrument repair person. He was just—it was so dreadfully boring as all dates were. And I got home. And there's a message on the machine from this

²⁰ Edited by narrator during the review process.

²¹ Added by narrator during the review process.

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woman saying, We need to get together. I need to get out of this apartment. We need to do something. And I remember thinking, Why in the world? It was one of those clarifying moments. Like, why in the world are you doing things with people you have no interest in and you're denying yourself the pleasure of being with someone you want to be with which is totally ridiculous.²²

So one of these Christmases I came home and I had been to a very conservative Bible church for years. We were in a very boring singles group together. This is before I went to graduate school. Sorry this is so disjointed. And many of the people in this group, as I recall, were closeted gay and lesbian people. And oh God were those boring meetings. We would have hymn sings. And then gradually the real heterosexuals would sort of trickle out and marry each other.²³ The rest of us would all be like the Auschwitz of church groups, just singles group.

[One Christmas] home from graduate school, one of the guys that I had been friends with and kind of been a stunt date for [and got together for drinks.]²⁴ We used to ask each other when we had to go to like official job things, we would ask each other, Could you be my escort? He looked like a GQ model, beautiful guy. We were totally uninterested in each other sexually. There was just not—and there never had been—for me—honest to God there has never been—I guess I'm one of these women with those short index fingers. There has never been sexual feelings for me with a man.

And so he and I go out to a jazz club or something and he said, screaming over these bands playing, I wanted to talk to you about something really important. I've been going to this group and it's been really meaningful to me and I think—I need to talk to you about it because I think you might have the same problem as me. And I said, Are you gay? I finally asked him, emboldened by Donna asking me. And he said, Well I don't think we should use that word. It's of the devil, it's too defining. I think it's just that we have deficits from our same-sex parents. I just was not close enough to my father. His parents were divorced and his father moved away. He said, I'm certain that if he had just spent more time with me and patted me on the head and said, You're a good boy E.

²² Edited by narrator during the review process.

²³ Edited by narrator during the review process.

²⁴ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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and just been more affirming and—I would not be in the place that I'm in.²⁵ He kept having trouble not using the word gay.

And he said, I've been going to this group. What was it called? It was Living Waters. It was this group and it was meeting in this clandestine basement in a Nazarene Church. And he said, And I think it's really important for me to be doing this, and there are counselors there. You meet with people who help you not to be gay and I've been doing it and it's been really meaningful to me, and I think you could benefit from that. And I remember thinking, This is great. This is what I've been waiting for. Because I would periodically get angry with God thinking, Why are you not providing me an opportunity to like get fixed here? I prayed not to be gay, nothing's happening. And so E. wrote down the name of this place on a coaster.²⁶ I said, Do they have a phone number? He said, No, no. They can't have a phone number because the woman who's organizing it's getting threatening phone calls. So I wrote this phone number down on a coaster and took it back with me to graduate school, to finish out and lost the coaster some place and was in a final workshop my last semester of school there. And I met a guy who, though not sexually attracted to him, I just loved this guy. He was just—he was very funny, we got each other's jokes, we liked each other's clothes. We just—I just enjoyed his company so much and he was a good reader for me with my stories and I read his and we would often meet outside of workshop and look at each other's work. And I had asked him if he would look at a story of mine.

I will never forget this. It was the night of the Olympics in France. It was the winter Olympics. And we had ordered a pizza and we were looking—we had the TV on. It was opening ceremonies. These children dressed in what looked like plastic bubbles. It was so surreal. It was just—it's just all just burned in my brain. And so we're eating pizza. And I'm explaining to him that the character in the story is having difficulty with her father and I'm just not quite sure how to make that seem more real. And all of a sudden he leans forward and he puts his hand on my lips kind of in a shush thing and pushes me over on the futon and is—he's on me, trying to kiss me. And I just stiffened like a board. And we sat up again and I said, This is not you. I'm—it's not that I'm repulsed by you or anything. It's just that I have problems that I cannot reveal to you.

²⁵ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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And this is not you. And he said, Well I just want to—I just want to have sex without it meaning so much.²⁷ I just want to have sex. I just want to feel good. And I like you.²⁸ And I thought, Oh that is the farthest thing from my mind. I can't imagine how you could ever have thought that I would be interested in this.

And I remember thinking—all the guys I would date I would think, What is wrong with you? Why can you not tell? Are you not picking up on something here that there is absolutely no [sexual] connection going on?²⁹ They apparently didn't. And so he left whistling. It was so awkward. And I thought, "Here goes another friendship. Another friendship ruined because he was misreading things and I was misreading things and—I mean, I could not have been more bowled over, more surprised by that. So I went into my bedroom, I remember, and thought, I am so pissed off. I can't believe this is going on. So angry with God, like, Would you just help me get off the stick here and just do something? So I'm then sorting through these stacks of papers, hunting for this coaster. I'm remembering this coaster exists with this name of this organization on it.

So I somehow manage to find the coaster. I write them a letter and my printer won't work. It won't print it out. And I think, Oh shit. It's another sign. I'm one of these people who's very vulnerable to horoscopes, vulnerable to—vulnerable to fundamentalist religion, frankly, just little signs and omens. And I thought, All right then if you won't let me print out this goddamn letter I'm going to go and stand under this woman's window and watch her—this woman that I had a crush on—and maybe I'll talk to her and maybe I'll tell her everything.

So I walked to the—to our GTA offices in the snow. That year it seemed like there were always three feet of snow on the ground.³⁰ So I'm standing under her window watching her move around. She was always in her GTA office because she was in the dorm. She couldn't find an apartment to live in that semester. And I don't say anything. And I sneak away, go back to my apartment. And I get home and the printer works. So I print out the letter. I mean it's just this tug of war going on. So I print out the letter, I mail it,

²⁷ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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²⁹ Added by narrator during the review process.

³⁰ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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forget about it, go through the rest of the semester. And then shortly before I was ready to move back to Kansas City this letter comes back, Addressee Not Known. Another sign. I'm thinking, All right then, this place doesn't exist. All right. I'm moving on.

So I move back to Kansas City and I realize that I can't live in Kansas City anymore. It felt too big. Missoula had been a smaller town. It was maybe—it's smaller than Lawrence even. And so I talked to some friends who had a job for me in Lawrence and I moved there as quickly as I could but reconnected with this guy who had given me the coaster and said—he couldn't use the word gay but there was something wrong with him and—reconnected with him. He got in touch with me and I found out this organization was in fact intact and where this meeting was going to be held. This first meeting it was like the beginning of a new semester.

So I enrolled in this Living Waters, showed up. I remember trying to pick my clothes, like How can I not look too feminine or too dyky or too—I just— Again, trying to stay under the radar. So I tried to find something that looked androgynous and did and bought every single book on the back table—*True Friendships* and—no, *Healthy Friendships*, *True Masculinity*. Why I bought that one, I don't know. I just wanted to be informed. I bought every possible extracurricular book you could get. And brought them all home and started going to these meetings. And they weren't working. I would have a small group meeting and then I would have a large group meeting with this—oh this woman. I've given her the name Pat-the-Heterosexual in this memoir. She was very, very traditionally female. She had helmet hair and a big plaid suit with shoulder pads and long, purple fingernails and her patent therapy was to hug you, hug lesbians until the weirdness went away. So she would hold you in these embraces because she believed that you had a deficit from your mother so she would—she would give you these bear hugs. And she just reeked of perfume and I would always leave these meetings with just a roaring headache.

We had a large group meeting. We would sing about not being gay anymore. And then we would go to these small group meetings and we would share about temptations during the week. And there was this poor thing in this small group with me who oh just so kind of seemed asexual to me but she joined a—like a doll club or a knitting class or something just to be near this coworker of hers that she had a crush on. Oh it was just

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awful. And then there was a guy who—in the small group who couldn't keep away from adult video stores. And I thought, These people are deeply repressed. I mean it might just be healthy—I remember having these heretical thoughts like, It might just be healthier if they were just in a dating relationship instead of all this kind of clandestine weird behavior. So—but I continue to try. And one of the assignments is to come out to your—to a family member. And that was part of your—part of your process of not being gay anymore is to come out about your struggles with your sexuality.

ALBIN: Okay so—

BARTH: [Not] to say I'm a lesbian but to come out and say to them, I'm not gay but I'm attracted to members of the same sex because I was not close enough to [my] mother as a child.³¹ And you had to resurrect memories of this deficit that you had with your parents and this terrible relationship you had with the opposite sex parent which they called opposite sex parent.

So they would have you—you write all these things down in your workbook. So I shared with my sister, Kathy—I have three sisters—the sister Kim who is closest to me in age who said, Don't use the word queer, and who told me about sex in a very [literal] way when I was about eight.³² But anyway then Karen, extremely religious oldest sister. And then Kathy who always seemed kind of like a middle-of-the-road-safe sister to me. She was not terribly religious, kind of funny. She was always the family bully but we got past that. And I finally just shared with her that, I'm not a lesbian but I have tendencies to want to be with women. And it's because I have this deficit of affection from mom and I—I want to stop doing it and I want to stop having these feelings and so I'm going to this group to stop having these feelings. And of course she's not prepared for this. And then she starts worrying that I am actually a lesbian and says, I've seen lesbians on TV, on *Oprah*. You don't look like a lesbian. You're not a lesbian. You just—my dad's a very odd man. And he was a workaholic when we were growing up and so it was kind of rough to be with him because he was such a crab. He wasn't terribly abusive, he was just kind of—he was a crab. And she had said, It was because dad was such a crab, he was so weird. You just haven't met the right man, and just

³¹ Edited by narrator during the review process.

³² Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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tried to talk me out of it. She said, How do you know you're a lesbian? I said, I'm not but I have dreams about women. That's not going to do it for me. That's not enough.³³ The first time I even sort of come out to someone I'm trying to convince someone that I am a lesbian, which is—it's not what I expected, not having someone yell at me for being a lesbian but trying to convince them that I was. So we let this go completely underground for years. It's never mentioned again.

So I graduate from this ex-gay ministry in the spring of that year. So it's been like nine months of pseudo-psychological crap. And I remember one meeting toward the end we were all supposed to sit on the floor and we were to give up same-sex lovers. It was a prayer meeting on the floor so you could fall over and not hurt yourself when you were sobbing and being slain in the Spirit and whatnot.³⁴ So I'm sitting on the carpet thinking, I've never had a same-sex lover. I don't have anybody to give up so I have nothing to do. I'm kind of sitting there in the corner and Heterosexual Pat comes over to me and says, Well it's just great that you don't have anybody to give up. That fabulous— So we graduate and I was given a diploma that says, You are no longer a lesbian or something to that effect. And I was given a balloon and a little Bible verse to take with me and look over the Bible verse and read it and then release the balloon. So I did all that. And in the meanwhile going to this meeting I started going to church with a friend, an old high school friend of mine, who revealed to me that she was gay.

And I—but I'd started going to Broadway Baptist with her. And Broadway Baptist—I don't know if you're familiar with them. They're true to their Baptist roots. Baptists typically were self-governing, individual churches were self-governing. They didn't follow a larger church hierarchy. They—very independent. They were hijacked by the Southern Baptist convention years ago but traditionally very much free thinkers. So Broadway Baptist was true to that early tradition, was in the Westport area.³⁵ And they were going through the process of deciding whether they would allow same-sex unions, not only did they affirm gay people as full functioning members of church. So they were going through this major kind of potentially divisive discussion. But I remember feeling so comfortable there, just so affirmed and so— And not that they talked about gayness

³³ Edited by narrator during the review process.

³⁴ Edited by narrator during the review process.

³⁵ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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every Sunday but it just felt like such a relief. But also from this Living Waters, this ex-gay ministry, they [said,] Here's a list of churches not to attend in the area.³⁶ And of course Broadway was one of them—stay away from Broadway like the plague. Fred Phelps used to stand out in front on their front stoop nearly every Sunday and sing—sing about how God hated fags and—and then [I] graduated from this place and decided, You know what, I'm not going to any church at all.³⁷

And it was kind of the first time in my life where I had the gumption to really not do it. I felt, I've got to clear my head here. So for about—a period of about six, eight, ten months, it was frankly quite a good experience to just not go to any church at all, to kind of just sit and be quiet. However, in the meantime, and this is something I've kind of tried to express too—it's weird for me to be talking about it. I'd rather be writing about it but I have this sense of—you remember Aunt Jesus, me referring to him—of him being present with me and never expressing any angst over my sexuality. In fact, I would get irritated with him for not expressing angst. And so throughout this whole weird circuitous trip through the church damaging and awful as it was, I had this sense of presence—of a God presence that in a way kind of preserved me, kind of protected me from the brunt of what the church was doing to gays and lesbians.

So when I take the hiatus from church in a way I'm kind of taking a hiatus from people, from organized religion. I was living here. I got terribly depressed, as many people do who go through these ex-gay ministries. You're kind of—you're told that you're a deviant and broken and in need of healing. And so you have to go through these contortions to try to have a memory and have Jesus back with you in this early memory healing. It's just like—it's next to impossible to even imagine what you're asked to do as homework. You're supposed to just keep doing this and pretend to be—fake it 'til you make it—pretend to be a really femme heterosexual woman. Start wearing makeup, start wearing dresses, just pretend and try to be interested in the other sex, try to date, which I'd done for the first twenty-five years of my life anyway and it didn't work. So I had this hiatus of time no church but also became terribly depressed. I thought, I've circled back on myself. I've headed forward, gone to graduate school hoping to become a real lesbian. I've not done that. I went to become a real writer. I've come back to

³⁶ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

³⁷ Added by narrator during the review process.

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Kansas City and now I'm in Lawrence and I'm a tech writer again. I felt like I had just circled back on myself—hadn't gone anywhere, hadn't made any progress. And then I'd gone to a group to try to become a person that I'm not. And that hadn't worked.

So I found myself one night sitting with an afghan on my head—I think it was some holiday, I think it was Christmas or something—feeling so depressed and tears were just rolling out of my eyes—not that I'm sobbing or anything they just are pouring out for no really apparent reason that I can tell. So I called a friend who had said she'd been to a Christian counselor, Christian therapist. And I thought, Well maybe that's an option. Although this ex-gay group had said, Don't go to a therapist. They will tell you that being gay is totally normal, that's of the devil. It is from the pits of hell. So I thought, I'm going to give it a chance anyway. So I pulled my phone under the afghan with me and talked to this friend and she gives me the name of this therapist. I remember as a child hearing people—my family talking about people who were in therapy or analysis was really, really not good, that showed something was not normal with them and—so it was—it took a lot of convincing of myself to get me to—I made the call finally, called this woman and said that I was gay and didn't feel like I should be and needed to work these things out and—she called back and we set something up and I started going to therapy and I started going into it with this goal of wanting to learn how to love and be loved. That was my goal. I wanted to be more readily able to give and receive love.

And told her that I was a lesbian but I didn't feel like I should be because God didn't want me to be. And she's kind of just hanging back, just listening, doing her little boxes and circles and family systems therapy stuff and tries to be as helpful as she can without being too directive, and she's very good. And over a period of about a year seeing her for therapy I start thinking it's not abnormal to be a lesbian. And I can't point to anything in particular she said other than she was a Christian woman who didn't seem to have a problem with people being homosexual. It was not abnormal in her mind.

So I started going back to Broadway Baptist Church with this friend of mine that I had gone with initially. And she and I sat on one side of the balcony. Seemed like the preponderance of homosexual people were in the balcony at Broadway. So we were on one side of the balcony and she had her eye on a woman who was sitting on the other

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side of the balcony. And I actually looked up and saw a woman who I found quite attractive sitting on the other side of the balcony. I thought, Oh well. That's all right. I can just look over there and think, She's attractive. I just wasn't quite ready to actually be real. I wasn't ready to take it out of the realm of theory.

So my friend decides she's got to move to the other side of the balcony to start getting closer to this woman she's interested in. So we make the big migration, which is very obvious because people sat in the same—like George Washington. You sat in the same pew every Sunday. So we moved to the other side of the balcony. And I started to have conversations with—very brief conversations with this woman that I thought was attractive. But my friend, Carol, who I'd started going to church with there said, You should not get involved with her. She's not gay. And she always did have this woman kind of on her arm who was wearing black leather and they looked together. And I thought, Well of course she has to be gay. Carol said, No I have it on good authority they're not gay. Well there went that but she's an interesting person. I might just be friends with this person. So I find out through the grapevine that she's a painter. And I thought, Well that's a legitimate interest. I'm interested in landscape painting. So I asked her if she had a show and I asked her where her painting was.

So I went to look at it and it was just—it was an amazing painting. And I thought, with no real conscious intention, I'm going to write to her and say that I saw her painting and I'm going to say how beautiful it was. So I get out some map-a-lope stationary. It's recycled maps from like U.S.G.S. It was very advantageous stationary to have pulled out because Lisa, the painter, loves maps. So I wrote on this map-a-lope stationary that I had seen her painting and that I felt like I needed to tell her how beautiful it was and that even though my family had grown up in Kansas and I'd always found it kind of boring that I thought her painting was beautiful and maybe she had another convert to Kansas going. So I mailed this letter and it worked its magic.

Apparently she—she was, in fact, a lesbian, which I was not to know for, unfortunately, quite a long time after that. But she felt pursued but then she kind of got over it and kind of thought, Well I might not mind being pursued. So we were all going to Broadway at the same time. We were all gathering after church breakfasts and I apparently told the story about a bad family vacation that she thought was really funny. So she then

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starts pursuing. I didn't realize it was pursuit. I was still believing, Oh she's not gay. And I was so green and so naïve. I had no idea how you'd even tell other than you just had a sense this person's attractive. So we started doing things together. Still going to church. I'm still not hearing from God that this is wrong. I'm still going to therapy, everything's going great. And then one night we were on a—well one morning we get together and we're together all day long. I couldn't [believe I'd] been with anyone that long.³⁸ I like my privacy, I like being alone and I couldn't imagine wanting to be with this one person for that long.

I must preface this by saying that an earlier date that I did not know was a date that we went on my friend Carol had called and said, Well how was it? How was your day with Lisa? And I said, Well if she were inclined, I would be inclined but obviously she's not so whatever. So we are then together on this very hot, God awful hot day in August. And we'd been together since eight o'clock in the morning and it's now six or seven. We come back to her house after hiking all day and her air conditioning is broken but she's insisting on fixing me dinner in spite of that. She's cooking, sweating. Then we have a meal. She's—her hair's in little curls, little sweat curls at the side of her face, we got a candle between us. I'm starting to think, If this is not a date there's something wrong with me and there's something wrong with her. We've been together far too long. So I said, I've got to go. I've got to leave now. My friend Carol was the stage manager at the Shakespeare Fest. I said, I've got to go help Carol pick up trash at the Shakespeare Festival. And she said, You work at the Shakespeare festival? And I said, No I just promised Carol I would pick up trash and—she's thinking, I like this person. Why is she wanting to leave? She said, But I made peach pie. I picked peaches from [Stephenson's Orchard] and I made pie, and I wanted you to see my skydiving video.³⁹ And I—so I said, Well I'll watch the video but I'm not having pie. And I was just resisting. I just—(makes noise) I was resisting the whole thing.

So—and at the time I remember thinking, Okay this is too real, that's fear number one. She's not gay, that's fear number two. And I don't know what fear number three was but there was quite a list. And so I watched her skydiving video. And there's a guy strapped to her back. She did a tandem jump. And I remember feeling jealous of this

³⁸ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

³⁹ Added by narrator during the review process.

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guy being strapped to her back in this video thinking, Okay I just—I've got to get out of here. I've got to leave. So I left and—and went to help Carol pick up trash and took the leftovers of this meal that she had fixed. And Carol said, Why did you leave without having pie? Carol ate the [leftovers.]⁴⁰ She was like, Why did you leave? So the next day at church—I stayed overnight with Carol. The next day at church Lisa and I were trying to think of any reason we could think of to be together and Carol had tickets to the jazz fest. And neither [Lisa or I] liked jazz but we went ahead and went just because we could—it was something to do.⁴¹ So we—at this point it becomes apparent to me, you know what, I think that was a date and I just can't stay away from this person and she can't stay away from me. So we're following each other to the blooming onion booth and the Porty Johns and poor Carol is back sitting on this blanket like, Well I guess I'll just sit here all alone. And there's Lisa.

ALBIN: How are you?

LISA: Goodness gracious.

BARTH: Oh you just came in at the good part of the story.

LISA: Oh.

ALBIN: It is good.

BARTH: It's one of those long, boring—so—

LISA: Hi I'm Lisa.

ALBIN: Hi Lisa, how are you?

BARTH: This is Tami. So at this point we realized, Yeah we really like each other. Lisa's squirting my feet with water, Carol's practically gagging. It's just—it's obnoxious. So the next day we—I'm at my apartment and Lisa calls and says, I didn't—we'd already

⁴⁰ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

⁴¹ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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arranged to see each other the next Friday. And she says, Yeah I just didn't want to wait until Friday to see you again. And then I knew. I thought, Okay I know for sure now. And I said, Well I really—I really like you. And she said, Well I really like you too. And so we were finally able to kind of tell each other—reveal the full truth. And I said, Well it's really brave of you to call me and say this. And Lisa said, Well I knew you were inclined. And I thought, Oh my God. So this whole inclined thing had like swept through who knows how many people back to her. So the whole time that we'd been kind of not dating—dating but not dating, she'd known that I was interested. So I didn't know she was interested and didn't know she was gay. So then we started to date and gosh, got the standard, Aren't you moving a little too fast kind of language and ended up—she ended up moving here to go to KU but then we found this house together. I needed to quit my job to go to grad school here and she was going to start school here as well. And I still had a real job and could get approved for a loan and she didn't have enough freelancing to be approved so we kind of filled each other's financial gaps.

And so we got settled here and continued to go to Broadway. Then the poor pastor, who was quite a visionary teacher, started to [go] a little nutso.⁴² There was a process in the church where they were trying to kind of reach consensus on whether gays and lesbians should be allowed to have marriage ceremonies at the church. And he wanted to kind of force it forward without going through the consensus process, and ended up trying to fire one of the pastors who wanted to make sure the consensus[-building] process took place.⁴³ So the church ends up kind of splitting, even though we all loved this man. He was such a great teacher. He had gone a little bit off his nut. And so we started meeting with this other group of people and formed a new church that didn't have any denomination at all and we didn't really know where we all stood theologically.⁴⁴

And at some point during that process, Lisa and I decided to have a ceremony and we decided not to wait for any church to say it was okay for us to do this. So we had a ceremony here in the backyard. But then we [were] kind of like the token married

⁴² Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

⁴³ Added by narrator during the review process.

⁴⁴ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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couple at this church that wanted to continue the consensus process.⁴⁵ And they did. They continued to kind of work through the process of moving toward affirming same-sex marriage. But they also went through a values process where they said, We don't know truly who we are theologically as a group. So they started meeting every Saturday morning to try to hammer out some theology—what do we believe about God, what do we believe about Jesus, what do we believe about baptism.⁴⁶ So it was a very interesting experience. And if you attended you could be a part of this whole conversation.

So Lisa and I dutifully went and had certain statements we wanted to really see get put in the values document, one being an environmental statement. We wanted there to be—to have some teeth to it. But we thought that this gay marriage statement would just really cause some problems. It didn't. It sailed right through. This church was totally affirming, ready to start—in fact, they hired an interim pastor who's a gay man. However, the environmental statement caused major problems. (laugh) People thought they would have mandatory recycling and—so that was a really shocking thing, to kind of leapfrog through this process with a group of people. It was a fabulous process. It was like a coming-full-circle for me, going through years of being closeted and being self-condemning and full of homophobia myself and then being able to be myself and be completely welcomed by a faith community. It was fabulous. And Lisa and I have stopped attending there.

I've started attending a church in town here just because it was becoming too hard to travel back and forth and because Lisa's faith journey has taken a different fork. And so I'm at Plymouth, this open and affirming UCC church in town, which I love. And things were hunky dory. I was—I've been revising this memoir and thought, Oh it's done. I just need to finish—finish the revisions. And then I get a phone call in—(interruption)—in November—like two days before Thanksgiving this year I get a call from—after ten years of having felt totally out, completely radicalized, completely political, I get a phone call from this guy from the past, the GQ, gay man trying to get me involved in this ex-gay ministry. I should never have taken the call. I was kind of—I told you to begin with I was—I had tried to arrange a deal to buy the Raven bookstore with another couple of

⁴⁵ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

⁴⁶ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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women and it ended up not working out. It was a grueling process. It was awful. And so I was already kind of heading down a slope, feeling depressed.

I get a phone call from this guy.⁴⁷ Lisa said, It's E.⁴⁸ And I thought, I'll take it, hoping of course that after ten years maybe he's come out, maybe something good has happened.⁴⁹ But I have this sinking feeling there wasn't enough context for it. He pretends to chitty-chat for fifteen minutes or so, catch up. And a couple of times he said, But the Lord was real—and I thought, Oh man he's starting in with the Lord, this and that. We're headed nowhere fast. And he said, And the reason I called you is because I know now that you've made some lifestyle changes.⁵⁰ I hadn't been out to him. I hadn't told him anything. I'd kind of cut off that whole part of myself, just said, [That] part of my life was over.⁵¹ He said, I know you've made lifestyle changes and God has told me that he doesn't want you to be a lesbian anymore. He wants you to leave your partner and wants you to have him be your all in all, have him be your source of love.⁵²

And it felt like such a boundary violation and yet I just sat there dumbfounded and—and skewered. It was like this old crap, this old shit, just verbal backup. And now having kind of communicated with people from all over the country because of this, it reminded me—I'd kind of come out of that whole ex-gay experience unscathed because I'd never had any real relationship. I just sort of left. I thought, This isn't working, and so I'm going away now. But the crap was still sitting in there kind of churning around, this sort of homophobic shit just—got—gets kind of stored someplace in you, in your tissues. And it just—it threw me for a loop.

So I'm in full-blown depression, I'm—and I said—Did I tell you on tape, I'm a person who's extremely vulnerable to horoscopes and—like a Jewish person seeing a nun in a station wagon and you have to go to bed for a week or something. I'm just totally superstitious. And part of fundamentalism is extremely superstitious and fear-based.

⁴⁷ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁴⁸ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁴⁹ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁵⁰ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁵¹ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

⁵² Edited by narrator during the review process.

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And I was bathed in that pond. So I started not wanting to get out of bed in the morning.⁵³ I started having doubts about everything. But I also started trying to do research that I hadn't done in those years of being out of this whole thing. A lot's happened with ex-gay ministries in that time. And I got hold of Mel White's book, his biography. And I didn't say, I just remembered that I finally came out to my family.

ALBIN: I was going to ask about that.

BARTH: After years, Oh my God, the whole coming-out process. Let me just jump back a little bit. I had, as I said, stored up all these little things that my family had said about homosexuality over the years—my mother, the Worlds of Fun thing and it's just so awful that they're splitting the Presbyterian Church and—they being homosexuals—and had no idea where my dad would stand on things. He'd just always been sort of a fragile wildcard. He had heart problems and as kids we were always [tiptoeing] around dad.⁵⁴ Don't want to upset him. My sister Karen, I kind of knew where she'd fall and I knew where my sister Kim would fall. They're both kind of religious and—not kind of religious, very religious, and kind of traditionally so. And I'd had that conversation with Kathy that had just hung there for quite a few years.

But holidays were becoming so awkward. Lisa and I had gone to my family's house for ages—every holiday. And they loved her. So five years had gone by. We bought this house together. But the fiction is that she's sleeping on the foldout couch and they just chose to believe it.⁵⁵ It's easier not to—easier to believe it than to think otherwise, except for my sister, Kathy. [She] has now had years to adjust, she loves Lisa.⁵⁶ She's thinking, Oh great my sister's a lesbian. What is the big deal? So holidays had become awkward and I thought, I'm going to do this. So I had taken a hiatus from therapy, found the same therapist again. I said, I need to come out. But I'd had Lisa's coming-out experience as a warning to me. Her parents hadn't—her father hadn't talked to her for a year, her mother was blaming her neuralgia on Lisa or whatever, saying it was stress induced or whatever. I thought, Well I don't want that happening to me.

⁵³ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁵⁴ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

⁵⁵ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁵⁶ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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So I did go ahead and kind of had everybody in my life who is important to me write me a letter to tell me who I was, how they saw me. So I got this whole file full of letters, people I knew would be affirming, and picked a time that was not associated with any major holiday, no one would remember that was when she [dropped the bomb.]⁵⁷ And so I waited until after—let's see, after Father's Day and before the Fourth of July, somewhere in there—and came out to them then. And my parents were amazing. My sister—I sent my sisters letters too. Sister Kathy called. [She said,] Well of course we knew, of course.⁵⁸ You told me. Of course I knew. And she said, And I've been telling all of them for [you.]⁵⁹ I said, What? So she had been trying to prepare them for me. And they'd all been—of course been saying, No, no she's not. No. No. We'd know if she were. No she's not. So the phone's ringing all afternoon. I have irritable bowel which—so I'm just crapping my brains out all day long. Phone would ring, got to run to the bathroom. So then the phone rings and it's my sister Karen and she [says,] I don't understand—I have three things to say to you—I don't understand and I don't approve, but I love you to death and I don't see you enough as it is.⁶⁰ So she never wants to talk about it again but she loves me and she wants to see Lisa and I more often. And then I don't hear from my sister Kim for quite a while but my parents then call that evening and it's like the day Kennedy was shot. They're saying, Well when we opened your letter I still had a little bit of my tomato sandwich left and your mom was—we were watching *All My Children*. So they're describing where they were, what they were doing.⁶¹

I had written in the letter that I was afraid that it would be too awkward to see them anymore, that was my greatest fear, but that I had to tell them. I had to give them a chance to know me. And my mother, first thing out of her mouth was, Why would you think we wouldn't want to see you anymore? That just breaks my heart. So I knew, Okay there are no books to explain this reaction. They were just—I was blown away by them. So they said, Well we have some questions and we hope you have some answers that will match them. So we want you to meet with us and we'll hash everything out. So I went to their house and they had—(laugh) When I got there they

⁵⁷ Added by narrator during the review process.

⁵⁸ Added by narrator during the review process.

⁵⁹ Added by narrator during the review process.

⁶⁰ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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each had a clipboard and they were sitting in their chairs, their La-Z-Boys at either side of the room and they had a list of questions and they were going down their list, Is this something we did? And I said, No, no, you did everything right. I'm actually happy to be a lesbian and I've lived a great life. And then my mother is saying, Well I'm worried. Are you practicing safe sex? And I said, Mom Lisa and I have had a very unchecked sexual past. She said, I don't want to know about it. And I said, Actually we're in the safest [sexual group] possible.⁶² I don't want to know about that kind of sex. I don't want to talk about it. As long as you're safe. I just want you to be safe.

And then my dad, who was the wildcard in all of this, dear old thing ends up saying, Are you going to have some sort of ceremony? And I—we had had a ceremony but we hadn't invited them because I wasn't out to them and I didn't feel comfortable and I frankly didn't want parents involved in a ceremony and I just—ay. And then he said, Were you planning on having children or adopting? So he's asking questions that are just far beyond my thinking. So I will forever be indebted to these two old people who just found a way to be with me. And my mother died like four years later.⁶³ But our relationship completely changed. She saw me fully for the first time. And I gave her that opportunity, which I'm so glad I did. So anyway, where was I? I have made a huge leap here.

ALBIN: You were talking about your parents. You were also talking about living here. Your friend had—from the past had called.

BARTH: Okay friend has called me, yes. He's called me. And he's telling me that God wants me to leave Lisa and quit being a lesbian. I'm terribly depressed. And so this whole ten-year period of being out of this ex-gay ministry, I hadn't really had to do much work to get over it because I hadn't stayed in it. I knew it wasn't working but there are apparently people who attend these things year after friggin' year after friggin' year and meet with—have reunions with—many of them remain celibate, although the goal, they tell you, is to just start dating heterosexually, that's what we want you to do and just fake

⁶² Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

⁶³ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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it 'til you make it.⁶⁴ So I'm estimating that this poor guy is probably now close to fifty and I have no indication that he's ever been in any kind of relationship.

ALBIN: And he's still in Kansas City?

BARTH: And he's still in Kansas City. And my initial reaction, being the nice girl—the good girl is, Oh the poor thing, Oh God the poor thing. But I needed to say, What a friggin' hideous evil thing to do to another person. What a boundary violation. I just—and that was the real true part of me, the little fundamentalist in me that had been kind of stove off in a corner was surfacing during this conversation, almost like a boil that needed to be excised. I had kind of stored her off in a corner and she needed to be dealt with. She needed to be reassured, she needed to be incorporated into the rest of me. It was the final refuge of homophobia in me. And so how I've been able now to look at this phone call was it was necessary. It was like lancing a boil. It was like forcing this lingering part of me to come to the surface. And it was the one thing I needed to be able to finish this book because I hadn't—I hadn't suffered in the way that many of these people.

Then I was able to get on the Internet, which is not a good thing. I went down into the depth, too much Internet research. But I was able to kind of read information about people who have been, as I said, involved in these ministries for years, try to get married then end up having clandestine affairs and it's been found out and then it's on the news in some cases, highly public peccadillos. And I was able then to feel—I don't know why at this point in my life—but to feel the pain that someone feels when they go through one of these ministries—to have someone tell you the love that you have is not legitimate, the life that you have is not legitimate, the person you have become is not legitimate. And the last ten years of my life have been the happiest and the truest because I was completely myself. I was my authentic God-made self. And that was the irony of all of this. Those were the years E. didn't know me.⁶⁵ The me he knew was the frightened, pretending, cross-dressing crazy, religious girl. So—yeah, so that's where I am now with a little assistance from some antianxiety, antidepressant meds which are fabulous by the way and a little bit of therapy from a new therapist in town. I'm ready

⁶⁴ Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁶⁵ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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now to have to write an epilogue about what happens to people and what continues to happen to people today frighteningly enough. So—

ALBIN: So why did you come back to Kansas after grad school?

BARTH: Oh yeah that's a little issue I skipped. Well—

ALBIN: And then why stay?

BARTH: My sense of this is kind of—there's quite a few reasons for it I think. I left to go to Montana because I needed to get as far away from family and from my mother as I could because growing up she could, I know, sense that I was—I was not going to be marrying someone and moving on. And she's from a very old school family. She has Swiss heritage and I was able to read a biography of Wyeth, whose mother was Swiss. And they tend to be—apparently there's this sort of cultural thing with Swiss women that they cling on to children far too long and get ill when they move out of range. And my mother has always been that way with us, with all of my sisters and [me.]⁶⁶ And [me], in particular, because she saw me being different from them, not moving out, not having babies.⁶⁷ She had planned on me being her little pal, her little—not caregiver because she didn't need care but somebody who she could just kind of hang out with. And it let my dad off the hook. He didn't have to kind of meet her emotional needs and—and I wanted none of that.

So I got as far away from her as I could. I enjoyed her company but I could see just this endless, ugh, this is going nowhere. So—however, I'm in Montana. I was so happy there. I think probably genetically too being Swiss and German there was some sort of mountain thing in me. I felt very at home there. And also had become intellectually, I think, more integrated with my sexuality. I was starting to study lesbian and queer theory and I was beginning to kind of get a sense of who I was in a better way there, and had taken full care of myself emotionally and physically and for the first time I was out from under the thumbs of my family. However, there weren't many opportunities for jobs. That was probably an excuse, because I could have found something.

⁶⁶ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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ALBIN: But what about New York? San Francisco?

BARTH: Well no, I'd never wanted to do that whole, if-you-can-make-it-there-you'll-make-it-anywhere thing. I just didn't have that urge to be—I was not—definitely not urban. I knew after living in Missoula I did not want to be an urban person.⁶⁸ But I wanted to—some part of me wanted to be able to go back home and be myself, be my true self—be known, be independent, be—I didn't want to fear going back home. Because I didn't have a terrible upbringing here, I just wanted to be—I wanted to carve out my own place here. But also there was this—there's this pretherapy. This was part of me that said, I have to go back there and, like my sisters had, and be there with mom because she needs me to be there and so I've got—so there were these multiple factors. Although the week before—I guess maybe a couple of weeks before I left school there, oh I could not sleep a wink. I had—I literally, I think, was not sleeping for like seventy-two hours at a time, didn't dream. I mean I just—and I was just so conflicted about leaving. But when I came back as miserable as it was first moving back to Kansas City being in this big city again and then moving here and not knowing anyone and being in this really tender, bad spot, I was able to integrate parts of myself that I would not have been able to do at a distance. I wouldn't—I don't—I honestly don't think I would have dealt with any of this had I not come back.⁶⁹ And I was able to live in Kansas, a state that I'd kind of always been intrigued by.

My dad was a Dust Bowl kid and had always talked about open spaces and how beautiful it was and finding sharks teeth and he lived out near—he lived near Healy. And I'd always kind of been fascinated with that part of my past but hadn't really explored it. And when I met Lisa she knew far more about the state than I did. And I've come to know where I'm from. So there are things that could never have happened for me had I not moved back. But God I think I would have been happy in—I think I would have been happy in Missoula. I just—there would have been things that I would have had to work out that would have been far more difficult at such a distance. I don't think I would have been able to confront things in the way that I needed to without going back.

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ALBIN: So when you were an undergraduate and you were taking classes, did you see other queer people from a distance and—

BARTH: Yes. Yes. A couple of times, couple of times. There was a woman in—and they were both writers. There was a woman I admired so much. Peg was her name. She had such a straightforward name and she—oh she was such a cool dresser. It was like the very beginning of the kind of vintage clothing thing. She wore like purple leather shoes and plaid men's suit coats. And she just—and her hair was—sort of all her hair was on one side of her head and she was just fabulous. And she was a good writer and she liked my writing and so we had this sort of admiration for each other. But she was so out there, so out. And I remember thinking, Ooh gosh, she shouldn't be gay. I was still in that major conservative mode. But I was so fascinated with her. So I've got these two halves of myself. And then a woman in one of my later—it wasn't a seminar but it was a pretty advanced course, she was a grad student at the time and I was an undergrad. What class were we taking? Oh. The book we were reading had something to do with childbirth and having children and all that.⁷⁰ And she was fairly militant about having children was not a useful process for women and it would hold them back and—and she scared the crap out of me. I had just gone into the labor and delivery room with a friend of mine who had had a baby as a teenager.⁷¹ And so I had this kind of, Oh sort of sweet, this baby-mommy kind of thing going on and that was what God wanted for you to do is have babies, and even though I didn't want them and knew I didn't want them it was sort of—and she just scared me to death but she also fascinated me. And she and a woman in my writing group—she got this woman to leave her husband. And so that was a big scandal.

But yeah—yes I knew of lesbians but I was just—oh and I remember being in this writing group oh after college. And they often—these—we would workshop each other's stories but these meetings often evolved into just drunken ramblings and games of truth or dare. And one night Donna, the woman who'd organized all this, decided that we were all going to go around and share when we lost our virginity. And I'm thinking, Um, how can I get the hell out of here? That brings up another story that I did not share with you. I was engaged to marry a man during one of my religious coma phases who was

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probably gay himself. He was very androgynous and it turns out very obnoxious and—but this got me great mileage in the she-is-truly-a-heterosexual area. But we had done absolutely nothing, because we had this religious thing and it would be improper to touch each other so we had this going for us and we were probably both gay and didn't want to touch each other anyway. So I remember going around the circle thinking, Oh shit, what am I going to say? I could lie but that wouldn't be right. But I could tell the truth and they were always—this writing group was always thinking, You do not match your stories, because I was far more free in my short stories than I was in person. So I ended up lying and telling them that I had had sex with my fiancé and they all said, No you did not. So oh God yeah that was all kind of early twenties thing.

ALBIN: Now you mentioned with your fiancé you got kind of this heterosexual mileage out of it, and earlier on you had said that you—three or four dates—you had had three or four dates, that you'd throw people off your trail.

BARTH: Yeah.

ALBIN: What made you feel that people were on your trail? Like what—

BARTH: Well it was mainly family.

ALBIN: Okay.

BARTH: They were kind of hoping for a certain age—certain age my sisters had all kind of paired off, like twenty-one, twenty-two they had all met someone and paired off. And I had a sense that they all wondered about me. They all talked about what a terrible tomboy I was. And friends were starting to wonder about me, a lot. And I was wondering about other friends. And so they're—so—and the church was wondering. The singles group would wonder, Well why isn't she dating anyone? So—so to try to just appear normal, until I could figure things out or until it would work, because always in the back of my mind I kept thinking, Well maybe this will work. Maybe I will be attracted to this person. And it wasn't as if I was repulsed by men in general, just never sexually attracted. And so I might enjoy their company but I always enjoyed the company of women far more. And then like I said I would—you would eat a meal and

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I'd think, Okay I'm ready to be done now. Could we just go home now? When I was engaged I could go weeks without—I could go days. He wouldn't allow us to go weeks but I could go days without talking to him and be totally happy, relieved in fact. I remember my sister Kathy saying to my mom, That's not normal. Does she not talk to him? I wanted to be with Sam every minute. She does not even want to talk to him?⁷² Apparently not.

ALBIN: So how did you—like how did you guys come up with the decision to get engaged?

BARTH: Well he just decided that I was—I was the right person.

ALBIN: And how many dates had you been on?

BARTH: We had dated probably from the fall to Christmas, so we dated for three or four months. And I was—I describe it as a coma. I was just in a little religious coma. He was very nonthreatening. I think he probably was gay. He didn't pressure me sexually. And I thought, Here's a very nonthreatening—he always seemed kind of like a dad, just kind of poochy around the middle and just sort of very nonthreatening. And I thought, Okay this guy is perfect and maybe I could make it work. Because he seemed very gentle. He was a better kisser [than my first boyfriend.]⁷³ And just one thing led to another and then—I was recalling this last night at a friend's house. He then became—started becoming more unpleasant, like starting to say, I didn't like this coat you wore to church. It looks too kind of mannish. I think you need to wear this other kind of coat, and oh just making kind of demands on me and deciding that I needed to do this or that and he was going to be the leader in our relationship, was very traditionally conservative Christian.

And I remember it was the year the Challenger blew up. And I have this—(laugh) I associate the image—this terrible—that terrible image of that forking smoke from the Challenger and him. Because I remember saying to him, Oh God I'm so upset about this. I'm so sorry for those people and their families. It's just so awful. Can you believe

⁷² Edited by narrator during the review process.

⁷³ Added by narrator during the review process.

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it? And his response was, If they knew the Lord then they're in a better place. And I remember thinking, This guy is crazy. I've got to stop this. And ironically enough I had met a woman in one of my classes during this engagement period at UMKC. It was the southern novel class, met a woman who was also a Christian. And we had become friends and she was older than me and we had been talking about who I was engaged to and everything. And she started saying to me, You know what, you don't sound like you're really ready to do this. And you don't sound like you really love him and I would really start praying about this seriously. And so in a way here this woman rescues me from this. And she herself was fairly conservative but she put a bug in my ear that I could hear. My family was very critical of him but that almost made me want to defend him more.

But yeah it was—it became very, very evident. And so I was so cruel. I broke it off on Valentine's Day but I thought, I cannot let it go one more day, one more minute. And I just ended it and he wanted the ring back and we parted. But oh what relief. It was like—it was like part of me thought, You will never actually do this. But part of me thought, You will actually do this. And I've known so many friends now who've actually followed through with it, have kids then there's a custody battle and it could have easily happened. But I remember reading a Dostoevsky novel. I think it was maybe *Brothers Karamazov*. I can't remember where it was exactly from. There's a guy who's led to the gallows—(interruption)—led to the gallows and then there's a reprieve and he's let off the gallows. And that's what it felt like. I thought, I've bought myself some time and I am free at last. I just remember thinking, Oh, I don't ever have to do this again. I remember kind of making a pact with myself, I will never let it get this far again. And I will never—I will never have children with someone like this. I had enough of my wits about me to know that I just—I could never dally in this way again.⁷⁴

ALBIN: So life in Lawrence. So you've been here ten years?

BARTH: Um-hm. I've been here—

ALBIN: You've been here longer than that?

⁷⁴ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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BARTH: I've been here since '92.

ALBIN: Okay. So you've been here since '92 and then you've lived in the house with Lisa for ten years?

BARTH: Yeah. Yeah about ten.

ALBIN: So politically what have you been involved in, in Lawrence?

BARTH: Well I think I probably became more out politically. Even before I came out as a lesbian I was becoming—I voted Republican like my parents growing up and became far more liberal and progressive in my thinking when I went away to grad school which I guess happens to quite a few people. Then when I moved here—the environment's always been a major concern of mine, in fact—almost more so than gay and lesbian rights. I mean I have to make that my top issue because it's so close to me. But environment has to run a real close second.

So politically we just—we heard Charles Jones, who's the county commissioner, speak one time on the radio. And I had called him and he was speaking about water quality. And it was before he ran for county commissioner. And I had said to him, If you ever run for any office I want to work on your campaign. And that was the first kind of—my family never wanted to be involved politically. It was kind of like, Ew, don't do that. But I thought, I want to get involved with this guy's career. And he did, in fact, run for county commission and Lisa and I did lit drops for him and became friends with him and that was kind of the beginning. And then we got involved with the Kansas Land Trust and oh so many organizations, the—Save the Wetlands group. Both of us are on the Imagination and Plays Committee. Politically—I'm now on the Parks and Rec Advisory Board which is an exercise in futility but Mike Rundle, knowing my environmental leanings, appointed me when he was mayor and I had gotten involved with Pesticide Free Parks before I was appointed to the Parks and Rec Advisory Board which I was a burr in their saddle before I even joined the board so yeah—so probably politically more environmentally involved than anything else. Yeah, I'm drawing a blank on what I'm involved with. I'm involved kind of with too much—

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ALBIN: Right.

BARTH: —at the moment. I need to kind of back off a little bit. Just one of the environmental—town environmental cranks. So is that what you were—

ALBIN: Yeah I was just kind of curious as to where politically you were involved in things. Did you have anything to do with the domestic partnership—

BARTH: Yes—

ALBIN: —that happened in Lawrence?

BARTH: I didn't have anything to do with the group that started the initiative.

ALBIN: So that was the Kansas Equality Coalition in Lawrence, right?

BARTH: Yes. And I didn't even really—we tried to get involved with NetworQ but we— (laugh) For some reason we'd ask to be put on their e-mail list and we could never get—we could never get put on their e-mail list. So there must have been some glitch of some sort. So Lisa went to one of their meetings but they met on Thursday night and that [is] always my night at the bookstore.⁷⁵ So we've kind of become connected with gays and lesbians in town by hook or by crook. We went to one of Bob Minor's homophobia workshops and met a very good friend of ours there and then she has potlucks. And we met numerous people there so we had to kind of feel our way through meeting people. Lawrence felt very—was supposedly a really liberal open community but it felt very closeted to us. We couldn't find a place to meet people. So yes when we heard about the domestic partnership registry starting, we got a call from the paper asking us if we would be—no wait a minute, I'm getting ahead of myself.

I decided to speak at the city commission meeting and did and it felt so good to be able to just say, We're not asking for you to approve of our lifestyle, whatever you want to

⁷⁵ Added and edited by narrator during the review process.

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call it. We're asking you to just do your duty to make sure that everyone's civil rights are protected. It just felt fabulous. But then I remember getting a call late that night. It was midnight, I think, from a *Journal World* reporter. Lisa was out of town. I thought— I've gotten a call at midnight. I'm thinking, Some weirdo is calling me and is—I figured I'd wake up in the morning and find something sprayed across the front of the house or something. But it was a *Journal World* reporter wanting to quote me and he wanted to make sure that he had my name and address and—why he was calling at midnight, I guess they wanted to get the story done and he was just going to take a chance. So then the morning that it became available we went down and wrote our little check and Marci Francisco gave us a little tin of Elvis chocolates, "Don't be Cruel" and had our picture taken with her. And then the *Journal World* called us to see if we would be willing to be pictured. And Lisa again had—she has a kayak and she goes out on kayaking trips and she was gone and wouldn't be back until a certain time and they said, Well we need the photo before a certain time. So they said, Well do you know of any other lesbian couples who might be willing—who have gone through with the domestic partnership registry? We had friends who wouldn't, who if they couldn't have the whole enchilada they didn't want anything to do with it or just didn't want anything to do with it at all. So I'm racking my brain trying to think of people who I could refer them to. And I literally was—it was a struggle to come up with people who—enough people who I knew were in a partnership and had actually taken that step.

And then Lisa and I had our picture taken and we were on the online edition, which was great. It felt really good. And I have to think that this strange, gay man from my past must have Googled me, which feels really creepy, must have thought I wonder and looked us up and found us and—so yeah. So we have our little certificate, our cards in our wallet. We had years ago though at a friend's who is an attorney—at her advice we had gone ahead and met with an attorney in town and had all our papers drawn up, our medical power-of-attorney and all those things and carried them with us on trips. And so we certainly felt—it was pretty anticlimactic. We have felt married for quite some time but it was good.

ALBIN: And do you run into any kind of homophobia in Lawrence with situations at the hospital or anything like that or businesses in town?

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BARTH: No.

ALBIN: Okay. I was just curious.

BARTH: I haven't. Yes. Not anybody denying me my rights but people coming into the bookstore, I mean you just see all walks of life. And there have been a couple of customers who have come in and said such awful things. And the older I've gotten and the bolder I've gotten I've been able to say, I'm a lesbian if that has any effect on you. And I'm always around the corner working at the bookstore—I'm always around the corner on Thursday nights when that hideous Heritage Baptist Church comes down and sings and screams and—they've come around the corner as I was locking up. In fact, a little girl ran up behind me and (laugh) saw me from behind and said, Sir, sir—trying to hand me a tract. And I don't really think I look like a sir, frankly. I was wearing pants which apparently they can't. And I've been stopped by women from Heritage Baptist and have gotten pretty—pretty insulting I'm afraid but I just have to. I said, I'm a lesbian. Would I be welcome in your church? And I have no plans to not be a lesbian. And it just—they have no answer. They just kind of blush and back away. And so—but really in any official capacity or any money changing hands or anything, I've never, never run into homophobia, no. In fact, in job situations everybody has been so affirming. So yeah. It's been a nonissue.

ALBIN: So I think we're probably going to wrap this up but is there anything that we may have missed that you want to add? No second engagement of any sort (*unintelligible*).

BARTH: No I don't think so.

ALBIN: (laugh) Okay. Thank you very much. I really appreciate this. This has been fascinating.

BARTH: Oh you're welcome.

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ALBIN: Thank you.

[end]