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***Between Gay and Straight:
Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation***¹

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Epilogue: Defending Life²

October 16, 1998: a day of endings and new beginnings. Ten minutes before 2:00 PM, my mother and I take the elevator to the third floor of the Communication building. Putting her arm around my waist, she says, “This doesn’t seem real.”

I rub my palms together and reply, “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Are you, um, nervous?” she asks, sounding a bit jittery herself.

“I’m getting there.” When we reach my office, I open the door for her. “I need to check on the room—number of chairs, arrangement. You can wait here, if you like.” She takes a seat at my desk.

Down the hall, I find Art in the performance lab. “Hey!” he calls out. “How are you feeling?”

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² Thanks to Dave Deitz and Lowell Harris for serving as videographers of my dissertation defense. The tapes proved invaluable in writing this section.

“Aside from the knotted stomach and dry mouth?”

With a chuckle, he remarks, “I know what you mean.”

“I guess for an advisor, a dissertation defense is the academic version of your kid getting married.”

“Something like that,” he smilingly replies. I join him in moving chairs, but Art shoos me away, saying, “I’ll handle this. Go collect your thoughts; try to *relax*.” I take a dramatically prolonged nasal inhalation before heading back to my office.

Turning the corner, I see my mother looking at an open copy of my dissertation, which she has read. When she faces me, her grey-blue eyes fill with tears. “I’m proud of you,” she says softly. She pauses, then, “I ... I know we don’t have time now, but sometime soon, I’d like to talk with you ... about the bulimia.” My heart drops. “No one in our family really knew.”

My mouth opens but no words come. This isn’t a conversation for which I was prepared. “I know, Mom,” I reply at last. “I guess in some ways, this was my coming out story, too.” Drawing her close, I take in the familiar scent of her White Linen perfume. We pull away far enough to look at one another; in her face, I see the curve of my brow and the shape of my eyes and jaw. She smiles and tucks strands of hair behind my left ear.

“This way?” she asks, pointing toward the performance lab.

“Yes. I’ll be there in just a minute.” I watch her walk down the hall and turn into the room.

Taking several deep breaths, I begin looking over my notes. A mass settles into my throat the instant I see his name: Matthew Shepard. In most of my presentation run-throughs, I broke down by the third paragraph.

His story has been front-page news for the past six days: the brutal beating, his parents' desperate return from Saudi Arabia, the round-the-clock vigil as he lay in a coma, the arrests of Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, Matthew Shepard's passing on Monday, and the planning of his memorial service, scheduled for today.

Almost every report has included the same photograph. In the profile shot, an introspective Matthew Shepard gazes downward and grins slightly. I try to imagine how Aaron McKinney could look at his soft, boyish face and deliver 18 blows with the butt of a gun.

The tears that have come so easily this week well and spill onto my cheeks. I grab a tissue, dab my eyes, and blow my nose. My fingers tremble as I straighten my long white dress.

Closing the door behind me, I begin the walk from my office to the performance lab. "It's okay if you cry during the presentation," I tell myself. "Surely lots of 'defendants' have cried at these things."

I crack the lab's door and peek inside. Art already is seated with the rest of my committee: Carolyn Ellis, Eric Eisenberg, Marsha Vanderford, and Barney Downs. Jim King, a professor of education and appointed chair of the meeting, looks over and waves me into the room. When he smiles, I remember meeting him a year ago. Responding to a colleague's self-description as a "dustbowl empiricist," Jim proclaimed himself a "fruit bowl interpretivist." I liked him immediately.

"Please be seated," Jim tells the audience. I hear my heart thumping in my chest. "In a few moments, Lisa will give a brief presentation about her project, then her committee will ask their questions, and finally the discussion will be open to everyone."

I move to the podium and look out at those gathered: my mother and husband, current and former students, several peers from USF, and about a dozen of the men I've befriended and studied. David and Chris sit together, each smiling warmly. To their right are Tim, Rob, Al, and Pat, who look excited and perhaps a bit anxious for me. When I make eye contact, Gordon raises his hand a bit and grins. My body floods with emotions: excitement at the impending transition from graduate student to PhD, pride that nearly 50 friends and colleagues are here, and a lingering sadness for a man whose promising life was extinguished just four days ago.

"Last Saturday," I begin, "as I was thinking about what I wanted to say to you today, I picked up the *St. Pete Times*. It was there that I first learned about Matthew Shepard." I pause and try to clear the quake from my voice.

"On October 6th, Matthew Shepard was doing something remarkably ordinary for a 21-year-old college student: having a beer at a popular hangout. Around midnight, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney approached.

"The three men left The Fireside together and got into a truck belonging to McKinney's father. It was there that the beating began. They drove to a secluded area and ordered Matthew Shepard out of the truck." I pause, knowing what comes next. "As he ... as he cried, 'Please don't,' Henderson and McKinney tied Matthew Shepard to a fence, kicked and pistol-whipped him into unconsciousness, and set his body on fire." I exhale and swallow hard. "They stole his wallet and shoes and left him tied to that fence, where he remained for 18 hours."

I push on. "As Matthew Shepard lay dying, a homecoming parade float at Colorado State University featured a scarecrow, a reference to early reports of what the first

passerby had mistaken Matthew Shepard for. ‘I’m gay’ was sprayed across its face.” The room is still and silent.

“Matthew Shepard never regained consciousness. He spent six days in a coma before dying this Monday, October 12th.” I look out at Tim, whose eyes brim with water. He nods reassuringly.

“These past few years, I have been on a journey. Perhaps it’s not one every person would take. But when I think of Matthew Shepard—a young man who spoke three languages and dreamed of becoming a diplomat—I wonder what he could have been thinking, feeling, or doing right now. Practicing his German? Writing a homesick letter to his dad? Having a happy hour beer at The Fireside? How might Matthew Shepard’s fate have been different if Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney had been where I’ve been, seen what I’ve seen, felt what I’ve felt, even ... just ... a little?”

No one moves or even seems to breathe. I pause before shifting into the more formal portion of my speech.

About half of those here have not read my dissertation, so I provide an overview of its history, consequences, and implications. “This work centers on two major questions,” I explain, “what does gay-straight friendship require, mean, and do, and how can friendship be considered a *method* of inquiry?”

“My project is a narrative ethnography, both a way of conducting and a way of representing fieldwork. Narrative ethnographers explore the creation, maintenance, and transformation of fieldwork relationships. We also write about those relationships and their turning points in the form of stories that invite readers inside the ongoing *dialogue* between ourselves and our participants.

“Through narrative ethnography, I show how my husband Doug and I—a straight couple from the rural Midwest with not a single gay friend between us—came to be immersed in a community of gay men; how the bonds changed over time; how they impacted our sexual, personal, and professional identities, our marriage, and our positions in straight circles of family, friends, and colleagues; how networks *outside* the friendships were affected; and what unique conversations were provoked along the way.

“To explain how we all came to be here today, I must take you back to a beginning. It is June 1994. My then-boyfriend Doug comes home from work and tells me how ‘cool’ his pharmacy supervisor is. ‘David’s been so helpful,’ Doug says, ‘a real mentor. He tells great stories; we laugh all the time. Oh yeah, and I think he might be gay.’” David grins.

“I suspect that David has a parallel conversation with his partner, Chris. Perhaps it goes something like, ‘My new intern seems all right. Doug’s very eager, a real go-getter. He’s pretty green, though. I think he’s prob’ly straight.’” Chris and David lean toward one another, chuckling softly.

“David and Chris get to see first-hand just how naïve the intern and the intern’s girlfriend are. What must our faces look like as we enter our first gay dance club? See our first drag show? Visit our first leather bar?” David laughs.

“And what must *David’s* face look like when Doug later asks about his softball team? What is David thinking and feeling as he explains to Doug that both The Cove team, and indeed, the whole Suncoast Softball league are gay-identified? Is David surprised that his ‘green’ intern is not deterred?”

I smile at David. “The first time Doug comes up to bat at his very first Suncoast Softball practice, David says to him, ‘I’m glad you’re my friend.’ It is the understatement of

understatements to stand here today and say the same to you, David.” With tears in his eyes, David smiles back.

“Fast forward to September 1995. The setting: a graduate seminar in qualitative methods. Needing an ‘alternative’ fieldwork site, I go to Tim Mahn, The Cove’s coach, and ask if I can *study* the team. Only for a moment does he look at me as if I might be crazy.” Tim laughs. “At the time, neither of us has any idea how much this last-minute, last-ditch pitch will change our lives.

“Beginning that semester, my life with these men becomes a research project—and then a *life project*. Tim and his partner Brandon Nolan invite me inside their relationship and its difficulties. Al Steel talks with me about concealing his gay identity from co-workers and his family. David tells me of Christmas cards returned—unopened—because yet another friend has been lost to HIV-related illnesses. Later, Gordon Bernstein and Pat Martinez share their struggles to come out to themselves, to be intimate with men, and to reveal their homosexuality to their parents; and Rob Ryan helps me envision and experience a place *beyond* categories like sexual identity.”

Looking at the group, I say, “Your stories and friendship have been among the greatest gifts of my life. They forever changed how I move through the social world, how I teach my classes, how I practice research, and how I write. In return for those gifts, I offer this project as a counter-narrative to the cultural fears and anxieties that moved Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney to treat Matthew Shepard with such inhumanity, to tear apart his family, and to destroy their own lives and families in the process.”

As I scan the audience from left to right, tears return to my eyes. “Individually and collectively, we have a long way to go and much work to do; perhaps some of that can begin

here today. Thank you for coming.” I take a seat and await the first question from my committee.

Professor Marsha Vanderford speaks first. “I want to ask about the notion of a counter-narrative. You say you want to offer a story that contests much of what’s disseminated about homosexuality. But you also refer to the project as a ‘dialogue’—between you and your research community, and between you and readers. This implies that you want to keep the text open, so readers are free to bring their own experiences to bear on the episodes you describe. As I read, I often felt guided by you. I would have felt almost disloyal—even immoral—to interpret the scenes in any other way than you did. So I wonder if you can create both a counter-narrative—which has a specific agenda—and an open text.”

“Like all writers,” I say, “narrative ethnographers have reasons for creating and sharing texts. One of my purposes is to question the scripts that construct heterosexuality and homosexuality as mutually exclusive polar opposites and that regard homosexuality as something to fear, hate, and/or suppress. I try to show how I have grappled with these scripts in my own life and how my evolving friendships with gay men have helped me write new ones. In short, I’m trying to convey what happened to me, to us, not what will—or should—happen to you. Readers will come with their own experiences, make their own meanings of our experiences, and decide for themselves what to do with what they read.”

Marsha responds, “I can see how the stories leave some things open, but what about the analysis chapter? In a sense you *do* lay out specific points and lessons. How does this differ from a standard argumentative conclusion?”

“I am making arguments,” I reply, “though I try to present them in a dialogic form. Because of this, the issues raised can be taken as conversational starting points instead of definitive conclusions, which tend to close off discussion.”

Art considers this and asks, “Would the text have been more open to alternative interpretations had you simply ended with the last narrative chapter?”

“Perhaps,” I say, “but then Eric would be asking me, ‘Where is the analysis?’” I wink at Eric, who returns the gesture. “I think different readers will be attracted to different sections. Some may be drawn to the stories, others to the more explicitly theoretical discussions, still others to the meta-narratives and methodological discourse.”

On that note, Carolyn jumps in. “I have a methods question. In your work, you ask if there can be ‘ethical gazing’ in the context of objectifying others in public life. I’m interested in ethical gazing and the practice of ethnography. I wonder if we always have to sell out somebody, and if we choose not to sell out our participants—as you try not to do through the methods of narrative ethnography and friendship—might we then be selling out our *readers*? Readers have to believe that we’re telling the truth, or at least ‘a’ truth.”

Nodding, I reply, “Like any text, mine is selective, partial, and incomplete. Its truths are multiple and experiential. That is, the work is true to my experience; it represents who my participants and I have become together. For readers, its truths—or non-truths—will depend on their experiences and interpretations. Readers can ask themselves, ‘Does it ring true to *me*? Does it provoke *me* to think, feel, and/or act differently than before?’

“That said,” I continue, “let me return to the notion of ethical gazing. The term ‘gaze’ carries a lot of ethnographic baggage. Traditionally, ‘we’ ethnographers were supposed to be distanced, neutral, apolitical, and value-free, reducing ‘them’—those we researched—to

mere objects of study. Such a stance makes it difficult to be engaged by others' humanity. Perhaps the move I'm making as a narrative ethnographer is from gaze to *engagement*. I'm striving to practice ethical *engagement*."

Carolyn responds, "A well-known sociologist once wrote to me, saying, 'You can be *friendly* with research participants, but you can never be their friend.'"

I say, "Friendship as method is meant to supplement, not replace, the research traditions from which that assumption emerges. We learn important and useful things about physical and cultural worlds *both* from a critical distance *and* through direct personal and emotional engagement."

I lean forward. "This approach demands that we get inside others' lives and stories. But it also involves stepping back from experiences and relationships, identifying points of connection *and disconnection*, examining those points analytically, and determining what can be learned from them."

Art asks, "For what kinds of research might friendship as method be *inappropriate*?"

"Hmm ... I think *any* study involving human 'subjects' could incorporate some aspect of it. Even in the most empirical, double-blind drug trial, for example, researchers can treat participants with an ethic of friendship. They can solicit fears and concerns, listen closely and respond compassionately, and *use* such exchanges to refine the study and direct its implications."

"So researchers need not study the *topic* of friendship to utilize this as a method," Jim says.

"Right. The study of close relationships—including friendship—is well suited for friendship as method. In contrast to one-time, retrospective surveys—the primary means

of studying relationships—friendship as method involves sustained immersion in participants’ lives, offering a processual and longitudinal perspective. But most any topic could be investigated with the practices, at the pace, and/or with an ethic of friendship. Emotional topics, like divorce, serious illness, or the birth of a child, probably lend themselves best to friendship as method, because the more emotional the topic, the more critical it becomes to have an open and trusting relationship between the researcher and participants.”

“In this kind of work,” queries Carolyn, “must the researcher and participants actually *be* friends?”

“I don’t think so. For a mutual, deep, and/or lasting friendship to develop between every researcher and all participants is unrealistic. Regardless, we always can approach respondents from a *stance* of friendship, meaning we treat them with respect; we honor their stories; and we try to use their stories for humane and just purposes.”

“But what if *they* are not humane and just?” asks Jim intently. “Would you study Matthew Shepard’s killers this way?”

I exhale slowly. “That would be extremely difficult. When something like this murder happens, ‘we’—the ‘non-perpetrators’—often are so shocked and disheartened that ‘we’ distance ourselves from ‘them’—the ‘perpetrators.’ We tell ourselves that they must be crazy or evil. Such explanations come quickly and easily. The *hardest* question to ask is this: what kinds of personal, familial, and cultural conditions have to exist for this act to *make sense* somehow, to seem almost *rational*? We don’t ask this because it implicates us in the problem; it forces us to identify with the killers, to bring them close and see them as part of *us*. Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney were unable to experience their

interconnection with Matthew Shepard; that's exactly what made him so disposable. But if we dispose of them in the same way, we come no closer to creating the kind of world where such actions become less possible. It would be profoundly uncomfortable and disturbing to study Henderson and McKinney with the practices and/or with an ethic of friendship, but that may be what's most needed."

Eric speaks next. "I want to start with a public apology. Frankly, when you proposed this study, I didn't think it would work. I didn't know how you would find a place from which to speak. I thought about traditional, realist ethnography,³ but I knew that you wanted to do more than merely collect 'data' from and theorize about a gay culture—about 'them.' Then I thought of autoethnography, where one's own experience becomes the basis for cultural analysis, but I had trouble imagining what a straight woman's experience could teach us about gay men."

He continues, "The move you made, however, was to narrative ethnography, where you weren't studying so much 'the gay experience' or 'Lisa's experience' as the *relationships*, which is something you *could* experience. Sitting here, I realized that my doubts about this project are part of the problem you're identifying. For one human being to speak *through* and *for* relationships with other human beings is the heart of your study. Now I feel blown away by its success. You've moved us toward the ideal of communication, which is to free us from the illusions of our separateness."

Eric then says, "I do have a question, and this is something I probably should be asking my therapist rather than you."

"Is she here?" quips Art.

³ See Van Maanen (1988).

“She could be,” Eric replies. “This is starting to feel like therapy. Here’s my point: every time I hear the expression ‘friendship as method,’ I cringe. I cannot get over this. Years ago, my grandfather told me, ‘Don’t poop where you eat.’” This unexpected phrase stirs the audience into laughter. “What I mean is that we associate pleasure with *unselfconsciousness* and anxiety with self-consciousness. This study brings so much self-consciousness to your marriage, to your participants’ and your sexualities, and to the friendships that I want to scream, ‘No!’ Why would you contaminate all that love with all this reflexivity? Give me an answer that makes me feel better!” Again we laugh.

“I don’t think reflexivity ‘contaminates’ love,” I say. “I think it makes it real and *useful*. What moved me to continue doing this *as a project* was the belief that our experiences could communicate something important and meaningful. Yes, to do that required me to examine and analyze their stories and our relationships. But in the process, I came to believe—and I think *they* came to believe—that what we could say about—and *through*—friendship needed to be said.”

I go on, “The presumption of heterosexuality is so strong that many parents never open a discussion on these issues. Sexual orientation and identity are not sufficiently part of the curriculum in primary and secondary school, and they’re not addressed adequately at the university level either. Matthew Shepard was a university student at a university hangout. So whatever unselfconscious pleasures I may have given up or asked these men to give up, I did because it *matters*. If I didn’t feel strongly that assumptions could be challenged, that conversations could take place, and that people could think, feel, and act differently, I never would have asked this of them.”

Eric responds, “Are you saying that you were willing to subject the friendships to this kind of scrutiny because of the greater good, or did this kind of analysis actually *enhance* the friendships?”

“I think in many ways, the relationships deepened not *in spite of* the research, but *along with* the research. As an ethnographer, I was moved to ask certain kinds of questions, to be open to a wide range of experiences, and to process and write about those experiences. Sharing papers with them provoked new conversations, which moved me to refine my analysis. The research and the relationships were mutually enhancing, not always perhaps, but overall, definitely.”

The next comment is Barney’s. “I have a question that also has to do with reflexivity. I’m very intrigued by Eric’s notion of ‘don’t poop where you eat.’” He lowers his voice to an intense stage whisper. “I think we have great fears about being self-aware, yet it is in our self-awareness that we are most crucially connected.” Moving his hand in front of his eye, Barney implores, “What about this iris out of which I peer? How is it shaped? How is it distorted? These are questions we seldom pose. So I ask you, Lisa, how has this project shaped your iris, your reality, your awareness, your humanity?”

I reply, “The metaphor I will invoke is that of awakening. Before I met these men, I was peacefully and comfortably asleep. Waking up was—and *is*—a sometimes-startling experience. If I hadn’t been where I have in the last four years, I doubt I would have responded so personally and viscerally to the murder of Matthew Shepard. There is grief in that, but there’s also a calling unlike any I’ve ever felt. That calling comes through in every facet of my life. For example, in the past three years, I’ve had several students come out either in my classes or to me privately. That never happened before. Something must be

present now in my classrooms, something that helps them feel safe. So, while waking up moved me out of a restful place, I would never go back. I now see what's at stake."

We've come around to Jim, who appears deep in thought. "I want to return to the narrative," he says slowly. "I told you before that I read all of it in one sitting." Jim inhales deeply. "A couple of times, I lost my composure." He pauses, looking at his feet. "I'm not sure I can talk about it." Silence, then, "At one point when I was reading, you brought Michael back to life." His voice cracks when he says, "And I broke down." Jim looks up at me. When the tears come, he lets them slide down his face. "It was so ... it was so good to see Michael again. My friends Peter and Jim, who've been dead for a few years now, came up and were reading with me behind my back." A lump forms in my throat. "I just wanted to thank you for that."

Jim smiles through the tears, then looks around at my committee members. When each indicates that there are no further questions, he says, "We now invite the audience to participate."

Murmuring ensues for nearly a minute, but no hands go in the air.

"I have something that might provoke responses," Art offers. "One of the things that Lisa and I have wondered about is how she is perceived and constructed by members of her research community. Originally, she planned to conduct follow-up interviews and incorporate the conversations into the text. I encouraged her to hold off because the project already had become quite an undertaking."

I look at my participants and say, "It's important for me to understand, from your perspectives, what this project did to us and for us."

John Giancola, a professor of communication at the University of Tampa and a fellow PhD student, speaks first. “I’m not a member of Lisa’s research community, but I am somebody whose life was changed by reading this. I started taking straight friends to gay places for the first time in 55 years. After a movie, a straight male friend and I were standing outside of the Hyde Park theaters. I asked if he wanted to get a drink. He said, ‘Sure.’ Normally we would go to Four Green Fields or some other straight bar. But I’d just read Lisa’s dissertation, so I asked, ‘A straight bar ... or a gay bar?’ ‘Either,’ he said. When I asked if he’d mind going to The Cove, he said, ‘No,’ and we went. Since then, I’ve had several other adventures because I took risks that I didn’t take before and wouldn’t have taken without reading your work and letting it inform my life.”

John then says, “I do have a question. As you moved through this particular group, how did you feel about their stability as a *community*? Coming from the late 60s and the gay liberation movement, I’ve been somewhat disappointed by the recent emphasis on gay men’s *economic* viability. Obviously for many gay men and lesbians, ‘gay wealth’ is a myth, but perhaps in some ways, others of us *have* become too aligned with middle-class values. Should the political climate turn very bad, did you get a sense that this group would know how to pick up the phone, discuss, and rally? Is this a responsible set of persons, socially and politically? Or is it all material culture and softball?”

“A couple of these men are card-carrying members of the Republican party,” I begin.

“Oh boy,” says Al with a good-humored grin, “here we go.”

“Four years ago,” I continue, “I had no idea that it was possible to be both gay *and* Republican. I suppose I wasn’t yet cognizant of the diversity *within* this community. Regardless of political affiliation, though, fiscal concerns—tax rates, income, job security—

often *do* seem to take precedence over civil rights and cultural climate. So I'm not sure that *these* are the gay men who would organize politically and rally for liberation."

I then say, "As masculine-identified gay men, they can and do pass easily in multiple contexts of their lives. To render themselves visible as gay men, they must consciously and actively come out. Each time they opt for visibility, they make homosexuality harder to dismiss or marginalize.⁴ But they also concede the privileges that come with being seen as heterosexual."

* * *

One "privilege" that Warner (1999) critiques is normativity. The more "passable" a gay man or lesbian is, the more s/he is perceived as "normal" (read also "heterosexual"). While normativity raises one's social and political status, it also complicates the process of making peace with a sexual orientation constructed as deviant (because there will be dissonance between one's public, "normal" self and one's private, "deviant" self). One who cannot or does not pass will more easily reject the normal-deviant binary and thus won't experience the attendant discord.

* * *

"The Cove has its own unique and local culture," I say. "The team is predominantly gay, male, athletic, masculine-identified, white, educated, and middle to upper-middle class. Though perhaps not consciously, the group is exclusive, in some ways for its own protection. Limiting participation by outsiders, particularly straight men, may make it easier for them to manage a gay identity that also is masculine and athletic—qualities more traditionally associated with heterosexual men. But the group's exclusionary practices also

⁴ See King (1999).

may close doors to friendships across many kinds of difference, including sexual identity, gender, social class, and race.”

“As I was reading,” John replies, “I saw that you were prying open those doors, and it made me want to do the same. Keeping our worlds separate becomes habit. Your work made me realize that, in part, the segregation was my choice. I have so much acceptance around me, yet habit has kept me from reaching out for it.”

“But I understand the constraints on that choice,” I tell him. “Social, political, and legal conditions render it an act of courage to say to a friend, even one you’ve had for a long time, ‘Would you mind going to The Cove?’”

A fellow graduate student, Jay Baglia, raises his hand. “I’d like to return to the issue of reflexivity and to how these men have been impacted by the project. I’m a lifelong softball player. I played with the same team for a long time but left them in order to pursue my education here. I rejoined the team this fall, and perhaps because of my coursework on gender, I began to notice an incredible amount of subtle and explicit misogyny. My question is, as your research community has gotten to know you and has read your portrayals, is there any reflexivity on *their* part? For example, how have they responded to the sexism you point out?”

“Maybe we should ask them,” I suggest.

They whisper among themselves, perhaps nominating someone to speak up. At last, Rob says, “Lisa pushes all of us on these issues. Whenever someone makes a sexist remark, we correct each other, even if she’s not around. We ask, ‘What would Lisa say?’”

Al raises his hand and adds, “I now try to correct *myself*, and do so *before* making a remark that could be heard as sexist. I don’t know that Lisa’s project changed my *thinking*

on these issues so much; I've always considered women my full equals. But I am more conscious of the *words* I use. I try to imagine how a woman might interpret what I'm about to say."

Rob then looks at me and says, "Early in our relationship, I remember talking to you about what it meant to be gay and some of my hang-ups about it. You were the first person—whether you knew it or not—who clarified for me that being gay related to my sexual orientation and not necessarily to being masculine or feminine. I didn't see myself as feminine, but my upbringing was that if you were gay, you were feminine, and that was a bad thing.

"A year later, I asked if you saw me as 'the woman' in my relationship with Tim. Your answer was: 'If you're asking whether I see you as the one who tends to be more sensitive and nurturing, then yes, I see you as the woman.' You turned being 'the woman' from a weakness—as I unknowingly had made it out to be—to a strength. Suddenly, it dawned on me: I should value *all* my good qualities, masculine and feminine."

"I also have a comment," Gordon says. "It relates both to access and to Lisa's role. I grew up playing baseball, played it in college for a couple years. Was very much socialized with middle-class, beer-drinking, heterosexual ideals. Socialized that way all my life. Our group has thought and talked about things since meeting Lisa that we didn't before. Our conversations were very topical. I don't know how often we expressed our emotions—what we thought, how we felt, how we came to terms with things. Lisa facilitated those kinds of conversations, and I don't think anyone else here could have facilitated them. I know that I couldn't have been as open, pushed the envelope that often, and really shared my views, because I was socialized not to feel pain. 'Deal with it, suck it up, and move on.'

But Lisa made it comfortable for us, and that made it possible for her to establish the kind of friendships we have with her.” His words leave me almost breathless.

Tentatively, Pat raises his hand. “I think that I have benefited more from Lisa writing her dissertation than *she* has, or will, even by getting a PhD.” My eyes well with tears, as do his when he sees my response. “Becoming involved with Lisa and the work she was doing ...” he pauses and lowers his head for a moment, “it enabled me to deal with my coming out. It helped me combine my old athletic, fraternity-brother self and my emerging gay self. I saw that I could be a *gay* athlete, a *gay* man with *gay and straight* friends.”

I make eye contact with David, who raises his eyebrows, as if asking for permission to speak. When I nod, he says, “I never imagined that the dissertation would have such an impact on all of us as friends. My friendships with these guys were pretty solid before, but the project has brought us even closer. Reading the dissertation, we all learned about each other. Since then, we’ve talked about the events Lisa wrote about, and those discussions have reforged the bonds between us. This was a very, very unique experience that we all shared.”

“Some of you have talked about potential benefits of this project,” I reflect. “For you, what were the risks, drawbacks, or considerations?”

“Truth be told,” David says, “until I read the dissertation, I didn’t know if you were writing a comic book or a textbook. I guess I didn’t know what to expect.”

Tim adds, “I definitely wondered what episodes you would include and how I would be portrayed.”

“Did you see yourself in your character?” I ask.

“Oh yeah,” he responds, “but it wasn’t always my ‘best’ self.” Then, in true Tim fashion, he says, “I’m really much nicer in person.”

“And better looking,” I add before he can.

“At first,” Al says, “I was concerned about my privacy. Since I’m not out at work or officially to my family, I asked you to call me ‘Adam’ in the dissertation. But over the past couple years, I’ve become more comfortable with who I am. Maybe the project had something to do with that; maybe I’ve simply matured. But if you publish this as a book, you can use my real first name.” Surprised by his request, I nod and smile.

Pat clears his throat. “The only ‘drawback’ for me is that I wish the project would have started earlier. We met just as I was coming out at 35. I wonder how different my 20s would have been had I crossed paths with someone like you, had I been asked to look within myself and discuss my inner struggles—as I have in my late 30s.”

Dennis Loutsakas, a PhD student, responds, “From listening to all of you, I get a sense that this work resonated with Lisa, with members of her committee, and with her participants. But I’m still not clear on how it would resonate with the general population. You started out by talking about Matthew Shepard, and I’m wondering how your work could have impacted those who committed the murder.”

“In our culture,” I say, “gay men are perceived as threats to the gender order: men on top, women on bottom, literally and figuratively. As Rob indicated, we tend to associate homosexuality and femininity, perhaps because we have been socialized to think and talk about sexuality and gender only in dichotomous and hierarchical terms. When two men are intimate, we assume that one takes the position of the man—the top—while the other takes the position of the woman—the bottom. This is a limited—and limiting—view of

sexuality, I know, but these terms—and their hierarchy—are reproduced in gay male cultures as well.

“Because I feature a masculine-identified gay community, my work challenges our culture’s linkage of sexual orientation and gender identity. Moreover, by critiquing hegemonic masculinity in both straight *and* gay male cultures, I’m attempting to draw attention to the emotional, relational, and political consequences of privileging masculinity and disparaging femininity.

“That in mind,” I continue, “let’s talk about Matthew Shepard’s murder. Aaron McKinney’s peers considered him small and weak. In spite of this, or perhaps *because of this*, he was known to pick fights, usually with men smaller than he.⁵ McKinney also is reported to have had sexual experiences with men, experiences that profoundly disturbed him.⁶ Had he read about these friendships, it might have made no difference. But what if McKinney had looked deeply into these men’s lives and stories? Could he have seen positive versions of himself? What if encountering Gordon, Pat, Al, or even Doug had moved him to feel less ashamed of his homosexual experiences?”

I then say, “But more than individuals must change. Families must change. Perhaps had Henderson and McKinney’s parents participated in conversations like the one we’re having today, they might have been encouraged to examine and alter the discourses they circulated about sexuality, gender, and prejudice. Discriminatory laws and the media also must change. The cultural terrain is shifting—but not everywhere. In the same culture, we have texts that valorize gay-straight friendships—like the film *My Best Friend’s Wedding*⁷

⁵ See Wypijewski (1999, September).

⁶ See Cullen (1999, October 26).

⁷ More recent examples include *The Object of My Affection*, *Trick*, and *The Next Best Thing*.

and the NBC sit-com *Will and Grace*⁸--and episodes of utter brutality, like the murder of Matthew Shepard.

“Art recently asked me what will make Doug’s and my journey attractive to other heterosexuals. In my response, I talked about personal growth, potentially fulfilling relationships, and the possibility of greater social accord. But, in the wake of Matthew Shepard’s murder, we now must turn the question on its head and ask, ‘What are the consequences of *not* confronting our fears of difference, of remaining closed off from one another?’ Ask a gay man who can’t bring himself to say the words. Ask the parents of a gay or lesbian teen who commits suicide. Ask Matthew Shepard’s relatives and friends. Ask Henderson and McKinney’s parents. Ask Henderson and McKinney. The conversations we need to have may feel uncomfortable. But the price we will pay for our continued estrangement is much higher.”

“Many of us here teach college students,” says Linda Laine-Timmerman, a friend and colleague. “What can we do to start these conversations and keep them going?”

“We can be self-conscious about every aspect of our teaching,” I respond. “We can ensure that the readings we assign are not heterosexist in their portrayals of sexuality and relationships. We can have students encounter texts by authors with a range of backgrounds, identities, and experiences. We can speak in non-heterosexist terms and confront homophobic discourse. We can develop course activities and assignments that move students out of their comfort zones and that require them to study and interact with groups to which they don’t belong. Research in the area of anti-oppressive education⁹

⁸ This centers on the best friendship between the title characters, a gay man and a straight woman. In 2000, *Will and Grace* won the Emmy for best comedy.

⁹ See Kumashiro (2000).

suggests that students don't so much *lack* knowledge about other groups as much as they *resist* knowledge that disrupts their taken-for-granted assumptions. Perhaps our major challenge will be to convince students that education is not the repetition and affirmation of the status quo but its *disruption* and change. Ideally, we can move them not only to accept such disruption but to *desire* and actively *seek* it."¹⁰

"When we see an episode of brutality," remarks Linda Andrews, another colleague, "that's disruption. All of us are searching. 'Why? How? What could we do differently?' As teachers, we can learn to create spaces of safety in which we may not *solve* crises, but we can begin *working through them* in collaboration with students."

"I think your dissertation can be a space of safety," says John Giancola. "In such a context—and when the moment is well-shared—the reader *knows* what to do for him- or herself."

"Yes," Eric concurs, "because the reader doesn't take everything literally—that's the power of story. While reading this, I didn't think to myself, 'My wife and I have to do exactly what Lisa and Doug did.' But some piece of this, some lesson like this, I can make my own."

Tim raises his hand. "As a reader, I kept thinking, 'I want to do something; I *have* to do something.' It gave me energy. I feel like I'm now a bit of an activist. So my question is, how, specifically, do you think we in the gay community can help?"

I respond, "I really appreciated what John had to say about reaching out for the acceptance and friendship that already may surround you. Heterosexuals can be ignorant and naïve. We say the wrong things; we do the wrong things. But don't be deterred. Your

¹⁰ See Kumashiro (2000).

fears are not unfounded, though sometimes they take over, and they close us off from one another. *Keep trying*. Give us opportunities to say no—or to say *yes*—to friendship with you as a gay person. None of us would be here today had David not had the courage to take a chance on a couple of bumpkins from the Midwest.”

David laughs. “Girl, it wasn’t like that at all. *I* was a bumpkin from Kentucky. If you want to know the truth, I didn’t feel so separated socially from Doug. We both went to pharmacy school; we both had been in fraternities; we both were in our twenties.”

“Sometimes we get too focused on our differences,” Doug remarks.

Rob speaks next. “This project says to me, as it did to John, ‘It’s okay to open the door to my straight friends.’ *We* have to build the bridge too.”

“And we shouldn’t put down those willing to cross it,” Pat adds. “A lot of gay men I’ve met have a difficult time with heterosexuals. At gay clubs, I’ve heard comments like, ‘Too many *straight* people here tonight.’ I never understood that. We should *welcome*, not criticize, those who can enjoy being part of ‘our’ scene.”

“If we cross the bridge,” Kerby says, “there are going to be painful experiences. We will encounter uncomfortable straight people; we may even lose a job. But there will be more people, more experiences, and other jobs. *We have to come out.*” The room buzzes with electricity.

Standing, Barney says, “We can help each other do that.” His voice rises in pitch and intensity. ‘Coming out’ is a metaphor for *everyone*. *Everyone* has to come out, yet we fear this and resist it. It’s such a difficult process because it requires us to abandon our previous maps of reality and construct new ones. This is our challenge.”

He then turns to the members of my research community and says, “As gay men, you and I go through the anguish of coming out. But remember, *they* are coming out, too. So we must treat them with sensitivity and compassion. It’s much easier for all of us to live the way we always have and never to crawl out of our closets. We have too many closets—one for every category that divides us.”

We silently absorb Barney’s comment for several seconds.

When it is clear that no one has another question or remark, Art says, “At this time, we will ask Lisa and the audience to leave the room.”

“I know it’s unconventional,” Jim suggests, “but there are fewer of us, so why don’t we leave the room?”

Smiling, Art shrugs. “Why not? It’s been an unconventional defense.” With that, Marsha, Eric, Carolyn, Art, Barney, and Jim step outside to discuss my academic fate.

When I stand, I am so overcome that I nearly lose my balance. My Mom approaches, her eyes red and watery. We embrace, and she says in my ear, “I’ll never forget this—as long as I live.”

Doug is right behind her. “Well,” he announces, “I guess I’ll soon be the ‘Mister’ of ‘Doctor and Mister.’”

“Ooh!” I reply, pecking his mouth. “Let’s hope.”

Rob and Tim walk toward me, looking dazed. “Unbelievable,” Tim says, shaking his head.

“I feel like I know you better,” Rob tells me. “It was like seeing you teach—a whole other dimension.”

Al gives me his usual bear hug, picking me up a bit. I run my fingers through his short, course hair.

Gordon catches my gaze. We stare at each other a moment, and I reflect on the things he said earlier. “What can I say, Gordon? Thanks.”

“Thank *you*,” he replies.

Pat comes over to me. He seems filled with thoughts, but no words come.

Smiling, I look at him and say, “I know. Me too.”

“When we walked in here two hours ago,” David reports, “I said to Chris, ‘This looks like it has the potential to be really *boring*.’” I laugh.

“I guess you surprised us,” Chris remarks, “*again*.”

Kissing my cheek, David asks, “How do you feel?”

“Blown away. The discussion, the support—it was better than a dream. The only other time I can remember feeling so completely overwhelmed was the night of my wedding.”

“That’s ironic,” says Linda Laine-Timmerman. “Some of us were just saying that this felt like a wedding. And look at you: white dress and all!”

Just then, the door creaks open. One by one, my committee files into the room.

Art clears his throat; everyone falls silent. “*Doctor Tillmann-Healy, congratulations.*” The cheer is as loud as any I’ve heard on the softball field.

Suddenly, I am engulfed by each of my families—my husband and mother, my family of friends, and, for what feels like the first time in years, my academic family. It’s good to be home.

Postscript:

On April 7th, 1999, Reverend Fred Phelps and his followers from the Westboro Baptist Church returned to Wyoming to picket the courthouse where Russell Henderson would plead guilty to murder. The protesters were surprised by a gathering of supporters for the Shepard family. Dressed in white costumes, seven feet high with eight-foot wingspans, the “Angels of Peace” surrounded the Phelps group so that they wouldn’t be seen by Judy and Dennis Shepard as they entered the building. In a remarkable gesture, Matthew Shepard’s parents approved of a plea bargain that many believe spared Henderson from the death penalty.

Six months later, Aaron McKinney stood trial. His “gay panic” defense failed, and he was found guilty of first-degree felony murder. During sentencing, Dennis Shepard read a statement. “I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney,” he said. “However, this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy.”¹¹ Both Henderson and McKinney are serving two consecutive life sentences.

Shortly after my dissertation defense, and with much trepidation about leaving home, I went on the academic job market. I applied to colleges and universities as far away as Seattle, and I interviewed in upstate New York and San Francisco.

In March 1999, I got a call from the department of Communication at Rollins College, a picturesque liberal arts institution in Winter Park, Florida—about an hour and a half from Tampa. The tenure-track job offer came a month later. In July, Doug and I bought a house and moved to Orlando.

¹¹ See Cullen (1999, November 5).

Tim Mahn and Rob Ryan also have relocated to the Orlando area, where both have successful careers. Though neither is out at work, Rob has told all his siblings and his parents. I saw Brandon Nolan on New Year's Day, 2000; he has a new love and a new job in Atlanta. Pat Martinez still lives in Tampa with his partner of two years, Chris Smith (though they too are considering a move to Orlando). Each is getting to know the other's family members, including Pat's father. Gordon Bernstein has stayed in the hairpiece business and has come out to his entire immediate family. Al Steel continues to advance in his company. While contentedly single, he feels ready for a long-term relationship. Al assumes his brother and mother know that he's gay, but the words remain unspoken.

David Holland and Chris no longer are together. We don't see much of Chris, but we think of him often. David continues to mentor us, of course, and perhaps we now mentor him as well.

In August 2000, David, Doug, and I traveled to New York City to see *The Laramie Project* at the Union Square Theatre. Following Matthew Shepard's murder, members of the Tectonic Theater Project made six trips to Laramie, Wyoming to interview townspeople. The play is based on interview transcripts and public documents. Each of the "actors" plays him- or herself as well as several "characters" from Laramie. As we sat in the audience, mesmerized by this complex, breathtaking performance, I was struck by how multi-layered and *human* everyone seemed—even Aaron McKinney (who, upon learning of Matthew Shepard's death, collapses in what appear to be shock and grief). Two times, McKinney laments the impending loss of his relationship with his young son. I somehow had forgotten that he was a father. How easy it would have been to caricature or demonize the perpetrators and Laramie itself. But *The Laramie Project* was friendship as method at its best—seeking not

to glorify, gloss over, or excuse but to *understand* so that we can heal and move forward—
together.

David, Pat, Gordon, Al, and Jeff still play softball together every Sunday. There is a gay league in Orlando, too, so who knows? Maybe Doug, Tim, and Rob will join forces again someday (and I'll start a new phase of this project). Doug and I see Tim and Rob almost every week, the Tampa crew about once a month. For this, and for everything they've given us, we are grateful.

These men and many others have taken me on the most important and educational journey of my life. Is it a journey I think every person could—or should—take? I don't know.

But you don't have to go everywhere I've been to understand that the violence Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney inflicted upon Matthew Shepard was rooted in our *collective* fears about difference. You don't have to see all I've seen to know that our fears, and our fear-based actions and *inactions*, stand between us and a more loving and just world. And you don't have to feel all I've felt to believe that in that loving and just world, maybe Russell Henderson, Aaron McKinney, and Matthew Shepard could have been friends.

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