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OUT OF THE CLOSET AND INTO THE WOODS; NATURE AS A MODEL FOR
RESILIENCE DURING GAY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

A Thesis Presented

by

Lance Johnson

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

May, 2015

Defense Date: March, 26, 2015

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Abstract

Navigating the process of coming out led to feelings of isolation, depression, and a loss of self-worth that were compounded by a period filled with negative social media and mainstream messaging. This thesis explores how an understanding of the systems and processes of nature as well as physical exposure to nature offered a place of healing and an avenue for understanding my identity as a Gay man: from identity confusion all the way through to identity synthesis. Using Scholarly Personal Narrative Methodology, I will interweave poetry and counter narrative storytelling to illustrate the significance of nature during my identity development.

Sexual orientation is scrutinized and vilified through social media platforms, advertisements, and daily life under the basis of cultural ideology and social construction. This disregards the larger contextual importance of other species that exhibit similar behaviors. I maintain that a connection with nature can provide individuals with a broader and more balanced perspective of sexual orientation--whilst navigating through the coming out process leading to a confluent sense of identity with reduced internalized conflict.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank those who have had a great impact on me during the years in which I was struggling with my own identity as well as those who helped me through this writing process.

I am forever grateful to my family- Eben Johnson, Kelley Johnson, Cindy Shoer, and Bob Johnson- for their loving support and tireless patience as I have navigated both coming out, and writing about it.

Thank you to my friends- Windy Paz-Amor, Erin-Kate Escobar, Shannon Gilliam, Emery Lohrasbi, and Tonya Ferraro- for providing me with much needed entertainment and laughter. They have all kept my spirits up while writing through some of the most difficult parts.

Finally, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Robert J. Nash. Without whom, I would not have found my voice in academia, or the courage to tell my story.

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Chapter 1. WHO AM I IF NOT FOR MY STORY?

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Who am I if not for my story?

Who am I if not for my story?

Who am I if I don't talk about the trials of life, if I don't share myself so that others can exist within the safety of these pages. If I keep my story bottled up inside, to ride out the storms across the ocean, picked up on the distant shores where no one speaks my language. My story is not mine, if I am not the one to tell it.

Who am I if not for the words I choose?

Who am I if I cannot paint the page with images unseen, if I cannot bring these words to life like shadows in the night. If I cannot ensnare my audience like thorns upon the rose, captured by the beauty of sight, scarred by the reality of touch. These words are not mine if they do not roll off of my own tongue.

Who am I if not for the meaning of my being?

Who am I if I don't speak of what I stand for, if I don't speak of what I search for, if I don't speak of what I've found. If I cannot share these truths that I hold to be self evident, these truths that act like the legs I stand on. Without meaning, there is no purpose.

--

1.1 Introduction

I have spent the majority of my life subconsciously guarding my story. It is not that I did not want anyone to know who I was or where I came from, but that I was not certain of any of it myself. And more importantly, I was not sure who would want to hear my story. Being gay comes with a never-ending roll of “caution, do not cross” tape. You have to learn which areas to wrap it around and tread lightly. In my early years of identity formation I wrapped everything in caution tape, and hid behind masculinity. Playing along with a straight narrative I made up with bits and pieces of stories I heard. I could not tell the real me from the personified me. “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-”¹ I did not take either for fear that I might meet resistance along the way.

It has taken me a long time to come to terms with my own sexuality. Almost twenty years, in fact, before I could actually say that to other people that I met, and even now I find it challenging. I have decided to write this thesis about my experience coming out as a gay man and how nature has been an integral coping mechanism. I have told my story before in bits and pieces but never the whole thing at once. I hope by writing this, that others feel inspired to tell their own stories. The past two years of schooling have surrounded me with other scholars who are willing to share their narratives and they are incredibly passionate, powerful, and moving.

¹ Frost, Robert, and Edward Connery Lathem. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

Before my first year in graduate school, I would have told you that I did not have a story, I was just going about my days doing what I do. My story would not mean anything to anyone else, it was just my own. Then I learned about the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) Methodology. It changed the way I thought about writing, and my own story. After sitting down for the first time and starting to put my story down on paper, I felt the need to continue and wrote one of the longest manuscripts of my life until this document. It was an achievement in and of itself for me, as I have never been much of a long winded writer. But this was different, I was writing about myself, and I could not stop. I wrote a lot of my papers about being gay, without ever actually stating it. I was telling my story, but still leaving a large part of it to the interpretation of the reader. Somewhere in the midst of my studies I realized that coming out does not mean that you elude to being gay. It means you actually write it. It lead me to the conclusion that I had to tell my full story. Even the parts I do not like to think about often. Once I began to do this, I felt empowered by my own narrative, and I felt like I was slowly lifting a weight off my chest, each letter I put down on the page brought me closer and closer to myself. I was not writing for anyone else anymore, I was writing for myself. This is my real story, not some cryptic manuscript laced with metaphors.

1.2 Scholarly Personal Narrative

Scholarly Personal Narrative is a methodology that goes beyond just telling a narrative. It encourages vulnerable and authentic writing to discover the universal truth of shared experience. It is a road map to connection and empathetic sharing. It takes just as much courage to write a story as it does to share in the experience as a listener.

SPN has helped me on the path to finding my own voice and understanding my journey through the coming out process. Much of my high school and collegiate years, the only writing I was doing was scientific and devoid of personal pronouns. I had been putting my own writings aside, and had not been writing poetry for almost four years. As such, it has taken me quite some time to get back into narrative writing and including the “I” in academic work still feels slightly awkward. I did not, until this point, realize how much I had missed poetry. As far back as I can remember I have always been fascinated by the ability of poets to incite emotion not only by the words they speak, but the manner in which they speak them. Much like my return to writing poetry, being able to write my own story and make meaning out of it as I go, is an entirely liberating experience. Many of the pieces I have done, allowed me to let go of some past memories hanging over my head in manner that feels not only healthy but also healing as Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray write in their book *Our Stories Matter*. SPN is a unique methodology, focused around the writer and the narrative. It can be both challenging to write, and challenging to read. The experience culminates in universalizable truths. Truths that hold meaning for

the reader in their own way. At the outset of creating an SPN, the goal is not to produce this profound piece of writing that will enlighten some of life's great mysteries. It is not to produce such a fantastic piece of work that publishers around the world are knocking on your door at all hours looking for a deal. For me, at least, the goal was to write, to tell my own story, as I have never told it before. In the end, I can only hope that my own story resonates with others and that the conclusions I have drawn, based upon my own experiences, bring comfort, or unsettle, as needed; that others who find themselves on a meaning making journey know they are not alone.

It has taken me a long time to come to terms with my own sexuality. Almost twenty years before I could actually say that to other people that I met, and even now sometimes I find it challenging. I have decided to write this thesis about my experience coming out and developing my own identity as a gay man. I have told my story before in bits and pieces but never the whole thing at once. I hope by writing this, that others feel inspired to tell their own story. In my graduate work, I have been surrounded by others who are willing to share and their stories are incredibly passionate, powerful, and moving. This is the power of Scholarly Personal Narrative. To be able to bring to light the hidden strength of one's own story in a field where it can stand on its own.

My undergraduate work was in the field of Wildlife and Fisheries Biology. I spent a lot of that time doing quantitative research and working with quantitative data. There was no "I" in that research. In my final year of the program, I had to write a management

report for a wetland mitigation site. Not one single part of that report contained any information about why it was important to the people, or how the lack of conservation would affect the people. I did not realize until later that one of the most important parts of any kind of research is the person behind it. Reading articles and studies during that time period made me efficient at gleaning the most important parts as quickly as possible. I learned that in order to understand the point one needs only read the first and last paragraphs. Sometimes even just the abstract will do. Sadly, “Science has become that horrible storyteller ... who gives us all the details nobody cares about.”² I have never once found this to be true about SPN writing. The juiciest part of the research lies not in the first or last paragraph, but in the narrative between. In the management plan I wrote about which species needed to be conserved and why, how the land could be protected but none of it focused on why it was important to me, or why it would be important to anyone else who picked up that paper or stepped foot on the land.

The challenge to SPN is that there is no institutional review board (IRB), no confidentiality protection for the participant. The researcher is the subject and there is no one there to stop you from writing, or telling you when to withhold details. The stories written in SPN can be tragic, troubling. They can drive the writer into deep and dark places. Places that, under such watch as an IRB board, would be cause for great concern. Victor Frankl wrote “If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in

² DeWitt, Tyler. *Hey Science Teachers – Make it Fun!* Filmed November 2012. Ted Video. http://www.ted.com/talks/tyler_dewitt_hey_science_teachers_make_it_fun?language=en

suffering.” Sometimes, writing through the suffering to meaning can do more harm than good. It can cause the writer to lose perspective, to get lost in the emotions and lose sight of the larger picture and the universalizable truth that lies buried underneath the rubble. During these times, the writer may become angered, frustrated, depressed, and even apathetic. Sections of the story may be left out, the work may be incomplete. I too, have found myself walking away mid paragraph because I did not feel comfortable sitting in front of my computer reading the words that I had previously typed. Trying to get away from the story from the varied emotions that can resurface during times of reflection. No matter what I did, or how I tried to distract my mind, the simple fact was that those memories were never going to go away and neither were the feelings that came with it. So I sat back down, stretched my fingers, and continued the story through to its conclusion. Only by doing this, did I find resolutions to the questions I had been unable to answer. “Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit... Finally I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing.³”

³ Anzaldua, Gloria Borderlands. "La Frontera: The New Mestiza." *San Francisco: spinsters/aunt lute* (1987).

1.3 Poetry

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The Journey of Pad and Pen

*Where I go I know not where as I step out into the brisk night air,
The winter breeze tickles my nose, what few plants are left have nearly froze.*

*Nature wipes its muddy slate, washes off a dirty plate
In the coming months she'll start again, the brightest days are just around the bend.*

*The troubling times they pass me now, dare I stop and ask them how?
Drifting by too quick to see, what these really mean to me,
A time to reflect later on, when the emotional rush has come and gone,
I'll sit and read and write, clickity clack of the keyboard sounding out into the night.*

*The clickity clack, the tippity tap of the stories that I write,
The patient cursor, dancing from darkness into light,
The pages grow and the story seems to jump out of the screen
An eloquent picture painted, my, what a beautiful scene.*

--

I do not remember exactly when I started writing poetry. My dad used to have a yellow college ruled pad of paper next to his night stand that he would write short stories on, stories full of rhymes and imagery. I always enjoyed that style of writing and so took up the practice of writing a few lines here and there every so often. I wrote poetry off and on, up until I hit high school. There was not really a place for it anymore, or at least in high school I felt like I would have been made fun of. Every so often I would write some poetry, but I never shared it with anyone. Not even my parents. I hid it so well, that to this day I cannot even find where any of it went.

When I was 13 or 14 years old, my aunt gave me Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. It is, and will always be one of my favorite books. I came across one poem in particular, "Thoughts."

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*Of Equality- As if it harm'd me, giving others the same chances and rights as myself- As if
it were not indispensable to my own rights that others posses the same.*⁴

It felt almost as if he was challenging the reader, even mocking the reader. And all this written sometime between 1851 and 1855, a time period that is not known for its acceptance of civil rights. I like to think that if you asked him today, he wouldn't change a thing about those two lines. Those lines have stuck with me since the day I picked that

⁴ Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1900.

book up. This is how powerful poetry can be. It is provocative and cut throat. It is not a crack in the armor but the blade of a sword that you use to challenge another. Some ten years later, and I have found my voice through poetry again. I have included selected poems that I have written throughout this manuscript as they were also an important part of my development. Poetry is how I started to write my story, one line at a time, one layer at a time. Now it all sits exposed. No longer will I use the euphemisms and imagery of my poetry to hide behind, but to show who I truly am.

The following chapters detail my coming out story. From when I was a young boy just discovering what it meant to have different desires, through high school where I found myself increasingly isolated, and finally to graduate school where I find myself now writing about the whole journey. Included in those stories are the ways in which nature has impacted my growth, provided an avenue and outlet for my negative feelings, and enhanced my perspective on what it means to be gay.

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Chapter 2. COMING OUT

“Burst down those closet doors once and for all, and stand up and start to fight.”

-Harvey Milk

“Cause I can live a lifetime living these lies, I can laugh and act okay, I can show a smile
and say I'm happy, but there has gotta be a better way”

- Ryan Dolan

Throughout my 24 years on this planet I have felt like I have had to convince myself that what I am and who I am is normal. My day to day existence is just as valid as my brother's, my father's, my mother's, and my friend's. Just because I do not see myself existing in mainstream culture, does not mean that who I am is not a part of everyday life. I thought that a big long document would be the final proving grounds for me, the last wall I had to break through before I could really truly feel comfortable in my own skin. If I was reading it on paper, words that I had written, then it had to be normal right? It was not only in my head anymore but it was down on paper. Besides, I would not be allowed to write about something like this if it was not acceptable. I started writing about coming out when I entered graduate school. Every time I sat down and started to write, the first words that I put down on the page would feel vindicating, intoxicating. This is me on a page, in real life. This is OK... It was a feeling that did not last very long. I still felt like I was guarding myself from being recognized.

When I was a young kid, my brother used to crack jokes at my expense frequently. Back then I had an incredibly thin skin, almost every joke he made brought me to tears. Well, maybe not to tears but I took it all to heart. Fast forwarding to now, where all those years of poking fun has given me a fairly robust skin for jokes directed at me. It got to the point in high school that I almost did not even hear the jokes anymore. I had become so adept at blocking them out, it was part of my cover. If I did not even flinch when someone called me a fag, it could not possibly stick. For all this time, I felt like I was afraid of being recognized for who I truly am. Like Batman was to Bruce Wayne. Being gay was my secret identity. Only myself and the select few I was willing to let into my cave would know the truth of my identity. Unlike batman however, there were no perks, no flashy gadgets, and certainly no butler to help steer me back onto the right path when I started to stray. I could see the light outside the cave but never dared enough to let myself step out of it. I had been doing that for so long it became part of my survival routine. “The first law of nature is self-preservation. Cut off that which may harm you. But if it is worth preserving, and is meaningful, nourish it and have no regrets. Ultimately, this is true living and love of self...from within.”⁵ Writing this document has given me the opportunity to reflect back on my growth through all the stages of coming out. Now in my final semester, I am able to confidently and proudly call myself a Gay man.

⁵ Hodge, T. F. *From within I Rise: Spiritual Triumph over Death and Conscious Encounters with the Divine Presence*. S.I.: Publishamerica, 2009.

2.1 Cass Identity Formation Model

Vivian Cass developed an identity formative model for coming out in 1979 now known as the Cass Model. She describes six different stages of coming out: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, Identity Synthesis. Identity confusion is often the stage when individuals start asking questions of themselves, acknowledging their different feelings and attractions. Identity Comparison is characterized by acceptance of the possibility of being gay, and social isolation. Identity Tolerance happens when individuals begin to acknowledge that they are gay, and searches out other gay, lesbian, or queer individuals to reinforce the feeling of “I am not the only one.” During Identity Tolerance, the individual accepts that they are gay and attaches positive meaning to their identity. Some individuals may begin to try and “fit in” with members of the LGBTQA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and Asexual/Ally) community. In the Identity Pride stage, individuals begin to tell others and a dichotomy is drawn between homosexuals and heterosexuals. This stage is often accompanied by a need to “devour” gay culture (reading and socializing) while denouncing heterosexual values (marriage, traditional sexual role structures). The final stage, Identity Synthesis is when individuals realize that they are accepted by others, heterosexual and homosexual and no longer view these as dichotomous. Heterosexuality is no longer an “other”.

There are three different models of coming out that have been proposed throughout the years, Cass's Model, Anthony D'Augelli's 1994 model, and Eli Coleman's 1985 Model. Both Coleman and Cass describe coming out in stages. D'Augelli described them as interactive process and not stages. While I think there is certainly validity in both notions of how coming out happens, my own experience felt very linear. And while there was identifiable overlap between stages, and sometimes regression, Cass's model felt like it most closely fit my own experience. D'Augelli and Coleman focus heavily on the development of community within a queer identity. Cass's model focuses more on the development of an individual identity. As you will read in Chapter 3, I have struggled to find acceptance within the queer community. I also observed during this process that my movement through Cass's stages tended to correspond with academic cycles, from middle school, into high school, and finally college.

2.2 Identity Confusion

I think I knew at a very young age that I felt different. It is hard to trace back to exactly when I really started struggling with my sexual orientation. I can remember sitting on a swing during our lunch break in seventh grade. I had a friend in middle school who used to ask me on a weekly basis which girl from our class I was interested in. I realize now that she was actually the one interested in me, and I am notoriously terrible at picking up on things like that. There we were, sitting on the swings, watching other kids from the school playing on the soccer field, on the jungle gym, and on the

basketball court. I would give her someone's name and some reason why I liked them and off she would go to play matchmaker. She had fun with it, and I did not mind, but I never really told her the name of the person that I actually liked. And that was because it was one of my best friends, and a boy. At that age, there was no distinction between what was OK and what was not. Nobody told me explicitly that it was not ok to like boys, but then again, nobody told me that it was. Dating was really a gimmick at that point in school and I was learning rapidly how to keep up appearances. I was known at the school for being an athlete and one of the better ones. I stood out for that reason, and I think because of that no one ever really questioned me about my sexuality, or why I never really seemed that interested in girls. “The world is so obsessed with defining sexuality for everyone and attaching labels to it. Any time any person openly leaves the sexual norm, their sexuality becomes, more often than not, the absolute defining characteristic of that person. It becomes the first thing people think about and often the first thing they mention. Every other part of that person all but disappears.”⁶ Not that sexuality was a huge topic when I was in middle school. It had just begun to surface with some main stream celebrities like K.D. Lang and Ellen DeGeneres.

K.D. is one of the first lesbians I ever connected with. My parents had this computer program called Microsoft Encarta. It contained all sorts of education programs and even an early version of a “choose your own adventure” style video game. One of the

⁶ Dan Pearce. “Anything But Straight.” *The Laughing Single Dad (Blog)* November 27th, 2012. <http://www.danoah.com/2012/11/anything-other-than-straight.html>

programs was a music database that had short minute long clips from popular singers at the time. There were two songs that I would listen to frequently on the program: one of them was Annie Lennox's *Walking on Broken Glass*, the other was K.D Lang's *Constant Craving*. I definitely played K.D.'s song more. It was not just about her music, but also about how she looked. In the video, her hair was cut short and she was wearing clothes that I did not see women normally wearing. I have been trying to find the exact video since, but if I recall she was wearing a button down, tie, and a vest. I did not know why I thought she was different from everyone else, but I did. And I liked her for that reason.

I did not have any gay role models when I was young. The Hollywood stars were just starting to come out of the closet and make waves in mainstream media and society. I did not know anyone personally so that left me with virtually no one like me. Being confused about what all these feelings meant, I did not want to risk getting caught with anything that could lead to me being identified as different. I had a few things here and there that I hid in special stashes around my room, but even those things made me panic whenever my parents came into the room. I had really good hiding places, to this day, I'm pretty sure they haven't found where I stashed things. I was not entirely sure what to call myself at that point. I did not like girls, or at least I did not like girls in the way that everyone else at my school talked about them.

The first time I ever met an out gay person was sometime around fifth or sixth grade. My parents had a friend who lived down the street a little ways, and we went over

to their house one evening for some celebration. I remember meeting him, and his boyfriend. They were friendly, just like any other people. There was nothing out of the ordinary about them, and my parents did not make a big deal about going over to their house, or really bothering to explain what was meant by the fact that they were gay. I got that they lived together but I do not think I fully understood what that meant.

Nonetheless, their situation, two men living together, was far more appealing than the thought of living with a girl. I am thankful for how my parents handled situations like this. It made me feel like there was not anything wrong with the fact that two men were living together. I had no idea their feelings about gays at that point, but when I started understanding that I was different I began to hide those thoughts away deep within myself. I thought that if they found out, they would disown me, kick me out of the house, and be disgusted with me. I found out later on that was not the case but regardless, these are the thoughts that were constantly running through my head. Thoughts that still sometimes run through my head. The hardest part about coming out is that those feelings never go away, no matter how many times you come out. I think that is something that is really hard to understand for a lot of people. Coming out is not something that you do once and it is over with. I find it funny that one of the first questions I tend to get asked when people find out that I am gay is “When did you decide to come out?” I'm not quite sure how to answer this question. I think the question that they mean to ask is “At what point in your life did you decide to live openly?” While they may seem like very similar questions, I have two drastically different answers for each of them. Coming out does not happen in a day, in a week, or any definable span of time. Coming out happens every

single day. It is like carrying an open umbrella around with you every day, even when it is sunny and there is not a single cloud in the sky. Eventually your arm just gets tired, and you want to put the umbrella down. But you cannot. So you get creative. You wedge the umbrella into your open backpack hoping it will do the trick, but gusts of wind keep blowing it over. No matter what you try, you always end up coming back to just holding the umbrella in your hand. Over time, your arm starts to get stronger, and you notice the umbrella less and less. But it never goes away. It is always there, ready for the rain to fall. Just once, “I wanna feel.. I wan't to fall like rain...with no shelter so I can feel which way the wind is blowing today.”⁷

2.3 Introduction to Nature

I was introduced to nature at a very young age. My dad had grown up hunting, fishing, and exploring the outdoors in a small rural town of Northern Vermont. My mom had also grown up appreciating her time in nature, a skier in the wintertime, hiker in the summer. Nature and the outdoors found its way into both of their lives. Early on I had a much more passive role and less appreciative approach to nature, I was often carried on either my mom or my dad’s back when they went hiking, or cross country skiing on the trails. As I grew, I began to explore nature on my own terms. My mom and I would spend a few days hiking the White Mountains and hopping from hut to hut. I would tag along with my dad when he went out grouse hunting. I did not hunt with him at first, but just

⁷ Sexton, Martin. *Fall Like Rain*. (Kitchen Table Records, 2012)

observed him and the surroundings. Spending time in the woods grew to be a passion of mine. Any chance I could take to spend some time out in the woods, I jumped at. Most often I found myself out in the woods alone. I found it best for me to trek solo most of the time because it allowed me time to process through what I needed, without entertaining the needs of someone else. I have hiked with more than a few people who find the silence of the woods disturbing and feel the need to fill it in with constant chatter. I do not mind entertaining conversation, but I find it gets in the way of listening to yourself.

I wish that I had the perspective on nature then that I do now. It has helped me to resolve much of the isolation and invalidation that I struggled with when I started to come out. It also helped me to reaffirm important relationships that I questioned during my coming out process. Not only the time that I spend physically in the wilderness, but also my understanding of how nature works. The benefits that I had experienced from nature only became apparent to me in the last few years. They have lead me to be much more intentional with my time out in the wilderness. “There is new life in the soil for every man. There is healing in the trees for tired minds and for our overburdened spirits, there is strength in the hills, if only we will lift up our eyes. Remember that nature is your great restorer.”⁸

⁸ Calvin Coolidge: *Telephone Remarks to a Group of Boy Scouts: What it Means to Be a Boy Scout*, July 25, 1924. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24184>

2.4 The First in my Family to Know

My mom and I have always been very close and she was the first family member that I came out to. My sophomore year in high school, I decided it was time to tell her. Due to the closeness of our relationship, and the relative similarities with which we communicate to each other I thought she would be the safest person to tell. Out of all my family members, I thought I could anticipate her reaction most accurately. That did not make it any easier to say. It is nearly impossible to prepare yourself for a moment like that. The fear is overwhelming. I ran through multiple different scenarios of how I should tell her. When was going to be the best time? Did I want to stick around afterwards in case she had questions or did I want to disappear for a while so that she could process on her own? I definitely did not want my dad to be around when I told her/ when she found out. My dad felt like a whole different animal to tackle. I am definitely close with my dad, but in a very different way. My mom is quite open emotionally. It is fairly easy to read from her facial expressions what she is thinking. My dad on the other hand does not express his emotions in the same visible manner. It felt much harder to predict what his response was going to be. For me, there is always a heightened level of fear when coming out to men versus coming out to women. With women, I do not have to worry about the loss of masculinity. Men on the other hand, use the effeminate stereotype attached to gays to subordinate their masculine identities. Coming out to a straight man feels like I am immediately giving up my claim to masculinity and therefore feel the need to over

represent as masculine. Especially given the fact that most often when I find my sexuality questioned, it is in straight male dominated spaces. “I discovered that, for boys, achieving a masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity. Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another. They also assert masculine selves by engaging in heterosexist discussions... Though homophobic taunts and assertion of heterosexuality shore up a masculine identity for boys, the relationship between sexuality and masculinity looks different when masculinity occurs outside male bodies.”⁹ Coming out to my dad carried a lot of that extra fear of disappointment, of losing his respect for not being the masculine son. I did not worry about that with my mother. The real fear with her was not knowing how she felt about gays. I had never heard her speak ill of gays or lesbians that I could recall. I settled on telling her late one night, after my dad had gone to bed. I would grab her attention for a few minutes and talk with her about how I was feeling. At the time, I felt really distant from my family, disconnected, because they did not actually know who I was. I do not think anyone in my family picked up on that. Part of learning to hide who I was also meant that I excelled at putting on a good face. I spent almost an hour sitting in the hot tub at our house, trying to come up with the right words to tell her. Trying to convince myself that I actually did want to tell her. After nearly turning into a prune, I got out, toweled dry, and walked back into the house. I panicked. There was no way I was going to be able to tell her face to face. I do not think I could have pushed any air past my

⁹ Pascoe, C. J. *Dude, you're a fag*. *The Structure of Schooling: Readings in the Sociology of Education* (2010): 391.

vocal cords at that point. Sheepishly, I wrote down what I had wanted to say on a small sticky note, placed it beside her computer and ducked off to bed.

My mom and I have always been able to talk very openly with each other, and the conversation that followed my coming out was no different. We openly processed through our feelings during a two and a half hour car ride to the ski mountain that we both taught at. She talked about the thoughts that had gone through her mind. Had it been something she did wrong raising me? Did she contribute to me turning out the way I am? There was a lot of back and forth sharing about what it meant now and what I was going to be dealing with as I came out to more and more people. She also talked about how difficult it was that my dad did not know. To this day I still feel incredibly guilty for not being able to tell my dad. My mom ended up telling him my sophomore year in college. I wanted to tell him, but could never actually get the words out of my mouth. I feel sorry for the hurt that I caused him when he finally found out. That I had not trusted my relationship with him enough to be the one to have the conversation. It is the only part of my coming out story that I wish I could take back, or have a second chance at.

My dad and I have now grown closer and I feel that I owe a lot of that to our mutual love of the woods. Every year, the two of us spend at least a few weekends out in the woods together during hunting season. When I first started out hunting with him, we used to talk frequently about our plan for walking through the woods. The thing to understand about how we hunt together most of the time is that it is done walking. We

spread out twenty to twenty five yards apart from each other and walk in a line through the woods. This, along with some common sense about which direction to point a gun, prevents accidental shootings. We would have to stop frequently so that I would know where he was or which way he was going to go. Nowadays I barely have to look at him to know where he is going or what he is thinking while we are out there. I have learned how he reads the landscape and how to sync up with that. In the winter we often go exploring the southern regions of the Green Mountain National Forest. I always feel like we can talk for hours out in the woods. Nature helped me to re-establish the trust that I had broken with my dad when I was unable to come out to him face to face. I have a much closer relationship with him and we are always scheming about how we can explore some new section of the woods. Last year, my dad and I spent the opening day of deer seasons together. We both got up around four a.m. and trudged off into the woods by the light of a headlamp. I was seated at the base of a tree, he was seated about five feet behind me at the base of another tree. Just as the sun began to rise over the treetops a group of coyotes began howling at the lower end of the valley. They were echoed by another group that was at the upper end of that valley. I remember turning and looking at him with a huge grin on my face. I am pretty sure that he had a huge smile hidden underneath the camouflage face mask he was wearing. I am never going to forget that moment with him.

2.5 Identity Comparison

I never really read any books that were written by gay men growing up. I think I was afraid to be seen with the book. It was something that could immediately identify me, perhaps the only thing that could immediately identify me. Otherwise, I could just blend into the shadows and nobody would ever know. So I had a very one sided perspective. Just my own experience, and nobody else's to help me process through it. Until my senior year in high school I had not even watched any movies where the protagonist was gay. I remember the first movie I watched. It was called Shelter. It centers on a young man in California who struggles with his identity, lying to his best friends and going down a destructive path that leads to his ultimate breakdown and subsequent rebuilding. It was a glimpse into a reality of someone else who was struggling through the coming out process and self-identification. It gave me comfort, even if it was fictional.

I kept mainly to my comfort zone in high school. I was a soccer player, and played for the school team my first year. I fit in well with the athletes. That is one of the places I had always felt equal, and respected. I had a lot of talent as a young player. In 2003 I competed in a national competition called Pepsi Dribble Pass and Score. I was flown out to California to compete and ended up taking third place out of some ten thou-

sand or more participants. I knew that when I played soccer, I was recognized for my talents by coaches and peers, and that was what was truly important. If you could play, not much else mattered. That is how it seemed anyway. The locker-room was a completely different story. A 2012 LA Times article exposed some of the homophobia that exists in professional locker rooms: "Earlier this season linebacker Brandon Spikes sent out a tweet claiming to be homophobic "just like I'm arachnophobic. I have nothing against homosexuals or spiders but I'd still scream if I found one in my bathtub." Spikes later said he was joking. But former Angels outfielder Torii Hunter, among baseball's most thoughtful and intelligent players, isn't kidding when he says an "out" teammate could divide a team." For me, as a Christian ... I will be uncomfortable because in all my teachings and all my learning, biblically, it's not right," he says. "It will be difficult and uncomfortable."¹⁰ High school locker rooms are not much different. It is a hyper-masculinity competition, rampant with homophobia. As long as I did not let on, I was just fine. I had to lie here and there, make up some stories about what I had done over the weekend, whether I had slept with any girls. I was pretty good at it, and I was never singled out.

My sophomore year I tried out for the junior varsity team, and did not make it. I was really disappointed about the fact that I was not going to be able to play soccer but was also feeling a huge relief that I did not have to go back into the locker room environment. "If I were straight, the banter would probably have just rolled right off my back,

¹⁰ Baxter, Kevin. *In Pro Sports, Gay Athletes Still Feel Unwelcome*. *LA Times*, December 29, 2012. Accessed February 22, 2015. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/29/sports/la-sp-sports-homophobia-20121230>.

but I'm not straight, and what the guys said and how they went at each other left me feeling totally alienated. And it wasn't like I didn't understand that the locker room banter was a way the guys bonded. It's a sort of ritual, almost a game, but it was a game I got worse at over time..."¹¹ It turned out to be a blessing not making the team. Through some mutual contacts my mom had, I ended up joining a pick up league that played at a local indoor sports arena. Every Friday the group would get together and play for a few hours. I met a few people that I seemed to get along with really well. I found out after the first few weeks that with the exception of two, they identified as gay or lesbian. They were the first core group of friends that I had who were part of the community. It was wonderful to be able to hang out with them, although they did not know I was gay at first. I felt very comfortable around them, and they did indeed seem so normal. I decided I wanted to try out again my junior year for the junior varsity team and went to the summer training camps that they hosted. It was nice to be back with my friends on a competitive field, but it still did not feel right. The soccer was great, but the same feeling of having to hide who I was did not go away. So I never actually went to try outs. Playing for that team did not make me happy anymore. Not when I could play on Friday nights with a crew of people who were just like me and made me feel normal.

When I was in high school, either my first year or second year, I had a friend named Matt. We were really close, we did everything together practically. He was

¹¹ Rogers, Robbie, and Eric Marcus. *Coming out to Play*. Penguin Books, 2014.

definitely one of my best friend at the time. I would show up at his house without even calling ahead and he would do the same at mine. We have drifted apart now, but I remember one time we were out on the golf course playing our usual weekend rounds. He was talking about this party that he had gone to the night before, and he met this one kid. He had found out at some point in the evening that this kid was gay. I recall the exact words he said to this day: “It was weird, like this kid was gay, but he was really normal, you know, he was normal, like you and me. It was really weird, the kid was really cool.” I laugh about it now. If only he had known.

I never went to any of my high school dances. Fortunately they often coincided with pick-up soccer on Friday nights so I never had to make up an excuse. I did not even attend prom. I was so uncomfortable, I thought for sure someone would be able to tell I had zero interest in any girl that I brought to the prom. I did not have any friends at the time who I could tell my circumstances to that would have provided me with some sort of cover story. For the most part, the social interaction I had with youth my age was either during the school day, or during the winter when I taught skiing at a nearby ski hill. It was easier for me to avoid people then it was to keep the lie alive. At least when I was by myself, I did not have think about what I said or how I said it. I had quite a few friends at school that I hung out with during the school day. During day to day conversations, I could get away just being quiet when the topic of girls came up with them. A few laughs here and there, perhaps raise an eyebrow or two during the conversation and I could keep the chat from turning towards me.

My senior year in high-school I had joined a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). I did not join the club outright. I was enrolled in a Race and Gender class that required a completed project in order to receive a final grade. The project was to join a diversity club on campus, attend meetings and write about what that experience was like. I viewed it as a good opportunity to join the GSA without anyone knowing my real motives. If anyone asked about it I could just tell them I had joined because of the class I was taking and that it was for my project. I went to the first few meetings, and it seemed fine. Everyone was very welcoming, and I enjoyed the experience. During the third or fourth week, the club had to take their photo for the yearbook. I was invited to join them in the photo, and happily agreed. That is, until we walked outside the building to go take the photo. I do not think I have ever been more uncomfortable in my life. The stares that were directed our way as we walked across campus cut straight through to bone. I wanted to turn tail and run, but I did not. Nobody said anything, or shouted anything at the group but they did not have to. That look clearly said “you are not welcome here.” I never went back, not even for the sake of my project. I somehow managed to complete it but steered well clear of both the club and the members that were in it. I felt more fear from being with other LGBTQ members than I did comfort.

2.6 Retreating to the Internet

After coming out to my mom, I found myself increasingly turning towards the internet to help process through my feelings. I could not get advice from my mom about what was going on, or what my feelings meant. I could not look to my brother's life as an example. As a straight man, his experiences taught me nothing about my own. Back in the days of MSN instant messenger and AIM, I frequented various chat rooms. At that point I was seeking validation through others, and the internet was not necessarily the best place to do that. While there were friendly users here and there, a large majority of it was very hostile. A 2012 study found that the frequency of online harassment has been increasing in recent years, from 6% in 2005 to 11% of respondents in 2010¹². I found that sites that were attempting to be informative and explanatory were often filled with users trolling the comment sections, spewing homophobic tirades and bashing the "lifestyle choice." To a young developing boy it is hard to believe an article written by one person when the number of derogatory comments outnumber the length of the article. The effects from exposure to this kind of bullying have been well documented in recent years including: "depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety, suicidal ideation and psychosomatic problems like headache and sleep disturbances."¹³ I found other sites that required the creation of an account which provided some screening from the hate speech

¹² Jones, Lisa M., Kimberly J. Mitchell, and David Finkelhor. *Online harassment in context: Trends from three Youth Internet Safety Surveys (2000, 2005, 2010)*. *Psychology of Violence* 3, no. 1 (2013): 53.

¹³ Cassidy, Wanda, Chantal Faucher, and Margaret Jackson. *Cyberbullying among youth: A comprehensive review of current international research and its implications and application to policy and practice*. *School Psychology International* (2013): 0143034313479697.

but with a now captive audience, they tokenized the sexuality of men. The home pages of the sites were covered with men wearing nothing but a slim piece of underwear and the comments were largely filled with users explaining the sexual acts that they wanted to perform on the model in the picture. According to the internet I was either supposed to be incredibly vulgar and sexual when talking to other gay men and expressing my identity, or I was the scum of the earth, destroying the sanctity of heterosexual world order and fueling the flames of hell. The website NoHomophobes is “dedicated to showing how often every day, week, month people on Twitter use hurtful language without thinking about it, focusing particularly on the words and phrases, “faggot,” “dyke,” “so gay,” and “no homo.” The numbers are astounding- between October 20th and 26th, “faggot” was used 217,851 times, “dyke” was used 31,197 times, “so gay” 72,904 times, and “no homo” 93,967 times. If one does the math, that means that the most-used (and what I feel to be the most offensive) of them all, “faggot” was used 1,297 times per hour last week.¹⁴” It never felt like there was a place I could just go to talk to people. To have a normal conversation about sexuality. There was no way I was going to physically visit an LGTB youth center, even though there was one located relatively close to where I lived. I was nowhere near ready to associate myself publicly with other gays or lesbians. The internet remained the sole place for me to gather information about who I was, how I was supposed to act, and where I was or was not allowed to be myself. It was overwhelmingly negative, and increased my social isolation.

¹⁴ Wells, Kristopher. *NoHomophobes.com*. No Homophobes Dot Com. Accessed February 10, 2015. <http://www.nohomophobes.com/>.

2.7 I am One of Many Species

I was fairly convinced at this point that being gay was far from normal, and that I would be living out the rest of my existence with this uneasy feeling. The perspective that I lacked at the time, and later acquired as a result of both my immersion into the environmental sciences in college and increased time spent in the woods is that homosexuality is not confined to just our species. Over 1500 species exhibit homosexual relationships and it has been well documented in at least 500 species¹⁵. Evolution has a way of weeding out the traits that do not infer benefits for survival, and yet homosexuality exists. Most importantly, for some reason that has yet to be fully understood it continues to be selected for. This is often forgotten within the social context that we talk about sexual orientation in. “An attempt to eliminate the biological aspect is misleading because it denies that social behavior takes place within nature and by extension of natural processes.¹⁶” Typically, evolutionary traits are linked to the mating process and their impact on an individual to mate. Homosexuality however, may infer benefits that are not necessarily or directly related to the mating process. “Animals may engage in same-sex couplings to diffuse social tensions, to better protect their young or to

¹⁵ Goudarzi, Sara. *Homosexual Animals Out of the Closet*. *LiveScience*, November 16, 2006. Accessed February 4, 2015.

¹⁶ Padgug, Robert A. "Sexual matters: on conceptualizing sexuality in history." *Radical History Review* 1979, no. 20 (1979): 3-23.

maintain fecundity when opposite-sex partners are unavailable—or simply because it is fun.¹⁷” Gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender are all socially constructed concepts. Meaning that these behaviors that exist have been given names, and have had stigmas and stereotypes attached to them based upon the attitudes and opinions of the dominant and ruling society members. These animals cannot be classified and boxed in to an identity in the same manner that we like to classify humans. In the environmental studies, behavior is often observed as simply an act of expression. The attached label, stigma, or stereotype has nothing to do with the actual behavior or how it has been recorded or documented. Their behaviors however, can still fit in to how we construct sexual orientation. Taking this larger perspective, these behaviors and homosexual relationships exist outside of our own species, and not only that but they serve a purpose. For a young man struggling to validate the fact that being gay is not some abnormality, or some divergent path, this is incredibly welcome news. No slandering editorial or dominant narrative can take away that fact. I am supposed to be here on this planet, as I am. It allowed me to let go of the feeling that I had to prove I belong here. “Homosexual behavior is as natural as heterosexual behavior. This means that homosexuality is found in virtually all groups of animals, in virtually all geographic areas and time periods, and in a wide variety of forms - as are heterosexuality, divorce, monogamy and infanticide, among other things.¹⁸” When I felt defeated, I needed only to remind myself of that simple fact. I am not alone, I am one of many species.

¹⁷ Driscoll, Emily V. *Bisexual Species*. *Scientific American Mind* 20, no. 3 (2009): 20-25.

¹⁸ Bagemihl, Bruce. 2001. *Animals do it: Whether Humans Wish to Regard it as Natural Or Unnatural, Homosexuality has always Occurred in the Animal Kingdom*. *Alternatives Journal* 27 (3): 36-37.

2.8 Identity Tolerance

First year of college felt like it was a fresh start, a fresh opportunity for me. I did not know anyone and nobody knew me. I could make whatever first impression I wanted. I found out later from a friend that my coming out was not quite as apparent to everyone else I was living with as I thought it was ...though the first year was still pretty easy for me. I told whom I felt comfortable telling and just left the others to come to their own conclusions. I had the attitude of “if they ask, I will tell them, but otherwise I’m not going to say anything.” While I still hold to the first part of this, the latter is no longer good enough. That was not truly living openly. But as a first year, it was enough. I could finally act how I felt on the inside. The first few friends I made I told early on, and they did not have a problem with it. It went far better than I was expecting. Interestingly enough, I still found it awkward to talk about guys. When we would watch TV, and a male celebrity would come on, my female friends would talk about how he was hot or cute. Much like men do with women, but I could never join in with them. It felt weird to be talking about a guy in that way, even though it was how I truly felt. I wanted to be open about my sexuality, and I thought I was at the time. But even so I was still learning what it truly meant to come out and live openly. I was worried that it was one thing if people knew that I was gay, but it would be different when they were actually presented with what that looked like in reality. That the contrast of knowing, versus interacting with, would change their minds about me being OK. That used to be a major sticking point for me, I was

worried it would change their opinion of me. I felt like I had to look over my shoulder a lot of the time. Friends that I had trusted before, now had to re-earn that trust in my eyes. It was risky coming out to them, but was necessary. If I was going to come out of the closet, I actually had to tell people.

Around this same time I started thinking about dating, and acknowledging, to myself, boys who I thought were cute or attractive. But I had no idea how to approach them, I mean how would I even know if they were gay? Or even interested? It was confusing and exciting. My life had been incredibly void of intimate contact, and I saw other first year students engaging in the normal flirting, touching, courting stages of relationship building all across campus.

2.9 When a Relationship Becomes Part of Who You Are

I walked into the cafe, glancing around to see what small little corner I could hide myself away into. The second floor had a balcony that overlooked the entrance with four to five tables. There was only one person sitting upstairs so I thought this would be a safe spot to go. I found a two person table in the far corner that had a view of the people entering from the street but not once they crossed the threshold of the doorway. I reached into my backpack to pull out the short homework assignment that I had brought with me so that it looked like I had a reason to be there. I did not complete a single problem on that homework sheet I had brought with me, but that was not why I had brought it. I had

never really been on a coffee date before, and the thought of meeting another man for that specific purpose felt very weird to me. I was very excited, but at the same time I still felt very guarded. In the back of my mind, I was hoping that no one else came to that second floor of the cafe I was in. I was worrying more about whether someone would see me sitting to get coffee with this guy than I was about the actual date. I do not really remember much about the date, and that ended up being the only one I went on with him. It is not lost on me to this day that I felt so uncomfortable from simply sitting across the table from another man. That I honestly cannot tell you a single thing about him. Not what he wore, what we talked about, or even what I was wearing. It is a terrible way to spend a first date.

My second year in college, I had begun to express my identity as a gay man with less concern over being identified. Other than the first date at the coffee shop, I had very little intimate interactions with other men. I was not sure how to put myself out into the dating scene, and I was not obvious enough that anyone ever approached me. I ended up meeting a guy by chance and things seemed to go rather smoothly for the first month or two. It gave me a lot of pride in who I was to feel like there was someone out there who liked me as I was, and as a gay man. I felt more confident in public, even though he was rarely there with me. The feeling of whether or not I was normal faded away as I began connect more intimately with my partner. Being with him validated the fact I was certainly not the only one, and that intimacy between two men can hold just as much significance as intimacy between a man and a women. I had been dating him for only

seven months when he decided that we needed to take a break. He was an hour away from where I was, and at a military academy. That presented the first of many challenges. I went above and beyond what one should, to accommodate him and got little to nothing in return. Sometimes driving an hour to see him only to find out unfortunately that he could not hang out and had to tend to situations on his campus. And so the cycle continued like this. I was put off and put off and put off. Reflecting back on it now, there were dozens of red flags that out of pure inexperience and an unwillingness to acknowledge, I ignored. I refused to treat being stood up as being stood up; I ate every single one of his excuses up, and even made some of my own. I did not listen to my friends. I kept repeating the same phrase to myself “they do not really know, they’re not in it like I am.” The months went by and I got more and more unhappy and less and less willing to admit it. Finally the end of the school year came. I had not seen him in over a month and I was getting fed up. I understood the challenge of dating someone who not only was separated by distance, but had restrictive liberty time that did not always end up resulting in him being freed from duty. A significant part of the break down was due to the fact that there was absolutely zero communication between the two of us, I was the last to know anything. He never introduced me to any of his friends, and quite frankly I am sure they did not even know I existed. The security blanket that he represented was slowly coming apart at the seams. Not only was I questioning the relationship, but I was also questioning how secure I felt in my identity. After all, the past months I had been building my comfort and my self-acceptance off of somebody else. As the relationship began to erode, so too did my confidence.

He was to leave for a two month, experiential deployment on a submarine mid-summer and would be out of contact the whole time. He proposed the break at the end of the school year, saying that it was not fair to me that he kept putting everything else first and that I was coming last. I reluctantly agreed on a break and convinced myself that I should not be the one to start communication again. If you love something, let it go and if it comes back it was meant to be, right? Well he did come back, but only to confirm what I had begun to suspect. The interest in discontinuing our relationship was apparent, and during the two month break he had slept with someone else.

I remember the night that I learned he had been less than faithful; I ripped a pillow to shreds (I am glad that I lived by myself). Question after question drove me deeper and deeper into a depressed state. How could he have said he loved me if he was so easily able to go and sleep with someone else? How much had he actually been truthful about? How messed up was I for believing everything he said? Is this why men are not supposed to be together? Did this mean that being gay meant a life of promiscuity as homophobes touted gay men to be? Why did not I see it coming? ...Why did not I see it coming?

I continued on this spiral, but I did not tell any of my friends. By day I was the happy go lucky kid who got to spend his summer in the beautiful town I lived in. By night, I was a train wreck of emotion, tears, anger, regret, and more tears. I confided in my boss that I needed to take some time and get out of Vermont. I left the state and

traveled to Maine where I met my brother and his, at the time, girlfriend. My brother is in the navy, and if there's one thing that guys in the navy are good at, it is drinking. So I drank, a lot. And I listened to country music and I tried to put everything behind me. I sat in a hammock, strung up between two trees on the edge of the lake. I watched the tips of the pine needles sway back in forth in the gentle breeze. Saw the current of the lake slowly carrying away all the leaves, needles, and other debris that had landed upon its surface. For the first time in a week I felt free, I felt relaxed, I felt like I could breathe again.

Then the next morning hit, and I woke up to an elephant sitting on my chest. The hurt and betrayal had not gone anywhere. They had merely waited for me to float back down to the hard cold ground I now walked on. I returned to my home city feeling no less anxious, overwhelmed, heartbroken or depressed. I confided in a friend. Despite her best efforts to bring me out of my slump, I could not get my mind off him. I could not let go of the pain and hurt. I withdrew from my friends, withdrew from my favorite activities. I walked to work, sat at a desk, did what I had to and walked home to my emotional prison of a house. I had to leave but I could not. I did not know where to go.

2.10 Healing Through Nature

My head felt so convoluted and unclear that I struggled to focus on anything. Things that I had previously felt so passionate about sat idly collecting dust. It felt like

someone had invaded my space and I could not get them out of there. I looked at things and I did not see them as they were, but as they used to be. Heartbreak is a tough pill to swallow, and the first failed relationship definitely hits the hardest. After another few weeks of this depressed cycle, I willed myself to get up and do something other than work or watch television. Neither of those things did anything to help me move on from my current state. I started hiking, short hikes at first. An hour long to possibly two hours. I did not bring anyone with me, just myself.

I have always been an observer in nature. A stretch of trail that someone can walk in five minutes I could spend five hours on. It got to the point where I would spend all day meandering slowly up trails, camp out at the top for an hour or two, and then slowly retreat back down in the waning hours of the day. With each hike that passed I felt less and less of the heartbreak, less of the loss, less of the anger. In a 1984 study conducted in a Pennsylvania hospital, patient's time to recovery was tracked to monitor the effect that having a window open to the outdoors and nature would have. Patients were matched, one who had a view of the open window and one who had a view of a brick wall. The study found "in comparison with the wall-view group, the patients with the tree view had shorter postoperative hospital stays, had fewer negative evaluative comments from nurses, took fewer moderate and strong analgesic doses, and had slightly lower scores for minor postsurgical complications¹⁹." The mere act of spending time in nature had helped

¹⁹ Ulrich, Roger. "View through a window may influence recovery." *Science* 224, no. 4647 (1984): 224-225.

me to heal from the feeling of torment that had been hovering over me for the past weeks.

I had spent the past year letting someone else dictate my emotional state. Drag me down to the lowest point, and step on me for good measure. Nature was the key to my recovery. It was the first place that I could go and work on myself. Every time I stepped out into the woods, the only person I could see or hear was me. Nobody else to tell me how I should or should not feel. I could feel all the anger, hurt, and betrayal slowly dissipating. On days that I was not able to get outdoors I could feel the negative thoughts come creeping back in, crawling up my leg and rooting my feet in place; preventing me from moving on. It did not immediately fix the fact that I felt broken. It did however allow me to start building myself back up again. I had a positive outlet for all the negativity I felt dragging me down. This allowed me to function on a daily basis without the overwhelming burden of that failed relationship. Arthur Brown said "All great discoveries come from a deep inner journey," and this was a journey that took me to many of the peaks of the green mountains. I will not give away my favorite spot to go, because it feels like a lightly traveled secret. The climb to the summit is steep and requires some scrambling, but the actual summit has an old fire tower that you can climb up onto and look down upon the entire state. Or at least it feels that way. I make an effort to visit this spot at least once a year, and I am always reminded of how far I have come from the first day I visited that mountain top.

Chapter 3: NEITHER QUEER NOR THERE

When I got to college, the first person I probably should have told was my roommate but that felt like an incredibly risky move. If for some reason he was not comfortable with me, or I was not comfortable with him, it would have made the rest of the year uneasy. He found out after about three months and much like many of the people in my life, was very surprised and a little bit confused at first. That was a pretty common occurrence when I came out to people. I often get response questions like: “Are you sure?” “Really? But you act so straight” or “Wow, you do not seem gay at all?” Most of the time I laughed these questions off, but deep down I felt a little frustrated by these questions. On one hand I was definitely grateful for the fact that I did not stand out as being gay, because that meant I felt like I had a lot more control over the when and where of coming out. On the other hand, it made me feel like I was not seen as part of the community. I had isolated myself so much in high school that by the time college rolled around I was desperately seeking some link, some way back into a community that would help me establish relationships and connections. At this point, I was still in the early stages of identity development. By the time I had entered college, I was falling somewhere in between Identity Tolerance and Identity Comparison. I had accepted the fact that I was gay, moving towards being able to tell others, but I had no attachment to the gay community at all other than the few friends who I played pick-up soccer with. It kept me from really being able to move out of the Identity Comparison stage. I found myself still trying to connect to that community once I got to college. I looked into

joining one of the affirming campus groups like Free2Bee, and Guy Talk, but I never did. I knew that there were spaces to go on campus where I could surround myself with people who identified as I did. But I always had these fear in the back of my mind. The GSA experience was still lingering and I certainly did not want to go through that again.

3.1 Identity Pride: The Borderlands

“The U.S-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe. To distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.²⁰” Gloria Anzaldua outlines in detail her borderlands theory in the book *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. She illustrates the notion that there are not only geographical borders (the United States and Mexico as shown in her work) but also psychological borders that can create destructive internal rifts of identity.

²⁰Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.” San Francisco: spinsters/aunt lute (1987).

The first time I heard the term hetero-normative was in my second semester of college. In this instance, it was used in a derogatory way to mean gay men who act straight and present as masculine. Something that gay men should not be, at least according to this group. It would not be the last time I heard hetero-normative used in this way. In fact, I found it to be a common definition within the queer community. You had to be counter-culture, counter-normative in order to fit in. Acting masculine or coming off as straight was not a good thing and did not do anything to advance the queer cause. It meant I had to find ways to queer myself if I wanted to be part of the community. But what did that even mean? Was I supposed to dress differently? Talk differently? Change my mannerisms to reflect a less masculine identity?

I wanted to be able fit in and socialize with the queer community but I felt ostracized from the start. I did not want to go to pride parade dressed scantily in rainbow attire as a show of how different I could be, and yet that was what it felt like I would have to do in order to fit in. I do not mean to say that this representation is not important. After all, the pride parades are founded on the belief that we need to be visible, something I believe in one hundred percent. I also believe that our queer community is incredibly diverse, and that needs to be represented too. If we are going to be visible, it means that everyone must be visible. From the drag queens and the go-go boys to the button down, bow tie wearers. Something, unfortunately, the LGBTQA community still needs to work on. "Different lesbians and gays scrutinize the cultural/Other to see if we're correct- they police us out of fear of instability within a community, fear of not appearing united and

fear of attack by non-gay outsiders. But I fear a unity that leaves out parts of me, that colonizes me, i.e., violates my integrity, my wholeness, and chips away at autonomy.²¹”

In stark contrast to my less than welcome introduction to the community, I also felt a sense of lust. This contradiction of not being queer enough and yet when I entered the dating scene all I saw around me was men seeking young, white, straight acting, fit, and masculine men. Headlines on profiles read: “Only looking for fit”, “Masc. only”, “Don't be femme, I date men, not women.” Others have found a very similar experience: “I am fit UB2 or don't bother talking to me.' 'I already have a father, if over 22 don't bother.' '34 y/o seeks twink. Willing to pay.' 'Not racist, but no chocolate or rice.’²²” I felt desired sexually but not socially. This contradiction in values did not do anything to ease me into the culture. It was a harsh reality of my college experience. I found it difficult to meet other guys in my day to life and turned to the increasing number of websites and phone applications that touted their ability to connect its members romantically or otherwise. Yet here I only found “a virtual world of avatars, most of which strive to project that they possess the qualities of the ideal, desirable gay man. A place where black men white-out their picture in attempts to pass as white men. Where people claim to be straight, or “straight-acting” to attract other gay men. Where femininity is masked and degraded, and masculinity is cherished and sought after. Where overweight men either embrace obesity to align with a “bear” or “cub” identity, or are told to lose weight. Where

²¹Anzaldúa, Gloria. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Duke University Press, 2009.

²²Gloff, Jeremy. *No Fats Or Femmes: A Gay Culture At War With Itself*. JEREMY GLOFF HOMEPAGE. Accessed February 18, 2015.

young homosexual men are told to identify as top or bottom, white or black, jock or bear, twink or otter, masc or fem. Men who spent the entirety of their childhood being bullied by straight guys, are being told that if they act straight, they'll be more sought after in the gay community. Black men who spent their whole lives terrified behind the closeted doors of the African-American community, and hindered by white privilege, are being asked to pass as the very race that degrades them.²³ I was feeling disgusted with the way that this community, MY community, was treating its own members. I had thought with all the oppression, all the hatred that this community had experienced firsthand during the fifties and sixties and the stonewall riots in nineteen sixty nine, would have taught us something about oppression and equal treatment. But if history has taught us anything, it is that we seem to learn nothing from it. And so I found myself now rejecting the community not because I did not dare be identified as a gay man, but because it felt so hypocritical. All I saw was internalized oppression of this kind running rampant through the queer community.

At the same time as my struggle with the queer community was manifesting itself, I no longer fit into the straight culture, or the straight narrative. I was neither straight enough, nor queer enough. I did not really have any community to associate myself with. It left me feeling like I either had to change and become queerer, or revert back to the closeted feeling and telling others narrative as my own to cover. In either case, the

²³ Bennet, Michael. *Op-Ed: On Grindr — Closeted Discrimination Within the Gay Community*. South Florida Gay News, March 28, 2014, Guest Columnist sec.

straight narrative or the queer narrative did not represent me. I had come to college with high hopes of being able to find myself a new home within queer culture and I did not find myself any better off. Because of all my years of hiding, I felt more comfortable, for the most part, blending back into the straight culture. I never went to any of the queer parties at higher ground. I mainly kept to my few friends who knew, and did not branch out much beyond that. It left me in a weird place, I had friends, but I still felt like I did not exactly fit in anywhere.

3.2 Finding a Place

The woods has always felt like the one place in my life that I have never had to do anything more than be myself in order to fit in. It does not matter whether I am happy, sad, or angry. Nature always has a place for me. This past fall I was out in the woods early one morning, quietly walking in over a foot of snow. As I came up to the crest of a hill, not more than twenty feet from where I stood was a young white-tail deer. His head was down in the snow pulling on some plants. He looked up, right at me, then put his head down and continued to eat. Not a half second later he snapped his head around to look into a brushy area behind him. Out walked another young spike who was staring straight at me. The three of us stood there for probably close to four or five minutes. The two deer carried on as if I was not even there. Finally they turned and walked off down the hill. It was incredible to be that close, and my presence did nothing to disrupt them. It felt like I was just a normal part of nature. Historically speaking, we have come from a

peoples who depended on the land and what it could produce in order to survive. Now we survive based on how we can manipulate those resources. I firmly believe that we are supposed to be connected to nature, and that our day to day lives are a battle for the body to adapt to the new environment we now force it to be in. Our physiology is not meant to be immersed in the twenty four seven environment of stress it now finds itself in. The adrenaline rushing, heart pounding, vasodilating response to stress is only supposed to be active when in fight or flight mode. And yet we put ourselves into situations where our body cannot tell the difference between fight or flight, and everyday life²⁴. Coming out carried with it newer, higher levels of stress. Being outdoors took away all that added stress and reset my system back to homeostasis. Without it, I am not sure how I would have been able to cope. A 2013 study from the Journal of Current Biology found that spending a week out camping caused the human circadian rhythm to reset itself to its natural light and dark cycle of 14 hours 40 minutes and 9 hours 20 minutes respectively²⁵. I can attest to this myself after spending a week camping out, while taking a first responder course. After the second or third day, I no longer had to set myself an alarm in the morning to get up. At night, I could lay down and almost promptly fall asleep. No need to read, watch Netflix or anything of the like. I felt incredibly in sync that entire week.

²⁴ Lipton, Bruce H. *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter and Miracles*. Santa Rosa, CA: Mountain of Love/Elite Books, 2005.

²⁵ Wright, Kenneth P., Andrew W. McHill, Brian R. Birks, Brandon R. Griffin, Thomas Rusterholz, and Evan D. Chinoy. *Entrainment of the human circadian clock to the natural light-dark cycle*. *Current Biology* 23, no. 16 (2013): 1554-1558.

Nature helped me to establish my sense of place. Nature is my place. No matter what town, what state, or what country I end up in. I will always be able to return to nature and the woods. Nature has become my comfort zone, and it is for that reason that I chose to have it tattooed upon my arm. Even when I am sitting in an office surrounded by computer screens, sticky notes, ringing phone lines, and whirring printers, I can look down at my arm and feel a little bit of that calm return to me. The trees that wrap around my forearm represent the safety and security that I find out in the woods. The birds flying out of the tops of the trees represent the fact that I cannot always remain within my comfort zone. Eventually I have to take flight and explore what lies beyond the edges of the forest. The clouds represent transition and chaos, much like the tumultuous water the octopus finds itself in. The octopus has always been one of my favorite animals. It represents change, and octopi are masters of color change and shape morphing. One species in particular, the mimic octopus has been observed contorting itself to mimic over twenty different ocean going species. They choose whether they wish to blend in or stand out based on the stimuli they experience and their surroundings. I spent much of my life doing very much the same thing. If I wanted to stand out I could, and if I wanted to blend into the background where no one would ever notice me, I could do that as well. But this octopus here on my arm is in full color, I wanted it to stand out. I chose it to be visible upon my skin for the rest of my life. "Every gay person must come out. As difficult as it is, you must tell your immediate family. You must tell your relatives. You must tell your friends if indeed they are your friends. You must tell the people you work with. You must tell the people in the stores you shop in. Once they realize that we are indeed their

children, that we are indeed everywhere, every myth, every lie, every innuendo will be destroyed once and all. And once you do, you will feel so much better²⁶”

²⁶ Milk, Harvey. Gay Freedom Day Speech (06-25-1978), San Francisco

Chapter 4. SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

“Define me with broad clichés, But I won’t undergo any hate for a stranger’s mistakes, I’ve struggled through the boundaries of society’s needs, And now I’m not trying to please”

-Ryan Amadore

I had the opportunity to enroll in a course during my graduate study that broke down colonialism, its manifestations, and how the educators that were present in the room could begin to work to correct the wrongs that have been done. It opened a whole new perspective for me. It was like looking at a map of the world as it currently stands and wondering how everyone got where they were, and then having someone sit you down in front of a computer and show you an animated map of the world from the breakup of Pangea all the way through to today... I walked away from that class feeling like now more than ever, I truly had to live my life as the person I was, and that narrative is incredibly important in doing so. Each person present in that class had shared experiences of dominance and oppression. Their counter narrative to what we read every day in the paper or see flashed across the news screens in homes. I had been using nature as my balance for years but never bothered to tell my story or to share my experiences of healing through that connection.

I can only hope that by putting this story down on paper and illuminating the confluence of nature and sexual orientation, others who are struggling with their identity

may find this story inspiring and empowering. That they may take on their own exploration of nature. It took me a long time before I actually felt comfortable picking up a book that read “Gay” somewhere in the title and reading it in public. Longer still to actually write about it. In graduate school, I truly felt that I could pick up any book I wanted. I could pick up research articles about horizontal oppression within LGBTQ communities. I could read about queer theory, and the critique of masculinity. Finally, it felt like the doorway was open to me because of the literature available. Gay youth should not have to wait until graduate school to feel comfortable picking up a book. When I finally did pick up a book, I wish I had had the presence of mind to read the personal stories and the narratives. Those seem to have the most lasting impact. This gateway led to me finally writing my story down on paper. Holding it inside kept me from being myself, and kept me from being able to enjoy life to its fullest. Acknowledging my true identity was kind of like putting together a puzzle. Some pieces of the puzzle, you know exactly where they go because of the edges. You can put them down before you even know what the rest of the picture is going to look like. Other pieces, you do not have any clue where they are going to go until every other piece around it has been placed and you can finally see where that piece fits.

4.1 Identity Synthesis

I bought the book *Coming Out to Play* by Robbie Rogers. Robbie is a professional soccer player who struggled throughout his teen years and early years as a professional

athlete with coming out. His story is troubled and tragic. He paints a poignant picture of the damage one can do to his or herself by hiding in the closet for many years. His struggle to heal all the wounds that he had created in his twenty something years of hiding only made the cuts deeper. I gave the book to my mom as a Hanukkah present first. She practically flew through it in less than a week. I met her for dinner a few days later. She brought up the book and her feelings that had come up while reading. She talked about how sad and upset she was about his struggles. His inability to talk to others about it, his isolation, and his feelings of rejection, loss and loneliness. Then she asked me if I had felt any of that. I told her that I had not. That I do not recall any real struggle to identify who I was, or struggling with being gay. That it had felt like I reached a conclusion that I was not interested in women, and that was that. It was not a lie, but it was not the truth. For the longest time I have avoided talking about those things. It was easier for me to leave it in the past, than it was to bring it up and talk about it again. In trying to fit in with the masculine stereotype, I sucked it up and kept myself from sharing. I did not show any emotion when I felt lonely, I did not show any emotion when I felt rejected. Not even when I was alone by myself. Showing emotion and admitting my feelings had been ground into me as the un-masculine thing to do. The last thing I wanted to be seen as was feminine, and an effeminate gay. I am at a point now where I feel comfortable acknowledging this, as part of my development. A period of time where I not only isolated myself from having much needed social contact, but a time period when I helped to reinforce dominant narratives of straight men as masculine and by association good, and gay men as feminine, or bad.

4.2 We Must Take Responsibility for Our Transgressions

Part of my path to identity synthesis included taking responsibility for the hurt that I have caused during the years of coming out. Because it took me a long time to realize what it meant to actually live the words “I am gay”, and be very proud of that fact. I have to be who I believe I am, not the person that I wanted everyone else to see through their own lens. Because it really does not matter what that lens is, it is not my own. I wrote a poetry piece during the course on colonialism, after reading and writing a book report on *Dude, You're A Fag* by C.J Pascoe. I picked the book out because at that point in my studies, I knew I wanted to write a thesis and was strongly considering writing it about my own experiences as a gay man. I had read a little about the idea of internalized homophobia and horizontal homophobia before but never really dug too deeply into it, nor had I ever taken responsibility for my own horizontal homophobia. “Prejudice and discrimination in any form is always wrong. History holds no example of good prejudice or benevolent discrimination. The choice is one that each of us must make. We can either accept one another for our differences, or we can continue tormenting each other because of them.²⁷” The piece that I wrote is called *Please Forgive Me for Throwing the First Stone*. I wrote it as a call and response. Call and response is rooted in African tribal culture and was documented as far back as the 1600s during the slave trade, but is believed to have existed long before that. The call-a passage from the book I had just

²⁷ Kimber, Dan. *Teaching the History of the Pink Triangle*. The Good Men Project. January 24, 2013. Accessed February 28, 2015. <http://goodmenproject.com/>.

read and the response- my own personal experience. I do not cry very often, but I did after writing this piece. I finally realized after all these years that living in the closet was not just about me, but about everything and everyone that I had harmed or done wrong to in an attempt to preserve who I thought I was. My parents, my brother, my friends. Classmates, teachers, and people from all walks of my life that I never knew about.

Please Forgive Me for Throwing the First Stone

To the boy in my high school race and gender class, I am sorry.

I am sorry that you had to get up and leave class, sorry that the teacher sat idly as students mocked everything that you stood for. I am sorry that in the building waves of oppression I slowly sunk under and became conveniently straight. Sorry that your soft voice, and effeminate mannerisms left you nowhere to hide, no safe space for you to exist in.

Chapter one page 5 “Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another.”

To the brave boys who walked swiftly down the hallways, hands in pockets, head barely hanging above your chest, I am sorry. I'm sorry that your worth was tossed back and

forth like the boys you watched play catch outside the classroom window. I am sorry that gay become synonymous with stupid and less than, thrown around like snowballs packed tight with words that stung like ice, shattering on impact, tearing off flesh from those who don't wear the cloak of masculinity.

I'm sorry that I, threw snowballs.

“To call someone gay or fag is like the lowest thing you can tell someone. Because that's like saying you're nothing.”

To the defiant young boy who brought his boyfriend to the prom, finally being true to yourself in front of all the others, I am sorry.

I'm sorry that the walls of this institution echo the message that you can be everything that you want to be, as long as you're not “that”. Sorry that teachers did not address you, did not protect you, did not even raise a finger to silence the ever gaining roar of hate that blasted through the speakers as you held onto the only person in the room who made you feel like you were still there. I'm sorry that I never went to the prom, because my grip wasn't strong enough to hold on.

“A fag by the very definition of the word, indicated by the students usage at river high cannot be masculine.”

To the boys in gym who sat on the sidelines of all the games, politely declined to be included, hung your head in your hands day dreaming while all the other boys played, because you did not want to get hit with a ball, trip over your own feet, or be chosen last. I am sorry.

I'm sorry that the only choice you could make was to sit down, and sit out, or stand up and face an hour of torture, an hour of reminders of your "shortcomings" and "failures" measured up against someone that you did not even want to be like. Told to organize items in the storage closet because you were better at that than you would ever be at basketball, or hockey. Sorry that you were expected to perform, expected to conform to the star pupils of the class, forced to compete in a rigged game for a title that only reminded you that you were never good enough. I am sorry that I did not come over and sit down on the bench next to you.

“Seth Walsh, a thirteen year old California middle schooler, hanged himself from a tree branch after relentless homophobic teasing. Billy Lucas, a fifteen year old from Indiana also hanged himself due to homophobic bullying. Eric Mohat, a seventeen year old from Ohio was teased for being a fag, gay, or queer because he enjoyed theater and played music. In response, he shot himself. Carl Joseph Walker Hoover was an eleven year old from Massachusetts who was hounded by classmates for being gay because he performed well in school. In response, he hanged himself.”

To my high school English teacher who stopped in the middle of class, slowly placed your book face down on your desk, staring determinedly over your glasses and uttered a simple question: “excuse me, but when did you choose to be straight?”

Thank you. Thank you for taking the moment and turning it. Thank you for being the voice in my head every time I wanted to throw a snowball. Thank you for being the words I hear every time I feel my grip beginning to loosen. Thank you for being the person I see every time I take a seat on the bench. And thank you, for being the reason I now stand tall.

4.3 Survival of the Resilient

Survival is not just about being fit. Survival is about being resilient; resilient like the ponderosa pine that only drops its seedlings to sprout new life after the forest fires have passed on leaving scorched land behind. Resilient like the black-footed ferret that had been lost to near extinction twice, only to find a way to claw itself back into existence. If you do not learn to become resilient, to get back up on your feet after getting knocked down, to dig your heels in and learn to weather even the most treacherous of storms, you will not survive the coming out process. It took me a long time to realize that no matter what happens, you have to keep putting one foot in front of the other even

when you cannot see what you are walking into. At times it felt near impossible to keep moving forward, but I found a way. At various points during my development, nature planted the seeds that allowed me to grow, sustained my development, and kept me moving forward to today. It provided not only a safe space for me to fall when I got pushed, but a spring board for me to right myself again. “I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness. If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this.”²⁸

4.4 Conclusions

I had been holding onto a lie for 22 years, letting only a few people in on it as I felt I needed to. But all those years of conditioning myself to hide, or erect barriers left lasting effects. I'm still understanding and uncovering all those effects. I wrote a piece that will be published on March 19th, 2015 in Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang's book *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College*. It was a letter I wrote to a friend from childhood. He was one of the first people I had ever come out too. I asked him if he ever experienced moments where he knew 100% that he was in a safe environment and still

²⁸ Thoreau, Henry David, and Bruce Rogers. 1906. *The writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

struggled to use the word gay when identifying himself. It is one of those things that I hate. I have to force myself to say the words sometimes, and it still feels weird coming out of my mouth. I have a visceral reaction to something that I should not. It has driven me to realize the importance of putting myself down on paper in the hopes that my story will provide some insight, or some comfort to anyone who is struggling with their own identity and coming out of the closet.

In a way, writing this thesis is the completion of the final stage of coming out. Ironically, it feels like coming out of the closet all over again, but this time I know how to cope. When the announcement of my defense goes out to the graduate college, I will virtually be coming out to hundreds of people that I have never met. Hundreds of people that have never seen my face and never heard my story. While I still have some butterflies about seeing my name underneath the title, I am ready. I am ready to put a face to the word gay. I am ready to tell my story in the hopes that others may come to find healing and empowerment through nature.

In student affairs work we often talk about meeting the student where they are at. With the expanding research on identity development, it is becoming increasingly clear how complex the development process is as well as the complexities that arise when multiple identities intersect. This presents a real change to professionals when trying to gauge where a student may be at in their own developmental process. I believe, moving forward, that we need to start looking outside of the standard theories and approaches we

often fall back on when engaging students. The development of an individual, while sharing common threads, varies greatly. More often than not, the same approach will not work for two students who may be in similar stages of development. Exploring the role of nature in my own development is one example of how non-traditional perspectives can positively impact growth and development and act as a catalyst for progression through a staged theory such as Coleman's.

If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or just beginning to question where you fit. I hope you know that you are not alone in this world and that no matter how difficult it gets, it truly does get better. LGB youth are four to five times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. It is disheartening to read headline after headline about a young boy or a young girl who has taken their life before they ever got to experience anything other than bullying and homophobia. Coming out stories must be told. They must be shared. Youth need to not only hear about the struggles of those who have come out before them, but the ways in which we have coped.

If you identify as straight, I hope this glimpse into what it is like for one person coming out as gay, offers you a new perspective. This experience is far from unique, and yet it is unquestionably different for everyone that goes through it. If you are supportive then show it. Say it every chance you can.

--

En Pathos Nexus

Every time I think that we've finally reached a place where we can come together as brothers and sisters, friends and lovers, reach across this great divide and see past this "other". I'm reminded that we're nowhere near, close

Maybe it's just human nature to categorize and marginalize, to spew words of hate and discriminate; fed into a system that only flows one way, homage we must pay to this decrepit machine built upon the backs of thousands of others long since left this troubled world.

Perhaps we're bound by this circle of life and death, and there isn't enough time to find the missing gear that ties it all together, solve this puzzle of basic human need for guidance and purpose and I've only begun to break the surface of how complex this issue at hand yet society begs I take a stand, but on what?

All this time I was taught that it's black and white, to question is to fight someone else's belief but psychologically we're the same, the same lights go off in my brain when you speak about your struggle and the anger shows through, I clench my fist too and though my words might strain the message unchanged "we human beings."

Tell your friend, your family, your students and teachers we don't need this machine, full of sand and grit, and parts that don't fit, we don't need to build robots, forged in our

*wake, emotionally opaque, connected through a plug, fuelling this bold and brazen
internet "thug."*

*How do we expect to get through this wall, if we can't see the face on the other side,
beaming with pride, ready to shake hands, throw out the old plan. Start from a place of
common love, regardless of who's above be it god or mars, Zeus or the stars great minds
can find our common ground.*

*You and I, we're not so different. Though my path has taken me through forests and
thickets, nights filled with the chattering of crickets. I look around this room and I'm
filled with hope and joy, we have all the tools. We can bridge this divide.*

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