**Foreword**

In my third year of college, my mission trip supervisor asked me to tell her more about my experience growing up in the church with an attraction to the same gender. After five seconds of mental gymnastics, I realized that a satisfactory answer comprised a four-hour conversation that neither of us could have at a Friday night vespers.

Although I have read many stories detailing an individual’s journey with their sexuality, I didn’t feel like I could offer any of them in place of my own. Some involve an overnight conversion from a sexually saturated daily routine to following Christ and renouncing old addictions and ideas. Others follow the experience of a boy or girl who fails to become straight until they accept their sexuality and leave their childhood church behind.

Though, my story may not be as exciting as those I found in the library, I believe it ultimately follows neither of the trends above, which is one of the reasons I felt the need to share it. After all, if I don’t, no one else will. Whether you are part of the queer community, the church, both, or neither, I hope my experience makes the discussion about sexuality more personal to you.

**Background**

My parents’ journey with God, the church, and with each other began soon after the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Despite their newfound faith, over the next decade, much of the rest of their community continued embracing atheism. Thus, to spread God's message, my father decided to pursue an associate degree in Literature Evangelism at a small, conservative school in Wichita Arkansas. After completing the program, the family moved back to Europe to help spread God’s word.

However, evangelizing in an atheistic country proved difficult. Due to poor cooperation from the Adventist church, my father followed an opportunity to lead students in literature evangelism at a small conservative high school in Tennessee. Thus, the summer I turned seven, my family found ourselves saying goodbye to our friends and family once more.

My first impression of the United States was the midday heat of Atlanta, Georgia, right before my first day of school. Because I had no friends and still needed to absorb a foreign language, I became so disoriented that I recall being afraid of stepping outside for fear of this new continent not having solid enough ground to support me. Luckily, it took next to no time to adapt to the new environment. Soon I was friends with all the other "staff kids" at the self-supporting high school my father now worked at.

Besides the academy I lived at, our home church was also quite conservative. And I don't necessarily mean this in a bad way. There were many good things that came of the environment I grew up in. I spent much of my time outdoors. I was schooled in various basic aspects of Christian theology at a young age. My church was so supportive of the elementary school I attended that many of my friends went there only because the church paid for their tuition.

One of the most touching experiences engrained in my mind portrays the academy’s generosity. Following a fire that left only a little hill and a concrete slab where my home used to be, neighbors and church members brought together enough spare furniture and household items to fill a gymnasium. I was blown away when I got to pick out new toys and a new sofa for the living room in the house the school provided as a replacement. Unfortunately, this same church environment later proved detrimental to me in several avoidable ways.

Due to the summer programs that my father organized for students, he tended to not be around during the times that I was at home from school. Although I realized that I had caring parents and was lucky to have both parents under one roof at all, I did not develop a deep relationship with my father. He succeeded in providing for his family against odds and encouraging excellent work ethic and productivity, yet I lack memories of enjoying quality time together.

\*\*\*

Not much happened between the day my life was flown across the Atlantic and my next vivid memory less than a year later. I was quite excited when my grandma, by far my closest friend among extended family, decided to visit us. My parents needed to drive several hours to meet her at the airport, and to spare me a lengthy trip, they left me with the neighbors.

I was particularly close friends the boy next doors who was just over a year my elder. Though he always seemed rowdier than I, we got along well. We spent a lot of time on his trampoline and forging new trails through the forest. In many ways, I looked up to him. At some point that weekend, his mom told him to tidy up his room. While putting all his toys in shelves and boxes (and probably stuffing many into the closet) he motioned me over to his dresser. I froze as he exposed his genitals to me and asked me to touch him.

I now know of stories where the boy in my shoes turned and ran the other way. I wish I could say that I, too, left that encounter trying to forget it, or even better, ran to adults for help. Rather, I remember not initially understanding what I was seeing, and then becoming very curious after several hours. At seven, I was incredibly unprepared for any sort of sexual encounter. What was that feeling? I didn't know, but it turned out that when he presented the opportunity again, I wanted to find out. I have no need to go into graphic detail, but while I was curious to experience something new, there were things that he asked of me that I was thoroughly uncomfortable with. Sadly, with perfect hindsight, I now see how they clearly point to his own molestation in the past.

A little later, when his dad came into his room and asked us how we were doing, while my friend kept his resolve, I was immediately overwhelmed with guilt and blurted out how I was really doing. After what seemed like a several-hour long interrogation and a lecture about "never doing something like that again," we were set loose to go play again.

When my parents came to pick me up the next day, my mom confronted me about what the neighbors told her. After getting scolded for hiding things from her and being reminded that Jesus was always watching, I spent the rest of my afternoon curled up on my bed. In shame, I prayed that Jesus would forgive me for what I had allowed myself to be a part of.

I don’t recount that experience because I was suddenly interested in other boys from that day forward. Neither molestation nor early same-sex sexual activity is a certain forecast for an individual’s sexuality. However, even though I didn’t think about that day for next two years, it very well could have affected me.

**Realization**

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint a day or location where I first remember being different from other boys, but in retrospect I can see that by my tenth birthday I wanted to be emotionally closer to my male friends than they wanted to be to me. As early as fourth grade, I began to notice the guys in my class much more than the girls. Without realizing what was happening, I began developing feelings for several of my classmates. I didn't resent myself for it because I didn’t have any indication that what I was experiencing wasn't normal for boys my age. Instead of thinking "I’m gay," I simply believed I understood girls better than average.

The story of how I realized I was attracted to boys is somewhat unconventional. During one night at a close friend's house (let’s call him Mark), Mark excitedly asked to borrow my iPod so he could show me something. While handing it back to me, I noticed "naked women" in the Google Images search bar. I didn't need a second glance to be horrified at the results. I may have surprised him by shutting that experience down immediately, but I surprised myself even more a few weeks later when I found myself looking for pictures of naked guys in the same manner.

At first, I had no clue what was going on, but I slowly began to realize that I wanted deeper, more personal friendships with my male friends. While they swooned over the single girl in their grade level (I attended a very small private school) I found that I could not relate. Instead, I would listen and compare the feelings they had for girls with the ones I felt for them. I was the odd boy out. Eventually, Mark and mine’s short-lived venture into pornography opened the door to more experimentation. First, I was asked to sext (well, okay, all I had was an email back then) and then to experiment with him physically. Soon, I didn't need to be encouraged every time and sometimes I would even be more the instigator than the obedient young follower.

Although I was curious during this period, I was simultaneously quite unhappy about my feelings for guys. It didn't take me long to follow my feelings and rising hormones to a quick Google search that told me I was gay. Thus, as an eleven-year-old, I was already well-aware of my sexual orientation and entered a mental conflict that would continue to haunt me for over a decade.

**Mental Foundation**

One summer evening after my new self-realization, I remember helping serve dinner and then carrying everyone's dirty dishes away. My sister joked "Ac is being so nice lately. He's must have, like, gotten a girl pregnant and is just being super nice before you guys find out about it." My parent's laughed while I cringed. I remember thinking, *I wish I had feelings like that for a girl. It would be so much better than the feelings I am really experiencing.*

In addition to beginning to have doubts about what my attraction to boys meant, I was beginning to feel more distant from my father. Most of the things he seemed to enjoy doing, such as fixing cars, I found no interest in. Instead, I was more likely to play with my sister's dolls or don a dress she gave me to amuse myself. Perhaps because my dad never had much of a father figure in his life, he didn't know how to reach me during that time himself.

To intensify the mental conflict, I began to encounter unanimously negative messages about “the gay people.” Whether in person or online, gossip and slander formed my first impression of my sexuality. Thus, I quickly grew accustomed to disgusted or fearful reactions around the topic.

One evening my mom called me to my parents’ bedroom. As soon as I saw my father’s face, I knew I was in trouble. "What is this?" he pointed to his laptop. Logged in to my Gmail, he was browsing through some of my more explicit emails with Mark. I stumbled over my words as guilt swallowed me. I can never recall getting any sort of sex-ed from my parents, but my environment at least taught me not to talk dirty with friends. My father pointed to more emails. Between my apologies and mental gymnastics to try to extricate myself from an incredibly uncomfortable situation, I claimed that it meant nothing and that the emails were just jokes and bad ideas.

I can’t recall if my parents were crying, but I know I was. It was emotional, but I didn’t try too hard to hold it in since I hoped it would help alleviate my punishment. I left scolding myself for being careless enough to engage in prohibited activities where my parents might see them. I aimed to be more careful next time.

\*\*\*

Very soon, based on some of the things the Bible said about "homosexuals" and the general atmosphere about the topic at school, I began to descend into much self-doubt and mental conflict over the feelings I was having.

My most vivid memory that came to symbolize how the church viewed me took place in seventh grade. One Sabbath I was working in the brand-new audio-visual booth above a church congregation when, prior to his sermon, the pastor announced, "Now, brothers and sisters, I've heard of other churches in California doing some dangerous things that contradict the word of God. You may have heard of churches that are accepting homosexuals. I just wanted to say that **we** are **not** going to allow ourselves to follow in their footsteps! We are God's people. No homosexuals will be accepted in **this** church!"

The *amens* resounded. To their credit, I never recall a full "anti-homosexual sermon" from any of the pastors throughout my years at that church. However, the words spoken from the pulpit that morning skewered my heart. I slumped down in my chair in front of several soundboards and trembled. Although the aging congregation appreciated my pastor's promise not to compromise their beliefs and invite "those people" into our church, they failed to realize that I was *already* there.

By the time I was thirteen it seemed like the anti-homosexual narrative was everywhere. It’s unlikely that something in my environment had drastically changed, but I became hyper-aware of anything that could provide information about the feelings I was experiencing. When my principal discussed with my teacher how he thought that homosexuals were just confused, I stopped to listen. When my teacher theorized, "What they are feeling isn't love. They don't know what love is. I mean, how could they?" the listening stopped. A habit of self-derision and overthinking settled in its place.

The adults in my life never offered any type of understanding toward those with whom I shared my feelings as I became a teenager. Because being gay was considered so disgusting in my community, the topic was never discussed in public. This formed a progressively lonelier existence for me as I didn’t know of anyone I could relate to. Worse, though, was that I was now involuntarily part of a group of people that many in my community feared or hated.

\*\*\*

Through seventh grade, I still probably could have come to more logical conclusions about myself and my sexuality. Instead, an experience near the end of elementary school embedded fear, hatred, and self-preservation into my understanding of sexuality.

Right around the time I started having significant desires to find others with whom I could relate, I managed to join a dating app through Facebook and control my preferences so that I could message other gay teens. I began to secretly borrow one of my mom's devices during the night to talk to a guy I’ll call Tristan, who, of course, assured me that he loved me and wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. I wasn't gullible enough to believe everything he told me, but hearing "I love you more" or "Good morning handsome" was a welcome change from my daily reality where anyone I might have liked had no capacity to like me back. Also, recognizing that I wasn’t the only one experiencing attraction to the same gender gave me the necessary space to relax the walls I had built over the past few years.

Having access to the internet in the middle of the night eventually led to some more Pornhub exploration, but both that and my secret correspondence promptly ended a week or two later when I fell asleep instead of returning the device one night.

\*\*\*

"*SMACK!*" It was on a Wednesday morning that I woke up while my head was mid-flight between my father's palm and the ladder on the side of my bunk bed. Another blow hit my face before I realized what was happening. "When you come back from school, I'm going to deal with you." I quickly collected my thoughts as my father's words faded.

For my entire school day and at subsequent extracurricular activities I found myself worried and nerve racked. What didn't make sense was that my dad had hit me. Hard. My father had never been physically abusive. I knew it was often a problem in other households, but I believed I was lucky enough to not have to deal with that. This aberration clearly conveyed that he was serious. Every moment of the day was filled with anxiety about what might happen when I saw him again.

At home, instead of helping my mom unload groceries, I was directed to follow my father into the woods behind our home. I was still mentally unprepared to process the situation. Shocked, I took more punches and slaps without resistance.

Soon, he took me to an empty room in our basement and delivered the heartfelt lecture that I had initially expected. I recall how he admitted that sometimes guys "have a lot of testosterone" and they may need to "let it out." However, *this* (gay sexual activity) was what had disgusted him the most ever since he was a boy. After half an hour, the message I received was clear. Being gay was the most disgusting thing. I felt like I would have rather been in trouble for actually having sex with a girl than for watching gay porn.

"You know that this is the worst thing you could be doing."  
"Mhmmm."  
"You want to have a wife and kids someday, right?"  
"Yeah, sure. "  
"Mommy and I talked and we decided that we are going to find professional help for you so you can figure out these confused feelings."  
"Okay."  
"And don't tell anyone else about this. Especially don't talk to Grandma and Grandpa about this. I'm not sure if they could take it at their age."

I wasn't used to seeing my father cry, but back then, I thought I understood why this occasion was so significant to him. I tried to imagine what it would be like to realize that my own child embodied what I found the most distasteful. Realistically, his motives were likely more grounded in what he believed was best for me, but what I remembered most was yet another adult’s disgust at my sexuality.

My father apologized the next day, but I wasn't nearly ready to forgive. Instead, I mentally followed a path that further isolated me. Because my parents were not native English speakers, I was not accustomed to receiving academic help. This carried over to emotional struggles which were never really discussed at home. Although in time they would have likely listened if I was willing to share, I wasn’t about to start opening up when I faced something as scary as having feelings for guys.

Thus, I instead aimed to distance myself from my parents to emotionally protect myself from their reaction to my sexuality. I set out to stop caring about what my parents, especially my father, thought about me. This strategy proved to be almost too successful. I can't say that anything my parents did or said after that made a difference to me regarding my sexuality.

\*\*\*

My parents booked a weekly meeting with a therapist at a private therapy center in a nearby city. I had read stories online about gay conversion therapy camps and some of the more conservative Exodus-affiliated ministries and was justifiably horrified when I heard I was going to see a therapist that specialized in cases like mine. Thankfully my experience was nothing like a story out of *Boy Erased* or *Stranger at the Gate*. Instead of electric shock therapy or verses from Leviticus in picture frames, I was met with several shelves lined with books about marriage.

I admit that I wasn't an easy thirteen-year-old to work with, but I had my doubts about the bald man with a million questions. One of the success stories he boasted was about a gay man who had come to him six or seven years prior and had finally purged himself of all sexual attractions. Now he wasn't attracted to anyone at all. If that wasn't a worthy goal, what was, right? I silently wished for that but decided not to let it show.

In the first of my few meetings with him, I was informed that I was not actually homosexually oriented, but rather I was going through a phase. I went in and out of therapy every Tuesday with the same thick book on *A Godly Marriage* and the same determination to quit as soon as I could. I didn't want help from someone who had researched sexuality. I wanted someone who could relate to what I was going through, but my therapist admitted he was incapable of that.

Unfortunately, some of my friends in junior high also supported my growing self-hatred. Comments among the pre-teens often attacked any form of same-sex attraction. Many of my friends would cat call each other and slap each other on the crotch. Although as far as I know I was the only gay one, I was also often the only one uncomfortable with that behavior. Very soon, my early introduction to and interest in sexual activity inverted when it was made abundantly clear that being gay was just about the worst thing that could happen to you.

Since I was being taken out of school every Tuesday for therapy, it took less than a month for my then best friend and first crush in eighth grade (let’s call him Jack) to figure out what was going on. First, he started theorizing that I was going to get help with some mental health issue, then specifically that it was for sexual orientation therapy. Someone safe to talk to would have been amazing at this point, but instead one of my closest friends since kindergarten turned on me.

It began with teasing, lewd jokes, and name calling. Soon, he avoided me altogether. I retaliated by trying to be nice to him every time he reminded me how disgusting I was. Miraculously, this either confused him or wore away his resolve to hate me, because the following school year he stopped bothering me. Sadly, this would not be the only friend I would lose over the issue of my sexuality.

\*\*\*

As I finished elementary school, the message I received from my environment was unanimous. Being attracted to other boys was a sin. Most destructive was the follow-up message: it was worse than any other sin. There were probably church members who would have been caring and non-judgmental if I had come to them, but at this point I was too afraid to tell anyone. I had never heard the topic discussed in a civil manner, and the handful of adults that knew my secret unanimously advised me to bury it as deep as I could. So, I did.

The problem that most fundamentally scarred me at this age was others’ ability to nonchalantly dehumanize queer individuals. The first form of dehumanization was ignorance. Many of the people I knew would rather pretend that I and others in the queer community didn't exist. When sexuality *was* discussed, most assumed that no one around was gay. Thus, language such as *those people*, *the homosexuals*, and *fags* was often used.

"I just can't *stand* it when *they* hold hands in public."

"What has our world come to. Now we have to watch our backs, so those homosexual pedophiles don't hurt our kids."

Secondly, the distaste towards homosexuality was extremely widespread. For example, I vividly remember driving through our small southern town the day after Obergefell v. Hodges was decided. Several church signs proudly advertised sermon titles such as "Two Men? That's Not a Marriage" and "It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

All these messages pounding me with shame from many directions caused my understanding of my own sexuality to deteriorate abysmally. My many prayers from that time best describe my feelings. One night I became especially worried about my increasing interest in boys. I decided to pray for deliverance once again, but instead I found myself pleading for a compromise.

"Dear God, you saw me struggling with my thoughts today. I don't why, but something is wrong with me. I've tried so hard not to think about guys, but I can't seem to get any better. I know you didn't make heaven for people like me, and I know that I'm not going there, but that's okay. All I ask is that even though I belong in hell, if you could please use me to help get other people to be in heaven, that could make my time worthwhile on earth. That would make me happy. Amen."

**Failing to be Straight**

By the age of fifteen, my experience had taught me that when my family and friends learned of my sexuality, they either believed I needed to be cured, or worse, that I was suddenly a threat to them. Clearly, I had to keep it a secret. The problem was, many of the people in my school already knew that I was gay or had heard rumors due to all the things Jack had said about me.

Thus, when my father decided to move to Collegedale, I felt as if I had been handed a blank slate to build a new reputation on. A reputation that did *not* include my sexuality. So, I set out to do just that. I focused on academics and friends. I tried to believe I was straight. I even embraced a new name, "Ac."

Although my self-perception was already dangerously unhealthy, it quickly degraded further as distance strained my few remaining friendships. Once my only space for sharing and reflecting on my own experience with sexuality disappeared, I found myself completely alone with my own thoughts. I began to think obsessively about my damnable form of love. It was clear to me that God detested sin and I sinned without even thinking about it. When I thought about what I'd heard from my friends’ parents, school deans, and teachers, I acquired a very bleak and unrealistic picture of the queer community as filled with monsters. Thus, when the opportunity presented itself, I became determined to become straight. I wanted to avoid a future where I, too, was a pedophile and actively supported the devil's goals.

Of course, I didn't feel or do any of the things I’d heard gay people felt or did, but I just assumed that would come in time. I might not feel the irresistible urge to have gay sex, but apparently that is what my feelings would turn into if not cured early on. I didn't feel attracted to kids much younger than myself, but the nightmare others called “the future” wouldn't leave my head. Recurring dreams of being rejected by everyone I knew convinced me that if I wanted to be accepted for who I was by the church, if I was to join God's side in the great controversy again, I would have to become straight. Until then, there was no point in even trying to talk to Him again.

My first defense to pray the gay away fell short quickly. Was I not praying hard enough? Should I be crying every night rather than occasionally? All I ever felt while praying by my bed were the vibrations of my ceiling fan.

I reflected on my therapy sessions for inspiration for further ideas. One thing I remembered was my therapist talking to me about how I needed to *want* to change if he was going to be of any help. That I needed to hate my homosexuality enough to want to leave it behind for good. Did I hate that part of myself enough? I reasoned maybe not. I simply tried to will the disgust into myself whenever I had a "gay thought." Usually these were most prevalent while walking between classes at school. *Oh, he's smiling at m-NO stop that. You can't think about that, ever.* I soon realized my will wasn't enough though.

Next, I had what I thought then to be the most brilliant idea: to condition my mind using paired association. I reasoned that if my “gay thoughts” became mentally linked to pain and punishment, I would naturally draw away from them. For the next few weeks, I would duck out of school hallways into the restrooms to hit my head against the walls after thinking about a popular guy walking at the other end of the hall. When I couldn't bring myself to inflict too much pain, I used my locker door or focused on psychological forms of punishment.

This conditioning didn't really achieve what I hoped, though. Rather than feeling less gay, I just felt worse about daring to have a crush. It became harder to get up, to look into a mirror. My mind started exploring other, more radical possibilities. What if I figured out how to be castrated? Would no testosterone equal no problems? I wasn't in a great position to ask an expert, so I decided not to do anything hastily before I could be sure to get the facts straight.

Despite already spending over a semester trying to resolve and re-rail my sexuality, I thought I wasn't trying hard enough. I noticed that thinking about a kind or attractive guy often began with seeing a kind or attractive guy. I began to control every action or idea that could lead to me having "gay thoughts."  
He was asking to borrow a pencil? Sure, but I should put it on his desk, so I don't accidentally touch his hand. Was that Tristan smiling at me from across the hall? I'd better look the other way.

This quickly led to a rather obsessive fight to guard myself from any interactions that might be interpreted by others as gay. I remember sitting down in a classroom after successfully avoiding eye contact with all my male classmates. I meant to ask the teacher about my grade, but a classmate walked in and sat in front of me.

*Ahh, I probably can't get up without seeing him. Probably best to sit here and intently stare at my iPad. Wait, why are you even thinking about another guy . . . wait does my finger look like it's pointed at him? He might figure out I'm gay . . .*

I curled up my hand. I hid my eyes behind my hair.

*Or what if I look unnatural around other guys, that might also give it away . . . did he notice that I noticed . . .*

I forced myself to relax. I tried not to notice, not to even think. I realized I was going crazy.  
I was failing at it all over again. The idea that liking guys wasn't a satanic ritual may have crossed my mind, but the delusions I had bought into were reinforced over and over again. For instance, when my friends liked someone, others were dying to know who it was.

"Believe in yourself."

"You won't know until you try."

But when a friend suspected that I might like someone or I dared share my darkest secret with them, I was often avoided. Slowly disassociated. A handshake was no longer seen as a friendly straight handshake, but as an opportunity for a gay to touch them. In my mind, the divide between myself and rest of humanity grew.

It's not that my friends and peers were judgmental or mean. We just came from a background that normalized this phobia. I know this because I fully understood why I was viewed this way. I doubt whether I would have acted differently had I been in their position. Though I was rarely bullied directly, many slurs and comments hit me harder than anyone would have dared spew them if they knew they were aiming at me.

Overall, the most detrimental experience may not have been enduring the derision and gay jokes that made fun of the hardest struggle I faced. Rather, my steadfast belief that my church offered the full, undiluted truth and that this included hating gay people made the most permanent impact. My church did not, in fact, officially believe many of the things the culture portrayed, but technical theology and official statements made no impact for me next to the way the topic was mentioned when someone dared broach the subject.

Having devalued my own non-straight life and losing motivation to become straight, I shuffled closer to an invisible line at the deep end of depression. Ending my life wasn't a novel idea, but it was one that grew almost impossible to refute. I was afraid I wouldn't make it if I kept thinking about my sexuality. Because I lived within two hundred feet of train tracks, I knew I only needed to slip up once to lose all my future fights.

To push it as far away as possible, I aimed to focus so much of my energy and attention on my academics that I would have none left for thinking "gay thoughts" or even thinking considering my sexuality. Though this could only ever be a temporary solution, this strategy worked far better than anything else had.

**Paradigm Shift**

By the end of high school, I'd become quite skilled at ignoring my sexuality. I regained the feeling of almost belonging along with an unreliable but savored joy for life. While ignoring my emotional and romantic attraction to the same gender, I even relearned how to appreciate my accomplishments.

As the human necessity to be known conquered my fear of rejection, I took the risk of confiding in more close friends. I knew that coming out had often affected those around me and reasoned that negative reactions were easier to face earlier in a relationship rather than later. And I did receive negative reactions. Some were no longer friends, or no longer the same friends. Some remained the same friends as long as I continued to pretend that I was no different.

After so many bad experiences, I was surprised that some of my friends showed support instead of disgust. Sometimes, I would be informed that what I felt was sinful, but many would also offer prayers, and I appreciated that. I recall opening up to one friend who reacted by teasing me about how much harder his looks must make my life. One mentioned that it wasn’t that big of a deal to them and that our friendship didn’t have to change. Another overheard the conversation but rather than gossip, showed kindness. Soon, I even confided in an adult whose reaction and support would slowly change my own self-perception.

Because my attempts at becoming straight only resulted in self-harm and the fear of emotional proximity, I considered others’ advice again. One friend gave me Christopher Yuan's testimonial and suggested that I go to therapy. I read the book but resented seeing a therapist due to past unpleasant experience. Another friend started sending me various resources and clips of sermons. Better yet, she was willing to listen when I needed it the most.

I remember being invited to a short seminar at a nearby church. I jumped at the opportunity, hoping to receive guidance on becoming straight or traversing my future. After attending all the meetings, I privately asked the once-gay speaker about how to live life with the crushing burden of having these unwanted attractions. He procured his own book, which, although a powerful conversion story, didn't answer any of the questions that pertained to my life.

For instance, the book, and many like it, recounted former lives filled with drug dealing, premarital sex, and/or addictions. They explained how being same-sex attracted may not be a conscious choice but living in the homosexual lifestyle was. This often left me wondering what in my life constituted a “homosexual lifestyle” and how I could escape the sins I didn’t know I was committing.

Despite these mixed messages, I noticed that a few of those I had entrusted with my secret simultaneously cared about me and loved God. This flew in the face of my belief that Christians hated gay people. Although the mere presence of my sexuality seemed to contradict the possibility, those that proved they cared regardless, made me consider that I could love God and be loved as well.

\*\*\*

My reconnection to God was nothing like the testimonies I had heard growing up. I had read countless stories of people narrowly evading death and turning to God who spared them for His purposes. Even my father occasionally told his gripping testimony. Several people I knew personally turned their lives around radically when they committed themselves to following Christ. "I stopped smoking immediately," a coworker explained. "Oh, and I became vegan overnight, too."

Though I enjoyed hearing these stories and appreciated God's power to transform, my conversion story proved more prolonged and unremarkable than those routinely published. Getting to know God didn't make me straight. I expected to feel awful on account of my sexuality in front of the God whose Word was sometimes quoted to justify queer dehumanization. Instead, I felt the most at peace with myself and my sexuality while spending time with Him. Instead of condemnation, I experienced comfort.

The most radical part of this process was leaving behind the shame I had carried ever since I recognized I was attracted to the same gender. When I came out to a few close friends in high school, I would often feel the need to apologize for being in their life. In my mind it could be devastating to be close to someone like me. However, with new perspective and support I was able to see value in myself again. One rehumanizing experience at a time, the shame dissolved.

Gradually distancing myself from cycles of shame, depression, and self-degradation felt phenomenal in college, but I still didn’t know how my sexuality might affect my life as a Christian. I couldn’t go on ignoring it like I had in high school. While searching for answers, I received a wide range of suggestions and solutions from the peers and adults I had confided in.

“You need to go to this one ministry I heard about in Texas.”

“If you’re truly seeking God, he will work miracles in your life.”

“A gay Christian is an oxymoron. You are deceiving yourself.”

“I’m sure if you just meet the right girl . . .”

“God is patient and works with best that we can do.”

To be sure of my choices before I spent more of my life aiming for orientation change, I tried to put my trust in God. I had never been much of a prayer warrior before, but now I was extremely intentional about continuously asking God whether I could expect to be straight someday. I had never made progress before and neither had many others, so was it ever going to be worth the effort? If so, I was prepared to follow through with what strength I had left. If not, I needed to figure out what was next.

At first, I felt like I was just repeating a daily chant for my journal, but after a few months, I felt like I began to receive some sort of answer through morning devotions and mentors. I didn’t get a recipe from God, but I gathered that if I was focused on becoming straight, my priorities were entirely in the wrong place. Apparently, I was asking a largely irrelevant question. I didn’t need to feel straight – as if sexualizing females is what would please God. Instead, God seemed to be asking whether I was willing to follow Him wherever he may lead and accept that to be enough.

Unexpectedly, I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted. Of course, following Him wouldn’t be simple either. First, I struggled to make sense of what this answer meant. I had little experience truly following God, and until then I had been convinced that His plans included hiding or curing myself. However, in time God *did* lead, though not in the direction I expected.

\*\*\*

Thankfully, my newfound hope did not end with me. A desire for transparency and instigating change encouraged me to open up to more friends and mentors. I wanted to confront the misconceptions some of my peers and superiors had about queer individuals. Many of us grew up with assumptions about the queer community that had never been challenged before. Often, I was the first individual to come out to them. A quite natural reaction tended to be:

"Well, I've always known it's bad to be gay. But I've never really thought about what it must feel like . . . at least not until you came out to me."

Naturally, we don’t bother to challenge assumptions and stand out unless we have a stake in the topic. That’s fine. However, many queer individuals choose to conceal their sexuality, which places them in a precarious position. They can take much of what is unassumingly said about them to heart while desperately trying to hide their pain for fear of being found out.

I certainly can’t point fingers. While I noticed others' perception of the queer community shifting, *my own* self-image transformed as my prejudices and homophobia gradually dissolved.

*Were gay people pedophiles?* Neither I nor any queer individuals I knew had felt anything that supported that.

*Was describing myself as gay "one step closer to the homosexual lifestyle"?* What even was that? Sure, I was romantically attracted to guys, but I had no lifestyle other than that of an intensely studious academic.

*Was the Bible "super clear" that same-sex romantic relationships are sinful?* If so, why is there such a large debate about it?

My point is not that I was suddenly enlightened and found all the *true answers* about sexuality and God’s intent for it. Rather, once I recognized how little I knew, I was encouraged to continue digging into the stories, theology, and research to gain a better understanding. Studying more testimonies and theological works on the subject revealed assumptions I nor many around had ever challenged.

To illustrate, while reading Robert Gagnon’s work on sexuality, I ran into a professor who politely asked what I was so focused on. After showing him the cover, he chuckled. “Well, the Bible is *very clear* about homosexuality,” he shook his finger at me, “it’s a sin.” I immediately challenged his statement and asked *why* he held this view. No response.

Though, I can't speak for the queer community in general, I personally do not care whether he or any of my friends hold an affirming or non-affirming theology. In fact, I want to avoid suggesting to others what they should believe because that is something they need to decide for themselves. What bothered me was that he was unable to give a single reason for his belief. Rather than answer, he warned me to not get “ideas” from the book, even though this book happened to be arguing *for* his viewpoint.

As a junior in college, I dug deeper into the stories of gay Christians such as Justin Lee, Greg Coles, and Mel White and into the various theological views they represented. Likewise, I felt God pushing me to fully leave behind the shame that had ruled my life for a decade. I knew that as a twenty-year-old I had neither comprehensive experience nor all the pieces to my sexuality, but I could still be whole. Hopefully, my experience would be relatable and encouraging to others.

In addition to putting myself out there, I felt that coming out was necessary to improve my mental health. By my junior year of college, I gathered up the courage to do so. Though it was nerve racking, it opened many doors I had never seen before. Not only did coming out improve my mental health, but it made others think about issues that they considered too distant from their community to pay attention to. Not everyone was encouraging and friendly, but the opportunities for connecting and sharing with others were well worth it. Rather than choking me from the inside, my story impacted those around me.

\*\*\*

So, what constitutes a satisfactory response? Many of the questions I receive at this point in my testimony revolve around how the listener can make a positive difference. What could have helped a struggling middle schooler like me?

Simply discussing sexuality more frequently would also go a long way. Though an unpopular topic in the past, sexuality is discussed more freely today. With plenty of books and other resources available, now is a good time to have educated discussions. To call out the Christian LGBT community for a moment, those of us that are capable should try to make a difference while we can. Too often we willingly forget the uncomfortable past and propagate the issue to younger generations. I have also wanted to avoid confrontation and even leave the church I grew up in, but I know that if I want to personally see a change, I need to be part of it.

We should all be either able to support our views or admit that we don’t know. Recognizing that we don’t know is perfectly fine. Assuming we do and belittling the queer community or church family tends to annoy others rather than edify them. Instead, we can all aim to be a safe individual especially to the youth in our environment. If you and I can’t imagine a friend or family member coming out to us, then we probably aren’t “safe” with regards to that topic.

Dehumanizing queer individuals and/or Christians not only pushes others away, but also blinds us from listening to reason and understanding other people. Making or contributing to gay jokes is another obvious red flag. Rather, if we want to make a positive difference, we need to actively challenge these ideas. After all, as I grew up, only a minority of individuals actually said or did the things that hurt the most, but it was the affirmation or silence of the majority that made the dehumanization sink in.

Unfortunately, even positive intentions can sometimes lead to very insulting actions. For instance, simply quoting 1 Corinthians 6:9 probably doesn’t enlighten queer Christians. Believe it or not, we *have* already read and likely studied the passages in depth at some point while struggling to reconcile ourselves with our faith. Often, similar situations in the non-affirming crowd arise from the justification that “the truth cannot be compromised.” However, believing we have the truth does not justify bringing it up every other time we see an acquaintance who is “in the wrong.” Not affirming does not necessitate disrespect.

\*\*\*

You may be here because you want to support. Or maybe your aim is to criticize. Maybe your friend or family member fits our ever-growing acronym, and you don’t know how you should feel about it. I encourage you to put yourself in their shoes occasionally. Like me, they may have struggled for years to navigate their sexuality. They may not even remember an existence without it. Frankly, my story is run of the mill among the rest of my friends in the LGBT community. Many of the feelings I have described are felt by others in the queer Christian community. So, rather than forcing painful conversations that may feel like insensitive accusations, strive to be someone they *choose* to confide in.

On the other hand, you might relate to my experience. Maybe you spent years confused and ashamed like I did. You may still be figuring things out. I still am. Or maybe you were able to take it all in stride. Regardless, your story doesn’t have to be perfect, remarkable, or even finished to make an impact. I’ve already done my best to deliver mine. O­­­nly *you* can tell yours.