**Foreword**

I’ve read many stories detailing an individual’s journey with their sexuality. Some involve 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.

My story may not be as powerful or exciting as those I found in the library, but I believe it ultimately follows neither trend, which is one of the main reasons I felt it was worth sharing.

When my mission trip supervisor asked me to tell her more about my experience growing up in the church with attraction to the same gender, I wasn’t sure what to share while avoiding a full-on four-hour conversation. So, in a way, this is also a personal tool for me to point to when I need it.

It is important to remember that my experience is not representative of all queer people. In fact, I hope that reading this reinforces how diverse every individual’s story can be. My story is also not meant to evoke pity, to state a theological argument, nor attack any individual. However, I value transparency highly. Just as I don't exclude my own mistakes and low points, when I talk about others’ involvement in my life, I have done my best to give the necessary full truth without using real names.

Because my story focuses on my experience with sexuality, I only focus on one aspect of how the church fit into my life. Although this comprises mostly negative experiences, there are many reasons why I am grateful for my church that do not involve my journey with my sexuality that I will not be able to mention here.

Whether you are part of the queer community, the church, or neither, I hope my experience makes the discussion about sexuality more personal to you.

**Trigger Warning**

My story includes

1. censored underage sexual activity
2. homophobia
3. an instance of physical abuse
4. therapy for sexual orientation
5. suicidal ideation
6. extreme self-disgust
7. discussion about God (with the belief that He is real)

If you are uncomfortable with the above, then please take care and do not continue reading.

**Background**

My parents both found God and the church after the fall of communism in Czech and soon after, found each other. Just in case this country is news to you, all you need to know is that it's a little nation, often called the "heart of Europe," that was rapidly embracing atheism following more that forty years of communist rule. This led my dad to pursue an associate degree in Literature Evangelism at a tiny, conservative school in Wichita Arkansas. Then our family moved back to the Czech Republic so that my dad could spread God's message.

Some of my earliest memories clearly reflect concepts that shaped my reality. For example, In Czech, I remember noticing that as Christians, my family was in the minority among an atheistic population. Even more unique was our flavor of Christianity, Seventh-day Adventism. In the back of my mind, I was always aware that I was a religious minority among the minority. I remember witnessing to my atheist friends from my hometown and having my beliefs challenged, possibly at the direction of their parents, to explain difficult ideas in the Bible. These beliefs would often alienate me from others around me. I didn't notice it much at age five, but I'm sure it would have been more challenging if I had stayed in Czech for my whole childhood. Due to the increasing difficulty of evangelism in the atheistic country, and especially due to poor cooperation from the Adventist church, when my father found the opportunity to lead students in literature evangelism at a small conservative high school in middle Tennessee, he decided to move again. Thus, the summer I turned 7, my family found ourselves saying goodbye to our friends and family again.

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 at my first school and still needed to absorb a foreign language, I became completely disoriented the first day that I recall being afraid of stepping outside for fear of this new continent not having solid enough ground and cool enough air. Luckily, it took next to no time to adapt to the new environment and make friends with all the other "staff kids" at the self-supporting Adventist high school my father now worked at. 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 the most. Thus, although I realized that I had caring parents, and was lucky to have both parents for that matter, I never had a deep relationship with my father. He was great at providing for our family and instilling good work ethic, productivity, and a healthy respect for God, but sometimes spending time with him seemed to be more centered around discipline and less around enjoying things together. I definitely have great memories of spending time with my father, but very few of them are from my first few years in the Tennessee.  
Besides the school 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. The church I attended was so supportive of the elementary school I attended that many of my friends went there only because the church paid their tuition. One of the most touching moments engrained in my mind was the way my "conservative school" came together after a fire 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 the academy's gymnasium. I was blown away when I got to pick up new toys and pick out a new sofa for the living room in the house the school gave us as a replacement. However, this same environment proved quite detrimental to me in many avoidable ways.

**Figuring it Out**

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 went to Atlanta to meet her, and to spare me a lengthy trip that I was not yet prepared to handle (everything feels much closer in Czech), they left me with the neighbors. I was particularly close friends with a boy just a year my elder. Though he always seemed more rowdy than I, we really enjoyed "out-jumping" each other on his trampoline and forging new trails together. In many ways, I looked up to him. At some point that weekend, his mom told him to clean his room up, so we started putting all the toys on the shelves (and probably more in the closet). It was when I was crawling down from the loft bed we shared that he motioned me over to his dresser. Suddenly, I froze as he proceeded to expose himself to me. 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 (I was unprepared for any sort of sexual encounter), and then becoming very curious after several hours. What was that? I didn't know, but it turned out that when he presented the opportunity again, I was willing to take the risk 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 we were really doing. After what seemed like a several-hour long interrogation and 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 praying, in shame, that Jesus would forgive me for what I had allowed myself be a part of.

For a long time, that day was not summoned to memory as I went to school and chased adventure into the forest surrounding our community. It's extremely hard 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 party I wanted to be emotionally closer to my friends at my sleepover than they wanted to be to me.  
I began to notice the guys in my class much more than the girls as early as fourth grade. I remember several of my classmates in particular who I developed feelings for without realizing that it was happening. I didn't resent myself for it. I had not yet had any indication that what I was experiencing wasn't the norm for boys my age. I wasn't thinking "I must be gay" back then. Rather, I believed I just wasn't cool enough, which was true to some degree. I wasn't as physical or aggressive as my peers.  
The story of how I realized I was attracted to boys is somewhat unconventional and counterintuitive. As a naive eleven-year-old who thought he knew the bible inside and out, I would pick fights with the LGBT community on social media. Of course, my arguments about homosexuality being a sin and God despising homosexuals were intellectually inferior to that of someone twice my age who knew how to use Google to find scientific papers. That phase didn't last long. During one night at a close friend's house, Luke 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, and I didn't need a second glance to be horrified at the results. I may have surprised him by shutting down that experience immediately, but I surprised myself more a few weeks later when I looked for pictures of naked guys in the same manner. Luckily, my parents confiscated my iPod after noticing that I was playing a video game on it one evening and I did not develop any sort of addiction at so young an age.

However, I quickly 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 the girls with the ones I felt for them. I was the odd boy out. Eventually, Luke and my short venture into pornography opened the door to more experimentation. First I was asked to sext (well, okay, all I had was a gmail 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 younger follower.

Although I was definitely curious at this time, I was simultaneously quite unhappy about my feelings for guys. It didn't take me long to connect the dots from my feelings and rising hormones to a quick Google search that told me I was gay. Suddenly, I wasn't arguing with people on social media that "the homosexuals" belonged in hell. Mercifully, whatever hate speech I couldn't personally find and remove was eventually deleted along with all of Google's failed attempt at social media. Thus before I was 12, I was already well-aware of my orientation and entered into a mental conflict that would continue to haunt me for over a decade.

**Shaping My Understanding**

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 dad. Most of the things he seemed to enjoy doing, such as fixing cars and wrestling (father, please fill in something here, I don't think wrestling is the best example) I found no interest in. Instead, I was more likely to play with my sister's polly pockets or don a dress she gave me to amuse myself. This was completely unintentional from both sides, but it still had a lasting impact. Perhaps because my dad never had much of a father figure in his life, he didn't know how to reach me himself. I wouldn't be left on uncertain ground with my dad for long, however.

One evening my mom summoned me to my parent's bedroom. As soon as I saw my dad's face, I knew I was in trouble. "What is this?" my dad pointed to his laptop. He was looking at some of my more explicit emails with Luke. I stumbled over my words as guilt surrounded me. I can never recall getting any sort of sex-ed from my parents, but I knew enough from my environment to know that I wasn't supposed to talk dirty with friends, let alone sexually. My dad 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 they were just jokes or bad ideas between the two of us. I'm not sure 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 decrease my punishment (and to be clear my parents didn't dole out unreasonable punishment. I was probably grounded from the family computer for a month or something). 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 shaped how I perceived the church viewed me happened around the seventh grade. The church membership comprised more elderly folks than a regular Adventist church due to a massive golfing community for retired individuals nearby. Thus, it likely comes as no surprise that conservative viewpoints were appreciated by most of the church body. One Sabbath I was working in the brand-new "sound booth" above the rest of the congregation when right before the Pastor began his message he 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 opening their doors to homosexuals. I stand here today and 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 invited to **this** church!" The *Amen*s resounded. To his credit, I never recall a full "anti-homosexual sermon" from any of the pastors throughout my years at that church. However, the words spoken that morning, and a few other times from the pulpit, skewered my heart. I slumped down in my chair in front of several soundboards and trembled. Although the congregation appreciated my pastor's promise to not invite "those people" into his 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. Likely it wasn't that something in my environment had drastically changed, but that 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 he 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 it's 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 lonelier reality for me, as I found myself on an even deeper level of my "minority within the minority" status. Worse, though, was that I was now completely involuntarily a part of a group of people that many in my community hated.

Near the end of seventh grade [eighth grade?] something relatively significant happened to change my support network and self image[change this intro sentence]. I started having significant feelings for some of my friends and 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 sneak time with one of my mom's devices during the night to talk to a guy named Brendan, 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 "I think you're beautiful" was a welcome change from my daily reality where anyone I might have liked had no capacity to like me back. Having access to the internet in the middle of the night eventually lead to some more Pornhub exploration, but all that promptly ended a week or two later when I fell asleep instead of returning the device one night.  
At this point, I've clearly explained that I was doing something pretty messed up to find someone, something I could relate to. If it wasn't critical to my story, I would rather omit what happened when my parents found out about it, but I can't. "*SMACK!*"It was on a Wednesday 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 out of your room I'm going to deal with you." I quickly collected my thoughts as my father's words faded. I tried not to look at anyone during breakfast and felt pretty nervous while at school. I kept thinking about how I had done so many bad things and now I was finally going to get a serious lecture about it. I hated sitting through lectures from my parents especially. They made me uncomfortable and always caused my to try to tell my parents what they wanted to hear so that they would be over sooner. What didn't make sense to me was that my dad had hit me. Hard. I knew it was a problem in other households sometimes, but I thought I was lucky enough to not have to deal with that. Every moment of the day was filled with anxiety about what would happen once I came back home. The wait was longer than usualy due to pathfinders, but after getting hugs and wishes of luck from all my closest friends, I went back home.  
I was just about to help carry mom's groceries into the house when my father came up behind me. "Kristyna is all the help she needs. You come with me." My mom pointed me towards him. I walked behind him as he led me into the forest behind our house. When he turned around and I met his gaze I barely saw his fist before it hit me. Reeling back I prepared to receive more of the anger he had built up throughout the day. For the next few minutes I obediently righted myself after every blow, determined not to let him make me cry. It ended sooner than I expected. He took me to an empty room in the school's guest housing (our basement) and delivered his heartfelt lecture that I had initially expected.  
Some of you who read this may be surprised or disgusted that I just accepted a physical attack at thirteen years of age. I think that the shock of being physically attacked by my father allowed me no immediate reaction to what was going on. At this point I simply wanted distance from him, so I tried to be patient and listen until he was satisfied that I had learned my lesson and let me go. I recall how he conceded that sometimes guys "have a lot of testosterone" and they may need to "get it out" sometimes, but that *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 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."  
"Mhmmm"  
"You want to have a wife and kids someday"  
"Of course"  
"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. Like 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 I had helped give life to someone who embodied what I found the most distasteful. My parents found a private therapy center in a nearby city and booked a weekly meeting with a therapist for me. To the best of my recollection, my father had never been physically abusive before or since. And, he did actually come and apologize the next day, but I wasn't ready to forgive. I was just beginning to process and cope with the ideas and fits that hit me the day prior. My mom seemed to support my father in whatever he did so I didn't come to her for any comfort. I wasn't used to getting help from my parents.  
I don't mean that my parents neglected me emotionally, I think they would have listened if I had talked to them more before, but emotions were not often discussed in our home and I definitely didn't start when I began having feelings for guys. Furthermore, I was accustomed to taking care of my academics by myself. By the fifth or sixth grade I was naturally better versed in English than both of my parents and I had never really asked for help in other subjects either. Thus when my unchosen feelings for boys my age made both of my parents cry and caused me father to hurt me, I decided that if I had no connection with them then they couldn't hurt me emotionally. 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 ever made an emotional difference especially regarding my sexuality.

I had read stories 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. Although not good, my experience was thankfully nothing like a story out of *Boy Erased* or *Stranger at the Gate*. I was relieved at the absence of electric shock therapy machinery or verses from Leviticus in picture frames. I admit 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. 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 learned 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 Godly Marriage and the same determination. 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 wasn't that person.  
Unfortunately, my friends in junior high also became a source that supported my growing self-hatred. Comments among the brand-new 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. My early introduction to and interest in sexual activity reversed 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, 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 being gay. Support or someone to safely talk to would have been amazing at this point, but instead my best friend throughout elementary school turned on me.  
First he was just teasing me, then making jokes and name calling either to my face or by using his sister as a messenger. As he grew more relentless over several months I decided to implement a strategy I had only been taught in church. Repay evil with good. I tried very hard to be nice to him every time he reminded me how disgusting I was. Miraculously, this either confused him or wore away at his resolve to hate me because the following school year he gave in and decided to be friendly again. At this point, though, I was fully aware of how disgusting and broken I was and began to embody the treatment and fear I had received.

I tell this part of my story in specific detail because it is a good example of some of the most painful reactions I received from my closest friends when I confided in them. As I finished elementary school (I stayed there through ninth grade), 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 almost certainly 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 ever heard the topic discussed in a civil manner and the adults that knew at that point all advised me to keep my sexuality secret. At least until it could be fixed. And even then it was likely something I wanted to bury as deep as possible in my past.  
"Well, whatever you do, you shouldn't talk about this. It's shameful."

The single problem that most fundamentally scarred me at this age was other's ability to nonchalantly dehumanize gay people. It's a tactic that is used all the time in films. Villains are dehumanized to encourage viewers to want to see the villains destroyed. A more serious and real example is when Nazis dehumanized Jews in WWII. It happens today and in some cases opens the door to genocide. In other cases it allows for extreme hatred of people with certain characteristics associated with skin color, culture, or sexual orientation.  
I found myself in an environment that generally dehumanized queer people. The first form of dehumanization was ignorance. The majority of the people I knew up until the age of seventeen would rather pretend that I and others in the queer community didn't exist. When it was discussed, it was assumed that no one around was gay. Thus, language such as *those people*, *the homosexuals*, and *fags* was often used.  
I vividly remember driving through our smaller southern city the day after Obergefell v. Hodges was decided and noticing several signs for a row of churches displaying sermon titles such as "That's not a marriage" or "Adam and Eve, not Steve".  
My mindset at this stage can be best described by one of my many prayers that I can still clearly recall. One day over summer break, I became especially worried about my increasing interest in boys. I decided to try to pray about it again and dashed outside to pray in my hammock in the middle of the night. Instead of a prayer for deliverance, this time I prayed, "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 to be 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 even when my family and friends saw that I was gay, 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, most of the people in my school already knew that I was gay. Or at least they 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 up my life and reputation on again. A reputation that did *not* include my sexuality. So, I set out to do just that. I focused my efforts towards my academics and friends. I tried to believe I was straight. I even embraced a new name, "Ac".  
As unhealthy as my mindset and self-perception were, they only continued to degrade. Immediately I felt my friendships strained by distance and my only space for sharing and reflecting on my own experience with sexuality disappeared. 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 environment, my friend's parents, school deans, teachers, things like "I just can't stand it when *they* hold hands in public" or "what has our world come to that we have to watch out so those homosexual pedophiles don't hurt our kids," I acquired a very bleak picture of the queer community as filled with some sort of 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 rumored 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's what I was experiencing often developed into if not stopped in its earlier stages. I didn't feel attracted to kids much younger than myself, but the nightmare of my likely future wouldn't leave my head. 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 again. Until then, there was no point in even trying to talk to Him.

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 the gay away were the vibrations of my ceiling fan. So I proceeded with the next logical cure I came up with.  
I reflected on my therapy sessions for inspiration. 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. So, 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.  
I had what I thought then to be the most brilliant idea to condition my mind using paired association. If my gay thoughts were mentally linked to pain and punishment, I hoped I would naturally draw away from them. I remember ducking out of a hallway into the school restrooms to hit my head against the walls after thinking about a popular guy walking at the other end of the hall. Usually I couldn't bring myself to inflict too much pain, so my locker door would have to do.  
This conditioning didn't really achieve what I hoped, though. Rather than feeling less gay, I 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 months 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 Aaron 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 may 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 intently staring 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 . . . did he notice that I noticed . . .* I forced myself to relax. I tried not to notice, 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 that mentality was reinforced over and over again.  
When my friends liked someone, other's 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. Slowly, the divide between myself and rest of my surrounding humanity grew.  
It's not that my friends, and peers were judgemental or mean. We just came from a background that normalized this phobia. I know this because I fully emotionally understood why I was viewed this way, and I agreed with my peers. I doubt whether I would have acted differently had I been in their position. I was rarely bullied directly. But 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 one week. I knew I wouldn't make it if I kept thinking about my sexuality and because I lived right by the train tracks, I knew I only needed to slip up once to lose all my future fights. Instead, I focused on pushing it as far away as I could.  
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 about being gay. It wasn't a great solution, but I did keep going and even found goals to live for again.

I suppose my honesty bears witness to the human necessity of being known. Although I was terrified of the inevitable consequences, I decided that if people would reject or fear me because of who caused the butterflies in my stomach then they ought to. It was preferable to having unknown factors in my life. People that may remain friendly yet willing to turn their backs on me if the truth ever came out. Besides, I wasn't naive enough to think that I was the only one hurt when I came out. My friends must have felt it too. If things did not go well, it would be easier to face the fallout sooner in a relationship than later.  
In fact, of the few male friends I opened up to, I viewed of those experiences as me providing the warnings that my friends deserved. If they were friends with someone who may become a monster, they deserved a heads up.  
I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was when instead of disgust, some of my friends showed support. After all, my best friend didn't hate me after I came out to him. I recall opening up to one friend who followed up with teasing me about how much harder his looks must make my life. Soon, I even opened up to an adult whose reaction and support slowly changed my own self-perception.  
Not all reactions were great, of course, I rarely came out to anyone. Often my friend would tell me what I'm feeling was wrong. Some would offer prayers, and I appreciated that, for I knew I ought to. Others, were no longer friends, or no longer the same friends, or the same friends as long as I continued to pretend that I was no different.

**Paradigm Shift**

By the end of highschool, I'd become quite skilled about ignoring my sexuality. This allowed me to regain a sense of almost belonging and an unreliable but savored joy for life. I could appreciate my accomplishments while ignoring my emotional and romantic attraction to the same gender. Self-harm and the fear of emotional proximity were the only fruits my attempts at becoming straight produced, so I allowed myself to accept help from others. One friend gave me Christopher Yuan's book 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 or sermons. Better yet, she was willing to listen.  
When I was recommended to go to a short seminar at a nearby church, I jumped at the opportunity. I recall attending all the meetings and privately asking 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, most of these resources explained how being same-sex attracted may not be a conscious choice, but saying you're gay and living in the gay lifestyle was. This often left me wondering what a "homosexual lifestyle" was and how I could escape the sins I didn't know I was committing.  
Despite mixed messages, I noticed that a few of those I had entrusted with my secret still cared about me, and they seemed to love God, too. Today, this doesn't shock me, but back then I still expected Christians to hate 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. My father had a similar experience during the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. Several people I knew personally turned their lives around radically. "I stopped smoking immediately," a coworker explained. "Oh, and I became vegan overnight, too."  
I definitely enjoyed hearing these stories and appreciated God's power to transform. However, getting to know God didn't make me straight. I expected to feel awful on account of my feelings in front of the God whose Word was quoted to justify queer dehumanization. Instead, I felt the most at peace with myself and my sexuality while spending time with God. Rather than condemnation, I experienced comfort.

The new insights weren't mine alone. As I opened up to more friends and acquaintances, many faced assumptions about the queer community that had never been challenged before, likely because I was the first individual to open up to them. To paraphrase a reaction I began to receive often, the line of thought tended towards "Well, I've always known it's bad to be gay, or lesbian. But I've never really thought about it much . . . at least not until you came out to me." The queer community no longer comprised only "people who want to undermine marriage." With a friend in the picture, suddenly everyone was more human.  
I certainly don't mean to point fingers. While I noticed others' perception of the queer community shifting, my own self-image transformed as my own prejudices and homophobia gradually dissolved. Likely the most beneficial part of this process was leaving behind the shame I had carried since I recognized I was gay. When I came out to my closest few friends in elementary and highschool, I would often feel the need to apologize for being their friend. In my mind it was a potentially devastating misfortune to be close to someone like me. Challenging the homophobia I was accustomed to and disentangling myself from shame over who caused the butterfly effect in my stomach went hand-in-hand.

Gradually distancing myself from cycles of depression and self-degradation was phenomenal in college, but I still couldn't comprehend how my sexuality would affect my life as a Christian. I couldn't go on ignoring it like I had in high school. When looking for answers, I received a wide array 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."  
"I'm sure if you just meet the right girl . . ."  
"We need to find you a boyfriend!" The resources I found online ranged from reparative therapy I decided to put my trust in God. I wanted to be sure of my decisions before I threw more of my life behind the effort at orientation change. Thus, although I had never been much of a prayer warrior, I was extremely intentional about asking God daily whether I could expect to be straight one day. I felt as if I hadn't ever made progress before, so was it ever going to be worth the effort? If so, I was prepared to throw all the strength I had at it. After a few months I felt like I was getting some sort of answer back through morning devotions and generally throughout conversations with a few mentors.  
If my focus was on being straight, my focus was entirely in the wrong place. Apparently, I was asking a largely irrelevant question. I didn't need to be straight. As if that would more holy before God than where I was now. Instead, God seemed to be asking whether I was willing to follow Him where he lead and accept that to be enough.  
Unexpectedly, I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted. Of course, following Him isn't simple either. If fact, soon I felt pushed in a direction that I never expected God to lead.

If I opened up to a friend or mentor, it was no longer out of fear that they would figure me out on their own. Besides desiring transparency, I also wanted to begin to confront the misconceptions some of my peers and superiors had about queer individuals. Most were assumptions that I had to break down myself.

* Were gay people were 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 gay lifestyle?" What even was that? I was gay 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 the *true answers* to these questions. Far from it. Once I recognized how little I knew, I was finally prepared to start digging into the stories, theology, and research to gain a better understanding. I can't speak for the queer community in general, but I personally don't care much for my friends and fellow church members to change their non-affirming theology to an affirming one or vice-versa.  
  To me, it makes a difference when someone chooses to recognize they are uninformed rather than pretending to know everything. So does taking a moment to consider that when we speak in public there are closeted individuals listening. Often young impressionable ones.  
  I've heard many individuals argue that because children are impressionable, they need to be told the full truths to combat our world's destructive messages. The challenge with this approach is that it becomes too easy to feel like our behavior is excused by our raw truth. Conservative theology doesn't need to include asking a fifteen-year-old me "don't you agree that those homosexual folks are disgusting?" Although, only a minority of people I knew in my community said things like that, there were even fewer willing to challenge those remarks.

Though I naturally avoid confrontation, I believed that if I was to see a change I needed to be part of it. My expectations of God once focused on becoming heterosexual, but instead I found God pushing me to leave behind the shame that had ruled my life for a decade. As I dug deeper into theology and stories of Christians such as Justin Lee, Greg Coles, and Mel White, who had publicly come out as gay, I became increasingly convicted to stop hiding my sexuality.  
While I hoped my story could encourage individuals with a similar journey, coming out was necessary to improve my own mental health. By 2021, I had decided to come out and soon picked a random date, February 4th, to do so. I was definitely afraid of receiving hate from my community, but when the time came I didn't really receive any directly. Being an introvert, it was likely that not many people noticed, which was fine with me.  
Coming out did, in fact, improve my mental health. The cycles of depression I had grown accustomed to further dissipated and I no longer bore the weight of keeping physical lists of who I'd come out to.

I've come a long way from the thirteen-year-old that prayed God would use him before leaving him to burn in hell. Still, my journey is far from over. I'm merely a college student with his own experiences, personal research, and developing relationship with God.

**Extra Tidbits**

For instance, one of the first books I read on the topic was given to me by a friend as encouragement that I could “change,” too. It was a powerful testimony of a same-sex attracted man who turned to God after being put in prison for dealing drugs. However, it wasn’t all that relatable to me as a teenager.