

Seeing Truth Through Love

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My move to Zürich earlier this month (and upcoming move to England) marks the fourth time that I've moved out of the United States in the last decade. On a personal level, this move has been radically different than any of my previous three moves. This time I'm making money and not paying to be there (pew). That feels good. More importantly, though, on an emotional level this move has been radically different than any other move I've gone through. I'm experiencing a whole range of emotions that has previously been completely inaccessible to me.

In particular, this trip has been marked by a profound sense of loneliness. One would think that everyone can feel lonely, but funny enough I've never felt it like this before. I haven't allowed myself to feel this way before. I've always seen it as a sign of weakness and responded by gritting my teeth and telling myself to be independent and self-sufficient. Until now I've never, ever seen it as natural, healthy, or positive.

This is just one example of the new emotions that I'm experiencing these days. In the last 8 or so months, my emotional life has completely bloomed with brilliant colors coming in all shapes and sizes. It's like I'm breathing for the first time. I think the reasons for this are complex and deep. I probably won't ever be able to give a full explanation of what's going on, but I'd like to give a stab at it here. I'd like to give my loved ones an update of my life and try my best to explain some of the beautiful things I have been learning along the way.

Of course, one of the principal differences between this move and the previous ones is that I'm out this time and I'm seriously dating. As a missionary in Mexico, I wasn't dating (you know, mission rules), and in both Russia and Oxford I decided not to date deliberately. I spent these last two years at home coming out and dealing with all the emotional, mental, lifestyle, spiritual, and religious transformations that necessarily accompany such an event. I'm grateful that I had so much time to take it slowly and deliberately without being pressured.

I've been dating off and on roughly since January of this year. I'm experiencing

a pretty common phenomenon among gay people: I finally understand what this hype is about dating, what songs are about, why people center their lives on this. It's like I went from eating rice cakes my whole life to eating food—suddenly there's a whole range of incredible flavors, textures, and sensations that I simply didn't know existed. Now I can relate to the heartbreak songs with life experience, to the love songs with feelings of my own, with the passionate paintings and other pieces of art. I feel like, for the first time, I'm actually tapping into the human experience. It's at once exhilarating and extremely frustrating—it can be hard not to lose myself in outrage that I've gone this long in my life without feeling the core, essential part of life that is romantic love. Romantically, I've lost at least a decade of my life.

I remember as a teenager getting caught by the deep heartbreak in Taylor Swift's "Teardrops on My Guitar" (I know, I'm embarrassed to admit this). I got caught up in a theoretical sense, like I was looking at what she was expressing through a glass window. Like it would not come to me in the moment, but maybe someday it would. That's how I've always related to any piece of literature, art, or music that expresses love: like it was a perpetual distant sensation that I could only relate to in a muted, theoretical sense—like with a black-and-white filter over it. Since I've started dating, that glass has shattered and I've been inundated with these experiences in the best way. It's not uncommon for a gay person to express something along the lines of, "I never really felt anything until I came out."

My new-found ability to feel has consequences in literally every aspect of my life. First of all, the fact that I no longer have a deep, dark secret makes it so that I can form deep, meaningful relationships. I no longer get scared by intimate relationships because I want to be seen, rather than having something awful and poisonous to hide. This has drastically improved my family relationships, among others.

Even more than that, though, being able to feel has touched my goals, my priorities, and my habits. It has reshaped the way I think about myself, others, and life. It's reshaped the way I connect with people, the things I talk about, the way I spend my time. It's taught me the extreme value of connection and people. In this move to Zürich, it's changed the way I've adjusted to a new country and set of circumstances. I've been kinder with myself, taken better care of my mental health, and invested in positive relationships in a way that has made this move far more manageable than the moves I've made in the past. One of those things is that I've allowed myself to feel lonely, to miss my loved ones at home, and to see that as beautiful, positive, and important as opposed to a sign of weakness. Instead of isolating myself from my previous life, I've embraced the desire to keep up important relationships.

Perhaps counterintuitively, my spiritual life has become profoundly richer and more meaningful through this transition. I've taken the reigns of my own spir-

itual life and made it my own, between me and God. I have a hard time articulating the insights I've gained, but my new-found ability to feel has made it possible for me to connect with God in a far deeper way than I have ever been capable of doing before.

As I wrote about recently, I believe that godliness is synonymous with intimacy with the Divine. Repentance is a way to repair and enhance our relationships with God and Jesus, and thus righteousness is best thought of as "right relationships" between us and ourselves, God, and others. If this is indeed the case, then it makes all the sense in the world that I could grow closer to God if I were able to feel and thus be more intimate with others.

My experience leads me to believe that one cannot learn godliness if one cannot love romantically. For those who haven't experienced the contrast between being in and out of the closet, it might be hard to see why the ability to embrace romantic love has profound effects on one's ability to love other people in a platonic way. It does; the best way that I can describe it is that romantic love teaches you so much about relationships and love that you can apply in platonic relationships, but that you may not be able to learn in them.

Love is the center of Christianity. I believe that the more one has the capacity to love, the more Christian that person can become. I believe that the more one learns about love, the more one can learn about godly truth—a kind of truth that permeates every aspect of a person's life. The scriptures often associate truth and love; they also describe unrighteous people as "past feeling." That is why coming out and dating has made me vastly more capable of being a true Christian and of comprehending truths that previously were inaccessible to me.

Recently, in a blessing, I was exhorted to open my heart. Rather than keeping a stone wall around it, I should keep a white picket fence around it with a "Welcome" sign. I've pondered at length on this. It coaxed me to open myself to my coworkers and connect meaningfully with them; it opened my eyes to enrich good relationships and make them better; most significantly, last week in a moment of acutely painful loneliness, it inspired me to enter a Protestant Chapel, kneel alone in the pews, and under the vaulted ceilings and imposing crucifix cry out, "God, let this be a time of intimacy between you and me." The connection I felt with God in that moment was deep because I finally knew what it was to open my heart to another Being.

A year ago you could have convinced me that my sexuality might be sinful; but the intimacy that I've enjoyed with God since coming out and learning to love has been so profound that I don't think I could be convinced that it's anything but godly.