

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Terry D. McGlasson for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling presented on April 15, 2011.

Title: A Phenomenological Study of the “Coming Out” Experience for Gay Men Raised in Conservative Christian Environments.

Abstract approved:

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This qualitative study explores the “coming out” experience of gay males raised in conservative Christian environments. Seven men with varying ethnic and racial backgrounds, between the ages of 20 and 40 years old, participated. Each was raised in a conservative, Christian environment during his formative years and each was now living as an “out” gay man. The study utilized a phenomenological methodology, which seeks to understand the core essence of the “coming out” phenomenon itself. Each participant was interviewed twice, for a total of at least 90 minutes. These interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then underwent four separate levels of analysis. A composite chapter is included which discusses how these analyses were utilized in determining the textures, structures and ultimately, the essential essences of the phenomenon which each man experienced and a concluding chapter includes strengths and limitations of the study as well as suggestions and implications for future research. This study highlights the literature relevant to contemporary LGBT issues, demonstrates the ongoing need for enhanced counselor training to properly meet the unique needs of lesbian and gay clients and includes recommendations for clinicians currently in practice as well as for clergy.

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A Phenomenological Study of the “Coming Out” Experience for Gay Men Raised in
Conservative Christian Environments

by

Terry D. McGlasson

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Terry D. McGlasson, Author

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Dedication

To every boy who has ever hidden in a dark closet...

To every man who has found the courage to step out and say, "No more."

"The world breaks everyone and afterward, many are strong at the broken places."
Hemingway

Chapter I

Introduction

This dissertation focused on the “coming out” process of gay men who were raised in conservative Christian environments. This chapter provides the rationale for the study, a description of the type of research methodology to be utilized, and an overview of the remaining chapters.

Rationale

I proposed a phenomenological study of the "coming out" experience of gay men raised in conservative Christian environments for the following reasons:

1. History indicates that members of the LGBT community have endured misunderstanding, prejudice and even oppression at the hands of groups that tend to be politically and religiously conservative (Heermann, Wiggins & Rutter, 2007; Herek, 2004; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989).
2. Studies indicate that gay and lesbian individuals who identify with conservative religious/faith traditions can experience significant psychological/emotional/spiritual distress in their attempts to come out, often being forced to choose between integrity to their true identity and adherence to their faith (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Nelson, 1982).
3. Studies indicate that practicing counselors and counseling students often lack sufficient training in working with members of the LGBT community and can show bias, potentially inflicting harm to their lesbian and gay clients based on their own personal, political and religious biases against the LGBT community

(Crisp, 2006; Israel & Hackett, 2004; Murphy, Rawlings & Howe, 2002; Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989).

4. To properly assist LGBT clients, there is a demonstrated need for enhanced, ongoing counselor training that is consistent with the best traditions of multicultural counseling (Bidell, 2005; Crisp, 2006; Israel & Selvidge, 2003; Matthews, 2005).
5. These unique concerns are reflective of the personal journey of this researcher. As a gay Christian man, who is also a licensed professional counselor and a candidate for a doctorate in counselor education, the issues presented here are not only autobiographical but will also remain a critical focus of my ongoing clinical and academic careers.

Methodology

I chose a qualitative research design due to its use of inductive reasoning, its emphasis on emergent design, and its nature as a form of research that is non-standardized, context-sensitive and dependent on the subjective expressions of both the researcher and the researched (Choudhuri, Glauser, & Peregoy, 2004; Cresswell, 2007). It is also consistent with this researcher's constructivist worldview, espousing:

1. The placement of emphasis on the *phenomena* of study
2. The mind's social constructions of realities
3. The existence of a subjective interrelationship between the researcher and the participant

4. The co-construction of meaning (Choudhuri, Glauser, & Peregoy, 2004; Creswell, 2007; Charmaz, 2006)

Specifically, the phenomenological approach was chosen for several reasons:

1. Its focus on several individuals' common or shared experience of a phenomenon is an excellent fit for the topic of my study (Creswell, 2007).
2. Secondly, as alluded to previously it is consistent with a constructivist worldview.

Lester (1999) states:

Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom. (p.1)

3. Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and its founder, Edmund Husserl, along with many in the phenomenological movement as it evolved in the 20th century, including Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Marcel, have made significant contributions to the field of psychology. This body of work was a protest against dehumanization and proposed original research and a theory that is true to human behavior and the first-person experience (Wertz, 2005). This researcher both personally and professionally supports such a movement.

The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to specifically examine the “coming out” *experience* of gay Christian men, by focusing on the phenomenon itself. The reader is provided with rich, descriptive detail of a unique experience, provided by those who have actually lived it.

Population

Criterion for participation in this study were men who self-identified as gay, were raised in conservative Christian environments and who had previously chosen to “come out” to family and friends. Conservative Christian environments were defined as denominations or movements that are part of the Evangelical or Fundamentalist traditions such as, but not limited to Pentecostals, Four Square, many Baptists and conservative branches of the Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. Also included were major groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Roman Catholic Church (Mead, 1985).

Subjects were selected through the assistance of university faculty and professionals who were currently working with spiritually-oriented gay males, to which letters were sent.

All potential research participants were then contacted personally by this researcher, confirming their suitability for the research and providing them with the basic information surrounding the project and answering any pertinent questions. Upon verification that the individual had met the research criteria, a consent form and a demographic information form were mailed to them with return postage provided.

Data Collection

Each individual was interviewed in person or by telephone and audio-taped, utilizing an interview guide with several predetermined open-ended questions which remained sufficiently flexible to allow for participants to fully explore their lived experiences (Walker, 2007). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Additionally, a reflective field journal was utilized which included notes regarding observations of the environment, the participant and the impact on and impressions of the researcher (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004). Following data collection, transcription and initial analysis, each participant was revisited. Prior to these secondary encounters, research participants were provided with a copy of this researcher's textural and structural analyses. They were asked to examine and then comment on the fidelity of the transcript and the interpretation involved in analyzing their words. They could suggest corrections or offer further elaboration. This information as well as additional questions from the researcher that may have arisen during analysis of the transcripts together comprised the second round of interactions. This process is known as a "member check" and the purpose is to gain clarification on interpretations and conclusions drawn from the initial interviews (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; McWilliam, Kothari, Ward-Griffin, Forbes & Leipert, 2009; Ryndak, Storch & Hoppey, 2008).

Data Analysis

After the data had been collected and transcribed from both the initial interviews as well as the member checks, a systematized approach to data analysis known as a modified Steveick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994) was utilized. It includes the following steps:

1. The researcher's own experience of the phenomenon is fully described.
2. A list of the significant statements made by the participants as to how they each have experienced the phenomena, a process known as *horizontalization* of the data

is developed. Each statement is treated with equal value and eventually, a list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements is amassed.

3. Significant statements are then grouped into larger units of information known as *meaning units* or themes.
4. A description is then written based on these themes, of “what” the participants experienced (what happened) using verbatim examples. This is known as the *textural description*.
5. A description is written of “how” the experience happened. Here, the researcher reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. This is known as the *structural description*.
6. A composite of the textural and structural descriptions is written. This is known as the *essence* of the experience “...and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study.”

Drawing from the lived experiences of each individual, similarities shared amongst the participants are highlighted and the words of the collective group begin to create a “portrait” of the phenomenon itself.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Due to the very nature of qualitative research, the traditional methods and standards applied to quantitative research such as internal and external validity, statistical conclusion validity and construct validity do not apply (Choudhuri, Glauser & Peregoy, 2004). However, trustworthiness – the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the research is critical.

While more detail will be provided in chapter three, the following is a brief summary of specific steps that were taken, based on Creswell (2007) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), to ensure trustworthiness:

1. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation: the researcher will personally spend several hours in the field with each participant, both interviewing and taking field notes based on observations.
2. Triangulation: This study will provide multiple sources of data including a comprehensive literature review, two rounds of interviews and field notes.
3. Peer review of the researcher's methods and findings.
4. Disclosure of the researcher's biases and personal connections to the topic.
5. Member checking will be performed through a second round of interviews with each subject, for the purpose of clarification.
6. Rich, thick description will be provided in the final report which enables the reader to transfer the information to other settings to determine whether the findings can be transferred based on shared characteristics.
7. An external audit conducted by an individual not connected with the study in any way, for the purpose of examining both the process and the product and determining if the findings are supported by the data.

Summary

In the midst of a larger community of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered individuals who are struggling to define themselves and make their needs known, there exists a smaller, distinct group of gay men from conservative Christian backgrounds who

have chosen to “come out” to their families and friends, risking their standing within their respective faith communities. This decision and ensuing struggle—their shared experience—is largely absent from the literature. By focusing on this group through a phenomenological framework this unique phenomenon can be better understood.

Overview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter Two will include a comprehensive review of the literature including specific areas of discussion on key issues within the LGBT community; the intersection of counseling, spirituality and homosexuality; and finally, the implications for multicultural counseling and counselor education. Chapter Three will consist of a detailed description of the research design and methodology as well as expanded definitions of the qualitative and phenomenological approaches.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

Issues surrounding the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community are at the forefront of civil rights discourse at the turn of the new millennium. Discussions regarding heterosexism, partner rights, gay marriage, adoption issues, and hate crimes highlight the personal and public tensions this community experiences daily (Avery, Chase, Johansson, Litvak, Montero, & Wydra, 2007; Harper & Schneider, 2003; Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008;).

Within the conservative Christian culture such issues for LGBT adherents are even more poignant and profound. The conservative Christian traditions, including Pentecostals, Four Square Charismatics, most Baptists and conservative branches of the Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches as well as major groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Roman Catholic Church (Mead, 1985), have consistently held strong negative views regarding the LGBT community. These prejudicial views and consequent discriminatory behaviors create for the gay Christian a unique environment of fear, mistrust, and oppression. A lesbian or gay individual attempting to practice her or his faith under such circumstances is often forced to choose between fidelity to one's sexual identity and acceptance and approval from one's fellow religious adherents (Buchanan, Dzelma, Harris & Hecker, 2001; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989).

In conjunction with this, the literature surrounding cultural competence in the helping professions has expressed increasing concern regarding competent incorporation of both spiritual issues and sexuality into counseling and counselor education. It has been reported that more than two thirds of the U.S. population claim membership in a church or faith community and 60% report that religious faith is a strong influence in their lives (Heermann, Wiggins, & Rutter, 2007). Consequently, many of these people, upon entering counseling, believe that addressing spiritual concerns in therapy is critical (Steen, Engels, & Thweatt, 2006). However, researchers have found that the average clinician is less religious than the average client, that spiritual and religious issues have been traditionally neglected in counseling and, in one study, only 25% of 341 counselor education programs reported that spirituality and religious issues were included as a course component (Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007).

Similarly, members of the LGBT community can often encounter critical deficits within the helping profession. Lesbians and gay men have reported higher than average rates of therapy usage (Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002), yet studies continue to show significant deficits in the skills and abilities of clinicians currently in practice as well as a lack of comprehensive training in counselor education programs (Matthews, 2005; Murphy et al, 2002). The absence of these critical components can result in counselor bias against LGBT persons and ultimately can result in misdiagnosis and harm to the lesbian or gay client (Rainey & Trusty, 2007).

It is within this context that the central research question is posed: What is the essence of the “coming out” experience, specifically of gay men from conservative

Christian backgrounds? To better grasp the complex sociological, spiritual, and interpersonal dimensions of this question, this literature review includes two key conceptual areas. The first area is an overview of the social and psychological issues specific to the LGBT community and includes an examination of counselor preparation and training for effective treatment of LGBT clients. The second area examines the intersection of counseling, spirituality, and homosexuality. This section will include an historical examination of the relationship spirituality has to both the counseling profession and the LGBT community and a specific discussion on the state of LGBT spiritual counseling.

Understanding the unique dilemma of gay men positioned between the competing interests of their sexual identity and their religious beliefs could provide opportunities for clinicians to assume the role of advocate for an oppressed, under-represented people group and provide an opportunity for counselor educators to re-examine their curricula to see if counseling students are being adequately prepared to address such critical issues facing this unique culture.

LGBT Community Issues

This section of the literature review will highlight several current challenges facing LGBT individuals including heterosexism, homophobia, LGBT stress, “internalized homophobia,” shame, and an extensive examination of the “coming out” phenomenon with its inherent challenges. The section will conclude with recommendations for training practicing clinicians and counselor education students in LGBT cultural issues.

For clinicians working with individuals from the LGBT community it is critical, as with any cultural group, to understand the unique issues they face and the institutional barriers that make thriving more difficult.

As stated in the introduction, LGBT people, as with other marginalized groups, experience oppression on a daily basis. Harper and Schneider (2003) indicate that in addition to harassment and physical violence, discrimination exists in areas such as access to education and human services, employment and housing. “Other forms of discrimination and oppression are *supported* [emphasis added] by legislation and other legal actions that explicitly exclude LGBT people from enjoying the rights and protection afforded most citizens” (Harper & Schneider, 2003, p. 246). These include prohibition of same-sex marriages (Myers & Scanzoni, 2005), same-sex sexual activity, joining the military, as well as adopting children (Lindenberger, 2008). Furthermore, within all of the categories mentioned above, there are LGBT persons who are also members of other oppressed and marginalized groups (women, people with disabilities, people of color) creating, in essence, the possibility of multiple layers of oppression (Harper & Schneider, 2003). Plummer (1975), quoted by McDonald (1992), summarizes it well:

The single most important factor about homosexuality as it exists in this culture is the perceived hostility of the societal reactions that surround it. From this one critical factor flow many of the features that are distinctive about homosexuality. It renders the business of becoming a homosexual a process that is characterized by problems of access, problems of guilt and problems of identity. It leads to the emergence of a subculture of homosexuality. It leads to a series of interaction problems involved with concealing the discreditable stigma. And it inhibits the development of stable relationships among homosexuals to a considerable degree...Homosexuality as a social experience simply cannot be understood without an analysis of the societal reactions to it. (p. 58)

In studying this climate of oppression, two significant terms have risen in attempt to explain the complex and often difficult experience of being a sexual minority: heterosexism and homophobia.

Heterosexism is often an invisible assumption, a cultural ideology that arises out of patriarchal societies and is ultimately derived from society's construction of gender. It is manifested in a society's institutions, such as the law and the language and through these institutions it conveys an underlying belief that everything homosexual is "...devalued and considered inferior to what is heterosexual" (Herek, 2004, p.16). The heterosexist conceptualization devalues all other affectional identities through the privilege and power of being the dominant culture (Smith, Foley & Chaney, 2008). Heterosexism refers to the "systems that provide the rationale and operating instructions for...antipathy. These systems include beliefs about gender, morality, and danger by which homosexuality and sexual minorities are defined as deviant, sinful and threatening" (Herek, 2004, p. 16). Heterosexism is manifested in myriad passive and active ways; it may be in the assumption upon meeting an individual for the first time that she or he is heterosexual. Or, it may be in representations in books, films and children's programming that solely depict couples as one male and one female. Heterosexism results in the biases on legal and medical forms that give only the options, "single" or "married." Also, it is in the stereotypes of gay men being effeminate and lesbian women being overly masculine. Heterosexism, as has been rightly argued, creates the climate for homophobia to arise, based on its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual (Herek, 2004, p. 16). In essence, it provides the "foundation" for the constructs of homophobia.

In its broadest and most commonly accepted understanding, *homophobia* describes fearful and negative reactions to homosexuals. More specifically defined, it is the “...irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuality and includes negative attitudes and beliefs toward homosexuals with feelings of discomfort, fear, and anger in relation to proximity and engagement with homosexuals” (Monroe, Baker, & Roll, 1997). The term, coined by psychologist George Weinberg in 1972, gave definition to the fear and hostility faced by lesbians and gays but it also indicated a critical shift by “...locating the ‘problem’ of homosexuality not in homosexual people, but in heterosexuals who were intolerant of gay men and lesbians” (Herek, 2004, p. 6). However, in recent years, many have concluded that “homophobia” places the focus too much on the affective aspects of fear at a societal level, rather than specific anti-lesbian and anti-gay cognitions within individuals (Williamson, 2000).

In essence, homophobia is the predictable result of a heterosexist society. If there exists a base assumption that heterosexual is the accepted orientation of the dominant group, then those who do not conform to that assumption are viewed as the “other,” and are vulnerable, certainly, to cultural and institutional oppression, as well as to deeper, less obvious negative consequences. Two such consequences of living under this type of oppression are examined here: stress, as it relates to the experience of being homosexual, and internalized homophobia.

LGBT people currently represent one of the most *stressed* groups of individuals in society. According to Iwasaki and Ristock (2007), due to societal discrimination, a lack of social and institutional support, and the often-felt need to hide their sexual identity,

gay men and lesbians report adverse health conditions including high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse disorders, affective disorders and suicidal behavior.

However, even the decision to hide one's true identity, despite the relative safety this may seem to promise, brings with it its own stress as well. By remaining "closeted," a term used to describe a lesbian or gay individual choosing to keep their sexual identity a secret, the individual must deal with the stress of constantly monitoring her or his speech and conversation, taking care not to mention partners, same-sex attractions, or involvement in the gay community. Studies have indicated that these individuals show higher rates of stress than LGBT people who are "out" (Harper & Schneider, 2003).

Some researchers now rightly view the stress experienced by the LGBT community as "minority stress." Williamson (2000) identifies minority stress as a psychosocial stress that is experienced through membership in a low status minority group. Such stress arises, "...not only from negative events but from the totality of the minority person's experience in dominant society. At the center of this experience is the incongruence between the minority person's culture, needs, and experience, and societal structures" (Williamson, 2000, pp. 100-101).

Clinicians working with lesbian and gay clients must be aware that the real and perceived stressors that their clients experience daily can significantly contribute to a decline in health and wellness. If untreated, the aforementioned stress can become even more deeply repressed and manifested as a form of guilt, anger, and self-hatred known as internalized homophobia.

“Internalized homophobia” and internalized shame are unique to the gay and lesbian community. The simple definition of “internalized homophobia” is the adoption of negative attitudes by LGBT people towards their own sexuality (Williamson, 2000). Through the process of introjection, harmful homophobic views from society are taken in and incorporated into the individual’s sense of self (Allen & Oleson, 1999) which ultimately results in self-loathing, guilt, anger, hate, disgust and fear (Herek, 2004). However, this process is far more complex than it may at first appear. Upon closer examination, internalized homophobia represents an intrapsychic conflict within the lesbian or gay man between what people think they should be and how they experience their own sexuality (Herek, 2004, p. 19). Heterosexist societal messages will couch homosexuality as sick, aberrant, immoral and illegal. If these characterizations are introjected, the homosexual will begin to mute her or his own feelings of warmth and excitement surrounding their true identity and slowly lose their sense of aliveness. In place of the genuine feelings, guilt and shame now fill the individual. Attempts may be made to assuage these unwanted feelings by acting and behaving heterosexual while stifling their true identity, but faced with this impossible task, this ultimately leads to a self-hatred of that part of him or her that society has rejected (Beane, 1981).

Allen and Oleson (1999) specifically examined the connection between internalized homophobia and shame. In their study of 90 gay men utilizing a 34 item inventory, they concluded that there was a significant positive relationship between internalized homophobia and shame in gay men, stating:

A *t* test showed that gay men high in internalized homophobia experienced greater degrees of shame than men low in internalized

homophobia...shame may now be seen as one of the core dynamics at the root of the pathological ramifications linked to internalized homophobia. (p. 37)

Internalized homophobia, then, represents the profound dissonance between incorporated destructive societal views of homosexuality and the inevitable emerging homosexual identity of the individual. This ultimately results in the most profound impediment in the adjustment to a healthy and positive homosexual identity (Allen & Oleson, 1999).

To stop this degrading cycle and embrace the truth of who they are, lesbians and gay men face perhaps the most daunting task of all: to “come out of the closet.” According to identity development theory, “*coming out*” has been suggested as an essential component in LGBT identity formation (Willoughby et al, 2006). “Coming out” is defined as “becoming aware of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others (Rasmussen, 2004). However, Taylor (1999) notes that the *essence* of coming out, contrary to popular conceptions, is not the *disclosure* to others but the critical element of “...accepting one’s gayness as a positive aspect of self” (p. 521). Regardless of emphases, it is universally agreed that both internal self-acceptance and disclosure to significant others must eventually take place for healthy development.

While the body of literature regarding the “coming out” experience has grown significantly, the information is typically presented in general terms, discussing common experiences and recognized stages but often not addressing specific experiences of subgroups within the LGBT community.

Coming out can often be an arduous process that occurs over time, often taking years (Rasmussen, 2004; McDonald, 1982). The enormity of this decision, including the myriad components that must be weighed, the pressure on the individual from all sides, and the consequences that follow must not be underestimated. McDonald (1982) summarizes it well:

...Coming out involves adopting a nontraditional identity, restructuring one's self-concept, reorganizing one's personal sense of history, and altering one's relations with others and with society – all of which reflects a complex series of cognitive and affective transformations as well as changes in behavior...coming out is an active process involving individual choices that have profound consequences for one's emerging self-concept. (p. 47)

Eli Coleman (1982) presented ground-breaking research in this area and proposed one of the first stage models for the coming out phenomenon. Coleman suggested five general stages seen in individuals traversing this journey.

Stage One: Pre-Coming Out

During the early years, the LGBT child begins to feel different and sometimes even alienated and alone. Because she or he is not consciously aware of same-sex feelings and therefore, cannot readily identify what is different or wrong, the tension is often communicated through behavioral problems, psychosomatic illnesses and in extreme cases, suicidal behavior (Coleman, 1982, p. 33). Concurrent with these internal experiences, the child is also very quickly learning the ethical values of his or her family, community, faith tradition and society which most often are sending messages that homosexuality is deviant and wrong. Faced with this tension, individuals protect themselves from awareness through defense mechanisms such as denial and repression.

While these defenses serve to protect the child, they also prevent the individual, the family, and society from having to confront homosexuality directly. This concealment comes at a significant cost. Coleman quotes Fischer (1972):

Every time a homosexual denied the validity of his feelings or restrains himself from expressing, he does a small hurt to himself. He turns his energies inward and suppresses his own vitality. The effect may be scarcely noticeable: joy may be less keen, happiness slightly subdued; he may feel a little run down, a little less tall. Over the years, these tiny denials have a cumulative effect. (p. 33)

A healthy resolution to the pre-coming out stage is breaking through these defense mechanisms and embracing being different.

Stage Two: Coming Out

In stage two, individuals are now acknowledging their homosexual feelings. Research indicates this most often occurs between 13 and 18 years of age. Here, they need external validation and risk disclosing to others hoping that they will not be rejected. Coleman states that no one can develop self-concepts such as “accepted” or “valued” or “worthwhile” all alone, so one must take the risk to experience true acceptance. Obviously, the response is critical. A negative reaction can affirm all the internal negative impressions previously held. A positive response can counteract the negative impressions, increase their self-esteem and permit the individual to begin to accept themselves (Coleman, 1982, pp. 33-34).

Stage Three: Exploration

Stage three is characterized by experimenting with a new sexual identity and is the first major experience of sexual and social activity with others. During this stage, individuals face several tasks including developing interpersonal skills, developing a

personal sense of attractiveness and sexual competence and recognizing that their self-esteem is not based on sexual conquest. It is important to note:

...Individuals with same-sex preferences are usually not afforded an adolescence during their teenage years [indicative of a] developmental lag, or the loss of chronological adolescence. Because most people in our society are encouraged to follow a heterosexual adolescence, homosexual individuals oftentimes do not enter their true adolescence until their chronological adolescence has long past. This can be very puzzling and frightening for men and women who have matured in other ways, e.g., intellectually, vocationally and financially. (Coleman, 1982, pp. 35-36)

Stage Four: First Relationships

As exploration loses its intrigue, individuals begin to long for intimacy and companionship. The task at this stage is to learn how to function in a same-sex relationship, especially in a society where opposite-sex relationships are the norm. First relationships can be very turbulent—characterized by intense emotions, possessiveness, and lack of trust, sometimes causing individuals to step back into sexual exploration, convinced that relationships will not work. LGBT people are often at a disadvantage because in addition to a lack of public support and the presence of overt discrimination, there is a distinct lack of same-sex couples as role models. So many young couples lack support from friends, family, community, and culture (Coleman, 1982, p. 38-39).

Stage Five: Integration

The final stage, integration, is characterized by an incorporation of public and private identities. Relationships can be more successful than in stage four and there is an ongoing process of self-discovery, expansion of social networks and intimacies that can be enjoyed.

Coleman is quick to point out that every individual is unique and there is often variation in how an individual traverses the process, including moving back and forth between stages. Accordingly, the final portion of this discussion on “coming out” will examine the individual variations that contribute to this process being so unique, and often times, so challenging (Coleman, 1982, pp. 39-40).

The “coming out” process is unique in that, unlike other minority groups, lesbian and gay individuals must *choose* whether to conceal or reveal their true identities, never being sure what the reaction will be (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007; Schope, 2002). The literature is clear that this unique dilemma carries with it significant considerations and a weighing of the risks throughout the decision-making process as well as significant consequences following the choice to disclose. Schope (2002) states:

The decision whether to disclose to others presents the gay person with the very real need to calculate potential gains and losses. Moreover, this becomes a continual and almost oppressive task that must be repeated in every new situation and with every new audience. If the person decides not to disclose, they find themselves constantly struggling to control information and behaviors with people who do not know their sexual orientation. Since most gay men and lesbians are typically out to some people and closeted to others, this creates enormous stress when members of these two groups overlap. (Schope, 2002, p. 2)

Other significant factors that may influence the coming out process include the age of the person, their race, their gender and their religiosity (Grove, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006; Schope, 2002). While research shows that men and women are coming out at earlier ages (Grove et al., 2006), the younger a person is, the more vulnerable they are because they lack both personal power in society and adequate support systems and are still highly dependent on their families of origin (Schope, 2002). Willoughby et al

(2006), indicate that seeking validation from family is critical for identity formation and the way in which the family reacts to and copes with the LGBT person's disclosure will likely influence the way the individual perceives herself or himself. Race and gender are significant because, as noted previously, these individuals are likely to experience prejudice and discrimination on multiple levels. Grove et al. (2006) report that Asians and Pacific Islanders as well as African American women and men are least likely to be "out," while women tend to begin the process later than men.

Regarding religiosity, more research needs to be done but some studies have indicated that religiosity is related to homophobia and can impact the consideration of openly identifying oneself as gay or lesbian. Fundamentalist or conservative religions are related to homophobic attitudes and behaviors and force gay adherents to these traditions to make very difficult decisions. Unfortunately, many gay men and lesbians decide to abandon their religious affiliations in their desire to "come out of the closet." One recent study showed that while 92% of lesbians had some form of religious affiliation as a child, only 34% of that same group currently had such an affiliation (Schope, 2002, pp. 7-8)

While the temptation for lesbians and gay men to remain closeted is significant given societal climate and the significant risks involved in disclosure, there is also risk in remaining closeted. Harper and Schneider (2003) report that the stress of remaining in hiding is akin to a minefield requiring constant vigilance to manage this potentially "explosive" double life, "...some people report finding it so stressful that they become introverted and lose their spontaneity for fear of slipping and inadvertently revealing their sexual orientation" (Harper & Schneider, 2003, p. 247). LaSala (2000) states that it is

possible that if a lesbian or gay man stays in the closet, psychological maturity may never be achieved. Additionally, outside pressure can be placed on the lesbian and gay individual to “come out.” Implications that individuals who choose not to are disempowered or dishonest and messages from some segments of lesbian and gay political activist movements can leave some to feel as if they have “...no moral alternative BUT to come out” (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 146).

Once the decision has been made to disclose, studies indicate that “coming out,” in and of itself, can trigger mental health problems (McMillan, 2006) and force the individual to “...reassess their lives in a whole host of everyday settings” (Cowie & Rivers, 2000, p. 507). However, there are also positive consequences. McDonald’s (1982) research concluded that most gay men achieve an integration of feelings and behavior that result in a positive gay identity. It has been previously noted that researchers such as Coleman (1982) and others consistently indicate that coming out to significant others is critical for identity formation. Hartman (2001) goes as far as saying that, “...coming out...is an enormously powerful personal and political act (p. 245),” while Beane (1981) likens the openly lesbian or gay individual to the Gestaltian self-supportive person

...who is able to see and accept others and the world as they are without needing to change them to feel okay about him or herself. It also means being able to recognize and accept that one is okay and loveable, even though different from others. (p. 224)

In concluding this examination of LGBT community issues, the following brief section will focus on the necessity for continued integration of the cultural needs of LGBT people into a therapeutic multicultural framework and will include

recommendations for how to improve counselor education programs so that they reflect an increased sensitivity to LGBT spiritual issues.

Following the lead of researchers such as Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), Israel and Selvidge (2003) make recommendations for LGBT multicultural competence in three areas: Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills:

Knowledge: In addition to being knowledgeable about their sociopolitical history, bias in assessment and mental health services and diversity within identified groups and identity development, it is also important that the counselor have knowledge of LGBT community support services, which include community groups, social organizations, gay-affirming churches, healthcare options, etc.

Attitudes: Counselors are encouraged to examine their own history, views, stereotypes and biases surrounding the LGBT community.

Skills: The ability to accurately assess a client within their cultural context, provide interventions tailored toward sexual identity development and advocacy skills would enable a therapist to promote institutional, legislative, and societal change.

Professional scales/instruments are also being created to assist practitioners in assessing counselor competency and cultural awareness (Bidell, 2005; Crisp, 2006).

While this aspect of LGBT-affirmative therapy is still in its infancy, two scales already exist. They are the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale (SOCCS) and the Gay Affirmative Practice Scale (GAPS). Scales such as these provide a critical “look in the mirror” for the counselor or therapist, and can often be a starting point in expanding their proficiency in working with lesbians and gay men.

Finally, Matthews (2005) has made recommendations to improve counselor education programs with respect to LGBT issues and concerns. As opposed to a specific course, his approach calls for an infusion of LGBT training throughout the entire curriculum including the core counseling areas of:

- Professional Identity
- Social and Cultural Diversity
- Human Growth and Development
- Career Development
- Helping Relationships
- Group Work
- Assessment
- Research and Program Evaluation

The author concludes that

Perhaps most critical, it is important to create an environment that is open and safe for discussion. Trainees have to feel safe and accepted in order to talk about these issues and to struggle with them. Students will take their cues from faculty, so such discussions should occur early in and throughout students' programs. It is important to respect the values that students come in with while also challenging them to examine the impact those values might have on their work with clients. (Matthews, 2005, p. 179)

Spirituality and Counseling

To better understand how clinicians can assist gay men from conservative Christian backgrounds, it is important to understand both the historical relationship between

spirituality and the counseling profession as well as the often times tense relationship between the LGBT community and the church.

Robin Powers (2005) reviewed the relationship between counseling and spirituality using the PsycINFO data base, searching all the way back to 1840. She reports a steady and consistent rise in the incidence of articles, books, chapters and dissertations dealing with both spirituality and counseling. In addition to scholarship, some of the significant people and factors of the 20th century that she highlights are:

- The psychologist William James and his lectures on The Variations of Religious Experience
- Abraham Maslow whose Hierarchy of Needs included a spiritual dimension
- The founding of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology in 1961 and the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (JTP) in 1969
- The founding of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values (ASERVIC) in Counseling in 1993
- The rise of the fourth force of psychology: multiculturalism, and the inclusion of spiritual issues into multicultural counseling

The literature regarding spirituality and counseling suggests many clients now expect an open exploration of their spirituality as part of their therapy. “Many people who come for counseling today bring with them a spiritual or religious worldview of some kind...they expect counselors and therapists to understand and include their worldviews in the clinical process” (Morgan, 2007, p. 18). Studies indicate that 96% of Americans now claim to believe in God. An examination of one specific time period,

1994 to late 1998, showed the number of Americans feeling a need to experience spiritual growth rose from 54 to 82%. Additionally, 81% of respondents in a 1992 Gallup poll preferred some integration of their beliefs and values into the counseling process and two-thirds of the respondents stated that when faced with a serious problem in life, they would prefer to be counseled by someone who personally holds spiritual values and beliefs (Morgan, 2007). Clearly, American culture with its history and roots in Christianity is speaking to a need for a spiritual connection. A review of the literature further indicates that the counseling community is beginning to embrace the fact that many clients desire an infusion of religion and spirituality. Most counselors support the principle of expanding multicultural training to include spiritual and religious aspects of diversity, and clinicians should be able to respond sensitively to the spiritual concerns that arise in therapy (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006; Steen, et al., 2006, Walker et al., 2004; Weld & Eriksen, 2007).

A potential difficulty, however, is that studies indicate that the use of spiritual interventions in counseling tends to correlate with the clinician's personal religious attitudes and behaviors as well as with their level of training in religious issues (Walker et al., 2005). This is problematic because other studies confirm that the religious heritage of the psychotherapists as well as their current level of church affiliation and commitment to religious practice contrasts sharply with the general U.S. population (Walker et al., 2005). Secondly, while a majority of psychotherapists claim that spirituality is important to them, as a group, they engage in spiritual practices less frequently than the two thirds of Americans who integrate spiritual practices into their lives daily (Walker et al., 2005).

Coinciding with the increased attention to and demand for inclusion of spirituality in the counseling office, counselor education programs are increasingly scrutinized in regards to religious and spiritual issues and are called upon to offer expanded training (Hage et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2004; Young et al., 2007).

Hage et al. (2006) report that, in a 2002 study, 78% of counselor education programs had no specific course that addressed spirituality and religion and that, in a separate 1995 study, only 53% of CACREP-accredited programs reported that religion was incorporated into the curricula and 67% said that the issue was included in practica. Walker et al. (2004) specifically suggest that

...Additional training, when offered, should address how to make appropriate use of one's own religious and spiritual experience when integrating religion and spirituality into counseling, as well as training regarding clients' religious backgrounds and the appropriateness of various religious and spiritual interventions with clients from differing religious backgrounds. (p. 77)

Young et al. (2007) highlight five specific considerations based on their survey of 505 American Counseling Association (ACA) members. First, the need to further develop curriculum and training guidelines is evident. Second, they issued a call for research that demonstrates how clinicians can objectively evaluate the role of spirituality in clients' issues. Third, there is a need to move this topic from a trend to a codified area of research. Fourth, there is a need to systematically investigate ASERVIC's nine competencies. And fifth, there is a need for greater dialogue in the professional literature as to how different practitioners are actually working with spiritual and religious issues.

Hall, Dixon, and Mauzey (2004) report the creation of a teaching model for a course in spirituality and counseling designed to help students:

- a. Increase their confidence in addressing spiritual issues
- b. Understand how addressing spiritual issues is helpful to clients
- c. Increase awareness of their reactions to clients whose spiritual values are different from their own
- d. Assess their ability to avoid imposing their own values on their clients

Finally, Hage et al. (2006) recommend the incorporation of spiritual and religious diversity into multicultural training, providing appropriate supervision to enhance spirituality competency and expanding awareness about the distinct contribution of spirituality and religiosity to health and well-being.

Having reviewed the literature on the history and current trends between spirituality and the counseling profession, the literature review will now examine the relationship between spirituality and the LGBT community.

Spirituality and the LGBT Community

Much like the counseling profession, the LGBT community has a unique relationship with spirituality. While often a source of personal strength and inspiration, spirituality – specifically conservative religion and conservative faith traditions – can also be a point of significant pain, struggle and oppression. The focus of my literature review for this section will be on conservative *Christianity* specifically and how it has impacted the homosexual community.

There are seven significant references to homosexuality in the Christian Bible: three in the Old Testament and four in the New Testament (Rogers, 2009). While conservative Christians interpret these specifically as teaching that homosexuality is abnormal and therefore a sin against God, this interpretation is by no means universal within the larger Christian community (Wink, 1999).

While some conservative Christians are blatant in their discrimination against homosexuals, the issue is often far more nuanced. It is a widespread belief that homosexuality is a choice, a sinful behavior or impulse and while the Christian church is called on to love all people, the embracing of the homosexual lifestyle or the engaging in homosexual behavior is strictly prohibited. This tension is evidenced in the precept many conservative Christians adhere to that states, “Love the sinner, hate the sin” (Bassett, Kirnan, Hill, & Schultz, 2005). Conservative Christian ministers and leaders teach and believe that one can truly love and care for an individual, yet simultaneously disregard their intrinsic identity, denounce their behavior and even, at times, justify discriminating against them. Bassett et al. created a questionnaire titled the Sexual Orientation and Practices Scale (SOAP) and administered it to students at a Christian liberal arts university. Findings indicated that religious fundamentalism predicted homonegativism and for some Christians, the distinction in the value between homosexual persons and homosexual behavior seemed to matter. For others, homosexual people and behaviors are the same, whether indicating rejecting or accepting.

In his article entitled *Scriptural Perspectives on Homosexuality and Sexual Identity* (2005), published in the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Robert Gagnon posits

that Christians “must not derive their identity” from their sexual orientation, he describes homosexual behavior as “...impulses and desires for things that God forbids (p. 298),” while building a larger argument that unlike race and a person’s ancestry, homosexual orientation and behavior is a choice. He further states,

In a sexual bond between persons of the same sex, the extremes of one’s sex are not moderated and true gaps are not filled. It is this reality that contributes markedly to the disproportionately high rate of problems associated with homosexual practice. (p. 300)

He goes on to offer high numbers of sex partners, high rates of sexually transmitted disease, an absence of long-term relationships and a high incidence of major depression and substance abuse, as proof of his contention (Gagnon, 2005). While many will find these specific comments and the broader ideology distasteful, it bears emphasizing again that many Christians do not agree with this viewpoint.

Many Christians find themselves “caught in the middle.” James Zahniser and Craig Boyd (2008) write, “...there is a growing *muddled middle* of people who do not necessarily consider homosexuality to be deviant, but who are not certain that answers to our current dilemmas should include gay marriage and ordination” (p. 215). While still not embracing the LGBT community, the authors call for elevating compassion over judgment, listening to the stories of gay men and lesbians and “...respectfully and sensitively seeking greater familiarity with the life narratives of gay and lesbian persons...” (p. 220).

Finally, there are long-standing Christian sects and faith traditions that have been and continue to be open and welcoming to the lesbian and gay community. Rogers (2009) lists several of these as the Metropolitan Community Churches, the Unitarian

Universalist Association, United Church of Christ, large sections of the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the American Baptist Churches USA and the United Methodist Church.

For LGBT individuals who have come out of conservative Christian environments, it is not as simple as suggesting that they walk away from a faith tradition that can be so harsh and judgmental toward them. This unique juxtaposition creates a deeply personal dissonance that "...can lead either to emotional growth, or if unsuccessfully resolved, to despair" (Roseborough, 2006, p. 51).

However, it's not all bad news. There is an increasing body of literature reporting that LGBT people are successfully resolving the aforementioned dissonance and are creating healthy paradigms that synthesize their sexuality and their spirituality. The next section will highlight several examples of the emergence of a healthy gay spirituality.

In a 2003 study, Andrew K.T. Yip polled 565 LGBT individuals about their spiritual beliefs and practices. Yip discovered that an overwhelming majority of them found their sexuality compatible with their Christian faith, at least 80% perceived God to be genderless and further viewed God as concerned for love and justice and accepting of all peoples. The majority of respondents acknowledged both the divine and human nature of Christ and that the Bible, despite its age, is still relevant to everyday life (Yip, 2003).

Traditionally dark and painful experiences for lesbians and gays are now being reframed through a spiritual paradigm and seen as healing and liberating. One example of this is through crafting narratives that demonstrate "...their counter-rejection of the

institutionalized Church as their moral arbiter” (Yip, 1999, p. 47; Empereur, 2007; Shallenberger, 1996; Walton, 2006). In other words, individual lesbian and gay Christians are rejecting a church that has rejected them, acknowledging that they too can judge what is moral and what is not. Walton (2006) states,

I suggest that identity integration can result *in spite of* anti-gay or anti-Christian biases expressed by significant or generalized others...I add that identity integration could also result *because of* such biases, as a kind of defiance against those who disapprove of people who subscribe to Christianity while at the same time identifying as gay...(p. 15)

In his 1996 study, David Shallenberger found that a majority of his respondents, while retaining an active spiritual life, shifted from the traditional and conservative religions of their childhood to ones that allowed and welcomed them to express themselves and not hide their sexual identities. These shifts were, in essence, forced by the judgments and negative attitudes of the institutions that were a part of their early religious training because they rejected a core part of who they were as individuals (Shallenberger, 1996).

It is ironic that the spiritual leaders and laity of this age seem to be finding their greatest strength and liberation in the most painful aspects of being an oppressed and misunderstood minority group (Empereur, 2007). Certainly, this is not a new concept to African Americans and other marginalized people of faith. “Being gay or lesbian places one at the edges of society; being spiritually-focused as well may intensify that marginalization. It is interesting to note that at these borderlands, a rich culture is developing” (Shallenberger, 1996, p. 211).

It is clear from the preceding section that both the counseling profession and the LGBT community have had their own respective, historical spiritual journeys. The

literature indicates that while gays and lesbians from Conservative Christian backgrounds have historically experienced painful personal internal and external negotiations, there are more spiritual options available to them today. However, the experiences of both struggle and triumph in this area are not documented by any systematic research.

This final section of the literature review will address the importance of integrating spirituality and gay affirmative-approaches to therapy.

The LGBT Community, Spirituality and Counseling

Thus far, this literature review has covered research and publications regarding the key issues and current concerns surrounding the LGBT community with the last section examining the relationship between spirituality and counseling as well as spirituality within the LGBT community. The current section will begin with a review of gay-affirmative counseling approaches and then transition into a review of the smaller proportion of literature dealing with the unique intersection of all three areas: spirituality, counseling and gay men.

It is now widely known that, until the early 1970's, the mental health professions considered homosexuality a mental illness (LaSala, 2000). Beliefs, specifically coming from the psychoanalytic traditions, indicated that homosexuality was a perversion, that it was evidence of psychopathology. One analyst, Edmund Bergler is quoted as saying, "...homosexuals are essentially disagreeable people...[displaying] a mixture of superciliousness, false aggression and whimpering...subservient when confronted with a stronger person, merciless when in power, unscrupulous about trampling on a weaker person" (Mair & Izzard, 2001, p. 476).

In addition to the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness, the first developmental theories specifically addressing the gay community were published. These critical early theories not only informed clinicians and counselor educators as to the development of lesbians and gay men, but also made recommendations as to treatment.

In 1979, Vivienne C. Cass published her seminal work “Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model,” highlighting the distance that the mental health profession had traveled in viewing the LGBT community with dignity and respect. Cass suggested six stages of development that lesbian and gay individuals move through in order to acquire a fully integrated sexual identity: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis. She noted, much like Coleman, that there are individual variations in how each person will experience this process and that no one model can fully explain the unique aspects of an individual. Nevertheless, it served the research and therapeutic community by giving them a foundation from which to proceed. Cass’ work was essentially the first and it is virtually impossible to read an article today on LGBT issues without seeing her work cited. It has been examined and re-examined, and perhaps most importantly, expanded on by later theorists. Troiden is one such theorist. His model consists of four stages and views identity formation through the backdrop of stigma (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). His stages are: Sensitization, Identity Confusion, Identity Assumption, and Commitment. Regardless of the particular model, these theories have provided the ground work from which treatment standards, therapeutic orientations,

techniques and interventions can be derived. However, the models themselves are generalized and often linear in their approach; thus more comprehensive treatment standards were needed.

In addition to attention to LGBT identity development, several helping organizations have now published treatment guidelines and standards, from which their members are expected to operate. The American Psychological Association's Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Clients (2000), is organized into four sections: Attitudes toward Homosexuality and Bisexuality, Relationships and Families, Issues of Diversity, and Education. The goals of these guidelines are to "...provide practitioners with (1) a frame of reference for the treatment of lesbian, gay and bisexual clients, and (2) basic information and further references in the areas of assessment, intervention, identity, relationships and the education and training of psychologists" (APA, 2000, p. 1). Likewise, the Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, a division of the American Counseling Association, has published Competencies for Counseling, covering areas such as Human Growth and Development, Social and Cultural Foundations, Helping Relationships, Group Work and Career and Lifestyle Development (ALGBTIC, n.d.).

While some authors have provided policies identifying best practices and competencies, other authors have chosen to describe more in depth clinical treatment processes and protocols unique to LGBT individuals.

Ritter and Terndrup (2002), in their Handbook of Affirmative Psychotherapy with Lesbians and Gay Men, state their belief that clinicians of all sexual orientations can

work effectively with sexual minorities and in fact, what is most important are the basic psychodynamic elements of integrity, knowledge, warmth, and genuineness that are key to all healthy therapeutic alliances. However, they also note that it is “crucial” that the clinician understands the degree to which heterosexism in our society shapes the lives of LGBT individuals and that clinicians must be willing to examine their own internal conceptions of homosexuality, identity, prejudice, etc. Mair and Izzard (2001) view gay-affirmative therapeutic approaches through the dual lenses of *implicit* gay affirmation and *active* gay affirmation. Implicit affirmation is described as operating from a premise that homosexuality is not wrong and that homophobia is at the core of the person’s struggle in the world. However, it does not necessitate the use of gay-affirmative interventions. Active affirmation calls for the safety of the relationship to be established right from the beginning, with the clinician making clear her or his intention to explore gay sexuality and acknowledging the difficulties of accepting a gay identity, which may or may not include the therapist’s disclosure of her or his own sexual orientation.

Despite the existence of treatment guidelines and competencies and philosophical discussions regarding therapeutic approaches, there is no one systematic approach unique to homosexual individuals (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). However suggestions for modified or expanded approaches based upon existing treatment modalities do exist. Ritter and Terndrup outline a unique phase-specific approach which combines four identity formation stage models with psychotherapeutic interventions for each stage. Maeve Malley (2002) suggests the systemic therapy approach, which views behavior as relational in nature and stresses the importance of the individual’s context. Malley states,

Increasingly...systemic psychotherapy seems well-placed to be considered as a 'socially conscious' form of applied psychology – one which attaches considerable importance to issues of difference and inequality, context and relationship, rather than having the client's 'internal world' as its sole focus. (p. 238)

Michael LaSala (2000) examines the application of family therapy with lesbian and gay clients. Despite the strong likelihood of significant stress in “coming out” to family members, LaSala states that 60-77% of gay men and lesbians decide to come out to their parents, making the importance of and need for gay-affirming family therapy self-evident.

These specialized approaches assist the clinician in understanding the LGBT client as an individual from a unique culture. They further serve the larger therapeutic community by encouraging them the continued development of treatment approaches specifically tailored to LGBT individuals and families.

The literature has documented the progression of the mental health field's conceptualization and treatment of lesbians and gays. Beginning with unfair characterizations and stereotypes to inaccurate and damaging clinical classifications, the field eventually began to sensitize itself to the needs of the homosexual community. Through early developmental models, to the publication of treatment standards and, finally, to a growing body of literature speaking directly to the interventions and techniques, the majority of the counseling profession is now seriously addressing the needs of the gay individual. However, one significant exception to this is found when counseling, homosexuality and spirituality all converge.

Without question, the most controversial therapeutic issue in the spiritually-oriented treatment of LGBT clients today is “reparative” or “conversion therapy,” which posits that an individual’s homosexual orientation can be changed. Advocates of this approach, influenced both by conservative and fundamentalist religious beliefs as well as outdated psychoanalytic perspectives, seek to change homosexual orientation to heterosexual orientation (Cates, 2007; Jenkins & Johnston, 2004; Shidlo et al., 2001). This approach has been met with significant skepticism within the professional helping community. An American Psychological Association publication entitled *Just the Facts* (APA, 2008), endorsed by thirteen major medical and mental health organizations, specifically states that homosexuality is not abnormal and that attempts to change a person’s sexual orientation can be harmful. Marshall Forstein (2004), in the *British Medical Journal*, labels sexual orientation change therapy as *pseudoscience* and states, “Society must not be allowed to use pseudoscience to justify controls on the behavior and interpersonal relationships of those who are same-sex oriented” (p. E288). Additionally, the APA in 1997 published a resolution affirming that homosexuality is not a disorder and that clients have a right to be treated with respect and dignity (APA, 1997) and the American Counseling Association published its official interpretation of their ethics committee which concluded that the treatment of homosexuality in therapy as abnormal is in opposition to the ACA (ACA, 2006).

Despite all of this, a minority of clinicians and educators continue to insist that reparative therapy is effective and essential. Malony (2005) states,

...There are ample reports of persons who have been redeemed from homosexuality and now exist in celibate or heterosexual

relationships...the vast majority of those who have experienced such counseling report their day-to-day life is fulfilling and that they feel they are living more in accord with the will of God for human life. (p. 363)

He later states that "...the actual practice of homosexuality is learned..." (p. 364) and "...I perceive homosexual behavior to be a habit problem" (p. 365).

While there is no question that controversy will continue to surround treatment issues for LGBT persons (particularly when spirituality is also infused), it is important to be reminded that studies show that there is no significant difference in the psychological well-being and psychological functioning between homosexuals and heterosexuals (Murphy et al., 2002). Nonetheless, the research also indicates that LGBT people do have specific concerns that can negatively impact their community such as "coming out," HIV/AIDS, discrimination and violence, depression, anxiety, etc. (Murphy et al., 2002).

The unfortunate reality is that the unique intersection of these three major areas (LGBT community, spirituality and counseling) can sometimes result in deep pain and isolation. Christian LGBT individuals often feel marginalized by both their cultural and spiritual communities and this can lead to damaging secrecy, isolation, and stigma (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005).

The tension is obvious: these individuals feel forced to choose between their spiritual and their personal integrity, often with troublesome consequences. "This struggle between sexuality and religion has mental health consequences. Attempts at reconciling these identities are associated with depression, guilt, shame, suicidal ideation and difficulty accepting homosexuality (Heermann et al., 2007, p. 713). The literature indicates that for some LGBT individuals, the connection of their sexual identity, their

need for spirituality in their lives, and the difficult mental health issues that arise is inescapable (Buchanan et al., 2001; Heermann et al., 2007; Nelson, 1982; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989).

Feeling forced to have to choose between their sexuality and their spirituality is indeed the source of great anguish, but can also be the entry point for affirmative counseling and therapy that need not take sides but can offer solutions and collapse a polarity that from the client's perspective, seems hopeless (Ritter & O'Neill, 1989).

Heermann et al. (2007) offer some general, preliminary guidelines in working with spiritually-inclined LGBT people: First, the therapist must be acutely aware of her or his own biases toward sexual minorities and exploring their own religion for messages regarding homosexuality, to avoid negative countertransference. Second, in acknowledging the unique pressures placed upon LGBT people, therapists should avoid focusing excessively on sexual orientation. Third, clinicians should assess clients for the meaning of spirituality and religion in their lives. Fourth, counselors can help clients to find safe places to explore spirituality and religion. This last recommendation is critical as the power of community is a significant piece that spiritually-oriented LGBT individuals are at risk of losing if they feel they need to sacrifice their presence in churches, synagogues and corporate places of faith (Nelson, 1982).

With these general recommendations in mind, the literature seems to espouse two approaches: dealing with the intrapersonal conflict and then dealing with the larger interpersonal issues.

It is important for therapists to help clients see that splitting their spiritual and sexual selves is not only difficult, but inadvisable (Buchanan et al., 2001). The key is healthy internal integration before attempting to reconcile external polarities. Punton (2008) views this dilemma through Adlerian lenses:

In Adler's view the human being is holistic, indivisible – unable to be divided. Holism for Adlerians also describes the purposive nature of the individual and his or her place as one of humankind...a creative whole, functioning within a social context with clear intention toward the future. (p. 165)

With adequate knowledge of the tensions these unique lesbian and gay individuals are experiencing, the therapist can assist the client in achieving the first step: interpersonal integration of their sexuality and their spirituality (Helminiak, 2008, *quoted by* Punton, 2008). To this, Ritter and O'Neill (1989) add to this, three recommendations.

1. Recasting Images: Clients can be empowered to reject images of themselves as dark and spiritually bankrupt and instead, recast images of themselves as rich with spiritual receptivity and inheritors of a sacred tradition.
2. Reframing Loss: While the sense of loss for spiritually-oriented LGBT individuals can be profound, highlighting and engendering the more life-affirming *responses* at each of these losses can assist them in “gaining a spirit of generativity and integrity,” fully understanding the strength they possess.
3. Facilitating a Spiritual Path: Spiritual re-birth can often be experienced by discovering a path that leads LGBT people to more gay-affirming faith traditions as well as articulating their own theology and spirituality.

This final point begins the transition from intrapersonal to interpersonal. Many LGBT individuals experience freedom by rejecting oppressive faith traditions and religious traditions that display no tolerance for them and instead, choose alternate paths toward religious and spiritual bodies that facilitate the integration of their sexual and spirituality. Buchanan et al., (2001 *quoting* Barret & Barzan, 1996) refer to this as a way of being liberated by bigotry: "...[a] liberation that occurs after being rejected from traditional religious organizations. Being freed from this external authority, gays and lesbians are available to 'reflect on and integrate their own life experiences, thereby creating their own personal and communal spirituality'" (p. 441).

While there are a minority of clinicians that have chosen to integrate spirituality and counseling in a way that seems harmful to the lesbian and gay man, the literature seems to be indicating that the growing attention that counselors are giving to gay spirituality is both affirming and effective. With a growing body of evidence indicating that spirituality and religious practice is associated with physical and mental health and well-being (Wiggins-Frame, Uphold, Shehan, & Reid, 2005), it is essential for the mental health profession to assist lesbian and gay clients who desire to find a healthy balance between their sexuality and their spirituality.

Summary

This literature review has examined two critical subject areas. The first area provided definitions for the terms heterosexism and homophobia and broadened into a discussion of contemporary issues in the LGBT community including prejudice and

discrimination, stress, internalized homophobia and shame and the “coming out” phenomenon.

The second area examined the history of spirituality within the counseling field highlighting the growing desire of clients to discuss their own spiritual concerns. It also reviewed the literature around the relationship the LGBT community has had with spirituality including the tense history between homosexuals and conservative religious traditions as well as a growing understanding of gay spirituality and how the aforementioned tensions are being used as the very foundation for a healthy spiritual life.

The third section examined the unique triadic intersection of the LGBT community, spirituality, and counseling, reviewing first the very conceptualization of gay-affirmative counseling and the more specialized spiritually-oriented gay affirmative counseling. It also critiqued the reparative or conversion therapy movement, primarily utilized by conservative Christian clinicians.

This extensive literature review both highlights the myriad of critical issues and concerns that surround gay men while also making clear that there has been very little literature published *specifically* addressing the “coming out” experiences of gay men with a conservative Christian background and the unique struggles and challenges they face as spiritually-oriented individuals.

The next chapter will outline my proposed research approach and methodology.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

A review of the literature revealed many issues unique to the LGBT community, the historic tensions between conservative faith traditions and lesbian and gay peoples and the discussion of integrating spirituality into the counseling profession have been examined, assessed and reported. However, between the threads of these significant issues exists a smaller group of individuals who have emerged from a world of conservative faith traditions that are often at odds with their true sexual identity. Individuals who comprise this unique minority people group experience profound turmoil as often, they feel they do not have a “home” in either the LGBT or Christian communities. It is these individuals and their unique experiences that this research seeks to understand.

In the following pages, I will outline the approach utilized in this research and the appropriate steps conducive to that research tradition that worked to ensure a sound methodology and trustworthy results.

The Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as: “...any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 17). Rather, it focuses on the lives, stories and lived experiences of people, as observed in their natural settings. The qualitative approach is often embraced by the social and behavioral sciences and is indicated when the

researcher seeks to understand the dimensions of a unique human phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Creswell (2007) suggests that several common characteristics of qualitative research are:

- Natural setting: data is most often collected in the field where the issue or phenomenon is being experienced.
- Researcher as key instrument: rather than relying on a questionnaire or instrument developed by others, the qualitative researchers themselves collect and interact with the data.
- Multiple sources of data: data can include interviews, observations and documents from many sources.
- Inductive data analysis: working back and forth with emerging themes and patterns, researchers build from the bottom-up.
- Participants' meanings: the researcher's primary focus must be on the meanings that the participants hold about the problem or issue.
- Emergent design: all phases of the process may change after the researcher enters the field. Qualitative design is appropriately flexible to allow for these shifts.
- Theoretical lens: the researcher views and often organizes the study by identifying the historical, political, cultural and social context of the issue at hand.
- Interpretive inquiry: researchers in this approach are expected to offer their interpretations of the data.

- Holistic account: by reporting multiple perspectives and identifying the many factors surrounding a situation, the researcher seeks to develop a "...complex picture of the problem or issue under study" (p. 39).

Lincoln and Denzin (2008) suggest that in addition to a unique focus on the individual's point of view within their own natural context, a key difference between qualitative and quantitative research is also philosophical. Breaking away from the positivist traditions of the physical sciences, qualitative researchers reflect postpositivist and postmodern sensibilities by valuing alternative research methods and embracing multiple and subjective realities.

Finally, Maxwell (1996) concludes that qualitative research possesses an advantage in three ways:

1. Qualitative research generates results and theories that are understandable and experientially credible both to the people being studied as well as others.
2. Rather than simply assessing the relative value of a program or product, qualitative research can *improve existing practice* by gaining deeper understanding of the process and the people involved.
3. Qualitative research allows for critical collaboration between practitioners and research participants -- an empowering experience that could lead to "real world" change.

Phenomenological Research

Phenomenology is rooted in the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who believed that science needed to restore its connection to people and the deeper

human issues (Morrisette, 1999). Creswell (2007) expands on the origins of phenomenological research by quoting Stewart and Mickunas (1990) who emphasize that by returning to the traditional tasks of philosophy, research is strengthened because it works to suspend all judgments about what is real (the biases and presuppositions of researchers) and rather allows reality to be defined by the research participants' own unique experience of it, thus collapsing the subject-object dichotomy. Reality, from a phenomenological perspective then, is "...only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (p. 59).

Phenomenological methods are scientific because they are methodical, systematic, critical, general and potentially intersubjective (Wertz, 2005). However, the intent of phenomenological research is not to test a hypothesis but rather to ask a question and allow the data surrounding the phenomenon to speak for themselves (Morrisette, 1999). Ultimately, the purpose of this unique research design is to produce "clear, precise and systematic descriptions of the meaning..." of the phenomenon being examined (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45).

The Constructivist Tradition

Consistent with principles in both the qualitative approach and phenomenological research practice, the constructivist tradition is both interpretive and reflexive, meaning that the data and resulting theory will be viewed as an interpretation that has evolved from the unique interaction between the researcher and the research subjects (Charmaz, 2006). "Epistemologically, constructivism emphasizes the subjective interrelationship between the researcher and participant and the co-construction of meaning. Researchers,

in their ‘humanness’ are part of the research endeavor rather than objective observers” (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006b, p. 2).

This researcher holds that the qualitative approach with its emphasis on the lived experiences of its participants in their natural setting, the phenomenological research design with its precise focus on the unique phenomenon experienced by the participants themselves and the constructivist tradition which readily acknowledges the reflexive and interpretive interactive role that the researcher plays with the subjects, made these approaches entirely appropriate for this study.

The preceding pages have briefly established the theoretical bases of the qualitative – and more specifically – the phenomenological traditions. The following pages will describe the specific methodology, consistent with these research traditions, utilizing a modified format suggested by Moustakas (1994) and will appear as follows:

1. Central Research Question and Sub-Questions: Discovery of topic and question rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance
2. The Role of the Researcher: Disclosing the background and the responsibilities of the researcher
3. Population: Construct a set of criteria to locate appropriate research participants
4. Ethical Considerations: Provide participants with instructions on the nature and purpose of the investigation, developing an agreement that includes: informed consent, insuring confidentiality, and delineating the responsibilities of the researcher and participants consistent with ethical principles of research

5. Interview Questions: Develop a set of questions or topics to guide the interview process
6. Data Collection: Conducting and recording lengthy interviews and follow-up interviews
7. Data Analysis: Organizing and analyzing the data to facilitate development of individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences
8. Ensuring Trustworthiness: Specific steps taken to address issues of trustworthiness and threats to validity

Methodology

Central Research Question and Sub-Questions

As mentioned previously, rather than being guided by a hypothesis, qualitative research is driven by a central research question to be explored. Qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving and non-directional (Creswell, 2007). The central research question is designed to guide the research from beginning to end and seeks to reveal the essences of human experience; it seeks to uncover the qualitative factors in behavior and experience; it engages the total self of the participant; it avoids predicting or determining causal relationships and it is illuminated through rich description and vivid renderings of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Further, according to Creswell (2007), the nature of the research question can be exploratory (investigating the phenomenon),

explanatory (explaining the patterns related to the phenomenon), descriptive (describing the phenomenon) or emancipatory (engaging in social action about the phenomenon).

The central research question posed for this study was: “What is the essence of the experience of “coming out” for gay men from conservative Christian backgrounds?” At this stage in the research, “coming out” will be generally defined as a gay man acknowledging to himself and others his homosexual orientation.

Several sub-questions are:

“How did your Christian background impact you as a gay man?”

“What were the circumstances surrounding your decision to “come out?”

“Describe your relationship with your faith community since coming out.”

The Role of the Researcher

Moustakas (1994) specifically states that the research question should be rooted in autobiographical meanings and values and should have social implications. He elaborates by saying: “In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus” (p. 104). Regarding this proposed study, the researcher, in addition to being an academician and psychotherapist, is also a gay man who was raised in a conservative Christian environment. Accordingly, the researcher is not only uniquely motivated by personal history but is also uniquely qualified to conduct this particular study. However, as mentioned previously, phenomenological research strives to identify the *true essence*

or meaning of the phenomenon being studied and the meaning those who are experiencing it, attribute to it.

Recognizing the innate presence of the subjective element in all research, phenomenologists believe that in preparation for the study, each researcher has an obligation to address potential biases and assumptions thereby producing the most reliable data possible. This process is known as the “epoche” and it has at least two significant steps: self-examination and “bracketing” (Mortari, 2008; Wertz, 2005; Finlay, 2009).

Epoche

The “epoche,” a Greek word that means to stay away from or to abstain (Moustakas, 1994), is a charge to phenomenological researchers to consider and analyze their own lived experiences, beliefs, presuppositions and ideas that, while likely providing a passion for their research interests, can also skew their perceptions of the study at hand. This process is viewed as so critical to their research, that Mortari (2008) states “phenomenological researchers must put the epoche at the core of their research, as the most important epistemic imperative.” The epoche can include solitary reflection, journal writing, and, in this particular researcher’s case, actually submitting himself to the interview protocol and then analyzing the data. This process of discovery is then included in the researcher’s reporting of the data. The expectation is that the researcher will be made more aware of his own values and experiences surrounding the focus of study and that this new-found awareness will allow him to better account for potential biases. These biases will now be intentionally “bracketed.” Bracketing is not simply a

general disclosure or a standardized "...initial first step where subjective bias is acknowledged as part of the project to establish the rigor and validity of the research" (Finlay, 2009). But rather, it is an ongoing intentional decision to guard against outside influence and to strive, during each step of the data collection and analysis, to free oneself of anything other than the phenomena at hand. Finlay (2009), citing Ashworth (1996) suggests that the scope of the bracketing encompass not just the researcher's personal feelings and experiences but also broader scientific theory, knowledge and explanation as well as beliefs about the truth or falsity of participant claims.

Researcher's Disclosure Statement

I am 44 years old and I have been "out" as a gay man for approximately seven years. The decision to come out much later in life was heavily mitigated by my conservative Christian heritage which consistently taught that being lesbian or gay was a sin and subject to the discipline of the church and to punishment from God. Though my parents never espoused such rigid beliefs, I globalized the deeply held fear of being ostracized and condemned and concluded that no one could be trusted with this information. At 19, I was already being groomed for the clergy, under the mentorship of two ministers. I underwent leadership training and was given responsibilities in the local church which included preaching, pastoral visitation and care and directing the young adult programs. By the age of 27, I decided I would pursue a career in ministry and attended seminary. For many years after graduation, I served as a local church pastor, all the while keeping my sexual identity a secret. It was not until my mid 30's that I entered therapy in the hopes of understanding who I was and to gain assistance in making hard

decisions that I knew would come. I eventually resigned my pastorate and began the long process of telling the truth to those closest to me. These lived experiences and my unique connection to both the LGBT and the conservative Christian worlds have obviously influenced my research interests.

As mentioned previously, as part of my preparation and involvement in the epoche process, I subjected myself to the same interview protocol I will be using with my research participants. The interview was conducted by a colleague who is also a licensed psychologist. The interview was audio recorded and later reviewed in its entirety by me. Several significant portions were analyzed and examined and my reflections follow.

Reflections on Self-Interview

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the interview was my recollection of the significant role shame played in my early conceptualizations of what it meant to be gay. Conceptualizations that were reinforced by the teachings of the churches I grew up in and the Evangelical subculture I was a part of. It never occurred to me as a young man that I could possibly be proud of, or accept my same-sex attraction. This was conveyed to me as unnatural and the result of a liberal godless lifestyle. The appropriate course of action laid out for me, based on my church's interpretation of the Bible, would be for me to confess this "sin" in my life, to renounce it, to seek God's healing and the accountability of those around me to keep me from falling into temptation. If I was fortunate, God would heal me and restore the heterosexual identity that I most certainly was born with and was intended to express. It is critical to keep in mind as a researcher, that participants in my study may not have, either been exposed to this harsh style of teaching

and acculturation, and/or that they may not have internalized it and allowed it such a significant place in their personal development.

The second theme that emerged from the interview was the very real experience of fear throughout my life – a fear that was accentuated when I began to “come out.” At the time that I finally embraced my identity as a gay man, I was still a pastor in a local conservative Christian church and was working for a conservative Christian liberal arts university. Had either of these institutions learned that I was gay, I could have quite possibly been terminated. This would have resulted, not just in economic hardship but also in the loss of my entire social support network. My friends and colleagues were a part of my faith tradition and a part of the institutions that I worked for. While fear and risk is always relative to the individual and can be experienced on many different levels, it is likely that some of my participants will not have experienced the threat of losing their jobs. However, they will have their own experiences of risk and fear and these need to be heard and understood as unique to them.

Finally, the third major theme to emerge was the manifestation of penitence and contrition. Both of these concepts come from conservative religious traditions and connote the idea of feeling remorseful and seeking amends for the wrongs one has committed. When I began to “come out” to those I trusted it was, like many in the LGBT community, often a painful and emotional experience. But additionally for me, friends told me later, that it felt like I was “confessing sin,” or seeking acceptance *despite* the wrongness of my condition. That in essence, I was apologizing for my gayness. Afterwards, I would appear to be more concerned about how the person was receiving the

information and how they were being impacted by it, rather than what state I was in or how I was being cared for. I believe this was not only an expression of the harmful teachings of my faith tradition, but indicative of a more deeply held belief I had that I was unacceptable as a gay man. In the interviews with my participants, I do not want to assume that they will hold these same harmful self-conceptions, nor that they will be as conflicted as I was. Conversely, I may hear experiences of discrimination and even violence that may surpass anything I have encountered.

My intention in this section was to explain the *epoche* process and to report on my own lived experiences as a gay man being raised in a conservative Christian environment. Moustakas (1994) states that the challenge is “...to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in the consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner.”

While personal disclosures about this researcher’s life are included here, an intentional decision was made to withhold information about the researcher’s sexual orientation or lived experiences to the participants during the interviews. While providing such details might have forged a connection or created an environment of trust for the participants, doing so was deemed unnecessary and held the potential of skewing the participants’ responses, resulting in biased data.

It is important to note that the unique role of the researcher in qualitative and phenomenological research is consistent with viewing *the individual as a research instrument*. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that because a person is responsive, adaptable and expansive, she or he is uniquely qualified as a research instrument. The

individual's ability to process data, grasp a holistic understanding of the issue and be available for clarification and summarization make qualitative research rich indeed.

Population

The most important criterion for selection was that each of the participants had experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Wertz, 2005). For this study, the criterion were:

1. A gay man...
2. who has a significant, formative background in a conservative Christian environment, and...
3. who has already "come out."

It was necessary to place age parameters on the desired research subjects due to inherent differences in lived experience between generations. Therefore, this research focused specifically on gay men born between 1970 and 1990.

Conservative Christian environments was defined as denominations or movements that are part of the Evangelical or Fundamentalist traditions such as, but not limited to: Pentecostals, Four Square, most Baptists and conservative branches of the Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. Also included would be major groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Roman Catholic Church (Mead, 1985).

"Coming out" was defined as "becoming aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others (Rasmussen, 2004).

Participants were selected through the assistance of professionals who were currently working with spiritually-oriented gay males as well as letters being sent to local gay-affirming religious bodies and LGBT community organizations. All potential research subjects who contacted this researcher were confirmed for their suitability for the research and provided with the basic information surrounding the project and answering any pertinent questions. Upon verification that the individual had met the research criteria, a consent form and a demographic information form was emailed to them directly.

Ethical Considerations

It is solely the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that ethical standards are in place, that confidentiality is maintained and that the fidelity of the research is preserved (Walker, 2007; Creswell, 2007).

Permission from the Oregon State University Human Subjects Committee was sought and all submission requirements were met. As a general rule, Creswell (2007) suggests that information submitted should include:

- The right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time
- Statement of the central purpose of the study and the procedures to be used in data collection
- Policies regarding the confidentiality of the participants
- A statement about the risks associated with participation in the study
- The expected benefits to accrue to the participants
- The signatures of participants

The student researcher personally responded to all potential research subjects, upon their initial voluntary contact, confirming their suitability for the research and providing them with the basic information outlined above, surrounding the project and answering any pertinent questions. Upon verification that the individual had met the research criteria, a consent form and a demographic information form was emailed to them directly.

Throughout the study the physical security of data gathered, including consent forms, field notes, tapes and transcripts was assured and upon completion of the study, all confidential information was destroyed (Walker, 2007).

Interview Questions

Polkinghorne (1989) differentiates the phenomenological research interview from the survey or questionnaire interview in that the latter is considered a stimulus-response interaction where the interview's question is the stimulus and the subject's answer is the response. "The phenomenological interview, in contrast, is conceived of as a discourse or conversation. It involves an interpersonal engagement in which subjects are encouraged to share with a researcher the details of their experience" (p. 49).

While Polkinghorne (1989) states that characteristically, the interviews are open-ended and unstructured, both Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) encourage the use of an interview protocol or guide. This researcher chose a combination of the two approaches by utilizing an interview protocol that includes several, standardized, open-ended questions that were asked of each participant in the same order. However, the

overall nature of the interviews remained flexible and allowed each participant to express themselves and elaborate in their own way.

The standard interview questions asked of all participants were as follows:

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. Approximately how long have you been “out” as a gay man?
3. Describe the spiritual or religious environment you were raised in.
4. Could you describe the circumstances surrounding you “coming out?”
5. What was it like to have the spiritual/religious beliefs that you had while coming to the realization that you were gay
6. What was it like to have had your spiritual or religious upbringing while you were “coming out?”
7. How did the process of “coming out” affect your spiritual/religious beliefs? Your religious affiliation?

Data Collection

Interviews were approximately 60 minutes and conducted face-to-face whenever possible. When physical distance did not permit this, phone interviews were conducted. Due to the sensitive nature of the material, the current cultural climate surrounding LGBT issues and the relative vulnerability of many within the LGBT community, the face-to-face interviews were conducted at a site approved by the participant and agreed upon by this researcher. However, it was assured that the site be relatively free from distraction and interruption. All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription. Field notes were also be utilized for later reference. Observation is an important factor

in phenomenological interviewing (Creswell, 2007; Wertz, 2005). Physical descriptions and awareness of the surroundings were included in an observational protocol included in the field notes. Critical to the interview as well, is the observation and awareness of the research participant and how the interview material is affecting him or her. Walker (2007) quoting Kavanagh and Ayres (1998) stresses "...the importance of assessing participants for signs of distress during research on sensitive topics and identifying strategies for minimizing discomfort" (p. 40). In the event that emotional follow-up support is indicated for the participant, resources were made available. It is also noteworthy that participation in such an interview can be an effective way for participants to better understand their experience through cathartic disclosure (Walker, 2007).

After conducting the first round of interviews, transcription of the recordings and textural and structural analysis, each of the participants was sent a copy of the textural and structural analyses for examination. Each participant was then contacted a second time. The purpose of this second interview was to clarify issues that arose out of the initial interviews. These subsequent contacts, also known as "member checking" (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; McWilliam et al., 2009; Ryndak, Storch, & Hoppey, 2008), also addressed issues of trustworthiness by ensuring that the researcher had an accurate understanding of what the participant was trying to convey.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the core stage of research efforts in phenomenological psychology. Its purpose is to derive from the collection of protocols, with their naïve descriptions to specific examples of the experience under consideration, a description of the essential features of that experience.

The researcher must glean from the examples an accurate description of their contents and the particular structural relationship that cohere the elements into a unified experience. (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 50)

After the individual interviews were conducted and transcribed they were read to grasp the expressions and meanings of the participants. Wertz (2005) emphasizes the importance of the researcher empathically connecting to the participants through the interview protocols. To do this, the researcher continues the bracketing process, leaving behind his own value judgments from an external frame of reference and instead, “...focuses on the meaning of the situation purely as it is given in the participant’s experience. This is the implementation of the phenomenological *epoche*.” *Epoche* is a Greek word which means to refrain from judgment and avoid the ordinary way of perceiving things (Moustakas, 1994). This essential concept lies at the heart of phenomenological research by highlighting the importance of casting aside prior knowledge and experiencing the phenomenon (through the words of the participants) from a fresh, un-biased and naïve perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

Upon a fresh reading of the transcripts of each of the interviews, a systematic approach to analyzing the data was employed. Moustakas (1994) presents a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method that was utilized. A brief description of the steps follows:

1. As mentioned above, in an attempt to acknowledge and then set aside the researcher’s own pre judgments and biases, a full description of the researcher’s own experience of the phenomenon is put forth.

2. While pouring over the transcripts of each participant, a list is developed of the significant statements made by the participants as to how they each have experienced the topic. This is known as *horizontalization* of the data. Each statement is treated with equal value and eventually, a list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements is amassed.
3. These significant statements are then grouped into larger units of information known as *meaning units* or themes.
4. A description will be written based on these themes, of “what” the participants experienced – what happened – using verbatim examples. This is known as the *textural description*.
5. Next, a description of “how” the experience happened. Here, the researcher reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. This is known as the *structural description*.
6. Finally, a composite of the textural and structural descriptions is written. This is known as the *essence* of the experience “...and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study. It is typically a long paragraph that tells the reader “what” the participants experienced with the phenomenon and “how” they experienced it” (Creswell, 2007).

Ensuring Trustworthiness

There is much discussion as to how qualitative research goes about applying the notion of validity. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that validity in phenomenological (qualitative) research must be approached from a broader perspective.

Researchers must persuade readers that the two types of inferences that they have made in reaching their findings are powerfully supported: (a) the transformation of the raw data into psychological expressions and (b) the synthesis of the transformed meaning units into a general structural description. (p. 57)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that the key issue is *trustworthiness*. Namely, can the researcher persuade his audience that the findings are worth paying attention to and worth taking account of? They have suggested the researcher ask herself or himself four questions:

1. How can one establish confidence in the “truth” of the findings? (Internal validity)
2. How can one determine the extent to which the findings have applicability in other contexts? (External validity)
3. How can one determine whether the findings of an inquiry would be repeated? (Reliability)
4. How can one establish the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the subjects and not by the biases and motivations of the inquirer? (Objectivity)

With these excellent questions in mind, this researcher implemented the following strategies -- modifying recommendations from both Creswell (2007) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) -- in an attempt to ensure the trustworthiness of the final report.

1. Prolonged engagement (scope) and persistent observation (depth) assisted in learning the culture of the participants and helped guard against misinformation introduced by the researcher. In this study, the researcher personally spent several

hours in the field or on the phone with each participant, both interviewing and taking field notes based on observations.

2. Triangulation (multiplicity) is the process of gathering data from multiple sources. In this case, the study is conducted in light of the comprehensive literature review. This added to the two rounds of interviews and field notes worked to assure that conclusions were not drawn solely from any one source.
3. Peer review allowed a colleague(s) to serve as de-briefers and “devil’s advocates,” asking the hard questions about meaning, method and interpretations. A minimum of two colleagues were enlisted to conduct peer reviews.
4. Clarifying researcher bias, as has been exhibited previously, made clear to the reader, this researcher’s connection to the phenomenon in an effort toward “full disclosure” and research integrity. Similar personal disclosures have already been made in this proposal and will be further outlined in reporting the data.
5. Member checking, as mentioned previously, was performed through a second round of interviews with each subject, for the purpose of clarification. In this instance, data, analyses and interpretations were taken back to the participants to be judged for accuracy and credibility.
6. A rich, thick description was provided in the final report which enabled the reader to transfer the information to other settings to determine whether the findings could be transferred based on shared characteristics.

Conclusion

A qualitative approach, specifically utilizing a phenomenological research design, was appropriate for an examination of the “coming out” process of gay men raised in conservative Christian environments. Utilizing the procedures discussed earlier assisted the reader in gaining a deeper understanding of this unique phenomenon. Implementing steps to address threats to validity ensured that the data and conclusions were trustworthy. And each of these considerations combined to allow this investigation to contribute to the research related to counseling, spirituality, the LGBT community, social justice and multiculturalism and counselor education.

Chapter IV

Participant One

Textural Analysis

Private Ponderings

P-1's path to understanding his sexual identity began with many incidents of personal questioning and private confusion. As a child, he recalls that his earliest feelings surrounding his sexual orientation were a vague awareness that he might be "different" from others: "...it was at that age when I was starting to kind of realize, that I wasn't like everyone else." These ponderings were connected to discussions that were occurring in his church youth group: "It was the first time that that kind of thing started to hit home. Church was when that started happening." P-1 relates that initially, he didn't specifically identify this difference as "being gay" nor did he consider it something negative:

And that's when I started to kind of realize it myself too, but that was like the farthest removed, I didn't think like, 'Oh I'm gay...' I just remember not realizing that it was a bad thing at first.

However, he does recall reacting defensively if others suggested he was gay. He states, "I knew what it was, I knew all of it, but at that point I'd get very defensive if anybody would make fun of me for being, 'Oh you're just the gay kid,' or something..."

At this time, he also began to feel conflicted due to the moral positions his church was taking against homosexuality. This often left him feeling guilty and ashamed:

I didn't want to believe it, I didn't want it to be true...I couldn't stop beating myself up because I thought that I was doing something wrong by not wanting to support the 'anti what I thought I might be,' I guess...I would lay in bed at night and I would pray that I would change...that I

wouldn't feel the way that I did and wouldn't have the thoughts that I had. And it was because of situations like that that made me pray harder.

As he grew older, people he met would ask him specifically if he was gay and he would deny it but then later the internal debate would begin:

A friend that I was close with, that hadn't been out previously had now come out, and he asked me specifically if I was gay and I told him, 'No'...but that made me go home that time and really say, 'Why don't I say yes, why can't it be, be something good?'

As these incidents of private turmoil continued, they gave rise to more tangible points of tension – tension between himself and the teachings of his church. And the growing concerns about his own family's view on homosexuality and how they would view him if they knew he was gay.

Tension Points

P-1 continued to struggle secretly with his own conceptualization of who he was. But increasingly tension was building at church. P-1 was raised in a small community in which, his family attended a conservative Christian church. He recalls a specific incident during his confirmation training when he felt pressured to sign an anti-gay petition:

I think the hardest part was being in confirmation and having my peers, people that I had grown up with doing the youth-oriented things within the congregation and having the person who was leading the class who is the pastor's wife, wanting me to sign petitions and then getting upset at me for not wanting to sign them.

Tension was also building inside of him as fear of how his family would receive his sexual orientation preoccupied his thoughts. He vividly describes discussions that the family would have after church services:

We'd often have conversations in the car about, like you know, anybody who would be gay would be choosing to live a life of sin and so growing

up I went through that...It was extremely difficult especially when we would have family discussions about the sermon because the sermons would preach against homosexuality...when I would sit in church I wouldn't get upset, it was more when my family would be so in support of it.

These incidents left him troubled: "...I didn't know how I would be able to say anything to my family later on...and that's when I started to not be able to sleep at night because I would not be able to stop thinking about my family's view of the religion."

These "tension points" that he felt with his church and his family, cumulatively began to have a significant effect on him leading to moments of profound emotion and pain.

Profound Emotion and Pain

The private confusion and interpersonal tension that P-1 was enduring understandably resulted in a significant level of pain. The very people who he was supposed to be able to trust and who were supposed to be a resource for him, his family, now elicited fear in him as he tried to reconcile their opinions about people just like him:

I always had kind of viewed my family as very loving and so when it wasn't, that started to get a little scary...I had a couple of nights where I would cry myself to sleep because I didn't know how I would be able to say anything to my family.

Later, when he finally "came out" to his father and step mother, there was tremendous emotion. His father's first response was to suggest that he might be confused and that counseling could help: "...it never felt malicious it was just that he was saying those things that hurt a lot." When his father then left suddenly, ostensibly to deal with his own feelings and reactions to his son's disclosure, P-1 describes being left with his step mother:

Because I didn't know what else to say to him...I just went inside. At that point I just let it all out because I was sitting in my room, just wondering what my dad was thinking, just crying because I didn't know whether I was going to be kicked out, or what was going to happen.

Later, when they reconnected, he shared that he and his father cried together and that it was a very emotional experience. While initially positive, his father's feelings would begin to change which led to disagreements, restrictions on his social life and finally, a painful separation:

It was at that point that I decided that I didn't want to live with them anymore. And so I told my dad and that was really hard. Because he got very, very upset and my stepmom did, and I got kicked out of the house that day because I told them that I wanted to, and so then it was, 'Well then leave,' pretty much. And so the day before the first day of my junior year I had to move in with my mom in a suitcase. So that was the hardest part of the whole coming out process for me.

Eventually, his step mom would ban him from coming to the house stating, "...she couldn't live somewhere that she knew that I was." These strong emotional experiences and painful interactions eventually took their toll on P-1 and led to a severe depression, suicidal ideation and hospitalization:

My junior year of high school I started getting really depressed and having a lot of problems with being able to get up and go to school...it got worse as I got older and when I was a senior in high school, I was hospitalized for a week, for having had a plan to commit suicide.

However, despite these incredible challenges, P-1 displayed a growing determination to claim the truth of who he was. While his interpersonal relationships at church and with his father's family represented much anguish, it was the relationships that he was building elsewhere that would begin to expand his understanding of himself and his sexual identity.

Interpersonal Expansion

In high school, P-1 began meeting people and making friends, beyond the connections he had with his small town church. These new activities helped to create confidence in him and these new friends represented a diversity of views and opinions that he had not been exposed to up to this point. He states,

I started to get a base of friends and I started joining things like the speech team and I started doing things where I was a little bit more comfortable talking in front of people....I think the big things in my high school career that made me want to “come out” was doing all the traveling for speech and different things like that and seeing other people from different schools and seeing all these different perspectives and seeing people who were “out.

This expansion of his social network allowed him, for the first time, to see that there were other places and other cultures and other people who were not as rigid and judgmental as those he had personally experienced. And while he credits these extra-curricular events and the contacts made through them, with helping him to come out, it seems that there were a few deeper, crucial relationships that really provided for him, the acceptance and support that he had been longing for.

Critical Connections

P-1's strongest testimonials in his interview surrounded the critical connections he made with people that were safe and caring. But these ranged in their level of intimacy. For instance, he credits the group counseling experience that he was a part of, after being released from the hospital, with helping him to develop coping strategies to deal with his struggles. His father eventually joined him at these sessions and he recalls this as the time when their relationship began to heal:

I was going through...all kinds of group therapy. My dad was doing it with me because it was a “parent-slash-adolescent” grouping. We’d do some things together and then the kids would go separate from the parents and we’d talk about different things from that perspective and I think this is when my father and I started getting closer again.

Another important relationship was a female friend who was the first person he came out to. She was clearly someone whom he trusted enough to tell that he was gay and she conveyed an unconditional love that was very meaningful to him. He recalls, “...she was like, right away, ‘Oh you know I love you, why would I not just because of this one thing?’” But she also seemed to have the strength of character to confront his ambivalence:

At first, I was like, ‘Well, I think I might be,’ but she kind of really did some of the probing questions like, ‘What do you mean you ‘think’ you might be?’ And it was through her that I started to be able to articulate how I felt and then realizing that I was saying things that, it wasn’t just a ‘I might be,’ it was that, ‘I was.’

But clearly, his most significant connection, especially as he was “coming out,” was with his own mother. He states that, “...as I’ve grown up, I’ve always felt confident in my mother.” He remembered a time when he was very young, that he and his mother were watching a television program about the death of Matthew Shepherd, a young gay college student who was killed in the commission of a hate crime. She said to him, “If you ever need to talk to me about anything, you always come talk to me and never feel like you don’t have someone you can talk to.” This left an indelible mark on him. Later, in high school, she was the first family member that he entrusted with the truth about his sexual identity:

I decided to tell my mom first before I told anybody else in my family because of that comfort that I had always had. When I told her, she was a

little bit shocked, but not, not unsupportive. She, you know, told me right away that she loved me and that she would be there with me...so she was very supportive, and I was glad to be able to have one of my parents know.

These vital relationships were invaluable to P-1's experience. They clearly offered him the loving support he needed to come out as a young gay man. But despite these powerful, positive experiences, it is equally clear that he has "paid a price" for his honesty.

The Price

As has already been documented, the decision to "come out" as a gay man for P-1 translated into many moments of intrapersonal confusion and pain as well as interpersonal risk and loss. He experienced fear, depression and even suicidal ideation. He felt torn and pressured as a member of his Christian youth group because he didn't want to protest against LGBT individuals. Yet, when he would take a personal stand against what he viewed as discriminatory practices, he then would be racked with guilt and shame. He directly lied to friends and acquaintances who asked him if he was gay, for fear of the consequences. And he was even kicked out of his father's home due to the growing tension following his disclosure. He clarifies that his father was initially supportive of him being gay:

It was at that moment that I started to realize that I could be proud of who I was, because at this point, I had my family behind me, even though, they've all said, 'We don't understand, but we love you no matter what.'

However, this expressed support quickly evaporated when his father and step mother learned that he had been dating a boy:

They found out after that, that I had had a boyfriend before I told them [that he was gay], and then they felt like I had been betraying them before because he'd come over to parties and we'd hung out a lot and all this stuff so they, at that point, thought it was that I was directly trying to betray them. And I told them that, 'I wasn't, I wasn't out of the closet at that point so how could I have told you? I'm telling you this stuff now so that you can, so I can share those things with you.'

As a direct result, his father began to significantly restrict his social life, not allowing him to connect with friends. This was achieved, primarily, through assigning him increased responsibilities at home to keep him busy. Eventually, as has already been described, he was kicked out of his father's home and banned by his step mother from coming back.

P-1 is now living as a fully "out" gay man, he is currently in a stable relationship and many of the difficult experiences related here, are a part of his past, rather than his current life. But perhaps, one of the most significant, lasting consequences of his decision to "come out," continues to be his spiritual life.

Spiritual Transformations

While P-1's relationship with his church represented a significant amount of pain and confusion, he is also quick to point out that there were positive aspects of his religious upbringing and training, and some that helped him to discover his own joy in humanitarian work:

There were all kinds of fun things, like AWANA [children's program] and then Vacation Bible School. All the things that I remember most and enjoyed doing the most were things that were focused on need, like the "30 Hour Famine," things that were fun to be around people, doing things for a good cause.

But, as he states, "...it was always harder for me to do the things that were more intensive like confirmation." It was these times of religious and doctrinal teaching that

confronted him with the tension between his faith and his sexuality and left him with such mixed emotions. So, eventually, during P-1's turbulent high school years, he began to distance himself from the church and religious traditions of his youth. While he continued to read the Bible, searching for answers, his disconnection with his religion became apparent:

I would read the Bible and try to interpret what, what was good about it...and you know, the more I searched and went through it, the more I started to doubt and then the less I started to believe, the more I started to distance myself from the church and from just religion in general. By the time I was at the end of high school, I had completely detached myself from any religion and told myself and was telling people, that I was an atheist because I just didn't want to deal with anything, I guess

When asked about his spirituality today, P-1 stated: "I'm still at a very difficult point in faith in my own life." However, he is now referring to himself a bit differently: "I think I've come to terms with the term agnostic as I am starting to learn more about things." He continues, "I happen to be against established religion, because I really don't like the, the pressure that it puts on people to be a certain way..." And referring again to his agnosticism, he states:

I've come to the conclusion that that is probably the best description of where I am at in my faith. I guess the way that I've interpreted, that it is kind of a belief in a higher power. But not really needing to understand exactly what it is.

And he returns, also, to a theme that found its roots in his early religious experiences: namely, his desire to help others:

And just being able to be at peace with that and doing things that I believe should be done in human nature; things that we should do to help each other because...we should help humankind.

However, perhaps because of decisions P-1 has made to create his own “spirituality,” one that makes sense to him, he struggles to define it and explain it to others:

I guess the reason it’s hard for me is to be spiritual the way that I’ve grown up with it, is that you still have some kind of, you pray, you do some kind of, you do something to acknowledge the Higher Power, being, or whatever it might be. But I don’t really do any of that, it’s just kind of a seeded belief in the way that I kind of live my life and the things that I do, and I try to be true to it I guess. It’s difficult because...I’ve detached myself so far from religion, so it’s hard for me to think about it without thinking about it in terms with how I grew up with it. Which has always been my problem when people ask you, like, oh what is your religion, or how do you believe? Things like that, or if we have discussions about different things or groups that I’ve been a part of, I don’t know how to speak about it.

Structural Analysis

Long Journey

P-1 is an enthusiastic person by nature. His energy can fill a room. He states that he was “flamboyant” from the time he was a little boy. He enjoys getting involved, meeting new people and helping others. However, when he begins to speak about the events around his “coming out,” experience, the change in his energy is discernible. By the calendar, it has only been approximately five years that he has openly identified as a gay man, but one gets the impression that it might, at times, feel like a much longer journey to him. A journey filled with fear, shame, tension and ultimately, relief. Fear, that he would not be accepted as a gay man by those he cared most about. Shame, that by being gay, he was somehow in violation of the religious creeds of his upbringing. Tension, as he constantly tried to gauge the views of those around him regarding

homosexuality and as he attempted to predict how each of these people would respond once they knew the truth. And relief at finally choosing to tell the truth about who he was.

When speaking of his first realizations of his homosexuality, P-1 recollects that he knew something was different, as early as 5 or 6 years old. He would not have known to put a label on it, only that there was “something” there. At 12 or 13 however, he not only knew for certain that this “difference” was indeed his sexual orientation, but also had determined to not speak of it to anyone else. Perhaps he had some clue, even at that age that topics such as his adolescent sexual identity were not to be spoken of. Or perhaps this was more of a general fear that any youngster might have of being different than those around him. In any case, his silence would prove to be a foreshadowing of how he would deal with the issue later in life. When he was older, he says that family told him they had suspected, but *that* conversation would not take place for years to come. As he aged and curious individuals would inquire, he would react defensively and deny being gay. But then he would go home and agonize to himself as to why this couldn’t be a “good thing” and why he couldn’t simply say, “Yes, I am gay.” These disparate reactions were indicative of the battle P-1 was fighting within – fear of being discovered, a desire to be known and frustration with himself as the lies began to mount up.

Childhood, Church and Home

At the same age that P-1 was beginning to realize that something was different about him, his family was enduring its own struggles. At age six, His father and mother divorced and the family split. While he spent significant time with both his father and

mother, he lived with his father and his father's new wife, during the early years of his "coming out" experience. These familial events are perhaps most significant because his father and step-mother were religiously conservative and adherents to a particular faith tradition – a "Covenant Congregation" --that was not friendly to the gay community.

The little church was nestled in a very small community about an hour's drive from his home. As mentioned, the church was conservative and quite minimalist by nature, however P-1 lights up when he talks about his earliest memories of his religious education. At such a young age, the focus is not so much on ideology or dogma but on tangible learning experiences with other children. These experiences are designed to help cement the principles and concepts of one's faith. He was heavily involved in the youth programs such as AWANA and Vacation Bible School, as well as confirmation, the more formal religious curriculum for youth that serves as a rite of passage for many Christian faith traditions. The youth group was contemporary and had musical bands for their worship time but what brought P-1 the most joy and satisfaction, were the activities focused on the care of others, such as the "30 Hour Famine," whose purpose was to raise money and attention for global hunger. These types of humanitarian causes tapped into the very best aspects of P-1's charitable character. And despite the trials endured as a young gay man in a conservative church in those early days, he is still drawn to opportunities to help others and sees this as a truer expression of his adult spirituality.

Pressure

Confirmation would conclude in junior high and it was during this time period, that the fond recollections end. He describes in detail, the difficult tension that was rising

within him as he tried to reconcile the positive experiences of being a young Christian with the beliefs and actions of his peers and teachers – beliefs that were increasingly becoming a large part of his religious cultural experience. He conveys many examples of feeling pressured to take moral positions against the issues of the day that his leaders felt violated church teachings. Not the least of which, was homosexuality and gay rights. Still “in the closet” at this age, he resisted signing the petitions that have become an iconic aspect of such morally-based protests. However his refusals were an important *statement* in their own right. The awareness of the strongly held opinions of church officials and the compliance he witnessed in his peers would have weighed heavy. So, in a very real sense, his determination not to sign the petitions might have been his first signal to the world around him that he was gay. A junior-higher, internally conflicted and externally pressured by his faith community -- the very people, the very institution that had represented to him, the care for and the sensitivity towards others -- was now entrenching itself against a community they did not agree with, people with whom he secretly identified.

Meanwhile, during the car rides home after services, he would listen to the family conversations as they discussed the sermons or the church’s positions on these controversial topics and these experiences left P-1 one filled with confusion and pain. He stated that he believes that the sermons he was hearing in church, denouncing homosexuality, wrought little damage compared to hearing his parents echo these same opinions. Surely, if the pastor felt this way and his parents agreed, there must be something wrong with him. He describes berating himself and lying in bed crying,

praying to God that he could be different – that he could somehow *not* be gay. These desperate prayers are ironic because his faith tradition taught him that prayer was his dialogue with a personal God who loved him. Prayer was an avenue for him to seek help and healing, yet his church and ostensibly his parents, were conveying that God did not approve of who he was: a closeted gay adolescent, isolated in a small town and surrounded by a group of peers, religious leaders, and even family who were not only taking ardent positions against the gay community but pressuring him to do the same.

At school, he was also beginning to feel increasingly isolated. He enjoyed activities that others associated with being effeminate, such as the Family and Consumer Science class. The dominate school culture, not deeming this to be a “masculine pursuit,” subjected him to teasing from his classmates that only served to reinforce his fears of ever allowing people to know that he was gay. If he was being ridiculed for enjoying pursuits that were deemed “not masculine enough,” how could he then risk telling these same people that he was attracted to boys? P-1 felt lost and very alone, lacking support from his family, experiencing guilt and shame at church and now being ridiculed at school for pursuing interests that seemed quite natural to him.

High School

High school for P-1, specifically his sophomore year, appears to be the “beginning of the end” of his “closeted” life as a gay man. As he left junior high behind, and found himself increasingly at odds with his church’s teachings, his inner strength and enthusiastic nature motivated him to get involved with extra-curricular activities such as speech team. Here, he found an atmosphere that was not sectarian and would represent,

not only a community of people with much broader views, but also speech club literally provided a stage where he could speak his mind and his opinions. Something that up until this point had been taboo. This, in turn, introduced him to a new set of friends and provided for him, opportunities to travel and visit other schools that were outside the socially-limited environs of his youth. And for the first time, he began to meet students who openly identified as gay. Finally, he found in the lives of others, a story he had been unable to pen for himself – living as a proud, self-identifying gay individual.

While P-1 was creating a new world for himself at school, his family's attendance at the Covenant church began to wane due to disagreements they had with some of the directions the congregation was heading in. This proved to be a "window of opportunity" of sorts, wherein the church and the Christian friends of his youth ceased to be the strongest voices in his life. To be sure, the internal debate did not resolve simply, but retrospectively, he knows that it was this combination of the "distance" from his religious community, the new culture of his friends on speech team and a growing realization that he was acceptable being gay, that laid the foundation for his "coming out."

Saying the Words

It was during these shifts in P-1's social and religious scenes that he decided he would finally risk telling another person about his sexual orientation. It would be a female companion at school. He chose her both because she was a "close" friend but also because he realized he *needed* to talk to someone about what he was experiencing and who he really was. He had carried it alone for far too long. She expressed her love and her unconditional acceptance of him and she also seemed to have an understanding of

the risks he was taking in telling her. They would have many discussions about it and throughout she seemed to possess just the right balance of loving compassion and assertiveness. There were times when, perhaps speaking with a “voice” not his own, he would waiver and use ambivalent language to describe his own orientation and it was she that would chide him and confront him to fully embrace the truth of his sexual identity. The sense was not that he ever really doubted that he was gay at this age, but rather that there were times when he probably felt it might be easier to be straight, the ambivalence serving as an internal “escape route” from the reality of his life.

Eventually, a few more friends were told and P-1 was having positive experiences as he “inched out of the closet.” However, he soon grew concerned because word had begun to spread beyond this small circle of trusted friends and reacting to this, he ceased to tell anyone else. He stated that he was worried that somehow his family would hear it second hand which was something he didn’t want. This concern would lead him to his next significant step.

Despite the progress he was making at school and with his friends, he knew that the biggest step still lay ahead: “coming out” to his family. P-1 repeatedly referenced throughout the interview, the singularly deep and essential importance that family held for him. And he believed strongly that despite being out to his friends, he would not consider himself fully “out of the closet” until he had found a way to tell his family. This seems to be a vivid indicator of how desperate he was for his family’s approval of the young man he knew he really was.

Home is Where the Heart Is

He turned first to his mom, the ever-present source of acceptance and strength. This decision seems in retrospect to be the “harvest” from all the “seeds” that his mother had planted throughout his life. Namely, the many messages she gave him that she would be a person he could come to when he was in need. And the support and comfort he had come to expect from her did not wane in that critical moment. She immediately conveyed her love for him – exactly what he was longing for. During those early discussions, she explained to him that she couldn’t fully understand what it meant to be gay, but despite this, she would be by his side every step of the way. Her lack of “expertise” didn’t seem to make a difference. What he heard was, “I am your Mom and I accept you for who you are.” Knowing that his mom’s support was in place, he now turned to his father and step-mother.

Unfortunately, the experience with his father and step-mother would prove to be much more complex. “Coming out” to them would prove to be an emotion-laden experience for all involved. His father was a more religiously conservative person than his mom and many of P-1’s associations with his father were tied into his childhood church so the prospect of allowing himself to be that vulnerable with this man posed a far greater risk. Upon hearing the disclosure from his son, his father immediately began to question him, suggesting that maybe he was confused or that it might be some sort of “phase” he was going through. He even suggested counseling. P-1 recalls that while his dad’s reaction did not feel malicious, it made the moment even more painful than it had to be. At some point during the conversation, his dad left P-1 alone. He describes this

tear-filled moment as one of confusion, because he didn't know where this left him and what he could expect next. Eventually, his step-mom came in and said his father wanted to speak to him. He found his dad outside sitting on the driveway and through tears, his father explained that no matter what, he would love him. P-1 states that at that moment, he truly began to understand that he could be proud of who he was. His family now knew and he no longer had to lie. But the indescribable satisfaction and relief P-1 felt in that moment would not last. Sometime later, his sister innocently disclosed to his father that he had previously dated a young man while he was still "in the closet," and this triggered a tragic over-reaction on the part of his dad and step-mom. They felt betrayed – feelings that confounded P-1. How could he have possibly told his father and step-mom that he had been in a relationship with a boy, before they even knew that he was gay? They apparently tried to clarify that they were not angry at him because he was gay but rather, they felt that he had deceived them by not disclosing that he had been living a "gay life." This was an incredible burden for a teenager to carry when he believed he was doing the right thing by sharing with his parents, what it was like for him to be gay. As the holidays approached that year, the tension grew as his parents began to treat him differently than the rest of the kids. He had much stricter guidelines on his social life and when he did go out, his parents made sure that his brother was with him. P-1 recalls that there were even times when they would create so many tasks and chores for him at home that he would have no time to socialize with his friends. This degradation in their relationship ultimately culminated in P-1 declaring that he wanted to transition into his mother's home and his father immediately kicked him out of the house

and banned him from returning for visits, anytime she was present. And so what had begun as a tearful disclosure and messages of acceptance earlier that summer, had resulted in P-1 feeling cast aside, treated differently and finally, P-1 risking telling his parents that he wanted a change. Once again, he was punished for his honesty.

While life in his mother's house seemed to be a safer and more conducive environment for him, the toll of these encounters and the years of hiding his identity began to wear P-1 down and in the final years of high school, he was diagnosed and treated for depression.

Treatment

He states that what started as a lack of energy and loss of interest in school and even getting up each morning, ultimately ended in his hospitalization for suicidal ideation. But the time in treatment seemed to be exactly what P-1 one needed – recovery, not just from the symptoms of depression, but from years of hiding and fear and then more recently, painful battles with his father and step-mom. And so it was during this time that combined with the support of his mother and new friends, the hospital treatment program and group counseling, he finally began to heal. His depression was brought under control and he continued to participate in out-patient therapy. And this is where a remarkable turn of events occurred.

His father consented to join him in a specialized group therapy experience that was oriented towards families and slowly, the two of them began to rebuild their relationship. P-1 came to understand that there were many issues and under-currents in his step-family – sources of tension and struggle – that had nothing to do with him

directly, but that had added to the pain and confusion in the household. During these conversations, his father disclosed to him that he was having his own personal struggles with his faith and spirituality. And also, that his step-mom had some mental health issues of her own. There is no question that both of these factors had contributed to the struggles P-1 had had with them in his “coming out” process. While initially, he was left to conclude that all of the problems in the household were a direct result of him being gay, he now began to understand that there were many other pieces to this puzzle that had nothing to do with him, nor his sexual identity. Eventually, while he continued to live with his mother, he and his father were able to assume a relationship that was safe for P-1, absent of condemnation. In essence, he was able to go back to that day when his father, without conditions or caveats, had said that he loved and accepted him as a gay man. Now, they could finally again move forward and have continued to do so since then.

Issues of Faith

However, his faith is still a source of sadness and difficulty. He feels that in high school, he was forced to choose between his sexuality and his faith because the ‘voices’ of his faith were telling him that he was wrong in being gay. Then, during his “coming out” experience, he had begun identifying as an atheist, ceased to attend church and ultimately stopped reading his Bible and praying. One gets the sense that this was a young man’s attempt to strike back at the source of his pain – the church and by default, God. His answer was to reject it all. However, nowadays, perhaps due to the healing in his life and simply the passage of time, he has softened that hard position somewhat. He

now refers to himself as an agnostic and states that he does have a spiritual/religious belief, despite the fact that it is often difficult for him to define.

Observing P-1, one can readily see that flamboyant exuberant personality that has been such an integral part of his identity which makes the obvious sadness of his “coming out” experiences, all the more poignant. He stated that he doesn’t talk about these experiences often, and upon hearing his story, this is understandable.

Textural-Structural

For P-1, the early realizations that he was different than the other boys – that he was *attracted* to boys – brought with it much anxiety and fear. The small conservative church that he grew up in held very strong anti-gay positions and as an adolescent, he can remember feeling significant tension as their youth leader pressured them to adopt the positions of the church, some of which meant that he would have to take a public stand against homosexuality.

I didn’t want to believe it, I didn’t want it to be true...I couldn’t stop beating myself up because I thought that I was doing something wrong by not wanting to support the ‘anti what I thought I might be,’ I guess...I would lay in bed at night and I would pray that I would change...that I wouldn’t feel the way that I did and I wouldn’t have the thoughts that I had. And it was because of situations like that that made me pray harder.

This intrapersonal turmoil was complicated by the fact that he would hear his family discussing Sunday sermons during the car rides home and it became obvious that his father and step-mother stood in agreement with the religiously conservative positions of the church. This left him, a young man entering high school, feeling that he had nowhere to turn ...no one that he could be honest with about his true sexual identity.

As he entered high school, P-1 found himself in the “closet,” with no one aware that he was gay and feeling alienated from his church and his family because of the harsh positions and beliefs they held regarding homosexuality. However, high school would also represent an interpersonal expansion, that unbeknownst to him at the time, would eventually lead to his “coming out.” He started meeting different people and getting involved in activities that allowed him to transcend the boundaries of his small conservative town. These connections provided something he had never been exposed to before, different values and alternative worldviews:

I started to get a base of friends and I started joining things like the speech team and I started doing things where I was a little bit more comfortable talking in front of people....I think the big things in my high school career that made me want to “come out” was doing all the traveling for speech and different things like that and seeing other people from different schools and seeing all these different perspectives and seeing people who were “out.

Empowered by these interactions, and tiring of the burden that he had carried for so long, he finally risked telling a trusted friend – he “came out.”

At first, I was like, ‘Well, I think I might be,’ but she kind of really did some of the probing questions like, ‘What do you mean you ‘think’ you might be?’ And it was through her that I started to be able to articulate how I felt and then realizing that I was saying things that, it wasn’t just a ‘I might be;’ it was that, ‘I was.’

His friend was there to give him the unconditional acceptance that he had longed for and her strength of character and insight further enabled him to overcome the self-protective ambivalence he was voicing and fully embrace the truth of who he was. Turning now to his family, there was no question in his mind that his mom would be the first person he

would tell. She had long been a source of comfort for him and did not reflect the conservative beliefs of his father and step-mother.

I decided to tell my mom first before I told anybody else in my family because of that comfort that I had always had. When I told her, she was a little bit shocked, but not, not unsupportive. She, you know, told me right away that she loved me and that she would be there with me...so she was very supportive, and I was glad to be able to have one of my parents know.

These early “coming out” experiences were critical for him and served as confirmation that he was doing the right thing. Finally, he was not only living in truth but he was finding that people – important people in his life -- were willing to love him and accept him for who he really was. Unfortunately, the experience telling his father and step-mother would be very different. He was quite aware of the values that his father espoused and the church’s positions that they supported. And this caused him profound pain:

I always had kind of viewed my family as very loving and so when it wasn’t, that started to get a little scary...I had a couple of nights where I would cry myself to sleep because I didn’t know how I would be able to say anything to my family.

The only thing that seemed to override the fear of how his dad would respond was this deeply held connection to family and a deep desire to be close to them...to be accepted by them. So in retrospect, there never seemed to be a question as to *if* he would “come out” to them, it was only a matter of time.

As he had feared, his dad and step-mother’s reactions did not embody the acceptance he was longing for. Initially, though very emotional, his father was able to convey to him that he loved him but the situation at home began to degrade very quickly.

They restricted his social life considerably, he believes, in an attempt to keep him from dating guys and interacting with those who would support him as a “out” gay man. And when they found out that he had already had a boyfriend, emotions and tensions exploded and P-1 eventually decided to move out and to live with his mom. This incited an angry reaction from his step-mom who eventually banned him from their home. These difficult and tense moments took a cumulative toll on P-1, a toll so profound that by his junior year in high school, he was depressed and entertaining suicidal thoughts.

My junior year of high school I started getting really depressed and having a lot of problems with being able to get up and go to school...it got worse as I got older and when I was a senior in high school, I was hospitalized for a week, for having had a plan to commit suicide.

He had paid a terrible price to live an authentic life. But he was “out” now and there would be no turning back. And to his credit, his father began attending out-patient counseling sessions with P-1 and they have taken significant steps in the years since to re-build their relationship.

P-1 is living a fully “out” life as a gay man and is currently in a stable relationship. His healing continues and each day he carves out more of an identity as a gay man. Part of that identity is a re-shaping of his spiritual life.

I would read the Bible and try to interpret what, what was good about it...and you know, the more I searched and went through it, the more I started to doubt and then the less I started to believe, the more I started to distance myself from the church and from just religion in general. By the time I was at the end of high school, I had completely detached myself from any religion and told myself and was telling people, that I was an atheist because I just didn't want to deal with anything, I guess.

Yet, there remains an uncertainty. He knows that he wants nothing to do with the kind of church...the kind of religion that rejected him because of his sexual orientation, yet he is not willing to walk away completely. He shares,

I think I've come to terms with the term agnostic as I am starting to learn more about things... I've come to the conclusion that that is probably the best description of where I am at in my faith. I guess the way that I've interpreted, that it is kind of a belief in a higher power. But not really needing to understand exactly what it is.

Interestingly, there is a sense that, rather than an expression of ambiguity, P-1's decision to view himself as an agnostic is actually a signal of his own newly-acquired strength in defining himself and rejecting the old dichotomies that would force him to choose between his spirituality and his sexuality.

Chapter V

Participant Two

Textural Analysis

Catholicism

To understand P-2's "coming out" experience, one must first understand the backdrop of the religious training of his youth. P-2 was raised in a Roman Catholic home and community.

I was born and raised Catholic. I went to Catholic elementary school and continued on through Catechism classes until I was 18. I was confirmed Catholic...I went to church every Sunday, for sure. I grew up in a really small town, so part of going to church was like...maintaining an image that you were constantly going to church. I was an altar boy too and so I was in church all the time.

P-2's parents were devout Catholics who raised all their children with the same beliefs and values that they held so dear. What is also clear is that Catholicism was as much a culture in his small town, as it was a church that he attended. He knew nothing else but the "Catholic way." However, during his senior year in high school, all of that would change. He had been confirmed which means that he had completed his formal training which serves as a rite of passage for Catholic youth. He explains that the instructional classes, or Catechism, included all his closest friends. This was a very tight community and he had known this small group since kindergarten. During one particular class session, the issue of homosexuality was addressed:

I listened as my friends, like all twelve of them...instantly banished these 'horrible heathens' to the deepest sanctions of hell. And I remember at the time thinking that I didn't know anybody who was gay...like I didn't know what it meant [but] it seemed really judgmental to go that far that

quickly. Because the deepest sanctions of hell, when you're raised Roman Catholic, is not a punishment that you put lightly on anybody.

He states that this was the start of the serious questioning of his faith. But he is clear that at the time, he did not sense a conflict between his faith and his own sexual identity because as of yet, he did not self-identify as a gay man. Rather,

I remember that the conflict for me wasn't trying to make my sexuality work with my faith, it was trying to make my faith work with that idea...I knew that wasn't how I felt about homosexuality, like I knew that that seemed too harsh...

He did acknowledge that, while he "believes" the timing of his religious conflict was coincidental and unrelated to any deep sense of his own homosexuality, he did "come out" a few years later, after he had rejected the Church's views on homosexuality and ceased to practice his faith. It cannot be known whether there was an actual direct connection with some deeper knowledge buried inside him, or if he had somehow completely compartmentalized the two issues. Regardless, this was the turning point.

In my freshman year of college, the year before I came out, I actually stopped practicing Catholicism so I kind of had this year of like weaning off of Catholicism...I lost my faith before I came out, so the question of compatibility with my faith never really was an issue...It was almost like a long transition process of leaving one life behind and then really creating a new one...I typically explain this to people when I'm asked: 'I gave up Catholicism for Lent when I was a freshman and then I came out the year later.'

The Unknown

P-2's realization of his true sexual identity appears to have come as a surprise to him. His story seems to indicate that the small, secluded town of his youth, his conservative religious faith tradition and the lack of any real exposure to homosexuality

or gays and lesbians all seemed to converge together to allow a veil of ignorance to shroud him. He states:

The small town I grew up in is in [State] and there is nobody really out, or prominent, or visible anywhere, so I didn't really know, like I knew what the words meant, but I didn't really know what, like a physical manifestation of that looked like.

It was as if he understood the concept but it didn't occur to him to connect it to himself.

He continues:

It was a big shock to me, not to many other people, but to me...because I mean I had no example growing up. So I didn't know, like if I was supposed to see something in myself, or like, how someone was meant to behave. Or...that it was even an option. Like none of those things were present.

P-2 states that in high school, he did not date girls but he was "...involved in nearly every school group." This singular focus kept him preoccupied to the point of overcommitted, "...and so I just didn't think about it."

Ironically as has been mentioned, it was his church that brought the issue of homosexuality to his attention.

I remember being told that it was wrong. I remember being told...that it was a terrible thing, but I also remember distinctly knowing that I knew nothing about it.

This eventually created significant spiritual and ideological tensions within him that led to his departure from the Church, but during those early teen years, there was no clear understanding of what lay buried deep inside of him.

The veil of ignorance was finally torn away when he went to college. He became close friends with a man who developed a "crush" on him and eventually asked him out on a date. Even at this point, it seemed to catch him off guard:

After a year of being really good friends, he asked me out and I was pretty sure I was straight. I hadn't really thought about it before. And suddenly had all of these questions that never was a question before. I gave it a shot, and it was confusing and messy...

This seemed to be the turning point for P-2. Now, filled with questions about who he really was, he turned to women:

After that, I tried to date a couple of women and they didn't really, like it didn't work out. Even when they were perfectly matched to me. It should have worked out...At one point I dated this girl who, on paper, she should have been perfect, and it didn't work.

P-2 studies and works in the sciences and while explaining these dating experiences with women, he conveyed the difficulty he experienced -- it made no logical sense to him: "I'm like a scientist so I like think in terms of controlled experiments..." While he grasped for an answer to this conundrum, one thing is clear from his story during this time: he was about to come face to face with his true sexual identity.

Roommates

P-2's first intimate encounter with a man was with his college roommate. This man had had what P-2 characterized as a "homosexual experience" previously, but was not "out of the closet" and seemed to be equally confused about his own sexual identity. They kept these personal experiences hidden behind the closed door of their shared room however, the covert nature of this fledgling relationship brought with it, difficulties:

There was a lot of secrecy and hiding and with that came shame...so it got messy and it even got worse then, when it ended because we were still living together and still had the same bedroom so we still had the same personal space even though we had all that stuff.

As P-2 indicated, the relationship was problematic and did not last long but one of the results was that both men decided to "come out" to their closest friends. Not long after,

the now former boyfriend began dating a different man, known to them both, who had also recently “come out,” which created for P-2 an awkward and unlikely triangle. However, the two men stayed together and while continuing to date, encouraged P-2 to do the same going as far as setting him up with another man. Throughout this confusing period, characterized by P-2 repeatedly as “messy,” P-2 had the opportunity, for the first time in his life to observe two men in an intimate and nurturing relationship. This gave him the critical reference point that had long eluded him.

I don't know that I ever would have...dated another man and given it a shot again...but then I saw him go and date this other guy. The two of them were the ones who set me up on the other date and so like, I saw the compatibility and how it was working and so like there was a lot of confusion but I had those two to help me figure it out.

As his sophomore year of college came to a close, P-2 had moved away from his small home town, walked away from the conservative faith of his youth, experimented with dating women, experienced the affection of his roommate, began dating men and had ultimately stepped “out of the closet” as a gay man.

Family

P-2's parents have been married for many years. He has two sisters and a brother, who were all raised with the same religious values that he was. He describes them during the period he was “coming out:”

My oldest sister and my younger brother were both in college...at the time. I think they both still identify as Catholic but they weren't you know, they were in college and they weren't going to church every weekend, and so there was some level of grey area as to where their religion, or religious identity might have been.

It was no coincidence then, that it was these two that he chose to “come out” to first. He soon discovered that they had suspected that he was gay and had discussed it amongst themselves. He states that his sister “knows me better than any person on the planet,” and at one point, had actually sent him a message saying: “So you have something that you want to tell me and you don’t want to do it, but I kind of already know, so just go ahead.” He did ultimately have that discussion with her and she received his words well, understanding the importance and weight this issue carried for him.

She knew it was a big deal and she knew that it was something that I wouldn’t know how to tell the rest of my family, so she was fairly supportive from the beginning and has been really good about recognizing that she doesn’t know a lot about what it means to “come out” so that those gaps, she lets me fill in for myself...

With the support of his oldest sister and the knowledge that his brother already suspected, he soon “came out” to him as well. He characterizes the conversation as positive and almost whimsically recalls the following:

...He’s in the military and very conservative but he and I have never been the same in any capacity...we both have a really high mutual respect for one another...and so it just became another thing on the list of, ‘Well you do that and I do this.’ And that was all the farther he thought about it. I think the most opposition from him I’ve ever gotten was you know, ‘I don’t want to see this,’ and I was like, “I don’t want to see you making out with your girlfriend or now, wife either” and he was like, ‘Well, that makes sense.’ And that was it...that was the extent of our conversation.

While this interaction might seem puzzling to some, P-2 appears to be quite comfortable with how he and his brother relate regarding his sexuality. However, the biggest challenge with a sibling was yet to come.

Telling his other sister whom he describes as a “devout Catholic,” would prove to be a more difficult and anxiety-provoking experience. His impetus for doing so was the

revelation that she was pregnant with what would be the first grandchild in the family...P-2's nephew.

...So she and her husband were having this kid and it was a great thing in the family and I just decided that I really needed to tell her because I wanted to be involved in my nephew's life and I didn't want this to be the kind of thing like, I told them and later they were really upset. I wanted her to figure out how she wanted to deal with that, you know, before and have that conversation.

This statement exemplifies the depth and complexity of the issues that P-2 had to consider. In addition to his own vulnerability and personal risk, he was trying to anticipate the implications on the relationship with a nephew that was yet to be born. As it turned out, the discussion itself would not be as difficult as he had anticipated. He explains:

She actually resolved the conflict for herself by saying, 'Well, God loves you anyways and you're my brother so of course, it doesn't change a thing.'

He viewed her stance as a convenient and unexpected turn to a potentially difficult moment in their relationship. He continues:

We talked a lot about it because she asked a lot of questions. She asked more questions than anyone in my family did because she didn't understand...And I talked through it and she told me flat out that she doesn't like it; she thinks it's wrong; she thinks it's a sin; she thinks it's gross...but I'm still her brother so she doesn't write me off because of it. That works for me.

In essence, he was willing to accept the fact that while she did not agree with his lifestyle, she was willing to accept him and maintain their relationship ironically, based on a creed from the very faith tradition that he had previously rejected. However, this portion of his story was not over.

Threats

The relief P-2 experienced regarding the disclosure to his devoutly religious sister would be short-lived:

It was really tough because I told her and then she had that reception that was better than I expected. And then I was fine and I went to college and she told her husband while I was gone. And her husband actually threatened to drive to [city where his college was located] to ‘beat it out of me.’ Then he told my sister that I was never allowed to hold their kid or be around for any family gatherings that their kid was at. That like I wouldn’t be involved with his life at all in any way, shape or form whatsoever.

P-2 went on to explain that while he was upset at the statements made by his brother-in-law, he wasn’t surprised. He said that understanding this man and the family he came from and the environment that he was raised in had prompted him to assume that tensions would rise. However, he was also quick to clarify that he never felt unsafe and knew that the threat was an empty one. And while P-2 worked to preserve the relationship with his sister and their family and struggled with his own emotions over the entire incident, it was his mother who would intervene on his behalf, to keep stability in the family.

Mom

Concerns about coming out to his mother were similar to those he had shared with his sister – his mom is a devoutly religious woman with a very strong personality and a well-defined belief of what is right and wrong. Hearing him describe the “coming out” conversation illicit images of a dance:

My mom kind of pulled it out of me with a series of questions. We were talking, about just anything, or nothing, the way you talk to your mother, and then, I kept referring to a guy, the guy, and she eventually asked me who he was and I kind of dodged it for a while, but she kept going and like she knew where I was going with it.

At one point, he characterizes the conversation as “mutually manipulative,” with each person saying or asking just enough to continue towards the elusive truth. When P-2 was finally able to tell her, his mother responded with a question and a series of statements that were painful.

She was really not happy when I told her. Her first question after I said I had a boyfriend was asking if I was sexually active with him which can be an awkward lead in question. I thought there should have been other questions first. But then, it kind of went from there to the classic, ‘I think you’re going through a phase,’ ...and ‘Now I’m not going to get my grandchildren,’ conversation and she was really upset because she thought I was at risk for diseases, like that’s cause her knowledge of what homosexuality was, that it was nothing but a way to get AIDS. So she was immediately very, very scared and very upset, ah, so that didn’t really go that well.

The conversations would continue as his mother struggled to understand P-2’s revelation through the lenses of her faith and the generation of which she was a part. But to fully understand his mom’s reaction to his sexuality, it is important to look more closely at her role within the dynamics of the family. P-2 states that when he sought comfort or support, it was not his Mom or Dad that he turned to, but rather his siblings. He saw his mom as the real strength and disciplinarian of the family and his father as often absent and detached:

The support system that I get from my family is largely from my siblings...the people I went to with my problems, the people that like, I talked to about what I was doing, that was my siblings...My dad owns his own business and was almost always on business trips...my mom was the one who you know, raised us and made us into people who were responsible and got things done and worked for what we wanted. So she did a lot of that but I think that made her the ‘enforcer’ more often than not...So initially when I had my sister and my brother’s support, you know, when my mom reacted so negatively, it didn’t shock me as hard as

it could have because I already had support from my siblings. So that was a little easier.

However, it was his mother's very strength of character that he depended on to convey critical information to his father. The all important conversation between father and son would never take place.

My dad and I actually after that, like we never really had a sit down conversation. My dad has known for a while, but I think it only has ever been said to him once, by my mom. And he just doesn't talk about it. He kind of refuses to, but because my dad wasn't around for most of my childhood, I don't really feel the need to have that conversation. So it's like we don't talk about it with him, but he knows, and I know he knows, and that's kind of where it's been left.

So it was mom that spoke with his dad. And, as it turns out, it was also mom who intervened after P-2's brother-in-law responded so negatively. Speaking of the threat his brother-in-law had made:

So, like I'm up in [city where his college is located] and then like within seconds of getting this information from my sister, my mom already knew and was on the phone with me telling me that she was going to handle it...my mom stepped in and actually resolved that because she wasn't going to let that stand. Regardless of her own opinions on it, she wasn't going to tolerate that.

In her dealings with both her husband and her son-in-law, P-2's mother reveals the strength of her convictions. Family cohesion, or at least the appearance of it, is of primary importance. So despite her own misgivings regarding his sexual orientation, she felt an even stronger need to advocate on his behalf and keep the family from splintering.

These characteristics are also displayed in a sad episode from her own marriage:

My parents had a seriously secretive marriage where my dad had cheated on my mom for ten years and she didn't know until the very end and so there was a lot of emotional disconnect between the two of them...She very, very, very strongly believes in high family values. Like marriages

are, 'You're staying through whatever.' Even like, my dad cheated on her for ten years and they're still together. So when I came out it was just another one of those severe blows to the family, you know, that nobody knew really knew how to handle it, but it wasn't going to change that we were a family and all of the expectations that came with that, were there and weren't going anywhere and she made that very clear, very early on.

His mother's own personal need to keep the family together, at times at her own expense, had now intersected with his "coming out" experience and she had chosen to take on the familiar role of enforcer, to keep the peace.

His entire family now knew that he was a gay man, and though the journey has been difficult at times, he believes that progress is being made and four years later, things have improved.

Progress

P-2 speaks about the last four years since he "came out" to his family – specifically about his relationship with his mom:

We have talked about it a bit where she tells me a lot that she is trying really hard to figure out what this means to her and that I have to be willing to give her time...

And speaking about his relationship with his brother-in-law, he said the following:

We have very conflicting views on almost everything in the world and so we're not close but realize that our common ground is my sister...that's really enough. So, he's at least made progress to the point where we talk at family gatherings and I get to see my nephew but like he's not comfortable when my boyfriends there. But he just kind of doesn't say anything about it because it's, you know, in my mom's house where she will basically slaughter him if he did say anything.

And about the situation as a whole:

My family is at the point now where I can bring my boyfriend home for Christmas and that's fine. I mean they've made, like it's been four years since they found out. So because of that, in those four years, a lot of

progress has been made both on my part and theirs for like figuring out how to make all of us come back together...

P-2 conveys a sense of moving forward with a growing comfort about who he is as a man and the decisions he has made to be honest with those around him. And now, four years later, there also appears to be some movement regarding his faith.

Entertaining Faith

A few years after coming out, I did join a student group on campus and through that group for the first time I met somebody who was Buddhist, somebody who was Jewish and somebody...who had been born and raised atheist...So I had more examples of more religions for the first time, and people that I actually identified with for the first time as close peers and close friends and so through them I've actually been exposed to different Jewish holidays and celebrations and what not. And so I've been exposed to more traditions or more religions so I've recoiled out of Catholicism and ended up in a sort of somewhere between an agnostic and atheist sort of space.

As P-2 continues to meet and interact with a broader community of people, he is discovering that there is available to him, a richer and fuller religious experience than the narrow parameters of his own childhood faith. There is an air of caution in his voice as he speaks of this and he seems to be moving slowly, experimenting and experiencing as he goes, but he seems to have lowered his defenses somewhat. Another critical connection is that some of the religiously diverse people he is meeting are also gay:

Entertaining the idea of getting back to a faith has actually been made more easy by the breadth of people that I have had exposure to through "coming out" because the people I've met, in the GLBT community, have had a more diverse selection of religion than what I was raised with.

Yet even as P-2 moves slowly forward in his adult faith journey, there doesn't seem to be any escaping the Roman Catholicism of his youth. When he returns home, it is as if there is a convergence of old and new and difficult decisions continue to confront him, ultimately resulting in sacrifices that do not reflect his own personal values but more so, the values of a small town and a family that strives for the appearances of cohesion:

When I go home now, I do go to church with my family still. But I do so mostly because my hometown is...there's an image that is portrayed by going to church. When you go to church on Sunday, it's so the other people who are in church on Sunday can see you there. And if you don't go to church on Sunday, then you somehow aren't one of the moral citizens in town and then you can't be considered as like a contributing member of society. So when I go home for you know, Christmas, or just a weekend, I go to church with my family and I do so because they're expected to go to church and when their children are home from college, their children are expected to be there.

However, even in these acts of compliance, there is a striking presence of authenticity: both a subtle underlying act of rebellion and a transcendent respect for the institution that coupled together, lend real insight into P-2's character and value system:

In a Catholic church it's very clear to identify who is not Catholic and who is based on who is standing, sitting, kneeling...there is 'Catholic gymnastics' that everybody goes through. And if you're not Catholic you don't know all of the rules. But I don't do them when I'm in church...it's like, maybe, a mini-protest against what I was forced to do for years...And I also know that since I've come out that word has spread through my hometown. I'm fairly certain that people in my hometown know. I'm also fairly certain that people aren't comfortable with it. And I think it would be really disrespectful of me, to be in Catholic church, behaving as a practicing Catholic.

And so P-2 continues on his path towards authenticity and wholeness, at times displaying significant courage to stand up and speak, even when it is difficult to do so. And, at times, quietly deferring to the entrenched systems in which he lives and operates.

*Structural Analysis*Didn't See It Coming

P-2 grew up in a small conservative, religious community where virtually all the faces in his neighborhood, on “main street” and at the local Catholic parish were familiar ones. His friends at high school were also the boys that he had known since childhood. Boys that he had sat next to in catechism, as together, they learned about the tenants of the Roman Catholic faith. These teachings and moral positions were then reinforced at home, by parents who understood Catholicism as not just a church they attended on Sundays but a way of life – a cultural distinctive. It was into this environment that P-2 came of age. His repeated statements about his complete lack of awareness about his burgeoning sexuality must be viewed within this context.

At home, he was shown a model of a man and a woman who came together, got married and had children. And even when this marriage was violated by a long-term extra-marital affair, divorce was not an option. Transgressions occurred, yet were not spoken of. Unity and cohesion in the family unit was of the greatest priority. And as far as he understood it, his future would look much the same. It need not be written out on paper for the message to be made clear: he was to grow up, be confirmed Catholic, find a wife and have children.

At church, interwoven with his understanding of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, was also a clear code of conduct – one that was thousands of years old. Sexuality was a private matter and intercourse between a man and a woman was ultimately for the purpose of procreation. Variations on this model were not tolerated. Those who dared

espouse different views were seen as threats to the Catholic way of life. Weighty, even frightening concepts such as sin and hell were taught to him as a youngster and as he grew older, he was provided with a “list” of behaviors and actions that were directly tied to such concepts. Homosexuality would have been near the top of any such list of transgressions.

At school, P-2 describes himself as “nerdy” and overcommitted. He threw himself into his studies and extracurricular activities and so it was likely that neither he, nor most people around him, would have really raised an eyebrow at the fact that he wasn’t dating girls.

But overarching these major areas of developmental influence was the singular fact that he knew no one who was “out” as a lesbian or gay man. There were no gay bars, there were no hip, free-thinking coffee shops and there were no “open and welcoming” progressive church congregations. Any homosexual living in this small, conservative community was hidden deep in the “closet.” This left him with only passing caricatures on an occasional television program, typically over-played and certainly unrealistic. This was P-2’s world. Ultimately, the sexual development of any individual involves myriad factors and it is difficult to pinpoint at what moment one understands who she or he is as a sexual being. Did he keep himself so busy at school so as to avoid the whole issue of dating girls? Was he so frightened by the judgment of his church that he never allowed his true sexual orientation to enter into his personal awareness? Was the potential disruption of the family dynamic and the threat of losing his parent’s support and love, acting as an internal blindfold to a looming truth? These questions cannot be answered

and so we are left with only one certainty: addressing this all-important issue in his life, would wait until he left his small home town and entered college.

Affect Incongruence

The boys in catechism thought that homosexuals deserved hell. His father has never spoken to him about his sexual identity. His religiously devout sister told him she thought his being gay was “wrong,” a “sin,” and “gross.” His mother’s immediate response was to question him about his sexual activity, she worried that he would contract AIDS and lamented that he would not produce for her any grandchildren. And perhaps, most shocking, his brother-in-law threatened to come to his college and “beat it out of him,” adding that P-2 would not be permitted to be anywhere his family was and certainly would not have contact with their expected child, P-2’s nephew. By any standards, these are sad and troubling occurrences. Yet, equally significant is the virtual absence of emotion and reaction on P-2’s part. At only one point in the interview, did he concede that these instances caused him to be “upset,” yet when pressed in the interview, he maintained his familiar calm affect. He explained that with time, things have improved with the family. And besides, he said, he has told these stories often, participating on discussion panels at his college. Yet his lack of expressed sadness and anger leaves one to ponder. Are these strong emotions denied, repressed or does this “scientist,” as he referred to himself during the interview, simply not feel hurt or threatened by these negatives reactions?

After his first foray into a homosexual relationship with a roommate in college, he seems to have proceeded to date women and “test” potential compatibilities with all the

focus and rigor of a scientific experiment. He states that with at least one woman he was dating, the relationship “should have worked,” and it seemed to puzzle him that it didn’t. Meanwhile, he watched other men in relationship as if he were gathering data and formulating for the first time, a paradigm for “gayness” that could finally inform him. Eventually, taking all this information into account and having the opportunity to date additional men, it is as if he reached a logical conclusion to his query, allowing him to then move forward into his gay identity.

There is no question that P-2 would have preferred to have the full support of his family and friends. Additionally, there is no question that P-2 is very aware of the difficult journey he has been on. He is insightful and articulate and recalled these events with great detail. The suggestion is not that he is, or was, in anyway removed from the reality of his lived experiences. Rather, he seems to have responded to the discovery of his gay identity, consistent with the way that he approaches his life, his studies and his work: logically and calmly.

Be True to Thyself

Yet if there were a passionate aspect of P-2’s character to be identified, surely it would be his deeply entrenched, personal sense of right and wrong. His worldview and the personal values and beliefs that undergird it, have consistently guided him throughout his life. Recalling again, the early teachings against homosexuality in his catechism class, it is significant that while he states he did not even view himself as gay at the time, he took great umbrage at the intensity with which the homosexual community was being denounced. He was confused as to why this one group was being singled out.

Additionally, he could readily see people who adamantly proclaimed a devout faith, yet lived in a way that he believed fell far short of the ideals they espoused. This he viewed as hypocrisy. Meanwhile, he had met others who claimed no religious faith at all, yet seemed to be “good” people. He also struggled with the Church’s teaching that they were to be charitable to all, yet there was such hatred being conveyed towards lesbians and gays. And even if homosexuality was a sin, why were they not being taught that his too, could be forgiven? Unbeknownst to him he was, in essence, laying the groundwork to advocate for himself in the future, for in a short amount of time, all of this would come “very close to home.”

By the time P-2 entered his senior year of high school. He had begun to put distance between himself and the Church. In college, he no longer considered himself a Catholic and so a year later as a sophomore when he began to embrace a gay identity, there was no spiritual conflict to be had. He had rejected a religious tradition that would have been at odds with his new-found identity and as he “came out of the closet,” he was free to experience this without the guilt, shame and persecution that would have doubtless been a part of his experience as a gay Roman Catholic.

Yet even now, there is a consistent respect and deference that he holds for others. Each time he returns home, he attends mass with his family. He states that he is fully aware that “image” is still quite important in his little town and that there is an expectation that the kids that come home to visit, will also be in church on Sunday. And while, as an out gay man, he willingly returns to the church of his youth, he has drawn a line on the extent to which he chooses to participate. He does not partake of communion

and does not stand and kneel in unison with the other communicants. He states that this is both, his own small act of “rebellion,” but it is also a sign of respect. Most of the people in church know by now that he is gay, and he understands that these same people would be offended if he came to church acting as a practicing member in good standing. So he chooses to not unnecessarily offend them, while at the same time, preserving his own dignity as well. And back at college, he is now being exposed to something entirely new: “out” lesbians and gays who are also actively spiritual. This is a new dimension for him, and one that currently confronts him with a fresh proposition: *he* can be “out” and religious. He states that he is moving slowly and learning as he goes, but there is no rush to commit to a new spiritual path just yet.

P-2 has wrestled with issues of hypocrisy and ideological tension within his faith tradition and has endured difficult reactions to his “coming out” as a gay man. Yet his steady demeanor and deeply held beliefs have guided him steadily along his chosen path.

Textural-Structural

P-2 was raised in a small Midwestern Roman Catholic community. In many such locales, Catholicism is not just a dominant religion but a culture and a way of life.

I was born and raised Catholic. I went to Catholic elementary school and continued on through Catechism classes until I was 18. I was confirmed Catholic...I went to church every Sunday, for sure. I grew up in a really small town, so part of going to church was like...maintaining an image that you were constantly going to church. I was an altar boy too and so I was in church all the time.

Throughout his formative years, P-2 did not recognize himself as gay, but he did have some very strong feelings about how the church was dealing with the issue.

I listened as my friends, like all twelve of them...instantly banished these 'horrible heathens' to the deepest sanctions of hell. And I remember at the time thinking that I didn't know anybody who was gay...like I didn't know what it meant [but] it seemed really judgmental to go that far that quickly. Because the deepest sanctions of hell, when you're raised Roman Catholic, is not a punishment that you put lightly on anybody.

These feelings represented a social conscience that seemed to transcend the morality that he was being taught at church. Again, at this age, he states he had no idea that he was gay. Rather, he was responding to what he perceived to be a odd over-reaction on the part of his fellow parishioners. He didn't understand why homosexuals were being singled out for this kind of judgment.

Meanwhile for P-2, the tight knit religious community of his youth gave him no reference points to truly comprehend what it meant to be gay. He understood the concept of course, but had no practical examples or role models.

The small town I grew up in is in [State] and there is nobody really out, or prominent, or visible anywhere, so I didn't really know, like I knew what the words meant, but I didn't really know what, like a physical manifestation of that looked like.

In high school he was busily involved in nearly every school group and extracurricular activity, which didn't leave much time for him to date or even explore his sexuality. He muses that it was a very small school and he was related to most of the girls anyway. So it was not until he went away to college, the he was truly confronted with his sexual identity.

Now at the university, the veil of ignorance was finally torn away when a roommate, who had developed a crush on him, asked him out.

After a year of being really good friends, he asked me out and I was pretty sure I was straight. I hadn't really thought about it before. And suddenly

had all of these questions that never was a question before. I gave it a shot, and it was confusing and messy...

They would keep this a secret from everyone and the relationship would prove to be problematic and short-lived. Confused now, by this turn of events and still uncertain about who he actually was sexually, he began to date women.

After that, I tried to date a couple of women and they didn't really, like it didn't work out. Even when they were perfectly matched to me. It should have worked out...At one point I dated this girl who, on paper, she should have been perfect, and it didn't work.

A scientist by nature, not just by declared college major, P-2 began to observe these events and slowly draw some conclusions by what he saw: "I'm like a scientist so I like think in terms of controlled experiments..." Relationships with women that in his mind should have worked, didn't. And what to do with the brief relationship with his roommate? As it turns out, this roommate had gone on to date a man known to them both, and in a strange twist of circumstances, P-2 saw in this relationship the reference point he had lacked his entire life. He was now witnessing two men dating and caring for one another. In fact, it went even further:

I don't know that I ever would have...dated another man and given it a shot again...but then I saw him go and date this other guy. The two of them were the ones who set me up on the other date and so like, I saw the compatibility and how it was working and so like there was a lot of confusion but I had those two to help me figure it out.

Based on these critical experiences of his first two years in college, and the distance he now had from the small Roman Catholic community back home, he began to embrace the truth that he was in fact, a gay man. He eventually "came out" to his college community

and embraced this new lifestyle. But what to do about his religiously conservative family?

He chose to tell two of his siblings first:

My oldest sister and my younger brother were both in college...at the time. I think they both still identify as Catholic but they weren't you know, they were in college and they weren't going to church every weekend, and so there was some level of grey area as to where their religion, or religious identity might have been.

He was intentional about choosing those members of his family that had themselves, found some distance from the church and had displayed a more progressive approach to life. As it turns out, both had suspected that he might be gay and his oldest sister had actually made overtures to him previously indicating that she was aware that he might have "something" he wanted to tell her. In her, and eventually his brother, he found the support and encouragement he needed.

She knew it was a big deal and she knew that it was something that I wouldn't know how to tell the rest of my family, so she was fairly supportive from the beginning and has been really good about recognizing that she doesn't know a lot about what it means to "come out" so that those gaps, she lets me fill in for myself...

However, he would experience a much greater challenge with his parents and his second sister, all of whom continued to devoutly practice their faith and support the positions of the church. He describes that first conversation with his mother:

She was really not happy when I told her. Her first question after I said I had a boyfriend was asking if I was sexually active with him which can be an awkward lead in question. I thought there should have been other questions first. But then, it kind of went from there to the classic, 'I think you're going through a phase,'...and 'Now I'm not going to get my grandchildren,' conversation and she was really upset because she thought I was at risk for diseases, like that's cause her knowledge of what homosexuality was, that it was nothing but a way to get AIDS. So she

was immediately very, very scared and very upset, ah, so that didn't really go that well.

There have been many talks between the two of them since and she is attempting, in her own way, to comprehend. He states: "...she tells me a lot that she is trying really hard to figure out what this means to her and that I have to be willing to give her time..."

Interestingly, in her desire to protect her son and to maintain cohesion in the family, it was his mom that would intervene on at least two important occasions to advocate for P-2. First, she was the one who told his father. To this day, P-2 and his dad have never had this conversation. Secondly, his mom stepped in when tensions began to rise with P-2's second sister and her husband. P-2 knew this conversation would be the most difficult because his sister and brother-in-law are very conservative people. She was pregnant at the time and the family was very excited. P-2 felt that if he was going to have a relationship with the new baby, it was important that the young expecting couple know the truth of who he was and spoke first to the sister. While he did not receive the support he had experienced from his other siblings, he felt her initial response was something they could work with:

We talked a lot about it because she asked a lot of questions. She asked more questions than anyone in my family did because she didn't understand...And I talked through it and she told me flat out that she doesn't like it; she thinks it's wrong; she thinks it's a sin; she thinks it's gross...but I'm still her brother so she doesn't write me off because of it. That works for me.

Unfortunately, things degraded when she later told her husband. He was extremely angry and exclaimed that P-2 would not be allowed to have any contact with their new son and in fact at one tense moment, he threatened to drive to P-2's college and "beat it out of

me.” Now, it was P-2’s mom that once again intervened and brought peace to the family.

She made it very clear that her son’s sexuality would not divide the family.

“...like within seconds of getting this information from my sister, my mom already knew and was on the phone with me telling me that she was going to handle it...my mom stepped in and actually resolved that because she wasn’t going to let that stand. Regardless of her own opinions on it, she wasn’t going to tolerate that.

Eventually, emotions did calm and over time cooler heads have prevailed. While not particularly close, P-2 and his brother-in-law are civil to one another at family gatherings and P-2 gets to enjoy being an uncle.

In his relatively young life, P-2 has experienced the distaste of religious doctrines that would judge and exclude certain groups of people; he has felt the surprise and confusion of an emerging sexual identity; and he has risked “coming out” to family members that did not understand him and in their worst moments actually threatened him and in so doing, threatened the very cohesion of the family itself. But despite it all, he has prevailed.

P-2 today, is living as a fully “out” gay man and is in a long-term committed relationship. He often shares ‘coming out’ experiences on the university campus to help others in their journey. He has rejected the Roman Catholic religion of his youth but is now in the process of deciding who he wants to be spiritually.

Entertaining the idea of getting back to a faith has actually been made more easy by the breadth of people that I have had exposure to through “coming out” because the people I’ve met, in the GLBT community, have had a more diverse selection of religion than what I was raised with.

While he continues to attend Catholic mass when he is home visiting, he does so out of respect for his family. Yet even in this environment, he seems to have found a way to maintain his own sense of self and of dignity.

In a Catholic church it's very clear to identify who is not Catholic and who is based on who is standing, sitting, kneeling...there is 'Catholic gymnastics' that everybody goes through. And if you're not Catholic you don't know all of the rules. But I don't do them when I'm in church...it's like, maybe, a mini-protest against what I was forced to do for years...And I also know that since I've come out that word has spread through my hometown. I'm fairly certain that people in my hometown know. I'm also fairly certain that people aren't comfortable with it. And I think it would be really disrespectful of me, to be in Catholic church, behaving as a practicing Catholic.

This respect for religious tradition, family and community while at the same time, balancing the need to make his own unique presence felt, is not something he saw modeled for him as an adolescent struggling with church teachings in a small Midwestern town. Rather, it is most certainly a product of P-2's own unique journey, one that has led him to sexual freedom and also to an expanding and progressive spirituality -- one that embraces diversity and authenticity.

Chapter VI

Participant Three

Textural Analysis

A Name for It

P-3's awareness of his own sexuality began as an adolescent pondering. He knew that something was there but his conceptualization of his sexual identity had not yet solidified in his own heart and mind.

To be honest I think I've always known that I was gay. I just didn't have a name for it. It just seemed normal. I really don't think it wasn't until I got into high school that I was able to put a finger on what this particular set of emotions and feelings were. You know if you want to describe it as a phenomenon, this is what I was feeling.

It's interesting that he comments that there was no "name" for it. He did not have a reference point or a paradigm in which to place it. But as his high school years began and he continued to mature, things started to make more sense.

I became very curious about being gay and you know the whole idea of homosexuality and identity...I remember it was probably my sophomore year in high school that I became particularly interested in just what that really meant.

In the process of coming to grips with this he decided to turn to his faith to help him.

Within the context of his life story, this would make complete sense. P-3 was a devout Roman Catholic...perhaps the greatest single force in his life.

I remember I had some books from my Confirmation classes that, you know, the required text or whatever, that we would refer to...we got a copy of the Bible and a Confirmation book that talked about various things and had the prayers in them and everything; and one of the things is that they have like an FAQ [frequently asked questions] section that was acting like the index so you wanted to know what was the stand on abortion, you

would go to the FAQ section and then it would refer you to a section in the book about abortion and it would discuss it in terms of what the church's stance on it was.

So he consulted this church publication in an effort to get his first sense of what homosexuality actually was and to see if this described him.

And I remember that I specifically went and looked up homosexuality. And I looked at it and surprisingly it was not particularly definitive in its stance. It just said that -- and this was in probably '92, or '93...I'm sorry probably '91 -- to me it wasn't "black and white" in terms of the answer that was provided in the book. It just said that it was a sin and ah of course it cited Leviticus. But it didn't go as far as to say that...you know the homosexual is a sinner. I think there was very little condemnation in that. Like it really was kind of like a footnote.

In addition to trying to gather much-needed information, he was already taking the beginning steps of understanding the complexity of his sexuality within the context of his faith.

And so I was very curious and I wanted to see what the church was because you know, you heard them, churches and religious organizations and what their stance on gay rights was at the time and everything and so I was very curious in terms of how does my own religion define this?

There would still be much to process and as he continued to grow and mature, his positions on sexuality and spirituality would solidify. Meanwhile, however, his heart began to speak...

But I was at the point now where I was already having...I already had one significant crush on a straight boy in high school, you know one of my best friends...it was really starting to manifest itself in terms of helping me to determine who I really was.

A Transformative Faith

In describing himself as “...very, very Catholic,” P-3 was indicating that for him, Roman Catholicism was a powerful and influential presence in his life and one that was also positive and nurturing.

I did everything—Mass every Sunday whether I was at home or sometimes we would spend the weekend with my Grandmother...we were always going to church. Ah religious holidays, we observed all of the Holy Days of Obligation. I went through and was Baptized, First Communion, Confirmation...I think the Spiritual environment that I was raised in...just the ideas and the principle of faith have been very strong in my family, particularly on my mother’s side. I think it was very reaffirming, very empowering, definitely a source of guidance and protection in my life... a belief that I’m loved and as long as I do good and never do anything malicious and I prayed, I could find a source of guidance and protection in my life from God...I’ve always had that instilled in me from a very, very young age.

Additionally, P-3 makes the point that the church was not just a house of worship, a place of reverence, but it was integrated into his very ethnicity and culture.

I think culture is entwined, it’s woven into Catholicism, the Catholicism that I grew up with being Hispanic...I’m fourth generation American, so I mean I grew up with English and everything, I had to learn Spanish so I could talk to my older relatives, but I saw the influence. And I think that someone who is Irish Catholic and gay would have a significantly different coming out process you know in terms of the religious aspects, than someone who is Hispanic Catholic and gay. And I think that was something that I had to “come out” to in the context; being Hispanic and Catholic.

To simply say that one is Catholic, does not adequately describe the complex cultural experience that worship was for him, or for others.

P-3 was quick to point out that while he views himself as a devout adherent and takes his faith seriously, it was not always that way.

I have to be very honest, when I was younger, especially in elementary years, I knew I had to pray, I knew God loved me -- you know to pray is to be able to talk with God -- but a lot of it was, "Don't eat meat on Fridays,"...you know the typical rules. I think it was much more "going through the motions" because that's what you know when you are a little kid. I mean, that's what you are told. And I think it was kind of all the way through middle school, I don't think it was until high school that I kind of realized the power of that relationship...Um, I think it was a sense of obligation to family culture, particularly to my mom...once I was in high school, that was probably a turning point to where I wanted to go for me. You know like it meant a great deal to me to go. And I think as I got older that just strengthened.

As he has matured in his faith and made it his own, he has also adopted a unique way of traversing what many have often found to be a complex journey. His intentional choice is to separate the holy or divine aspects of the church, from the "human" parts -- the dogma and creeds -- that he saw could so easily turn political in nature. In fact, he connected this to the papacy itself:

...it's whoever the Pope happens to be at the time...I loved Pope John Paul II. I believe that he truly was a progressive figure here in the church. He believed in evolution, he was for the movement of starting to include women, allowing them to make the ranks of the church. And to me that is an indication if the church can change directions so abruptly because of the change in leadership...Because obviously this Pope is particularly conservative and you know has these major concerns with these priests and the boys and I think has done a very unfortunate job in addressing that and to me that's just an indication again that this is man and not God.

P-3 seemed to adopt almost a *purist* approach to his religion. It was not to be complicated or diluted with the changing political and social tides of the day, but rather should be focused on God and the loving relationship that God wants with humanity. Church, then, provided a venue where he, a child of God, could go and respond to this invitation of love.

The one thing that I think going to church does is that it provides me a place to worship God, and so my relationship with God, has always been a loving one. I've had so many events and situations in my life where I can honestly say that I know God has heard and answered my prayers. And I know that no matter how I'm regarded here on earth, that His love for me is infinite. And His capacity to love and be merciful and forgiving is infinite. So, He knows that I am a good person, or I try to be, I aspire to be, and so that's really what I count on in terms of the relationship, and how I view myself through the religious lens.

These deeply held beliefs have also provided profound comfort for him in times of trial.

He describes one such incident:

After I finished my Masters and I left to go work on my Doctorate, I was in a bigger city. I think that really helped me see who I was. Especially after a very bad, bad breakup that I had in '05, I really came to church even more, I came closer to God because of the hard time I was having in my life and I really was looking for forgiveness for some of the things that I did, for some of the things I didn't do. I went to confession and I just confessed to God on my own, and seeking comfort and forgiveness in Him on my own during that year really was a pivotal point in terms of knowing I'm loved.

Through the ancient practices of his faith, he was provided an avenue to deal with his own perceived wrongs and afforded an opportunity for healing and restoration. At its best, this is indeed, the true strength of spiritual faith and practice. However, it is not lost upon him that this is a sensitive topic among many in the LGBT community, who do not view the church as an ally but rather as a source of oppression.

I've found that there are a lot of gay men who are practicing Catholics and I feel comforted knowing that I'm not the only one because you know there are individuals who either ask out of curiosity or ask, I'd say furthering a political agenda...you know, "How can you be Catholic and gay?" And you know sort of questioning my faith...Politically I am very much a moderate. I am very much in the middle. I really don't believe in being at an extreme of either end. I have one friend who is a beautifully sweet guy but he is very much Atheist and he's never even said anything to me personally but just from what I've heard, he will make snide

remarks or very condescending remarks about organized religion and to me that is as offensive as someone on the right wing making horrible judgment calls on people that are different from them. So to me you know if we're trying to look for a sense of a balanced society, you cannot be either/or. There is a good middle that's respectful.

When asked if his faith created a problem for him personally as he became aware of his true sexual identity and then eventually decided to "come out," he responded:

For me...when I was coming out...the idea of religion and how I'm viewed was actually a very, very small part of the whole process. The reason I say that is because...I've always felt that it is a personal relationship between God and myself. And I believe the stances and the particular point that the church takes on homosexuality...I find that to be political. I believe that that is man's influence on the church...honestly there was very little tension...I know that I'm loved, I know that I have been blessed because -- I tell this to anyone that knows me and whenever religion, particularly Catholicism comes up -- I know that that there is a God, because there is no way I would have been blessed with someone like [his partner]. To me that that is the ultimate confirmation that I would need that I am loved.

In an ironic twist, P-3 has not only felt an absence of tension between his sexuality and his faith – a tension that so many have struggled with – but he goes as far as to credit God's love and provision for providing his male life partner. And he adds, that since moving to a larger city that has a strong Roman Catholic (and gay) population, he has met others who have been able to negotiate these seeming tensions in a similar manner.

I think other people feel it to because when we go out, you know we go out to the bars and I tell [his partner], "Oh my gosh, that guy goes to my church, that guy goes to my church," you know, so I think that is kind of the perception that we all have...so I've never ever been in a place where a Catholic priest has said homosexuality is a sin, "We must work toward its demise," or anything like that.

He concludes his thoughts by saying, "I don't think there was ever a day or night where I was in conflict with trying to be both a Catholic and identify as a gay man.

A Fading Heterosexual Ideal...A New Gay Identity

Reflecting back, P-3 explains why he seemed to struggle actually identifying that he was gay in his earlier years.

I think it's because I couldn't distinguish...I think at that time, in terms of the gay portrayal in media...what I knew was that gays were cross dressers, they were flamboyant. You know I didn't see anybody like me— just kind of very introverted and quiet you know...thinking back about the movies that I would see and stuff, I didn't see anyone like that...I mean usually they were pretty much stereotypical caricatures. They were punch lines.

He was not those things. He recognized that some of these descriptions were unfair caricatures and others just didn't apply but he still didn't know where that left him. So, he did what so many do and tried to adopt a heterosexual way of living.

And so I'm like, "I'm not like that." And not in a judgmental way. You know just as in, well, that not me. If anything I think even with my friends you know...there was always the perception that I was more geek than gay.

I had probably three girlfriends all the way until my senior year...I think in high school I was still under the impression that I was going to get married and have children. It wasn't until my first year in college that I saw kind of like the diversity in terms of the people that were out there. And I started kind of talking to myself and I started catching myself looking at other guys. So I think that really did it.

It was not until he went to college that he was finally able to gain a firm grasp on his identity and make the important choice to begin telling the world. He shares about a series of chance interactions with another student that precipitated his realization:

That very first semester when I was walking from one of the parking lots to one of the buildings...it was a trek right across campus and it was every Tuesday and Thursday; and so you kind of see the same people...because they are going on the same schedule that you are. And there was this one boy who kept smiling at me as I walked past him and I started seeing this

boy almost on the dot every Tuesday and Thursday. And um then one day it was a Wednesday and I had a Wednesday class and I was in the Union and I saw this boy and he was coming out of the bathroom as I was going in and he pulled my arm, you know just not pulling me away, but just kind of tugging on my arm and as he walked past and that's when it kind of hit me I'm like, "He is hitting on me," and I think that's what started everything. I think that's when I started the processing, you know me playing with the possibility that I am gay and then that everything else in terms of being heterosexual you know marrying a woman, having children started subsiding.

As he finally allowed the truth to settle in, the false personas that he had tried to adopt just began to fade away. The first person he told was an old friend from high school but it didn't go exactly as he had anticipated.

The first person I "came out" to was my best friend in high school who also happened to be gay, but I think was a little further behind on the timeline. So when I came out to him, I was expecting to hear, "Oh, I'm gay too!" And instead I got, "Oh I experiment." So it was like kind of kind of a letdown because I was hoping to hear, you know, that he would say the same thing, but it was pretty good. I think in terms of my friends, I was very comfortable...

And so, his new life began and each day seemingly, he grew more comfortable with himself and his attraction to men.

Like I started saying, "No this is so much more what I feel." You know, who I am and I think that's when it started. And this was probably the fall of '93 and so by the time spring came around in March of '94, I had already concluded yeah I'm gay because I started really, I was letting myself look at other boys and everything.

While his life away at college was starting to come together, there was also home and his family that had to be considered. But talking to his family would have to wait. There was still hesitation and fear: "My family ah, I did not come out to anyone until probably '96. So for about two years it was just my friends and myself."

“We’re a Large Family”

Two years after he had “came out” to his friends, it was time to speak to his family and allow them to “meet” this new man that he had become. The first person would be his mom, the matriarch of the family

The first person I came out to was my mom. We were watching a movie that had a stereotypical gay character...it was not a very good movie, so you know I think we just were kind of talking of different things as the movie was going on and then she asked me, you know, “Are you like him?”...“Like him?” and she was like, “Yeah, are you like him? Do you like men?” And I was very quiet and I kind of knew this was the moment. And I just said, “What do you think? I think you know the answer to that.” And she said, “Well I need to hear it from you.” And I said, “Well, yeah I’m gay.” And she asked, “Are you sure?” And I said, “Yes.” And she said, “It’s because you haven’t met the right woman.” I said, “No, you know I’ve had girlfriends through high school,”

The unlikely moment had come and though it was fairly unremarkable, the issue was far from closed...

We kind of left it at that for a few days and it didn’t come up. We’re a large family, it’s my mom, my dad, and I’m the youngest of six boys. So you can imagine, ah after that happened, she kind of made phone calls to everybody, you know asking for an “intervention” of sorts, for everyone to talk to me and I was very happy that my brothers were supportive and they said they would talk to me, but they pretty much told my mom not to put any hope into it.

P-3 was not surprised that his mother called the other brothers asking for help. However, his homosexuality did not seem to be the surprise to them that it was to her.

I knew she was going to do that...that’s how we’ve always been in my family. You know there’s a dynamic in terms of, we’re all very close so it was expected. I mean there was no other way I could have imagined it happening. I just knew that if one person knows it’s very hard for a secret to remain in my family...There was not a single one of them that said, “Are you sure, are you questioning?” No, I think cause they all knew as well. And I think that two of them, particularly the one that I think kind of

has a sibling rivalry with me, I was really surprised because he was actually one of the ones, “Well, we love him anyway.” So that was kind of a big, big surprise for me. I mean this was all by no means a smooth process, it was very tumultuous at times...it was a lot of processing, a lot of grieving and for many years my mom did not truly accept it.

His mother, realizing that the rest of the family was not shocked and concerned about p-3's orientation, decided she would pursue the issue from a spiritual perspective.

She didn't go into denial, it turned into, “She's going to pray a lot for me, pray for conversion or a ‘coming to the light kind of thing.’” Ah she did it very covertly...I mean she did not condemn me at all...it was all very much..I think it was part of her grieving process.

P-3 did not convey any sense of frustration or anger at his mom at all but rather, realized that she needed to deal with it in her own way. Meanwhile, P-3 just wanted things to get back to “normal.”

“The Elephant in the Room”

He had overcome many hurdles on his journey and now, both his closest friends and everyone in his family, with the exception of his father, knew that he was gay. What he wanted more than anything was to have a “normal life.”

...I didn't want to be treated differently. I didn't want the “elephant in the room” kind of thing. That was really what it was...I did not want to be perceived as different. And I think of in terms of who I was, I really just wanted normality...my brothers have their wives, I want to be able to bring home a boy, and him to be treated as if he were a woman and I was straight, I mean I wanted normality all the way through. I still didn't even know what kind of person I was. I think that it was just a lot of uncertainty on my part of who I was and how I wanted to be perceived, for me, the big thing was -- and this was very erroneous on my part I think -- it was, “Once I have a boyfriend they'll see how happy I'll be.”

Despite insecurities about his physical appearance, and just not knowing how to navigate in the gay world, he did have a relationship with another man in those early college years. This lasted about seven months and occurred before he came out to his mom.

Lymphoma

In the late '90's, things would take a dramatic turn for the family. At this point, no one had told his father that he was gay.

I think my mom kept him in the dark about it, for a number of years didn't really tell him because she didn't know how he would take it.

But a tragic diagnosis would lay the groundwork both for his father to be told and for his mother to finally find peace about it all.

She [his mother] acquired hepatitis through a blood transfusion which gave her cancer of the liver. And so she had a transplant in '99. And that gave her a two a two-year extension on her life which we were all very grateful because so many wonderful things happened in those two years that she was around to enjoy and be with us. And probably after that first year, she became very much more open. And wanting to know who my friends were and one of my best friends, ah Victor...we kind of dated for a little bit, probably about two months and then we just became best friends since then. And so Victor was always coming over visiting or we were going somewhere, and a couple of times she asked what my relationship was with Victor, and I said, "Ah we're just friends," and she had asked, "Are you sure you're just friends? Ah, well, I like him for you, that's all I'm going to say." And so I thought that was wonderful and I told Victor and, you now he was very happy with hearing that.

Unfortunately, his mom would not survive much longer, but before she passed away, she had a talk with her husband.

My mother passed away in 2001...she had some time to come to peace about a lot of things and my dad was there; there were a number of weeks where it was just her and my dad and so I was under the impression, and I

am pretty sure it was correct from what everyone told me, she told my dad; and I think he had just sort of left it at that.

The issue has never been pressed with his dad. His father doesn't seem to have the desire, or the words to sit and have a "heart-to-heart" about such things and the family, and P-3, have respected that. However, this is not to say that his father is not invested and interested in his life. P-3 describes his dad's philosophy in relationship to his son's life:

And as long as he's happy; he knows what he is doing; you know, "[P-3] is taking care of himself and you know finishing or at that time completing his education, he has a job; he's okay." And I think that is kind of been what my dad uses to comfort himself.

But his father is also not without his own surprises. Referring again to his friend and former boyfriend Victor:

And you know my dad loved Victor for some reason. Victor tended to dress, very alternative at the time. So my dad, he just marveled at the things Victor would wear. You know it was just like he stepped out of the TV or something.

His father has slowed his pace in his later years and seems to be content with this yet his support for P-3 is still evident, in its own way.

He's met my partner and he's met my previous boyfriend from a number of years ago...now he's older, and he's become a very quiet individual. Since my mom passed, he's really become very calm; not as outspoken, doesn't like to rock the boat. And I think for his comfort, ah you know it's pretty much unsaid, but he'll ask how [P-3's partner] is doing, he's good at that, and asks about work. You know he really doesn't pull out anything specific, you know I think for him that works best and I think in terms of the nature of the relationship and how it affects the family that works best.

And concluding his thoughts about his mom, P-3 gave this touching homage:

I told [his partner] that the beginnings of my faith, the essence of my faith in God I think that is one of the greatest gifts that my mother ever gave me because she was the one that helped me to see that from a very young age. And to this day carries me through life. And so I always say that is one of the greatest gifts, if not the greatest gift my mom ever gave me.

A Positive Experience

In what seems like an appropriate closing note to the interview, P-3 provided some thoughts as he reflected back on this phenomenon that was, the “coming out” experience for him:

I’d been very blessed in terms of all the people I came out to...of my friends there was never an issue. I never lost a friendship over it. No one treated me differently. It was just ideal friendships all the way through... I don’t think there was ever anything truly negative that came about that would be out of the ordinary. I think “coming to terms” isn’t always a clean, easy process. But in the grand scheme of things compared to other individuals, you know, no getting kicked out of the house, no death threats, no disownments, everything for me in my life was, I mean it was still emotional and tumultuous at times but not as unfortunate as other people have had.

Structural Analysis

Moderation

P-3’s voice carries with it, the maturity of his years -- a life lived well. There is wisdom that is evident to the reader, as he discusses his views on sexuality, spirituality, family and friends. Perhaps an appropriate description would be a word that he himself used, *moderate*. He said this in the context of discussing politics and religion but one can see how this quality is displayed in other aspects of his life as well.

P-3 has long lived in the middle of a very unique tension. Many in the Roman Catholic Church of which he has been a part of since childhood would condemn him for

his homosexual identity and lifestyle, insisting that it is in direct contradiction to Scripture. Yet he has chosen a quiet, intentional and devout religious life that would make the average American churchgoer look ambivalent at best. For him, religion is not a practice to be exercised but a relationship and a way of life to be lived...daily. It is personal and yet, profound. And yet this is not a man who judges atheists and agnostics (certainly not adherents to other faith traditions), nor is he out proselytizing in a manner that has become such a negative stereotype of Christianity for so many. He is a “true believer” within a religious tradition the refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of his own sexual identity.

Conversely, he is a member of the LGBT community whose ranks include many who have been harmed and persecuted by the church. It is not always popular for one to be religious in gay social circles and to be sure, he has heard the rude, agenda-driven comments. Yet he defends his spiritual convictions and takes issue with those in the LGBT family who would denounce individuals like himself, seeing this as the worst kind of hypocrisy from those who should know better – those who have been so often on the losing end of such harsh criticism.

One cannot help but see the irony in a *moderate* life philosophy, seeming so *radical*...

A Higher Love

This moderate approach to life is displayed as patient and empathetic love in his personal relationships as well. It is moving to witness P-3 giving his mother, the space of literally years, to resolve her own personal issues with his orientation. Not simply *tolerating* her resistance but understanding her need to grieve the loss of her dreams for

her youngest son and too readjust the expectations that could be found in the heart of any mother. She would travel her own spiritual pilgrimage and reach her own conclusions, as fate would have it, while she was slowly dying. Additionally, one can only imagine the longings of a son's heart to have his father's full and unconditional acceptance.

Especially in such matters as delicate and personal as one's own sexual identity. Yet his father simply does not seem to be the kind of man who is comfortable engaging on such issues. P-3 seems to have understood this – understood his father – and despite his own relative needs, accepted his dad on these terms. This is an act of charity and one of respect. In a world, seemingly replete with examples of the prevalent philosophy, “Me first,” P-3 has allowed the integrity of his life and the quality of his relationships to speak to his father and give witness to him in a way that words probably could not. And indeed, P-3 conveyed touching moments, glimpses if you will in later years, of his dad's expressed care and concern both for him, his friends and partners.

Of Man and Of God

Perhaps no part of P-3's story displays his mindset and the internal strength of his character more so than his ability to clearly define for himself, his own unique worldview -- one that has not been fully influenced or biased, either by the LGBT community or the Catholic Church. He has stated previously, that from his earliest recollections, even before he knew to call himself “gay,” that he never had a sense that there was anything wrong with him or his feelings of attraction to men. To be sure, there was fear and likely a primal understanding that this was not information he could freely share to a homophobic world. Despite the lack of any gay role models in his life and the presence

of poor caricatures of gay men and lesbian women in the popular media. And in particular, in spite of nearly two millennia of church teachings against homosexuality, somehow, P-3 was able to create a clear line in his spiritual way of being, between his personal relationship with God and the failings of humanity and its influence on church policy. Stage models of spiritual formation and faith development indicate that this complex conceptualization is rare in individuals and even more so in adolescents. In retrospect, it is clear that this insight and inner strength of character has served P-3 quite well and protected him from being trapped in the social polarities of our day that seem to ensnare so many on either side of the argument. But rather than a pragmatic solution to avoid controversy, P-3's worldview allowed both his sexuality and his spirituality to thrive and grow to fruition in such a nuanced way, that he never personally experienced the supposed conflict that is currently the fuel of such heated debates in the public arena.

"I'm Blessed"

Looking back over the transcript, P-3 often used the phrase, "I'm blessed." While certainly, this phrase is likely uttered by many in passing to convey a level of gratitude or appreciation, there is a real sense that with him, it goes much deeper. It seems to speak to an assurance that God is actively working in his life and that the "blessings" he enjoys are a result of God's love. He stated at one point that there have been numerous moments in his life when he held a certainty that God had heard and answered his prayers. That God could see, in essence, the best intentions of his heart and his aspirations to be a good man. He conveys deep appreciation for the "gift" of faith that his mom passed onto him. Not the example, or the model or the template, but the gift, connoting the sense of a spiritual

legacy that again, God's hand was in. He spoke of his friends being a blessing in his life and seems quite gratified to share that there were no "issues" on their part, regarding his sexuality and that he never lost a friendship due to his "coming out." And in a particularly moving moment in the interview, he offers as proof to anyone who would listen, that the evidence of God's love and provision in his life is the presence of his beloved partner. Even the way he relates his story and his "coming out" experiences speaks to a peace of mind that seems to permeate his being. He stated on several occasions that although no one comes through this process unscathed and that, to be sure, there were difficult moments and painful emotions, he is appreciative for the relative lack of difficulties and then cites some of the common barriers that so many have had to experience such as being kicked out of their homes and death threats and being disowned.

Speaking to P-3 and listening to his story, one is encouraged that this journey...this phenomenon, does not always have to be a traumatic one. Because it is an issue so close to one's heart and so fundamental to one's identity, it is inevitable that there will be an array of emotions. And there seems to be no denying the intrinsic element of risk. But P-3's life boldly speaks to the reality that one can live a devoutly religious life and also live openly as an "out" gay man and find fulfillment on both paths.

Textural-Structural

P-3 states frankly that he has always known that he was gay.

To be honest I think I've always known that I was gay. I just didn't have a name for it. It just seemed normal. I really don't think it wasn't until I got into high school that I was able to put a finger on what this particular set of emotions and feelings were. You know if you want to describe it as a phenomenon, this is what I was feeling.

One of the first steps he took in trying to solidify his understanding of his emerging sexual identity was to turn to his faith. He was raised as a devout Roman Catholic and his faith was a source of culture, community, comfort and personal fulfillment. So it was completely consistent for him to examine his sexuality through the lenses of his religion.

And so I was very curious and I wanted to see what the church was because you know, you heard them, churches and religious organizations and what their stance on gay rights was at the time and everything and so I was very curious in terms of how does my own religion define this?

He read the books given to him during his religious training and though they stated that it was a “sin,” to engage in homosexual activity, it was left ambiguous as to how God actually viewed the homosexual. Meanwhile, he never heard in the Catholic parishes of his youth, sermons or teachings denouncing the LGBT community. So very early on, P-3 drew his own conclusions stating, “I don’t think there was ever a day or night where I was in conflict with trying to be both a Catholic and identify as a gay man.” While the official teaching of his church viewed homosexual relations to be sinful, P-3 had in essence, created his own standard that fit comfortably for him.

In high school, the development of both his sexuality and his spirituality became more obvious. He states that as a child, his relationship to church was much like other growing adolescents. It was a staple but he would often find himself going through the motions of the liturgy, not truly owning it as his own. However, during his teen years, this changed. He began to view his spirituality as a relationship with God...

...I don’t think it was until high school that I kind of realized the power of that relationship...Um, I think it was a sense of obligation to family culture, particularly to my mom...once I was in high school, that was probably a turning point to where I wanted to go for me. You know like it

meant a great deal to me to go. And I think as I got older that just strengthened.

Likewise, his sexuality was becoming more real as well.

But I was at the point now where I was already having...I already had one significant crush on a straight boy in high school, you know one of my best friends...it was really starting to manifest itself in terms of helping me to determine who I really was.

Though he was starting to experience some very real feelings towards other young men, he had also been raised in an environment where he saw no practical examples of lesbian or gay individuals and certainly not same sex relationships. He recalls that occasionally he would see gay characters depicted on television but they did not seem to resonate with how he viewed himself. So he took what was for him, again, a natural course of action and began dating girls.

I had probably three girlfriends all the way until my senior year...I think in high school I was still under the impression that I was going to get married and have children. It wasn't until my first year in college that I saw kind of like the diversity in terms of the people that were out there. And I started kind of talking to myself and I started catching myself looking at other guys. So I think that really did it.

So it wasn't until college that he first experienced the diversity of other people, beliefs and cultures and realized that there were other paths available to him. Slowly, his attraction to men took a more prominent place in his consciousness and he started to realize that he was not a heterosexual. In a sense, the more he embraced these deeper attractions, the "straight" persona he had adopted in high school just faded away. Now identifying as a gay man, he chose to "come out" to an old friend from high school who he assumed was gay as well. It didn't go exactly as planned but it was definitely positive.

The first person I “came out” to was my best friend in high school who also happened to be gay, but I think was a little further behind on the timeline. So when I came out to him, I was expecting to hear, “Oh, I’m gay too!” And instead I got, “Oh I experiment.” So it was like kind of kind of a letdown because I was hoping to hear, you know, that he would say the same thing, but it was pretty good. I think in terms of my friends, I was very comfortable...

As he grew more comfortable identifying openly as a gay man, he also grew in his understanding of how he would practice his faith. He knew by now that official church teachings condemned a gay lifestyle but for this young man, who had transformed his spiritual beliefs in high school from religious practice to personal relationship, any contradiction between these two worlds was collapsed.

For me, when I came out...the idea of religion and how I’m viewed was actually a very, very small part of the whole process. The reason I say that is because...I’ve always felt that it is a personal relationship between God and myself. And I believe the stances and the particular point that the church takes on homosexuality, abortion, I find that to be political. I believe that that is man’s influence on the church and the church is by no means perfect because it is run by man so thus its imperfect

So for P-3, there was no great tension, but rather an intentional choice...a refusal to have his faith and his sexual identity pitted against one another. He was convinced that God loved him just the way he was and therefore could move forward as both a gay man and a devout Roman Catholic. He rejected the very basis of the argument and has defended himself before both Catholics and gays that don’t understand his choices. He has sought out parishes that refuse to take a hard stand against the LGBT community and to this day he feels completely at home in both worlds.

Two years into his college career, he was definitely on his way towards an authentic identity but he had still not “come out” to his family. The first person he would tell was his mother.

We were watching a movie that had a stereotypical gay character...it was not a very good movie, so you know I think we just were kind of talking of different things as the movie was going on and then she asked me, you know, “Are you like him?”...“Like him?” and she was like, “Yeah, are you like him? Do you like men?” And I was very quiet and I kind of knew this was the moment. And I just said, “What do you think? I think you know the answer to that.” And she said, “Well I need to hear it from you.” And I said, “Well, yeah I’m gay.” And she asked, “Are you sure?” And I said, “Yes.” And she said, “It’s because you haven’t met the right woman.” I said, “No, you know I’ve had girlfriends through high school... We kind of left it at that for a few days and it didn’t come up.”

In the interim, his loving and conservative Catholic mom had called his brothers asking them to intervene and somehow convince him that he was mistaken. Of course, in the end this did not happen. Several if not most of his brothers had long suspected he was gay and they realized that he needed to be real with himself and others. But P-3 understood that his mom needed time to process this in her own way and he was willing to give that to her. What was absent in all of this was any harsh judgment or rejection. The risk in telling his family, in speaking those words for the first time, was very real but his family chose to embrace him rather than reject him. Meanwhile, he has never had a specific conversation with his father about his sexuality which is quite indicative of the family dynamic and of his father’s personality. However, P-3 believes that years later after his mother had been diagnosed with cancer and was dying, she used the occasion to tell her husband about the truth about his son.

P-3's greatest concern regarding his family was that he be allowed to live a "normal life" and just blend into the family dynamic that he loved so much.

...I didn't want to be treated differently. I didn't want the "elephant in the room" kind of thing. That was really what it was...I did not want to be perceived as different. And I think of in terms of who I was, I really just wanted normality...my brothers have their wives, I want to be able to bring home a boy, and him to be treated as if he were a woman and I was straight, I mean I wanted normality all the way through. I still didn't even know what kind of person I was. I think that it was just a lot of uncertainty on my part of who I was and how I wanted to be perceived, for me, the big thing was -- and this was very erroneous on my part I think -- it was, "Once I have a boyfriend they'll see how happy I'll be."

In fact, this is exactly how it has played out. He has brought his past boyfriends home and his current life partner has a good relationship with the family and his father.

P-3's story seems to be somewhat unique. While the potential for conflict certainly existed between his emerging identity as a gay man and the Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality, it was his very strength of character and insight that rejected this false choice and instead he created a way that allowed him to live with pride in both worlds. While there was anxiety and risk in choosing to "come out" to his family as exemplified by how long he waited to do so, his family accepted him, each in their own way. P-3 is a positive and optimistic person who has chosen his own path and his own rules to live by. His internal strength and clarity seem to have been present from his earliest years and by remaining true to his convictions, both spiritually and sexually, he has found a contentment in his life that quite evident.

Chapter VII

Participant Four

Textural Analysis

Life as a “PK”

P-4 started out life as a “PK.” That is an abbreviation for “pastor’s kid,” and is an informal nickname or moniker of sorts used in many Evangelical Christian traditions. His father was a Lutheran minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America or ELCA. The ELCA is generally seen as the more liberal or progressive wing of the Lutheran Church in America today. Yet even within this movement, there can be significant differences of opinion on key issues and significant variation based on the region of the country. P-4 describes his heavy level of investment in the church during those years:

...during that time I went to confirmation, I did church camps, I was a camp counselor, I was a camp hand. I served on the first ELCA Synod for Southwest, Southeast [state in which he lived]....The first youth member there and I served there for four years.

Unfortunately, just as familiar to him as being a PK, were the deep-seated views that came with being a part of a Christian faith tradition in the Deep South:

I never had, um, pressures from my dad; as far as there was never any kind of homophobia from him specifically. From the parishioners in the church it was quite evident that type of behavior was not accepted, or tolerated in the community. And ah, there were a lot of regular, homophobic remarks at ah, youth events, or what not or sitting out in front of the church talking. And, ah, you know in the community, if teenagers would “come out,” a lot of times they wound up being disowned by their families, and kicked out.

So even as a young man, heavily invested in the church, involved on many levels of leadership and the son of a minister, there existed an ever-present fear at church, because he was also gay.

So, it you know, I guess it bred an environment of fear for me and lack of fitting in. But a lot of that again, based on the religious components and ah, so much focus on that and “judgmentalism”...especially during the last ah, last few years when the issue of ordained clergy was coming up -- whether or not they had to take a vow of celibacy or could be partnered -- was you know big things.

Despite the “heaviness” of some of these undercurrents during his formative years in the church, when asked if he liked being a “PK,” he responded with a level of lightheartedness that is typical of P-4’s personality:

Um, did I like being a PK? Yes and no. Um, cause we were in a small town in [southern state where he lived], and my parents are pretty liberal... We moved quite a bit, about every three to six years we’d move. So I never got to feel like I fit into a school system. Until after I graduated and left home. It certainly had its benefits in the church and with the parishioners in small town Texas because the preacher’s kid can do no wrong. And that was a literal belief system when I was a teenager. I would go to the local store and the people are sitting there drinking and they offer me beer, but if their kids come around or even try to get a sip, their kids you know get smacked. But I was the preacher’s boy, so it was okay...during my rebellious stage it was fun because the key to the parsonage was the same as the key to the church, and so I could go into the sacristy, and we’d go in and steal communion wine, and ah those kind of things, and so, that was fun.

But it wasn’t all fun and games. Life with a minister can also be taxing and the demands on his father were no different. Often, the heaviest burden is born by the family:

I remember being very bitter about the church. And not liking the church because ah, it was church first and then family, for dad. There was three vacations in a row were we left and came back early because someone had died. And so you know, I resented the church for that, but all in all it

was good. I got a good foundation of morals from it, and definitely was beneficial in my life.

As he alluded to earlier, P-4 was in a unique position as a young person because he had been selected as a “youth representative” on the synod council. Synod church councils are typically regional and can represent several local congregations. This was a leadership opportunity that impacted him quite strongly.

And the worst thing about being in church I thought was when I was on synod council, we were at a meeting arguing over the Bishop’s salary and whether it should be 120 or 170 thousand a year, and I’m sitting there thinking, “You know my dad never made more than 38 thousand, and he had two Parishes and stuff. So what the hell are we talking about 100 plus?!” That’s when I ah, I really thought, wow, and I got into the politics of the church and I thought how?

Ironically though, serving in this position actually allowed him to better comprehend, as a young man, the struggle that LGBT people were having in the church.

Serv[ing] on the senate council and seeing the struggle and the onset of ordaining gay clergy struggle in the church, um made it easy for me to polarize this one group...was able to know then in the church, I’m not alone here...

Later, after he “came out,” he continued to serve on the council for a time. He found his “voice” here and actively advocated for what he thought was right:

...my second term on synod council I was “out.” And so when the synod council would address things and a council member would say something that I considered stupid, I would call him on it. And it was like, you know, “What are you saying?” You know, “Lest you be judgmental. You know, I can’t believe you’d do that? “That’s not Jesus in your heart.”

Experimentation

P-4 is very at ease with himself and speaks candidly about his early years and some of the formative sexual experiences he had during those times. His earliest recollection was at seven:

...that summer I lost my virginity. Yeah. To an 11-year-old girl in the neighborhood. She taught me how to “French kiss,” fuck, and dip Copenhagen all in the same afternoon.

P-4 recalls that same year, an interesting conversation that he had with his mother:

I was ah seven years old and we were sitting home and watching the local news, and um, this rapist had gotten caught. And ah he had raped these two girls in this one town nearby and it was sad enough, but he was the same rapist that had raped a boy in another town nearby, and I looked at my mom and I asked her, I said, “Ma, that’s horrible, but how is it possible for a boy to rape another boy? I mean I know how a boy can have sex with a girl, but how can that be? And she told me. And when she told me there was this like weight lifted off, like oh, cool, that’s for me... And then ah, when I was eight, I had my first, ah male experience.

Through this disturbing incident he observed in the news and the subsequent discussion with his mom, he was able to formulate for the first time, what homosexuality was. And it resonated. Reflecting, P-4 views these early childhood experiences as a normal, formative aspect of growing up.

I mean really, small town Texas, there’s nothing to do, and when you go out and play and you see animals do stuff, you go out and try it. I mean that’s just, that’s just part of growing up small town like that. I guess everybody did it. And everybody went through the experimental stages and playing at that time.

Things calmed down for a while and then in junior high, he was active again.

Um, well you know that was you know seven, eight, and then ah, nothing really until middle school. Now middle school, from basically 12-14, was extreme experimental time and, and I was pretty active.

But the “experimentation” transcended just adolescent sexual exploration. As he moved into high school and his awareness of his sexual identity became more profound, so did his understanding of how to negotiate relationships and experience community while having to remain covert.

So, um, but it was you know experimental in school. I had a couple of friends that had come out, it was a lesbian girl at the high school and she was ridiculed and humiliated and ah, and you know I mean so it’s scary for the rest of us. But there’s still like the experimentation and what not on the side... You know we knew each other, but we kept secrets at school. Um, you know in high school I had a girlfriend that was a lesbian. That was my cover at school.

This was a complex “path” to travel for young teenagers, especially when considering their heterosexual counterparts are stereotypically unrestrained in their pursuit of girlfriends and boyfriends and the inevitable ensuing drama that is so much a part of high school life. Life, that is, for straight kids.

Ethiopia

There is another aspect to P-4’s formative years that was quite unusual for a child and one that would have a lasting impact on how he viewed those around him and himself. His parents were missionaries in Ethiopia.

We were on the mission field in Ethiopia, from when I was one to six, and ah doing famine relief, and then we came back state-side and I was in a Parsonage in [southern state]...from 76 through 88 when I left for college.

By six years of age, he had seen more pain and suffering than most adults would in a lifetime. His time on the mission field heavily shaped his social conscience and brought to the forefront for him, issues of economic disparity and racism. He describes it:

That comes out being on the mission field and doing famine relief in Ethiopia from [ages] one to six and you know when I'm four years old one of my playmates dying on my porch from starvation. And then, you know, going and taking the food that was clutched in his hand when he died and giving it to somebody else, because he's not going to eat it anymore. And then seeing all of the waste here. That that you know that was a huge thing too. You know and I guess I just rebelled against the wastefulness and the judgmental and discriminatory practices of who I defined to be American Christians.

Um, part of it I think had to do with me coming back from Ethiopia and all of a sudden being thrown into a "field of snow," if you will. You know, there was so many white people. White people wasted so much. And then the black people that were in the community were poor. And there weren't very many of 'em. And they went to Goodwill for their clothes, and that is who I went and hung out with. Immediately those were my friends. I did not try at all to associate with the wasteful white folks. And ah, as I was growing the religious culture to me I associated that with Anglos. It was the "Texas rednecks" because all the churches that I went to were almost 100 % white. "Rednecks."

Back in America, P-4 seemed drawn to those who were less fortunate, those whom society looked down upon or cast aside. And as he grew older, he would develop a profound and personal understanding of how they suffered.

The South

P-4 is old enough to remember overt racism in the small towns of his youth. He describes it vividly:

So, you know, [area where he was raised] was small town country people and I would see that, ah, group of people discriminating against the poor black women. When I was, when I was in elementary school at that time we still had a "whites only" swimming pool in our town...And at my birthday party, because my dad was a preacher and I had my birthday party there, [at the public swimming pool] I had invited a Mexican boy and a Black boy to come swimming with me and the only reason we got to go in was because my dad was a preacher. And no one would do that. And so we went in and as soon as he jumped in the pool, everybody at the entire pool left, and we had the entire pool to ourselves, four kids and my

parents. And when we left, they drained that pool. Yeah. They drained it. It was closed for a week while they drained it and cleaned it. Because a “nigger” had been in it.

And it was this very same environment of bigotry and intolerance that weighed heavily on his decision about if, and when, to ‘come out’ as a gay man. When asked how he would describe being gay in a small southern, Christian community, he stated simply, “...ostracizing. You know, self-induced, totally self-imposed...yeah.” He didn’t hesitate in saying that if he had “come out” as a younger boy in these towns of his youth, “I would have been beaten up and ah, you know, harassed terribly.” Later, as a student-teacher, he describes the discrimination he experienced:

...when I was a teacher I got kicked out of student teaching because I was gay. And then when I was student teaching my final semester of college and I got kicked out of one school district because I was gay in [state where he lived]...From that point forward, every time I’ve interviewed with other teachers for fifteen years, it was part of my interview, “I am gay, and if this is going to be an issue with your school, then it’s not going to be a fit. I interview like that because why waste our time?”

As if “coming out” were not daunting enough, these environmental factors gave P-4 good reason to avoid such a risky decision.

Avoidance

It was in college that P-4 finally decided to “come out,” but this did not arrive without significant hesitation and fear. He describes how elaborately he went about avoiding the “talk” when he would go home to visit.

...once I was “out” at college I never came home alone. I always brought three or four friends with me. And that would maintain a distraction so I never really had to be alone with my mom and dad.

However, despite his best attempts to circumvent it, the inevitable discussion weighed heavy upon him and one particular night, the moment finally came:

And, ah this particular night we had gone, there was a volleyball tournament. We went and played and ah after the tournament there was a social and my friends were over at the church and my mom and I were at the house alone, and I was like, oh hey, let's do this now and I picked a spontaneous moment to do it because I knew it was something coming and I had a moment and I knew I'd be leaving soon...

His mom seemed to anticipate this moment and helped him get started:

I'm sure mom had ideas, because when she and I had our talk, I was like, "We need to talk," And she just looked at me and said, "You're coming out." And I was like, "Yes!"

While P-4 had gone to great lengths to avoid this discussion, he had spent considerable time thinking about it. In the process, he had created an entire rationale as to why it would be *prudent* to tell them. He explains:

Sophomore year, I was getting ready, you know, I was about to be twenty and I just decided like, "You know what, if my parents don't support me for who I am then they shouldn't have to support me financially." And that was what I used for the justification in my head. And then when I got home and was telling ma, and I was just like, "I just thought you need to know in case you don't support me." And she said, "That is not" She said, "You're telling us because you want us to be a part of your life,"... "You want to be a part of us and you don't want to lie to us, you want us to be supportive of course and that's what you're hoping and we are..."

In a moving testament to the connection between mother and son, his mom not only interpreted what he was doing but also continued to give him the words he needed to express the deeper longings of his heart: he desperately wanted his parents' acceptance.

When I came out, I had been sitting with my mom for a couple of hours, going through the tears, talking about it, she was totally supporting and accepting of me, and my dad walked in and my pressure with that is that I was concerned always about my dad because I'm adopted and have an

older sister and they had to wait until I was born to go forward with filling out papers cause he had to make sure he was gonna have a son. And you know for that I felt pressure, ah continuing the family name...birthrights and so forth. And so he comes in as my mom and I had been talking and he said like, "What's going on?" and I just looked at him and I said, "Dad, I'm gay." And he looked at me and he said, "Are you sure?" and I said, "I'm positive I am." And he said, "Well, you're still my son whether you like it or not."

And so the conversation flowed. He told his story...his true story, enveloped in support from his loving mom. Meanwhile, there was yet another level of fear that weighed on him. He knew from the accounts he was told about his adoption, that his parents had been quite intentional about wanting a boy to carry on the family name. P-4 worried that his father would be disappointed that he would not bear biological grandchildren for him. Serendipitously, his father walked in while he and his mom talked and in an exchange that feels anti-climactic, humorous and poignant all at once, P-4 told his dad that he was gay and in just a few short words his dad put all his fears to rest. Finally, his parents knew he was a gay man. And they loved him and accepted him. He shares how this moment felt:

Relief... Oh, it was so liberating. My goodness it was, "Boom," and from that point forward I have never looked back...once I knew that they were supportive of me then I didn't care about anybody else. And, ah, it was liberating...

Sister

"Coming out" to his sister, unfortunately, did not go as well.

I have a sister, she's married and lives about ten miles from where my dad's last Parish was...it was a small town and she married into the community...she and my nieces live there and still attend church and ah, don't miss a Sunday.

He recollects that about a year before he “came out” to his parents, his sister had come to visit him at college and he chose this moment to tell her:

She came to my school to go party with me, she’s older than I was and I told her when we were getting ready to go out to the bars. She’d never been to a gay bar and she did not go. She went home. She just couldn’t believe it. And she and I still don’t have a good relationship.

The first family member that P-4 risked “coming out” to, had literally walked away from him and returned home. And this began a long-standing tension between them that continues today, though they still both struggle to find a way to relate.

My sister won’t let her children come and see me. Even if they come with grandma and grandpa...for 17 years since my niece was born, I was told I was not supposed to touch my niece....

Initially however, it was not clear to him or the family how deep her aversion to this sexuality went. They assumed the real resistance was coming from her husband:

I blamed her husband for that and went off on him and had a good argument and it was just this summer we discovered that she was the one that was saying no and not her husband...

He describes in detail, the incident that brought all of this to light:

The younger of the nieces wanted to come with my mother [to visit him] and my sister had said ah she had to talk to [her husband] about it and then when that had been put off and put off and then my mom who was at my niece’s called my brother-in-law about, could she come with my mom to come and visit me last summer, and [he] was like, “Sure, have fun but pick a week that doesn’t conflict with ah volleyball practice...And when they called my sister back, and said, “Hey, he said okay!” My sister said, “Well I’ll have to say no, sorry.” She was not allowed to...My mom called her out on it, and was like, “So all these years you’ve let [your husband] take the blame?” She was like, yeah, you’re right I guess I have.” So now...I do my best to spend time with my nieces and I have little to say to her. Except you know when I look her in the face and I just say, “I can’t believe it.” “I always thought you were different.”

Dad

As was mentioned, “coming out” as a gay man, P-4 felt a particularly strong burden regarding his father. He explains:

I knew mom wasn't going to be a problem. My concern was with my dad, and that all led back to the adoption stories of knowing my sister was adopted at six days and I was at six weeks and it took longer for me because I had to have a penis when I came out...my dad wanted a son. I'm six generations and I'm the last one with the family name. Dad's older brother has only daughters. His father's brothers have only daughters. I wouldn't be bearing children and I didn't want him to be ashamed. Disappointed. That is what it literally, ultimately was. That was my hardest thing in coming out.

He believed the responsibility to continue the family name had fallen on him. He heard the adoption stories growing up and knew of his father's desire to have a son and the intentionality his parents displayed in the adoption process to make sure this would become a reality. Now, two decades later, P-4 already preoccupied with the fear of sharing with his family that he was gay, also had to face the possibility that he was disappointing his father and failing to live up to his responsibilities to the family. Fortunately, P-4 discovered that not only had his dad accepted him as a gay man, he would also become a fierce advocate. He recalls a story from his time serving on the synod council:

So it was right when I was twenty-one. It was my last year on the synod council and one of the churches...had put forth a motion to intentionally exclude homosexuals because, “They are an abomination, and the church must take a stand against them.” I went straight for a microphone. And I was the second person to a microphone. And ahead of me was my father. And they acknowledged him before me on the microphone, and his first comment was, “How can you call yourselves Christians, when you're offering such a message of hatred? We are called on to welcome all into

our community and to minister to them; not to judge them.” And you know, I was able to walk away from the mic cause he kind of said a lot.

The pride in P-4’s voice was evident in this recollection. His father had not only accepted him as a son...a gay son, but was now publicly defending him and those like him from the church that had been a long-time source of judgment. But these defenses were not without a price.

...most recently he’s retired. And he accepted an interim call out of retirement to a parish without a pastor who were going through the “call” process. And when he acknowledged that he had a gay son, the president of the church council took it upon himself to terminate my dad’s contract. He could not be a “fair or unbiased leader” with a gay kid. It biased him too much and he couldn’t think clearly to represent God’s message....my dad got fired because I’m gay. And so my dad has totally taken a stand for me.

His father has continued to stand by him and accept his true identity. And in the end, his father’s dreams were fulfilled: “...now I have a son and he is all happy, and he is a grandfather...”

Life and Spirit...Today

While P-4 was “coming out of the closet” as a gay man, there were also radical shifts taking place in his spiritual life as well.

As I came out I moved away from believing in God or a true spiritual being...I’m not a practicing Christian now. I really see the whole institution of organized Christianity as far as the churches and such and their political system as so bastardized...more ah of convenience for people to use as weapons.

As he came into himself as a sexual being he also felt more empowered to choose what was best for him as a *spiritual being* as well. But as with the “coming out” process, this happened gradually.

...it happened over a period of time in my college years. And you know part of it was taking six hours of theology. My intro. to theology class was awesome and what he did was break it down, he broke down beliefs, that are you know widely held beliefs, of the church and then made us question everything that we were taught and then justify it. And when I came back around, I could not justify any of it. Other than this was some really, really, really, high caliber “Walt Disney” stuff going on.

He had begun to see the world through different eyes and the years of discrimination and judgment had taken their toll:

Well, I think part of the deal when I was coming out and struggling with it, was how the church in their discriminatory practices. And so it made me become more judgmental of it and more skeptical of the practices of ah Christianity you know...

However, he is quick to point out that this is his own decision and he respects the right of others to worship in their own way. Additionally, he still has ties to the church through his personal relationships:

But I’m also a firm believer that if Christianity really works for you, and it makes you happy and helps you sleep at night and you find comfort and hope in it, don’t change. You know, keep it if it works for you...one of my best friends from college is a Lutheran Minister now; she’s a lesbian. And some of my role models in college, you know, my advisor, and one of the very best professors I ever had, she was the one who forwarded me your request for subjects. Ah, Dr. X, and they were great role models and you know she’s still very active in her church community and has a very close relationship with God.

Reflecting on his life now, he concludes:

I’ve been much happier since. I’ve just decided you know that I don’t have to consult or pray, I can sit here and think about it and make my own decisions and ultimately own the consequences of my own actions totally. I’m a much happier person and I find life to be much more enjoyable and positive...Yeah I guess I’m spiritual to some extent, you know I stand on my deck and I look out and I see the real beauty of nature and I have a physical reaction to it. You know like bumps, or energy running through me. And I believe that there is a balance of energy in the cosmos and such...I think of myself as Agnostic. I’m not Atheistic because if I was

solely Atheistic then I would say that all these people that are going to church, are full of crap. They go for some reason, and it does serve a purpose for them and it's generally positive in their lives, so I think they should continue doing it.

Structural Analysis

Awakening

P-4 had a unique experience in that while he was traveling his own personal journey towards freedom and authenticity, he was also developing a profound social conscience, the “seeds” of which, had been planted in him during his earliest years. While with his family on the mission field in Ethiopia, he had been exposed to the consequences of famine, poverty and oppression as well being immersed in a culture completely foreign to him. He grew to possess a love for those who were different. So when he returned to the states and to the tiny conservative enclaves of rural southern life, the racial and social inequities were evident to him in a way that was unusual for someone his age. He began to formulate his own conception of white privilege and could see how this played out in day-to-day life. He felt drawn to those who were downcast. In them, even at this early stage, he could see a reflection of himself. While outwardly, he was favored as a white boy and the son of the local Lutheran preacher, inwardly, he was also beginning to realize that he carried a secret; one that if discovered, would have ostracized him as much as the people of color and little means, that were pushed aside in his own home town. The result of this tension was that he instead, ostracized himself. He pulled away and pulled within to some degree. And other than the consolations of his own nurturing heart, he would find that needed safety not within the confines of the church that he knew so well, but rather through communing with the disenfranchised of

the world around him. These people were not the subjects of Christian missionary altruism, as he had seen in his childhood, in fact ironically, in many instances they were the *victims* of white Christian intolerance and prejudice. Inevitably, as he grew older and his own sexual awareness expanded, he would come to associate these white, privileged Christians with the same intolerance he had seen them display towards the ethnic and racial minorities in his community, but now, their judgmental glares were fixed on his sexuality. So when he did decide to “come out,” there was a passion fueled by years of pain and anger that now gave him a voice of advocacy, both for himself and for all those who knew what it felt like to be discriminated against.

Fire

Some of the earliest recipients of this passionate, fiery new voice were the very church leaders that he had been serving with on the synod council. “Out of the closet,” P-4 now became the “thorn in their side” on issues of social justice, particularly in regards to the LGBT community. He had been raised by a minister and had lived his faith in a fashion that was real and vibrant to him. He knew the scriptures that the establishment would trot out to prove their case that homosexuality was an abomination in the eyes of God. And he also knew what so many did not, that in the context of the entire breadth of Holy Scripture, these passages were few and viewed through the eyes of historical and contextual criticism, together they formed a weak argument at best. In addition to his own study, he honed these critical exegetical skills during his time in theology class at college. There, with the help of progressive professors, he was taught to

dig deep and see the entire picture. To question the long-held beliefs of his Christian dogma and not accept them at face value. And so he did.

But the fire was not limited to his battles with church synod members. After suffering several dismissals during this student teaching, not based on performance but solely due to his sexual orientation, he decided to adopt a direct approach. When he went to interview for full-time positions, it was he who took the initiative to bring his sexuality “into the room.” Not to flaunt and cause unnecessary discomfort, but rather to state clearly, “I am gay, and if this is going to be an issue with your school, then it’s not going to be a fit.” The little boy, who had previously restrained his natural personality and hid in the shadows of a closet of shame, had now emerged and he was intent on living a real life. Only P-4 can know for sure if the confrontational strength others heard in his voice, was always a true reflection of his inner resolve, or if there were at least moments when this was instead, a bold projection to protect himself and keep those who might hurt him on the defensive. But one thing is certain: he would no longer be silent.

The Family Line

One cannot help but be moved at the unintended burden P-4 carried as a young man regarding his father. Both he and his sister had been adopted. And as so often happens in families everywhere, they grew up hearing the stories of how they came into the world and what the early days of this young family were like. The story P-4 grew up hearing was that his kind, devout father had desperately wanted a son. There were no more males heirs left in the family line. So there was great intentionality during the adoption process to ensure that the next adopted child would be a boy. He would carry

on the family name. He would fulfill the needs of his dad's heart. And to be sure, many boys would readily embrace such a birthright with vigor and a sense of nepotistic gratitude. However, as P-4 matured and began to realize that he was gay no doubt there came a moment when it hit him. He was not going to be able to fulfill his father's longings...at least not in any traditional sense. And so now, as a college student just coming into himself, he carried the weight of not just telling his father that he was gay, but also that there would be no wife, no wedding, no traditional family portrait. And in addition to all of this, he was rapidly putting distance between himself and his Christian faith – a faith tradition that his own father had spent a lifetime serving.

It would seem that straight or gay, boys have a special relationship with their fathers. And straight or gay, the ancient archetypal struggle between men and their sons continues: fathers expecting much from their heirs; sons striving to live up to those expectations. Nevertheless, P-4 and his father are on good terms today. And P-4 now has a son, the cherished progeny. And the family continues.

P-4 shared that on at least one occasion, his dad has lightheartedly shaken his head and questioned to the heavens, "Where did I go wrong?" And P-4 has responded by saying that his father didn't go wrong. That he did the best he could and in fact, his father is responsible for the value system he holds today.

Relating

As an aside, near the end of the interview, P-4 reflected on relationships and potential difficulties that young gays face after they come out. As has been mentioned, for years he hid in the "closet" and while in high school, he began to develop a small

network of lesbian and gay friends, even then this was all done covertly for fear of potential fallout. High school relationships for anyone are tenuous at best, but carried out in secret, there is rarely a chance to develop a sense of self in relation to another. Difficult to discern, what it is that one is looking for in a partner. And so, later in life P-4 reflects, there is a tendency after breaking free from the “closet,” to move too quickly and to invest too deeply in the first person that conveys care and affection and to immediately associate this with love. It was in this context that he made a glancing reference to a long-term relationship that was, in his words, “...three years of bliss, four and a half years of hell...”

It is most likely lost on everyone but the closest of observers that there are many consequences of such discrimination. P-4, through his passing reference, brings to light, the sad truth that “coming out of the closet,” is in many ways, not the end but just the beginning.

Filling in the Gaps

P-4 was quite clear during the interview in stating that he did not reject Christianity and become an agnostic *because* he is gay. He saw the discrimination against the LGBT community as yet another symptom of a larger problem with many in the Christian church: namely, the failure to practice their creeds as originally taught by Christ and recorded in the Gospels. P-4 could not support such hypocrisy and chose to separate from a faith system that he described as a “crutch,” for at least many of its adherents. Yet, there is also a side to him that won’t take this rejection, in essence, to the

logical conclusion. He is not an atheist and as has been mentioned, he supports those who are true followers of Christ and live out their Christian love and devotion.

When asked if he thought that he would have arrived at this same agnostic conclusion had he been a heterosexual growing up in the church, he immediately responds, “No.” He said he believed he would have married a “...good Lutheran girl,” had a family, baptized the kids and continued “...playing that game because it would have been easy to fit in.”

P-4’s reality however, is that he *is* gay and that he *did* reject the faith of his family...the faith of his minister father. And now he is a father himself and he often wonders how he will fill in the gap in the moral instruction of his own son. Ancient lessons of charity, love, grace and forgiveness that were taught to him throughout the many Sunday mornings of his youth will not be a part of his son’s life. And this concerns him.

While southern, conservative Christianity was responsible for a significant amount of pain in P-4’s life, there is still a glimmer in his words that would allow for something spiritual...perhaps a path not yet taken?

Textural-Structural

P-4 has a unique background, being raised as the son of a pastor and spending his first six years of life on the foreign mission field in Ethiopia. The “religion” he first knew growing up, was one that was practically and humanely applied by his progressive parents assisting people in the direst of circumstances. He literally grew up in a cross cultural environment, exposed to poverty, famine and death.

...you know when I'm four years old one of my playmates dying on my porch from starvation. And then, you know, going and taking the food that was clutched in his hand when he died and giving it to somebody else, because he's not going to eat it anymore...

However, these powerful and transformative early childhood experiences would then stand in stark contrast to the racist and classist world of the American southwest that he came home to. While his father ministered to a local conservative Christian congregation P-4, now nearly an adolescent, struggled with the inequities that he saw all around him. People of color being discriminated against and lacking the basic resources that the white privileged seemed to have in abundance. When he looked at the white community, two important things began to stand out to him. First, was his early experience with homophobia.

I never had pressures from my dad; as far as there was never any kind of homophobia from him specifically. From the parishioners in the church it was quite evident that type of behavior was not accepted, or tolerated in the community. And ah, there were a lot of regular, homophobic remarks at ah, youth events, or what not or sitting out in front of the church talking. And you know in the community, if teenagers would "come out," a lot of times they wound up being disowned by their families, and kicked out.

Even as a youngster he had begun to realize that he was attracted to boys and by middle school, he had already experienced his first sexual encounters, so the awareness of the homophobia around him was particularly relevant. Secondly, he observed that the same white people that filled the pews of his father's congregation – the ones espousing the anti-gay biases -- were sometimes also the same people who were discriminating against the racial minorities around him. Witnessing this first hand, it not only shocked his well-developed social awareness formed over those years of famine relief in Ethiopia but now, it hurt him personally as a young gay adolescent who was hiding in the "closet." He

remained in hiding throughout high school though by this time, he had found a small group of lesbian and gay friends. They all kept each others' secret and P-4 even went as far as having a "girlfriend" to prevent people from discovering the truth of his life.

I had a couple of friends that had come out, it was a lesbian girl at the high school and she was ridiculed and humiliated and ah, and you know I mean so it's scary for the rest of us... You know we knew each other, but we kept secrets at school. Um, you know in high school I had a girlfriend that was a lesbian. That was my cover at school.

Going away to college gave him the space he needed to begin exploring how he felt about his spirituality and his sexuality. But there is no question that he had already begun to make some judgments of his own.

Well, I think part of the deal when I was coming out and struggling with it, was the church in their discriminatory practices. And so it made me become more judgmental of it and more skeptical of the practices of ah Christianity you know...

Despite these strong feelings, he continued his association with the church during his early years in college and served on the denomination's synod council, a position he retained even after "coming out." He saw what he believed to be politics and erroneous teaching and wanted to be a voice of advocacy for people like himself. Likewise he was also coming to grips with his sexual identity and was now "out" to college friends, yet he continued to avoid telling his parents. He recalls the lengths that he would go to on visits home, to avoid that important conversation.

...once I was "out" at college I never came home alone. I always brought three or four friends with me. And that would maintain a distraction so I never really had to be alone with my mom and dad.

However, eventually the moment came when he found himself alone with his mom. In retrospect, it is obvious that the secrecy with his parents had become a burden and that he needed to simply say the words. His mom clearly anticipated this:

...my mom and I were at the house alone, and I was like, oh hey, let's do this now and I picked a spontaneous moment to do it because I knew it was something coming and I had a moment and I knew I'd be leaving soon... I'm sure mom had ideas, because when she and I had our talk, I was like, "We need to talk," And she just looked at me and said, "You're coming out." And I was like, "Yes!"... She said, "You're telling us because you want us to be a part of your life,"... "You want to be a part of us and you don't want to lie to us, you want us to be supportive of course and that's what you're hoping and we are..."

Finally, the pressure was gone. He had "come out" and his mother not only supported him but helped to provide the words he needed to say. However, even as well as this conversation went, there was another level of fear and pain that transcended him simply "coming out" of the closet. He had long worried that his father would experience a particular disappointment, not because his son was gay, but because P-4 was the last male in the family line and he would not be "passing on the name." He had remembered stories from his childhood about his adoption and how his father was insistent that they find a boy. Now years later, stories that were heard and originally understood through the ears of child, loomed heavy as an adult.

...six generations and I'm the last one with the family name. Dad's older brother has only daughters. His father's brothers have only daughters. I wouldn't be bearing children and I didn't want him to be ashamed. Disappointed. That is what it literally, ultimately was. That was my hardest thing in coming out.

Fortunately however, his fears would not be realized. His father embraced his son and since that time, has been a vocal advocate for a loving response to the LGBT community.

At one point he was even dismissed from an interim pastorate because it was discovered that he had a gay son. Yet his support has not wavered.

Just as P-4 rejected the “closet” that had hidden his sexuality for so long, now he also rejected the Christian religion of his childhood.

...it happened over a period of time in my college years. And you know part of it was taking six hours of theology. My intro. to theology class was awesome and what he did was break it down, he broke down beliefs, that are you know widely held beliefs, of the church and then made us question everything that we were taught and then justify it. And when I came back around, I could not justify any of it.

He loves his parents and respects the faith that his dad has served his entire life. He also has several other Christian friends and mentors whom he cares for deeply. He does not begrudge them their faith...

But I’m also a firm believer that if Christianity really works for you, and it makes you happy and helps you sleep at night and you find comfort and hope in it, don’t change. You know, keep it if it works for you...

But as for himself, he could simply no longer reconcile being a part of an institution that had caused so much pain to LGBT people and other minority groups. The decision to leave has been good for him and has allowed him to explore a spirituality unique to his own journey.

I’ve been much happier since. I’ve just decided you know that I don’t have to consult or pray, I can sit here and think about it and make my own decisions and ultimately own the consequences of my own actions totally. I’m a much happier person and I find life to be much more enjoyable and positive...Yeah I guess I’m spiritual to some extent, you know I stand on my deck and I look out and I see the real beauty of nature and I have a physical reaction to it. You know like bumps, or energy running through me. And I believe that there is a balance of energy in the cosmos and such...I think of myself as Agnostic.

Chapter VIII

Participant Five

Textural Analysis

No Labels

P-5 grew up realizing he was attracted to males but never “named” what this was for him. He simply knew that this was true and then chose to not speak of it.

Now looking, it’s funny because, like you don’t really realize it until you realize it and then you’re like, well I always knew it...I mean I definitely knew that I was attracted to men...had I ever called myself gay or struggled with homosexuality? “No.”

To label it was, ostensibly to admit it, at least to oneself. This is the most basic level of denial – the internal battle...

That’s ultimately the struggle, is that when you’re struggling with it you’re like, “Oh, there is no issue, it’s just this little thing, that’s not me...you kind of don’t label yourself until you “come out,” essentially. Because then its like, “Yes, this is a part of who I am.”

P-5 remembers that this struggle had gone on since he was a young boy but it was not limited to his own secret, internal grappings:

I had been teased my whole life, it had always been there, like there was an underlying thing. I mean like in grade school, junior high, even high school, other guys would make fun of me, they would call me gay.

So while he was struggling to understand his own covert attraction to men and enduring the relentless teasing of his classmates, he was also trying to make sense of what they were seeing in him and what made him so “different.”

You know, I’m not the most masculine and I’m pretty slender...But I think that part of that was at the time my dad was very absent and things were going down with the divorce and he was gone a lot and so essentially my role models were my two sisters and my mom. So I think some of that

was just the meeker side of it, there were no other men in my household. And then too, some of that was just developmentally immaturity...

P-5 sought to understand what was happening to him at the time. And even now, he looks back and acknowledges that he had certain physical characteristics and this, combined with an absence of male influence in his life, contributed to an effeminate affect that his classmates then seized upon. These childhood struggles likely reinforced the fears he was already experiencing trying to understand these deeply painful aspects of his personhood, and it would still be many years later until he would choose to risk telling others his secret.

Looking For a Home

P-5's spiritual journey is equally complex and sheds an important light on the depth of his religious convictions. He describes the church of his childhood:

I was born in a Baptist church and then raised in mostly a Bible Church...the church I was raised in was very, "traditional," I guess would be a good word. The organ was played for worship and if you stood for more than a couple songs [connoting a more "active" style of worship] most of the congregation would then call in and complain during the week...it was kind of, I would say a stifling church for a young kid growing up in it.

But during his high school years, his parents went through a divorce and slowly, one by one, his mother, his father and then he and his siblings stopped attending this church.

This created a "window," where he was free to look for a religious community that was more attractive to him and certainly, more relevant. He found such a place:

I think by the end in the church that I was raised in it was like, "Oh do I really have to go to church?" Because it was more of a stifling environment...I moved and went to a non-denominational church...that I went to all through high school. It was kind of that time where I was like, "This is how I was raised, we've been in church our entire lives and now

it's kind of...you know, the family structure is breaking down..." The representation of what you've been taught is kind of breaking down, so that is why I was okay, I don't like the church anyway.

It didn't take long for him to get involved at this new church, a choice that would reveal a deep desire of his to serve God. This pattern has stayed consistent throughout this life.

[I] was very involved with the youth group there; I actually would preach if the youth pastor was out of town and taught Sunday School for five and six year olds, every year did VBS [vacation Bible school]...so very, very involved; you know pretty much when the doors were open, I was there helping out in some way or leading something or doing something...all through high school.

P-5 seemed to know what was missing in the churches of his younger years and when presented with the opportunity, took full advantage by seeking out a house of worship that would give him the opportunity to thrive.

I think I've always gotten involved in any church that I've been in and I think the Lord has used that to kind of keep me there. I think if you're not involved it's a lot easier to um...well there is no community so it's a lot easier to kind of disappear and there is nobody to be like, "Hey, what's going on?"

But in addition to his involvement, he was getting personal needs met as well:

The church I went to was a "young" church, a lot more families, there was a large youth group and so with that season I had lots of fun there, I was very involved there...a lot of my core friends in high school were from the church and that is kind of how I got connected with the church.

Yet even in this aspect of his life, there were also questions that weighed on him.

Questions that seemed to have connected back to issues about who he really was and where was truth to be found in all of this?

There was always this drive to like, "What I know is real and in some way I need to reconcile my life...so there has always been a kind of pursuit of knowledge, a pursuit of God, a pursuit of the religious institution...I know that this is real. There is something inside of me and that knows that

this is truth but at the same time just trying to reconcile real life with faith.”

Up to this point in his life, he states that his questions never reached the level of desperation. He had no religious falling out, nor did he have some supernatural divine experience where his doubts were alleviated. It was far more complicated and profound than this:

There was definitely times in my life like, “What is this, is this true? Is the church the real, correct structure of how God intended it? Does that meet my needs?”...I was still very much searching for answers within the church...

These years represent positive memories of service, community and worship. And they are also early indications of his devotion and intentionality regarding his spirituality and his quest to find answers to his questions.

Research

To be sure, P-5 had been asking questions all along. But he had done so in a way that kept his deepest concerns, hidden. He knew what he felt but he dared not let others know:

I definitely knew, I knew that the attraction was there and had had some conversations indirectly with youth pastors or counselors...not necessarily like pertaining to me, but just the topic in general. Cause kind of when you're at that age and that awareness, you kind of find ways to gauge where people are at on the issue without divulging anything...but not refer to anything. Kind of that, “I have a friend who...” scenario.

This was the safest way he believed he had to get the answers he was seeking. However, having now graduated from high school, he would soon have more freedom and opportunities in front of him and he would indeed, make the most of them.

P-5's next significant step in life seems entirely consistent with the journey he had set in motion in high school. He decided to attend a Christian college in another state. A place where he could continue his search for the deeper answers:

So I did a year and a half at a Christian university and during that time I was a Biblical Studies major and a Psychology minor. And I did quite a few college credits in high school so when I started in college I didn't really start with the "pre-reqs" in undergrad like most people do...I kind of jumped right into my major and my minor and so I was taking predominantly Bible courses and psychology courses.

While his intellectual curiosity drove him, he questions in retrospect if he was really ready to move that quickly.

That was good and bad. I think that maturity-wise, I wasn't really at that level because I was taking upper level Bible classes with juniors and seniors who had taken a lot more Bible classes and kind of like developed their theology a lot more and it was pretty overwhelming to me.

But perhaps most important during this time was a research class that he registered for.

As part of this class, he was expected to choose a central research topic:

...I had to take a research class and I chose homosexuality...I was kind of like, "This is my opportunity to figure this out once and for all." That is how naïve I was, because I was going to "figure it out."

So ironically, as a committed Christian student, majoring in biblical studies at a Christian university, P-5 now returned to concerns that he had held deep inside him since childhood. What was homosexuality, what caused it and was this who he was?

I spent an entire semester in this research class, researching homosexuality because the premise of the class was, "We're at a Bible school and so everybody in theory, believes what we believe, so the research can't be Biblically based." So the teacher was very much like in the mindset of, "You need to be educated of the world, to speak to the world." So all of my research was psychologically and scientifically based. There was no Biblical side of it.

Ultimately, the end of the term and the end of the research project found him tired and filled with more questions than answers. And also, realizing there was another avenue to his research that he had not yet investigated:

So I did that and was taking all of these Bible classes and was just getting very, very overwhelmed, with feeling like I wasn't in the right place...like I didn't care as much as these other students in these classes I was in...[I] just came out with more questions than answers...after I had done the research paper for that class in my head I was like, "Okay well the other side of the issue of homosexuality would be the Biblical side...there was always kind of this thing in the back of my head that was, "The next step was you have to look at the Biblical side."

His research would be put on hold, as he was forced to deal with bigger issues, Should he remain in college? How was he going to deal with his accruing debt? And was he willing to address personal issues that were starting to show themselves?

Rock Bottom

The accelerated college schedule, the research, the secrets, all the unanswered questions...in essence "life," had finally caught up to P-5 about a year and a half into his college career. And he realized that he needed help:

In college I actually met with a couple different counselors and was fairly honest: "This is what I am dealing with"...I was medicated for depression and then for sleep, I couldn't sleep. So I was taking an anti-depressant and then sleeping pills...I had just had major surgery on my knee because I had torn my ACL; I was severely in debt; I had my car repossessed. Like everything that I had worked for was kind of coming crashing down...I kind of just hit -- I guess for lack of a better word -- like the bottom you know...got to a place where life as I knew it was falling apart.

In addition to seeking psychological help, he was also making important decisions regarding his schooling:

Every little issue of the Bible came to be a huge defining issue of salvation and ultimately after a year and a half, I was paying for school loans and I

didn't know. I didn't know if I wanted to continue down the road I thought I wanted to go down and so I'm just going to take a break from school and not go into anymore debt...So I left, but I stayed in [the state he was residing in] and I worked full time at Starbuck's and lived out there for a couple more years.

Big changes were now taking place and over the next two and a half years, he did his best to care for himself and in so doing, created a very minimalist routine, doing as little as possible:

And so for one summer, I pretty much literally just woke up and walked to work, walked home, got back in bed and I read. I read the Bible, I read books.

Still, during this difficult and challenging time, he could not walk away from the questions he had. He had finished his scientific and psychological study of homosexuality. Now, he turned back to the Holy Scriptures of his youth...but with new eyes. Speaking about the messages he had been given from childhood he said:

My whole life it was just very much, "Nope, it's wrong. It's simple, it's wrong." There was no "if's, and's or butt's" about it. At the end of that summer I got to a place where I still had no answers but I didn't feel like the issue of homosexuality was as "black and white" as I had been led to believe my whole life.

And so finally, having experienced depression, insomnia, financial debt and physical injury; at the end of a year and a half of fast-paced college that included an entire semester's study on homosexuality; having been reduced to doing virtually nothing more than work and reading the Bible and Christian literature, he had finally come to at least one answer: this issue he had struggled with for so long and the questions about its morality were not nearly as clear as he had been led to believe.

Speaking Up

It was during this time P-5 began to fight back against some of the painful teachings and one-sided positions that he continued to see perpetuated around him.

By the time I got to “coming out,” I was like, “I have to figure this out for myself”...conversations that I had had, or the people that I had talked to through high school and college...it was so black and white, it was so – it’s wrong.

He characterizes some of these messages and teachings:

So everybody who’s gay chooses that, they have an absent father and they need to get over it. It’s sinful, “The end.” All I had was that information and my life experience...so by the time college rolled around and I really started grappling with it...even if I wasn’t vocalizing it there was much more of a mental acknowledgement of, “Okay, this is real for me,” and so the damaging part kind of came in or people so willing to dismiss my pain and suffering and dismiss my faith and my relationship with God for six verses in the Bible that they read this way.

He was coming into himself during this period of his life and was now more acutely aware of the damage these teachings had done. In his words, one can hear defiance and frustration. It was as if finally, after all he had gone through, he had given himself permission to start speaking out. He remembers one such instance when he was hanging out with some friends:

I had you know spent an entire semester doing research on it and you know having all these different scenarios and all this different psychological research and all these different scientific studies, like I just remember sitting and having a conversation with a group of friends at the time, this is when I’d already left college and was working at Starbucks and um we had watched some movie, I don’t remember what but there was a gay person in it, and so then they just started talking about it and...I had been, you know really struggling, really researching and they’re they were just totally bashing on this character and pretty much all gay people in general and just talking about how wrong it was and finally...I just remember going, “Why, because your mom said so?” And my friend was like, “What?” I was like, “No really, why is, why is, why is it wrong?” And he was like, “Because” and I was like “No, but because why? Because your pastor said so, because your mom said so?” And he was

like, “It’s just so wrong.” And I was like, “You know what, it doesn’t bother me that you hate all gay people, it bothers me that you don’t even know why.”

He continued by pointing out what he believed to be the hypocrisy and inconsistency of their own teachings:

“The fact that you have no response for...” And then I just started going through the Bible and saying, they say this is wrong but we do that; they say this is wrong but we do that; like your girlfriend leads youth group, the Bible says that women shouldn’t speak in church. Is that wrong? No, like you can’t pick and choose, like at least if you’re going to believe something, know why you believe it.

This powerful exchange took place just several months before he would finally “come out” as a gay man. Reflectively, he recalls his personal thoughts during this time. Far from the frustration he was expressing to others, these private ponderings were much more poignant:

...all I have ever tried to do is pursue the heart of God and I’ve always believed that he is real and I’ve gone to this camp and gone to this Church and I’ve done this and I’ve done this and you know I’ve gone to Bible College...I’ve tried to do this, this, this, and this to get rid of it, and it’s still there. And so for me it was almost like, “Okay, it wasn’t denying my faith, but it was denying the Christian heritage that I’ve come from.” And then like, “Okay, I don’t know anything, but I know God is real and this is how I feel. So, how do we reconcile those two things?”

Starbucks and Serendipity

While it seems the issue of P-5’s homosexuality was building and he was becoming more vocal, he is clear that he had not made the decision to “come out.” However a serendipitous phone call would change all of that.

[I] actually never intended on coming out but um one of my best friends, um who had been one of my roommates in college, um, him and his wife called me one day and her brother was going to be in town and needed a ride from the airport so I was going to give him a ride and I was like, what are you guys coming out for? And my friend was like, well actually my wife's brother just "came out" to us and told us that he is gay, so she is flying down to go tell their parents with him because they are they were a very conservative Christian family, and it's not going to go well, so she was coming to be a support for him.

He had not planned this but the moment had nonetheless presented itself to him. After so many years of talking around the issue and refusing to label it and researching and struggling...finally, his time had come. And he believed it was no accident.

...looking back on that conversation there were so many things that were very uncharacteristic of our friendship that took place. And I just believe it was the hand of God. Then he was like, "Well how are you?" And that's not usually, I mean we talk about deep things but it's not usually how it's approached. And it all just kind of came flooding out. You know and I was like, "I'm gay too, I've been struggling with this."

He allowed himself to be more vulnerable than he had ever been with anyone and his friend showed him acceptance and care. However, it was not just a matter of telling someone else the truth of who he was. In so doing, he truly realized his own identity for the first time.

It was just a good friend who I knew was going to love me no matter what, and that just came kind of like flooding out. And in that conversation I just remember a physical weight being lifted off of my shoulders, and a calming peace, and I remember sleeping that night and I hadn't slept well for so long and I remember hanging up from that conversation and thinking, "Oh, this is what it feels like to be me." I never knew that I didn't know what that was like...Like it was just that, "Oh this is why I've always been searching and struggling and not feeling accepted and this is kind of like the root and I don't even know what it's like to be me, what it feels like."

The phone conversation would be just the beginning. During this period of his life after he had quit school and was working the job at Starbucks, his intention was to scale back dramatically and allow himself time to heal. What a pleasant surprise to then realize that this coffee shop and the people who worked there would not just represent a paycheck but a safe community with which to rediscover himself. Now, with the momentum from the phone call, he turned to them:

After that honestly, it just felt like it just kept coming up. The next day at work I had like worked with the same people for two years and we, we were a family and I just started kind of telling them, and then it was that Starbucks community where you know, I had just felt accepted and felt like people were really, really genuine, which in hindsight is really funny because I always felt that more from the secular community than the Christian community.

Again, as with the conversation with his friend, he found acceptance. And he reflected on the irony that in this group of baristas, he felt a care and love that he had not experienced in all his years in the church. And they did not seem surprised to hear the news.

I was like, “I’m coming out,” and they were like, “Well it’s about freakin’ time!” And most people were like, “Thank goodness, we’ve been waiting.” I remember with one of my friends too, I’m like, “So pretty much I’m the last to know.” He was like, “Yeah we talked about it a lot.” And just that feeling of love and acceptance. And people being so happy, for me being happy. It was just like, “Oh what was I so afraid of?” And then six months after that I flew home to sit down and tell my whole family. That was because that was the next step for me.

He had told a friend, he had “come out” to his coworkers and found in them a community, but he had a family that was still unaware of all that was happening. He knew this was his next step.

Flying Home

P-5 recalls that beyond his own fears of just saying the words, he was particularly concerned about “coming out” to his family for two reasons: first, he worried that it would cause division in a family that was already surviving separation and divorce. And secondly, he had heard their opinions expressed through the years:

...it was a nerve wracking trip, but I was at a place where I had experienced love and acceptance. And had kind of had my view of family restructured a little bit. In that one reason why I had never done anything, and never come out and had never talked about it was because it will destroy my family. And my family in spite of everything that had happened, we're very close. And I knew what their beliefs were, and I knew my sister had had a friend that had “come out” and I sat home and listened to all of the behind-the-scenes conversations of what people really thought, and what people were really saying and had kind of had a sneak peak of what my life would be like. I was like, “I can never do that. I can't do that to them, I can't lose my whole family. Is it really worth me embracing this one little part of me and leaving everything?” And um for many, many years the answer was always, “No,” until that conversation that night with my friend. And, um, so I flew home and I told my family and both my parents, my sisters and my little brother and um, all in all it was, it was, very difficult, but it was good, it was a good experience.

He soon realized that it was not just telling his family that he was gay but it was also showing them this new man that he had become. He had grown, changed, and had found love and acceptance and even a new definition of “family” elsewhere. This was exemplified in an exchange with his mother:

I remember a couple of things from it, but one thing I remember her saying was, “Well I think God was preparing me, cause from the minute you got off the plane I was like, “I hope he's not here to tell me he's gay.” She was like, “The only reason I thought that you weren't going to was just because you seemed very, very calm.” And I said, “Well ultimately that is because it doesn't really matter what you say and before it always has. I am happy and I am free and that's more important to me than if I

hurt you. I don't want to lose you, and I am afraid of what you're going to say, but ultimately I have to choose my happiness over your happiness." And that was like a whole new place for me.

Certainly, the discussions did not end that day. In typical thorough fashion, P-5 has continued to follow-up and pursue an ongoing conversation. And, he decided to tell his extended family as well. All of this, integral to his "coming out" process.

The last three years has just been lots and lots of conversations with all members of my family and it's been a really amazing process to watch them try and deal with it and then ultimately God giving me grace to listen to everything and understand that they're coming from no information, and trying to get to where I've spent many, many years getting. They've made me a better person in those conversations and I hope that I've helped them like at least vocalize things or think through things...And ultimately several months after I came out...I wrote a letter coming out to my aunts and uncles. And in the letter I remember saying, "I make no claims to having any answers; and I make no blanket statements about homosexuality, all I want you to know is my journey and where I am at. This is what I believe and I believe; that God and me are still okay. And that is all I know right now."

Be True to Thyself

P-5 continues his journey and the same strength that finally allowed him to "come out," now strengthens him daily in making decisions about how he will live this new life. He has moved and started a new chapter but even as a gay man, he does not always go in the direction others might expect. Here, he speaks about the gay club scene:

I don't choose to live the lifestyle of gay clubs and gay bars and gay friends and gay partying...When I first moved out here I definitely dabbled in that. I mean [city where he now lives] has much more of a gay community...but ultimately, again, I think because I've always pursued my faith first, I just was always like, "This is may be fun, but it's not real...and it's not really my personality. I never drank before that and I've never done the clubs or bars before that, so for me it was kind of , I did it because I felt like that that was what was expected of me, and I just got to a place where I was like, "My sexuality doesn't change my personality.

And I wouldn't do any of these things if I hadn't come out, so why would I do them now that I am come out?"

This tension also played itself out when he began to look for a new church:

I got connected with this church that ultimately for lack of a better title, is a gay church...most of the pastoral staff is gay and ninety percent of the congregation is gay and I was kind of like, "Oh this is great, like I can have both, I can have my faith, my church, and my sexuality. I was there for eight months and I ultimately left because I didn't feel like the church was biblically based at all. And I saw a lot of people preaching one thing and living another thing and I felt like that environment...they were really preaching like, "You're okay just the way you are," and after a couple of encounters of going out with the pastors and watching them get completely drunk and make out with random men I was like, "This isn't Biblical for anyone." And so I left that church, and went to my current church and was like, "I know what I believe, and I know what God believes about me and I don't need the church to affirm my sexuality. So basically the church that I am at now believes that um homosexuality is real, um but...it's not the identifying, it's the acting which is sinful. And that the only way to have a pure and holy relationship is a heterosexual one. So they believe heterosexuality is God's design and that homosexuality is a result of "the fall," and there is no holy way to live in a homosexual relationship.

P-5's description of his new church is indicative of who he has become as a man. He is proud of who he is and no longer lies about his homosexuality. However, he continues to hold very strong religious and spiritual convictions and believes that to act on his gay orientation...to be in a homosexual relationship would not be pleasing to God. And so he chooses to remain celibate.

I very much believe that the Bible is truth and um so for me it was like, "I have to take the whole Bible and all parts of it and I can't pick and choose my theology"...this is what I believe is God's design and God's perfect plan...God has very patiently and lovingly taken me through many, many steps and slowly changed my heart and changed my mind...and that means that I don't think that there is a pure and holy way to live in a gay sexual relationship.

He is at peace with this decision and states that the love and acceptance he continues to experience from those around him satisfy the needs that would otherwise be met in a more intimate relationship.

Structural Analysis

Internal Compass

Upon deeper examination of P-5's story, one soon becomes aware of a measureable internal strength or resolve that has guided him throughout his life. While it is true that there were aspects of him that were confused, scared, and unsure as to whether he could live in an authentic way, there was also a courageous and driving energy within him that made his "coming out," in retrospect, seem inevitable. The first example of this was during high school when he decided that he was ready to explore a different church. To be certain, there were external factors that laid the groundwork for this decision: the break-up of his family which coincided with his parents ceasing to attend the church of his youth; his high school friends and their connection to the new church. These were important factors but ultimately, it was P-5 acting on a growing internal dissatisfaction that empowered him to make the important change. He stated that he felt it was time to make his faith his own, or decide to reject it all together. This decision, one made while still an adolescent, should not be minimized. The church played a very important role during his developmental years and his parents -- his entire family -- were associated with that church for as long as he could remember. Such decisions for devout religious adherents can weigh heavily as church becomes home, family, culture, community and perhaps most importantly, their critical connection to God. But P-5 was searching for

something more: a place where he could *grow* in his relationship with his god and worship freely without the stifling constraints of the religious environment he had known for so long. This was P-5 asserting himself and making a statement regarding what he wanted...what he felt was right for him.

After completing high school, he broke away, moving out of state and taking the next step in his personal development as well as his spiritual maturation. He enrolled at a conservative Christian college and threw himself into a biblical studies major with a psychology minor. Often, college freshmen are not even certain as to what they will major in, much less declaring it and then enrolling in upper division classes that found him surrounded by students who were older and more experienced. Eventually, it would prove to be too much for him, but his decisions early in his college career were in effect, laying down a marker, stating that he wanted answers and he was not going to stop until he found them. His research into homosexuality was obviously, far more than a course requirement. He sensed that he had not been provided with an accurate understanding of the complexities of one's sexual orientation and so consistent with his character, he sought his own understanding. Yet, the information he read and the data he examined did not give him an immediate sense of relief or self-justification. Far from it. The deeper he dug, the more unnerving it would be. He was confronted with information that directly contradicted what he had been taught throughout his life. No doubt, it called many aspects of his faith and his education into question. It left him, as he stated several times, with more questions than answers. But the net gain was a growing independence, a

maturing faith and critical information that would allow him eventually, to make an informed decision.

The incident he spoke of when he was watching a movie with his friends and they began to make some insensitive comments about a gay character, truly displays the personal growth he had experienced by that time. There was frustration, even anger, in his voice as he challenged them openly. At this point, he was not even “out” to them so not only was he actively asserting an unpopular position with his friends but he was also taking a significant risk for a gay man living in “the closet.” Yet he spoke his mind, and he did so in very strong terms. This was a young man who was not simply speaking an alternative viewpoint. He was speaking words that he had never been allowed to say. He was speaking for a young boy who had known there was something different about him, but kept it locked away. He was speaking for so many who are just like him, many who of whom are still hiding in “closets” of desperation.

P-5’s internal compass, his driving passion for knowledge and truth, has been a constant in his life and an integral aspect of his “coming out” experience.

“Damaging and Uninformed”

A poignant moment during the interview with P-5 was when he was asked how he would describe his experiences as a young, closeted gay man attending a conservative Evangelical church. He replied: “damaging,” and “uninformed.” These two simple words speak volumes. After examining his story and the pain he has endured, most readers would not be surprised if they were to discover that he walked away from his faith, desiring closure on a painful chapter in his life. Yet much to the contrary, P-5 is

living a rich and fulfilling life as a practicing Christian...who is also a gay man. To comprehend the complexity of his spiritual and sexual odyssey is to see and accept the clear distinction that he makes between his Christian *heritage* and his personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ. P-5 believes that the human influences of his faith tradition were at fault, not God. Throughout his entire “coming out,” process there is no question that the spiritual struggle descended to a profound level within him. He asked himself the hard questions, he pondered rejecting his faith and he felt the very real sting of his quest, but ultimately he could never reject a god in whom he found comfort and love and acceptance. While this might be puzzling to many, it is not to him. His faith remains strong, in fact stronger than it has ever been. While one cannot know what the future holds for him and what challenges may arise down the road as he continues to grow and mature as a sexual human being, what is evident in the present is that he is a committed spiritual man who faced these difficult issues head on, and has definitively made decisions for himself with which he is at peace.

Family Ties

While the interview did not focus on his family background, enough was spoken to suggest that, as with so many, these relationships are complicated and at times, represent pain and struggle. He speaks of his parents’ divorce when he was still a young man. And in discussing his effeminate affect that was the target of so much damaging harassment at school, he believes that at least some of this could be attributed to an absent father and the lack of strong male role models in his home. In essence, there was no one there to show him what it meant to be a man. Later, in college as he prepared to

“come out” to his family, he was burdened with the fear and self-imposed responsibility that his disclosure might fracture the family even further. Could he live with himself with such an outcome? And it seems he had good reason to be nervous. He recollected specific conversations about homosexuality in his home and negative comments made by his sisters that gave him a “sneak peek” into what he might expect.

While time tends to dull pain and soften difficult moments from the past, his risk in those moments three years ago were very real and seemingly motivated as much out of love for his family, as they were out of a pursuit of authenticity for himself. “Coming out” of the closet can never bring his parents back together and it is certainly not guaranteed to easily reverse everyone’s strongly held views but he does share that the last three years have been healing and powerful in their own way. There have been many conversations that now reach even to the extended family. And in a strange twist of irony, P-5’s risk in choosing to tell the truth about who he is, has actually connected him in a new and unique way to his loved ones. He says that these moments have made him a better person.

The Hand of God

Essential to P-5’s spiritual beliefs is the fact that God takes an active interest in his life. There is a real and living relationship between them and God gives him strength and even creates circumstances and events that are ultimately for P-5’s well being. Throughout the interview, P-5 gave testimony to such moments. When speaking about his pattern of being heavily invested in the churches he has attended, including positions of leadership and instruction, he states that God used these to help keep him connected to

the church in times when it certainly would have been more convenient to just drop out and walk away. And he reflects a belief that was shared between he and his mother, that God helped prepare her for his “coming out” disclosure. She had a sense that this was coming and even remarked at his peaceful and calm affect when one would reasonably expect just the opposite.

When telling the story of “coming out” to his dear friend whose wife’s brother was going through the very same process, there is an unmistakable certainty in his voice that God’s hand was orchestrating these events. He said that at that time, he had no intention of “coming out” to anyone and yet here was a good friend calling him and sharing that his own life had been touched by a gay man “coming out.” He said while their friendship had been strong, there was something about his friend’s affect that particular day that seemed to speak a message of safety to him -- one that beckoned him to divulge his own truth. He fondly recalls that afterwards, there was an immediate peace that swept over him and he slept better that night than he had in quite some time. Finally, he believes that God gave him “grace” to deal with the fear and resistance exhibited by his family. A grace that has allowed them all to become stronger and, as mentioned earlier he believes, has made him a better man.

P-5 is a reasoned, intellectual individual. One never gets the sense that these accounts are emotionally-charged short-cuts that provide an easy resolution to difficult issues. In fact, it could be argued that his insistence on remaining spiritually devout while living as an openly gay man, complicates his life considerably. Yet, there is also a

certainty in his voice that he could no sooner deny the truth of God's role in his life, than he could deny the truth that he is gay.

Holy

For many, there is a religious ethic that transcends most all others. Beyond any conception of right and wrong, beyond any moral code of "do's and don'ts" and beyond any intellectual belief system or dogma, there is the concept of holiness: the very attribute of God. Devout, monotheistic religions around the world exhort their followers to strive towards God's personality and "heart;" to love like God loves and to seek truth and purity the way God exhibits these qualities. For P-5, a practicing Christian, it means striving after a lifestyle that God has called him to. And while he does not judge others or condemn those who have made choices different than his own, he holds himself to a very high standard of conduct. These standards fueled his decision to ultimately leave a "gay congregation" because he observed what he described as hypocrisy in the lives of its leaders. Not because they were gay but because, in his opinion, they were living one way at church and another in the bars on the weekends. He knew this would not be acceptable for him. And it is this very striving after holiness that has also led him to the decision at this point in his life, that he will willingly adopt a celibate lifestyle. He is not embarrassed or apologetic that he is attracted to men. But he has not been able to simply overlook what he believes to be authoritative teachings from the Bible that prohibit homosexual intimacy. He maintains that God loves him as a gay man but that God also expects him to pursue a life of purity and this cannot be expressed outside of heterosexual relations.

P-5 has found acceptance and support from friends and family that both compensate for his lack of a partner and also have provided for him, a freedom to "...question, to struggle, to grow, to heal." P-5 is "walking the line" between his faith and his sexuality. And he is striving to embrace both in such a way that is personally authentic and pleasing to God.

Textural-Structural

P-5 has known "church" his entire life...conservative, traditional Christian churches.

I was born in a Baptist church and then raised in mostly a Bible Church...the church I was raised in was very, "traditional," I guess would be a good word. The organ was played for worship and if you stood for more than a couple songs [connoting a more "active" style of worship] most of the congregation would then call in and complain during the week...it was kind of, I would say a stifling church for a young kid growing up in it.

During high school, his parents divorced and gradually ceased to attend the church they had been at for most of his childhood. This gave him an opportunity to seek out a congregation that would better fit his needs. He found one and dove right in:

The church I went to was a "young" church, a lot more families, there was a large youth group and so with that season I had lots of fun there, I was very involved there...a lot of my core friends in high school were from the church and that is kind of how I got connected with the church... I actually would preach if the youth pastor was out of town and taught Sunday School for five and six year olds, every year did VBS [vacation Bible school]...so very, very involved; you know pretty much when the doors were open, I was there helping out in some way or leading something or doing something...all through high school.

Church was “home,” a safe haven in many ways for P-5. His family was breaking up, enduring a divorce and meanwhile he was carrying his own deep pain that no one knew about. He had been the subject of teasing and bullying for years:

You know, I’m not the most masculine and I’m pretty slender... I had been teased my whole life, it had always been there, like there was an underlying thing. I mean like in grade school, junior high, even high school, other guys would make fun of me, they would call me gay.

The cruelty of the school yard aside, P-5 did know that something was different about him, but he had never given it a name.

Now looking, it’s funny because, like you don’t really realize it until you realize it and then you’re like, well I always knew it...I mean I definitely knew that I was attracted to men...had I ever called myself gay or struggled with homosexuality? “No.”

His response to the teasing, to the tumult in his own family and ultimately to his own sexual confusion was to seek solace and meaning in his faith. He describes it as a “drive” or a “pursuit of God.” He is a devout man and believes that God loves him, wants a relationship with him and plays an active role in his life. But this is not to suggest that he was a passive follower. In addition to his service and leadership since his teen years, he was also asking hard questions and demanding real answers. And so it was not surprising that when he graduated from high school, he went away to Bible college. Here, he hoped he could sharpen his understanding of his faith, find the answers to his many questions, and hopefully bring peace to his troubled heart.

So I did a year and a half at a Christian university and during that time I was a Biblical Studies major and a Psychology minor. And I did quite a few college credits in high school so when I started in college I didn’t really start with the “pre-reqs” in undergrad like most people do...I kind of jumped right into my major and my minor and so I was taking predominantly Bible courses and psychology courses.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the roots of his relentless pursuit were inextricably connected to his repressed sexual identity. By now, he knew the truth of who he was.

I definitely knew, I knew that the attraction was there and had had some conversations indirectly with youth pastors or counselors...not necessarily like pertaining to me, but just the topic in general. Cause kind of when you're at that age and that awareness, you kind of find ways to gauge where people are at on the issue without divulging anything...but not refer to anything. Kind of that, "I have a friend who..." scenario.

But he also knew that being gay was regarded as sin in his faith tradition. In fact, an *abomination* that was outside God's design of heterosexuality. So P-5 was trapped in a paradoxical dilemma. The very sanctuary that had protected him and provided for him a place of personal and spiritual fulfillment, was also contributing to his greatest pain. The more fervently he pursued God through the church, the further he had to remove himself from his sexuality. But in college, all of this would change.

During his first year, he enrolled in a research class and each student was to select an issue that was to be the focus of her or his studies. P-5 chose homosexuality.

...I was kind of like, "This is my opportunity to figure this out once and for all." That is how naïve I was, because I was going to "figure it out." I spent an entire semester in this research class, researching homosexuality because the premise of the class was, "We're at a Bible school and so everybody in theory, believes what we believe, so the research can't be Biblically based." So the teacher was very much like in the mindset of, "You need to be educated of the world, to speak to the world." So all of my research was psychologically and scientifically based. There was no Biblical side of it.

Consistent with his personality and his history, he pursued his research with vigor. But the end of his first year and a half in college, two things were becoming clear. First, P-5 had concluded that the issue of homosexuality was not as "black and white" as he had

been led to believe by his faith tradition. He was emerging with more questions than answers and rather than finding a convenient resolution to his biblical and personal questions, he was actually more uncertain than ever. Secondly, he was beginning to wear down. He refers to this period of his life as “hitting rock bottom.” He was quickly accruing debt, he was becoming increasingly depressed, he was not sleeping, and he was still plagued by an emerging sexual identity that he was afraid to reveal to anyone. He states, “...everything that I had worked for was kind of coming crashing down.” Eventually, he sought out counseling and was placed on medication that helped to ease the depression and insomnia. And he made another significant decision during this time. He decided to quit school. He would enter into a chapter of his life that later he would view as a time of healing and clarity. But at the time, he just knew he could not continue living the way he was. During this period, P-5 consolidated:

And so for one summer, I pretty much literally just woke up and walked to work, walked home, got back in bed and I read. I read the Bible, I read books.

He had been forced to slow his relentless pace and take account of what was most important to him. So he worked during the day at Starbucks and then came home and rested and read the Bible, a source of truth and inspiration throughout his entire life. And it was during this time that he finally began to reach out to others regarding his sexual identity. His actual “coming out” even caught him off guard. He tells the story:

[I] actually never intended on coming out but um one of my best friends, um who had been one of my roommates in college, um, him and his wife called me one day and her brother was going to be in town and needed a ride from the airport so I was going to give him a ride and I was like, what are you guys coming out for? And my friend was like, well actually my wife’s brother just “came out” to us and told us that he is gay... looking

back on that conversation there were so many things that were very uncharacteristic of our friendship that took place. And I just believe it was the hand of God. Then he was like, “Well how are you?” And that’s not usually, I mean we talk about deep things but it’s not usually how it’s approached. And it all just kind of came flooding out. You know and I was like, “I’m gay too, I’ve been struggling with this.

He had finally said the words and the relief that filled him from the disclosure, coupled with the love and concern his dear friend had shown him, nurtured him in a way that he had never known. This would prove to be the beginning of P-5’s personal and spiritual restoration. The next day, he turned to his coworkers at the coffee shop.

After that honestly, it just felt like it just kept coming up. The next day at work I had like worked with the same people for two years and we, we were a family and I just started kind of telling them, and then it was that Starbucks community where you know, I had just felt accepted and felt like people were really, really genuine, which in hindsight is really funny because I always felt that more from the secular community than the Christian community.

After all the years in church, ironically he had found true acceptance in a phone call with an old friend and he had experienced true community in a group of coworkers from Starbucks. Eventually, he would fly home and “come out” to his family. His mother was surprised, not just by the news but by the confident man he had become. When she remarked about his calm, countenance, he replied:

“Well ultimately that is because it doesn’t really matter what you say and before it always has. I am happy and I am free and that’s more important to me than if I hurt you. I don’t want to lose you, and I am afraid of what you’re going to say, but ultimately I have to choose my happiness over your happiness.” And that was like a whole new place for me.

Indeed, he was finding his way and experiencing clarity and freedom as a gay man that was unprecedented. However, the spiritual questions still remained. How could he be gay and also a Christian, contrary to all he had been taught? And where was he now in

relationship to a Church that had caused him so much pain in their simplistic, judgmental conclusions about the lesbian and gay community? The answer for him, predictably, was complex. At first, he attended a “gay” congregation thinking that his might be a happy median for him. But he was distressed at what he believed to be the hypocrisy and reckless lifestyle of the leaders in the church. It was not that they were gay but that he felt that outside the church, they were living in a fashion that contradicted what they were teaching inside the church. He left there and eventually found a congregation that worked for him.

And so I left that church, and went to my current church and was like, “I know what I believe, and I know what God believes about me and I don’t need the church to affirm my sexuality. So basically the church that I am at now believes that um homosexuality is real, um but...it’s not the identifying, it’s the acting which is sinful. And that the only way to have a pure and holy relationship is a heterosexual one. So they believe heterosexuality is God’s design and that homosexuality is a result of “the fall,” and there is no holy way to live in a homosexual relationship.

At this point in his journey, P-5 has rejected the teachings of his conservative faith tradition and concluded that being gay and Christian are not incompatible. He rests in an assurance that God loves him and accepts him...the true him. However, for P-5, he has also decided that celibacy is the best path for him at this time. He still has strong convictions regarding scriptural teachings on homosexual behavior and though he has been able to identify and condemn, the harsh judgments and discriminatory behavior of many in the conservative church, he still feels convicted that he cannot simply ignore what he believes to be truth in the Bible.

I very much believe that the Bible is truth and um so for me it was like, “I have to take the whole Bible and all parts of it and I can’t pick and choose my theology”...this is what I believe is God’s design and God’s perfect

plan...God has very patiently and lovingly taken me through many, many steps and slowly changed my heart and changed my mind...and that means that I don't think that there is a pure and holy way to live in a gay sexual relationship.

This seems to be consistent for a man that has never settled for easy answers and has relentlessly pursued God and divine truth. It is unclear where his path will ultimately lead but for now, P-5 is experiencing a peace that had previously eluded him. He is comfortable with his decisions and is living a life committed to authenticity.

Chapter IX

Participant Six

Textural Analysis

Trying to be “Straight”

P-6’s memories of an “awkward realization” go back many years:

I mean it was very hard for me because there was always those awkward feelings I would say going all the way back to you know, your pre-teen years. Um going through puberty and things like that when you have all those sexual feelings going through your mind and everything. There was always those awkward feelings that made me question it, um you know about different sexes and how you felt about them so I would say way back to my pre-teen years I always was questioning myself about it.

Even in elementary school, P-6 knew that something was stirring. He points out that in addition to all the typical developmental awkwardness of puberty he carried the added burden of having sexual feelings that he didn’t fully understand. Almost instinctively, he tried to push them away.

Ah but like I said I never really wanted to accept it and so I always just pushed it away and tried to you know make myself different but as I grew up through high school I never really wanted to accept it.

This process of questioning and repressing continued into high school:

There is a lot of doubts you know and a lot of second guessing...there’s always that time period where you question it and for me when I was going through high school it was always in the back of my mind. I always had those feelings, but I always chose not to, um deal with it at that time, and I chose not to accept it...

However, there were many elements that contributed to his confusion and fear: the small town culture he lived in, the Christian faith he was raised in and the high school culture

he was immersed in. All these conspired together to pressure P-6 not just to avoid the feelings and repress them, but to literally create a heterosexual persona.

I tried to do what everyone else was doing which was you know being straight and having girlfriends and doing all that stuff during high school. And I never thought about “coming out” during high school because I would have been uncomfortable doing it being that we lived in such a small community that was very Christian based...everyone is pretty judgmental and things like that, so I never felt comfortable at that point. I guess it wasn’t really until about my senior year in high school when you know, I was pretty much sure about my sexuality...

All through high school, he pretended to be someone he was not. But by his senior year, there was no question in his own heart. The problem now was if, and when, he would let everyone else know.

Holding Hands

College was a welcome break from the confining small town environment of his youth. While there, he met many people representing diverse values and cultures. This was nurturing for him and also, as he would soon discover, empowering...

And I ended up, ah after going to college and going away from the home town and being able to meet a bunch of people with different backgrounds and different ideas and orientations and things like that really got me to explore myself and realize who I was as a person and become okay with who I was. About the middle of my freshman year you know, to myself, I was a gay man. I wasn’t out yet and I was completely okay with that and I always told myself that I had no reason to come out unless I was seeing someone, or it was starting to affect my personal life with other people; or anything like that...

Going away to college is often a significant transition for a young adult. But for P-6, it carried a particularly important weight – it was his ticket out. It would provide a safe place for him to finally understand and embrace who he was. Even the specific college he attended was significant. He gives more of the background story:

One of the biggest decisions in my life was deciding to go to college where I went. I could have gone with the rest of my friends up to a different school with all of them and done that but I chose to take a different path and go out on my own because part of me knew as a senior in high school that I wanted that time to explore myself and to meet new people. I had a large group of friends and about five or six of them were all going up to [a city in his home state] to go to school, and you know they all wanted me to go obviously. One of my best friends was actually quite upset when I decided not to but you know I knew I needed to make that choice for myself, and I needed to step away from that core group that was holding you back because of you know the implications of what they would think of you and all of that I mean so I ended up going to school pretty much by myself without anybody that I knew and I wanted to do that to make new friends, and to explore you know different parts of my life and the world I guess.

And so he left on his own. And he took that year to grow and expand. But as his first year of college drew to a close, he had still not “come out.” And now, he had moved back home for the summer and entered into his first relationship with another man.

The following summer when I ended up going home...I ended up seeing a boy and I decided that I wanted to come out and tell before they started finding out through other people or that kind of thing.

This simple statement doesn’t really express how complicated things became. While he was ready to stop hiding and he clearly wanted to spend intimate time with another guy, the actual moment of his “coming out,” caught him a bit off guard. He continues:

Well what happened was a very interesting situation. I was seeing this guy and we were hanging out quite a bit and I always knew I needed to do it at some point you know, I just was flirting with the idea of doing it for about a month as we were seeing each other and what actually ended up happening is that I was hanging out with this guy and a friend of ours saw us holding hands late at night walking down the street and so he told a friend of mine, and then my friend confronted me about it and then that’s when I told him and you know that’s when I made the decision. I was like “Okay, I need to tell my family and I need to tell my friends and everyone before they start hearing through other people,” because that definitely wasn’t the way I wanted it to happen.

While it is true that he had not chosen the precise moment that he would “come out of the closet,” it turns out that he had been trying for a while and this incident actually came as something of a relief.

I think it was surprising, but it was also a little bit relieving because I knew I had to do it, I just had nothing to push me into doing it and I don't know how long it would have taken me if I hadn't been pushed like that. And it wasn't a bad push. It wasn't something that I wasn't ready for. I think it was something that needed to happen...it was funny because before all that happened I was actually trying to hint towards my friends of what was going on with me and my boyfriend because they knew him as a gay man and he was out and everything. And so I would hint to them, “Oh yeah, I'm going to hang out with so and so tonight.” And they'd be like, “Oh really, I didn't know you guys were friends.” You know and they never got it and so I think I needed something like to push me into it...I definitely was shocked I guess that he found out that way and I was very surprised that he was you know brave enough to confront me about it, but yeah, it definitely was also relieving.

Once those initial words started to flow, P-6 kept talking. He started making phone calls to his friends back at college. One call in particular, truly highlights his sensitivity and, perhaps in a sad way, the deeper concerns about intolerance and judgment that he might face if he was going to live as an “out” gay man.

I formed a bunch of friends up in college too at that time um and I called all of my friends...I think the first one I called was the one who was going to be my roommate the next year and you know part of me thought he may not want to room with me anymore. So I figured I needed to figure that out. I don't know why I ever thought that but I called him first and told him and I was like, “Hey if you don't want to room with me then I totally understand.” But he was...everyone you know was like super cool with me and they were like, “Oh no that's fine, you're still the same person, we don't think anything.”

Then, he turned to more of his friends there in his home town. Listening to these accounts, one cannot help but be impressed with the courage that flowed from him as he told his story, again and again. It is also quite evident how ready he was to stop hiding.

I told my close friends from my home town as well and they were all really cool, a lot of them were really shocked because um you know I wasn't the type that someone would think would be gay I guess if you were to look at stereotypes...if I had to guess you know I would say that 90 percent of the people I meet, never would guess that I was a gay man. The way I act you know I'm not very effeminate, I don't possess a lot of the stereotypical gay qualities I guess.

Apparently, whatever conception his friends might have had of what a gay man was like, it wasn't P-6. Nonetheless, he was a gay man. One that was experiencing a level of truthfulness and relief that he had never known. But now, it was time to tell his family. This would prove to be more daunting.

A Large Family

P-6 describes his family and how those first “coming out” conversations unfolded:

I have a large family...three brothers and two sisters and obviously my parents and they're still together. I called all my older brothers and sisters, my younger ones I didn't tell until the next day...they were all super cool about it. There was obviously you know a lot of tears but I knew that they would be accepting of it because you know I've seen them interact with homosexual people and I've seen how they handle it and I knew that they were very positive about it and they are very welcoming and open and that went well, but it was that night when I spoke to my older sister you know she was like, “Well did you tell mom and dad?” And I was like, “No.” And that was when she was like, “Well you really need to tell them.”

Almost hidden within this account is a testimony to how closely P-6 had been watching his family, scrutinizing the model they had set forth for how they dealt with the LGBT community. These are the actions of someone who understood the inherent risks involved in “coming out” and needed to have some level of assurance, even with his own family, that they were going to embrace him. He continues...

So then it was either the next day or the day after that I decided to tell my parents. And that was a lot harder than I ever thought it would be. I knew it was going to be hard cause my dad is...I guess he is about two generations behind right now you know. He doesn't understand it, he doesn't get it...it was very hard for him. Um my mom on the other hand, I don't really know how she feels about it. I think she is okay with it, but she tends to agree with him. Um so she kind of sits back and just agrees with that, um...so yeah, it was very hard. But I told them and at first, the funny thing was you know at the time the guy I was dating was seventeen, so he was underage. So the first impression was, "Oh isn't he kind of young?" I was like, "Ah, okay. I just told you I'm gay and you're worried about? So the first impression, I think it was more shock than anything and then they were kind of like, "Okay are you sure?" And I was like, "Yeah."

This interaction is not just the recounting of a story but is a window into the dynamics of P-6's relationship with his father and mother and what he faced that day when he went to them to tell his secret. And while he paints a picture of two people who would seem unlikely to actively embrace him and advocate for him, it is also telling that despite this, it was still important for P-6 to approach them. He continues, by discussing his mom's reactions in the days and weeks that followed:

Well one of the biggest concerns of my mom's when I came out was that I was going to run away and never come home, you know like move away...because in her eyes that is what happens to any of the people that were gay in our community. You know they "come out" and then they never come home anymore. And so she didn't want to lose me as a son, or you know have me move off to some foreign city and never come home or never visit the family. Um, so that was her biggest concern.

There is a level of poignancy here as he describes his mom's deepest fear in having a gay son. Her concern about losing a vital connection to her son, speaks vividly of a mother's love, regardless of whatever personal feelings she had or was actively formulating about homosexuality. It is also, yet another glimpse of a home town culture that was not prepared to openly accept men like P-6.

A Negative Effect on Business

That summer, P-6 found himself with the beginnings of a whole new life. He had gone away to college to figure who he was and had come home and entered into his first relationship with another man. He had come out to his friends and his family. He had taken huge strides in just a few days' time. But as he quietly sat and reflected, the same night that he had come out to his family, he was surprised by his father's entrance into the room.

You know it really wasn't that bad until later that evening. I went downstairs was trying to recuperate and think about everything that had happened...my dad came down and he was like, we need to talk, and this is when he really went off the deep end. He was really upset about it and he brought all of my younger brothers and sisters up and we talked and he was concerned it was going to affect his business in town. And he was concerned that the church wasn't going to accept me anymore...he actually went and spoke to the priest that night to get like guidance from him and to see what he thought about it...

When asked what he was feeling while all of this went down, he expounded:

...he had brought us up into the kitchen and like we were all talking as a family about it. I was like, "No way." You know when he was saying that, I was really like, "Really? You think that that's how people are going to respond to it? I guess, having been away for college and seeing what people are actually like and how accepting people really are....but I was...I was like, "You're ridiculous there is no way somebody is not going to come and buy stuff from you because your son is gay, you know."...I guess at that time I was really, you know, it had it had all been brought out on the table. I sat there and I just listened to his points and I took it in. I didn't really respond. I wasn't going to try to fight him about it. And, and you know I just...I took it as it was I guess.

Somehow, he tried to take it all in. Perhaps it was an understanding of his father.

Perhaps, it is indicative of P-6's mellow, easy-going character. But either way, he

reflected back on the incident by saying simply, "I think it's comical like looking back at

it, but yeah he really didn't know how to deal with it." Unfortunately, this would not be the last difficult encounter with his father.

It was about a week after I had come out and you know I was still living at home. I actually was getting ready to leave back to college in about two weeks and I came home one night and dad was sitting there, and I thought because you know it's been awkward talking whatever and I thought, "Hey you know, I'll say hi to him," and I just said hi and asked him how his day was and he literally just freaked out on me and he yelled at me and told me how he can't sleep because of what I told him. He told me that he wished I'd have never told him...he said I wasn't normal...he just said a lot of mean things to me, straight to my face and you know at that point, that is where I was just like, wow you know this is going to be interesting to see where this ends up down the road.

P-6 did not overtly express a lot of emotions during the interview so it is difficult to know exactly how this left him feeling...but one can only imagine. Several weeks later, he would return to school. And, as with all things, life marches on and time has a way of softening strong emotions. When asked where things are at with his dad today, he responded by saying:

Yeah so I definitely went through a lot of hard times with him but I think that was just his way of dealing with it but eventually he got over it and now, it was funny because then I ended up going away for college and anytime we come back, he was nicer to me than he would have been before I had ever "come out." It wasn't like he wasn't ever nice to me, but I feel like he made an effort to say hi to me and ask me how things were going and things like that.

He suggested his own theory as to his dad's change in behavior:

I think after going through the whole initial process maybe he realized that he was being you ridiculous about it and I don't know but I guess maybe that was his way of being nice before my mom so that I wouldn't feel put off from coming home or coming to visit or anything like that, so I guess that's kind of how I interpreted it. Um but I don't know...

So things are at least more civil between he and his father, but when asked about how he is dealing with P-6's homosexuality specifically, he responded: "...we just never talked about being gay...we just don't really talk about it I guess...with my dad anyways..."

Low Expectations

There is a final note that should be added regarding P-6's "coming out" experience with his family. It was significant to note how low he had set his expectations going in. He explains:

After I "came out" there was a lot of tears...it wasn't sad crying, it was more unexpected, like you don't know what is going to happen. I guess the biggest thing I wanted was just for them to be okay with it. That was my biggest fear is that they weren't going to handle it well and that it wasn't going to go well...but I knew that there was going to be some sort of disagreement and some sort of confrontation about it because I know my family and that's how they are and I guess the whole time I was more just feeling like, "What's going to happen?" you know, because I've heard of stories where kids literally get disowned by their families and things like that when they "come out" and so I was more on the lines of like, this going to be a big deal or is this something we're always going to have to deal with...are we always going to have to be arguing about this? Is this really going to affect our family really as much as he thinks it is? And so there was a lot of doubt and a lot of uncertainty as to how things were going to pan out in the future with this.

His words speak for themselves...

What Do I Believe?

Coinciding with P-6's "coming out" experiences, was a season of questioning about what he really believed regarding his faith and if it was also time to make changes in this aspect of his life as well. He was raised in a devout Roman Catholic home and this religious tradition was an integral part of his life growing up.

I was raised as a Catholic Christian. I grew up going to a Catholic grade school and I was born and raised in a small town in central [state where he

was raised], basically where the majority of the population was Catholic. We did church every Sunday and holidays and all that and ah you know the whole family was raised that way.

When asked how he felt about this religious upbringing, he responded:

Oh it was fine...you know having the Catholic grade school and the Christian upbringing, you know I valued it a lot and I thought it raises you with good values and good morals and you know a strong conscience and background and stuff like that and looking back on it now, I really enjoyed being raised that way. And having some sort of moral values and background and something to live by and I thought that the Catholic Church and you know the Catholic classes and going to grade school really helped build that moral background.

While he had appreciated the moral foundation that his faith had provided for him, he was beginning to ask some hard questions.

Once I was able to “come out” that’s when I started to form my own ideas and insights and actually look at myself and think, “What do I believe?” You know I’ve been brought up with the Catholic background and the Catholic rules and all the Catholic traditions, but how much of that do I actually believe and how much of that do I actually agree with? You know I look back at it now and you know as of right now I believe in God, but I don’t really practice any sort of Christian religion right now. I have my own beliefs and I feel like I’m a good person and you know I live by the moral standards that I want to...

During his first year in college, he was now “coming out” as a gay man and also deciding for himself, what he wanted his faith to look like. He understood where he had come from, but he was starting to struggle with some of the inconsistencies he believed he was seeing in the Catholic faith.

You’re always taught when you’re younger, God loves you no matter how you are; if you’re black, white you’re different, anything like that, and it’s just so contradictory for them to then pick and choose someone out of the human population where you know a certain amount of people are going to be homosexual and to pick that whole set of people and just say we don’t agree with this. I just never thought they should be putting the blame on people for what they do. You know they always teach

forgiveness and all that but they can hold this out? So I guess as I grew older I just sort of realized you know, I'm not doing anything wrong...so I like a different sex than other people, I'm not hurting anyone by doing that...so I never felt like I was doing anything wrong; I never felt like it was wrong. And that's where my disagreements with the church started to arise, and started to come up, it's just like, "Why?"

His concerns in taking these new positions was not that he was wrong, but rather, he didn't know where this would leave him.

It was difficult because I didn't know where I was gonna go from there as far as the church...you know for a certain period of time right before I came out, I wondered if you know, everyone in the community if they found out, if it would be unacceptable for me to go to church anymore.

Yet despite these very real concerns, he was determined to find a path of spiritual practice that was consistent with who he was becoming as a man and consistent with, ironically enough, the moral code that he had been raised with and still held dear to his heart. Not the code that decried certain groups of people and judged others unfairly, but rather the ones that preached love and forgiveness for everyone. Today, he finds himself in a very different place.

I guess if someone were to look at my life and judge me as to whether I was spiritual or religious they would say no I'm not at all. But the way I think about it, I don't go to church on a regular basis, I don't go participate in Mass, you know I don't do any sort of youth groups or anything right now in my life...so I guess no, if you were to look at it from an outside view you wouldn't think I was a spiritual or religious person at all. But looking at it from my point of view and the thoughts and feelings that I have about it, I still very much consider myself a religious person. I still have very strong moral backgrounds that were brought up through the Catholic Church, I still believe in God. I believe in basically in the majority of the basic principles of a Christian religion or you know, Christian upbringing. I just choose not to practice it...

And as he has branched out and experienced the freedom of deciding his own path, he has had the opportunity to share with others and to hear their stories and their traditions, which has in turn, enriched his own quest. And yet, there is also this ironic realization:

And it's very interesting because I've had conversations with friends about religion...I've had friends that you know are different um Christianities and different sects and things like that and they've talked to me about their different views and I've always thought you know if I ever were to start practicing and going back to church you know, I'd probably be Catholic...there is something about the traditions of the Catholic Church that I really do enjoy and really it's nice to be able to participate. I like when you go to Mass, you know what you're going to expect; you could go to any church in the country and it's going to be the same...you're going to kneel at this point, you're going to sing at this point and you're going to get Communion at this point and to just have that uniform, I guess, set of traditions is kind of neat so I enjoy that part of it...

Clearly, such decisions are not as simple as saying one is a Christian or not; one is a practicing Catholic or not. In many ways, P-6's religious tradition is also his very culture...something that runs quite deep. He concluded with these thoughts:

I'm the same person I was seven years ago when I used to go to church every Sunday and go to youth group and got confirmed; I just don't practice out in public...You know, it's more of an internal thing for me...

However, just because he appreciates his spiritual heritage and seems to be at peace with where he is now, should not be mistaken as a laissez faire attitude. He holds some very strong opinions about the impact of the Church on his life as a gay man: "...you know I don't have time for people who are not going to accept me for who I am or be okay with who I am."

Coming Out of the Closet...Coming out of the Church

Fresh with a new open identity and a new spiritual direction, P-6 has not forgotten the difficulties that he endured being a gay man and a Catholic. He explains how this impacted him:

I never felt bad about myself. I never thought I was doing anything wrong...the more I grew up and the more I gained my own insights and own opinions about things it really seemed, I don't know...going to church and being a practicing Catholic really seemed more...you know, it made me question, "Why am I doing this?" "Why do I feel like I need to go to church every Sunday and why do I practice in a religion that is not even going to accept me for who I am?"

There is a strength in his voice as he revisits these questions from several years ago, as if protesting anew.

I think that honestly is one of the largest things that held me back and had me always doubting myself about it. I never felt like it was acceptable...I knew that it wasn't really accepted within the church's eyes, so I guess being brought up with that background you get these things pushed in your mind and like you know you're to not have sex before you're married, you know you have to marry a girl you have to do all of this...That and living in a small town with very closed minded people was one of the biggest factors that held me back from accepting who I was, and accepting it earlier than what I had done.

And then, a moment of honest, reflective admission:

If I thought that coming out as a gay man was going to make me a bad person, or make me not acceptable in God's eyes...I would have never done it...I needed to get to the point of realization that, you know this isn't a bad thing...I mean yeah there are there people who look down on it but these are the ridiculous radical people you know that still are racist or whatever, it's just...but yeah I never know once thought that coming out was going to you know make God not love me.

He concluded the interview by making, what seemed for him, an important distinction about his "coming out" of the closet...and the church:

Nothing much changed between my faith when I “came out,” it was more of um, “coming out” made me realize the flaws in organized religion...just the things they put in people’s minds...they made me dislike the concept of organized religion more...it wasn’t even the fact that it was because I “came out” or because I was a gay man but more of the fact that “coming out” and experiencing being more open to people has made [me] see the judgmentality everyone, you know the people that are in these organized religions and some of the ridiculous thoughts and rules that they have in these religions and the way it’s pushed on people to make them believe...I feel like it sets progression back as far as people accepting gay men and accepting homosexuality and things like that.

Through the strength of his own convictions and internal resolve, despite judgment from the church, anger from his father and fear realizing he could not orchestrate how all of this would unfold, P-6 has forged forward and has become a whole and integrated man...a man who is both gay and religiously devout.

Structural Analysis

Going Away

One cannot read P-6’s account without immediately being impressed with his internal strength and determination. Listening to him speak during the interview, he presents as a very relaxed, low key individual who takes time to reflect as he talks. But close scrutiny of his story also reveals a man who feels things very strongly and a man who, as was evidenced, took some decisive actions to care for himself and ultimately, better his life. Perhaps the first example of this was during his high school years. It is quite a complex feat, to live everyday as if one were the opposite sexual orientation. This is not merely an act of hiding one’s homosexuality. It is a mission attempting to, in essence, will oneself to be something he is not. It is more than just dating women. It is a

frame of mind, a way of speaking, mannerisms...behaviors. It is rising every day, determined to show the world a completely contrived personality. Not with a desire to deceive but to survive. From his perspective, this was the path of least resistance. This is what he had seen modeled in his conservative community his entire life. This is the portrait the Catholic Church had painted and stamped with “God’s approval.” This is what he saw at home and what he saw at school. While there is no question as to the strength required to “come out” to the world, which of course he eventually did, it should not be underestimated the energy and strength he exuded in simply trying to get through each day.

As he has said, by his senior year he knew without a doubt that he was gay. And with graduation approaching and college on the horizon, excitement grew amongst his friends at the prospect of all of them heading out to the university together and living out this American rite of passage. But P-6 had a different plan—one that his friends would not understand. He had decided that he was going to go away alone. He is clear that his motivation in doing so was that it would give him the space that he needed to finally find himself. Somewhere that was not home, with new people who had no preconceived notions of who he was. There were serious questions that were rising in him about this all-encompassing religion that had been such an unmistakable part of his life. And greater still, there was a different man inside waiting to emerge. A gay man who was tired of pretending...tired of remaining silent. And so he struck out on his own. One can imagine how freeing this must have felt. He would make new friends that year and expose himself to different values and worldviews that no doubt, refreshed his spirit and

emboldened him to finally find parity between his external and internal worlds. He had resolved long ago, not just who he was but also the quiet assertion that it was *not* wrong. What was left now was to reveal this man to the rest of the world. That moment was fast approaching.

Remarkable Sensitivity

P-6's life is a journey of quiet determination and woven into the fibers of this tapestry are glimpses of a sensitive man who feels deeply and cares for those around him. Perhaps most poignant was his discussion of lowered expectations regarding his family. He stated that his desire was simply for those he loved the most to "Be okay with it." To be okay with him being gay, as if he were saying, "I don't need you to celebrate it or even fully understand it. I just want you to accept it, and then to get on with your lives." Here was a man who did not require special attention and even avoided causing great ripples. This is not someone who would likely be found with a megaphone and a protest placard. Rather, he has quietly sought an authentic way of life that works for him. He has sat and listened as those around him expressed disappointment, as was the case with his close friend after he announced he was going to a different university by himself. And when his father came apart emotionally, decrying his concerns about business and public perception, P-6, surrounded by his younger brothers and sisters, listened rather than screaming or cursing or even getting up and walking out like so many others might have done. There is no question, these moments caused him pain and fear but it in retrospect, having heard his story, it just wouldn't have seemed consistent with who he was to respond in such a fashion.

However, during the interview, he said something more. As he continued discussing his family, he said that all he really wanted was for them to say “I love you...we still love you.” And then, with virtually no hesitation, he followed by stating that he did not expect that would happen. It is difficult to do this piece justice, as listening to it, one does not get any sense that P-6 felt he was undeserving of this kind of acceptance and affection. This is not an insecure individual who assumed he was unlovable. Rather, the impression is that he is amazingly aware of those around him and of the dynamic within which he lives and because of that, he is realistic about what he could expect from his culture, his religion, even his family. Likewise, reflecting on the very event that led up to his “coming out,” he was seen walking with his boyfriend, holding hands, late at night in his hometown. He was acutely aware of where he was and what he was doing and assumed the risk of being seen by someone and yet chose an understated act of defiance to speak his truth. He had been trying to hint to his friends what was happening yet when they didn’t discern his quiet messages he just proceeded with the relationship and allowed that inevitable moment to unfold. Then, when he was spotted and his friend confronted him and word spread, he accepted that the time had come and almost immediately, picked up the phone and began to call his friends and ultimately, tell his family. One of his first calls was to the man who was slated to be his roommate for the coming year at college. He said he wanted to tell him so that if the roommate had second thoughts about wanting to live with a gay man, he would have the chance to back out. Again, there was no sense of self-shaming deference but rather, an

unspoken understanding that it was possible that his roommate would have an issue and P-6 felt he deserved to know.

Finally, it bears emphasizing that though P-6 has formed some very strong opinions about his Roman Catholic background and has taken definitive steps to walk away from the public practice and expression of his faith, he still chooses to attend mass every time he comes home as an act of respect to his parents which is also an acknowledgement of the power of perception in his small home town – acknowledgement that his absence from mass would be noticed and draw undue attention to his family and to his homosexuality. This is an act that, far from ideological hypocrisy, speaks to an acute understanding of the needs of others and the realities of the world in which he lives.

Down the Road

Throughout the interview, P-6 made several references to his concerns about not knowing how all of this would play out. This didn't leave one with the impression that he was sitting around, pining over these uncertainties but rather, it conveyed the sense that at each step of the "coming out" experience, he had limited control over the unfolding events...and he knew it. He spoke of not knowing how his father would ultimately cope with his homosexuality and wondered if the angry, emotional scenes would continue. He mentioned also, pondering about the church back home and if he would be allowed to return knowing that he was gay. These thoughts and concerns are certainly understandable but in the *fog* of the "coming out" experience, when there is so often strong emotion and dramatic reactions and even painful consequences, it seems significant that the *future* was of consistent import to P-6. He had spent many years

carrying around this secret, adapting to a heterosexual way of life, gauging the potential reactions of those around him, questioning the contradictions of his faith and ultimately, planning his departure from his hometown to create the space to find himself. These things, he could do. These things, he had spent considerable time contemplating. But what he didn't have control over was everyone and everything beyond him. These elements could be anticipated but not guaranteed. And perhaps, in observing his story, this is one of the most unnerving aspects about the "coming out" experience. Despite all that LGBT people do to control their own stories and carve out their own paths they are also inextricably connected to family, friends, colleagues, classmates and even a general public, whose reactions cannot be controlled.

Contradictions and Choices

Consistent with all that has been said, P-6's departure from organized religion was also a well-contemplated decision, noticeably absent of reactionary responses and unbridled emotion. No one would blame him if he was filled with resentment regarding the way he had been made to feel judged and unacceptable. But when discussing his views on religion and spirituality, it is not the judgments that P-6 reacts to, but rather a larger context of perceived contradictions and hypocrisy that he takes issue with. He is clear in stating that he did not leave the Roman Catholic Church because he "came out" as a gay man, but rather, that his "coming out" experience helped him to see uncomfortable inconsistencies within his church. He conveyed disillusionment with the reality that parishioners are so aware of who is in attendance at mass each week and who is not. He opined that they preach love and forgiveness and yet single out individuals and

groups of people and judge them to be unacceptable in the eyes of God. These revealed contradictions were the impetus for P-6 to break away and find his own avenue of spiritual fulfillment. But interestingly, this decision was not a break from the morals, standards and beliefs of his Catholic heritage, as one might expect. In fact, he is surprisingly candid about the fact that little has changed regarding his internal values – many of which were formed by his church. Rather, his argument is far more nuanced. He abstains from participating in mass and speaking openly about his faith not because he is embarrassed of it nor because he has rejected it out of hand, but rather it is a statement about his frustration with the adherents of that faith that so often act in a way that blatantly contradicts the very values they claim they hold so dear. He knows that he is loved by God and that he is not unacceptable in being gay. He holds that there is a ‘right and wrong’ in life and strives to treat others with respect and dignity. These are not just personal ethics but religious standards and ones that he takes very seriously. But he will not associate with a church that doesn’t.

P-6’s life displays a remarkable consistency of affect and cognition – feelings and thought patterns. He is a man who presents as steady and self-assured, yet there is no sense of pretense. He accepts himself as he is and he cares for others in a sensitive and empathic manner. He has intentionally sought opportunities to develop and mature himself as a man, he has struggled to find a spiritual way of being that is honest and sincere and he has fought to live an authentic life as a gay man. It is a life that demands respect.

Textural-Structural

P-6 remembers “an awkwardness” from very early in his life. It stemmed from sexual feelings that as a little boy, he did not fully understand.

I mean it was very hard for me because there was always those awkward feelings I would say going all the way back to you know, your pre-teen years. Um going through puberty and things like that when you have all those sexual feelings going through your mind and everything. There was always those awkward feelings that made me question it, um you know about different sexes and how you felt about them so I would say way back to my pre-teen years I always was questioning myself about it.

For a young man growing up in a small Midwestern town seeing no “out” homosexuals, he didn’t know what to do with his feelings other than to keep them a secret and to blend in as best he could. So P-6 tried to be *straight*.

I tried to do what everyone else was doing which was you know being straight and having girlfriends and doing all that stuff during high school. And I never thought about “coming out” during high school because I would have been uncomfortable doing it being that we lived in such a small community that was very Christian based...everyone is pretty judgmental and things like that, so I never felt comfortable at that point. I guess it wasn’t really until about my senior year in high school when you know, I was pretty much sure about my sexuality...

Compounding P-6’s dilemma was the fact that he was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family.

I was ah raised as a Catholic Christian. I grew up going to a Catholic grade school and I was born and raised in a small town in central [state where he was raised], basically where the majority of the population was Catholic. We did church every Sunday and holidays and all that and ah you know the whole family was raised that way.

It was not that he resented his faith, in fact he credits it for providing a good moral foundation for him. However, this moral code also included teachings that prohibited

homosexual expression. He knew this. And so, during his high school years, while pretending to be heterosexual, he began to formulate plans to break free from this culture that was keeping him in the “closet.”

Upon graduating from high school, P-6 left for a university away from home and specifically one that his friends would not be attending. They did not understand his choice and one close friend in particular was hurt over his decision. It is important to note that P-6 is a very kind, easy going person who typically does not draw a lot of attention to himself and likes to get along with everyone. Yet in this instance, he was driven by a deeper need to find a place, a community, where he would finally be free to sort out his questions and decide who he wanted to be.

One of the biggest decisions in my life was deciding to go to college where I went. I could have gone with the rest of my friends up to a different school with all of them and done that but I chose to take a different path and go out on my own because part of me knew as a senior in high school that I wanted that time to explore myself and to meet new people...I knew I needed to make that choice for myself, and I needed to step away from that core group that was holding me back because of you know the implications of what they would think of you and all of that I mean so I ended up going to school pretty much by myself without anybody that I knew and I wanted to do that to make new friends, and to explore you know different parts of my life and the world I guess.

This was a significant act of self-advocacy and during that first year of college, though he was still not “out,” he had clearly developed a better understanding of who he was becoming. He would return home that first summer but he would return a different man.

P-6 returned and now ironically, back in his home town, he began his first relationship with another man.

The following summer when I ended up going home...I ended up seeing a boy and I decided that I wanted to come out and tell before they started finding out through other people or that kind of thing.

There is no question that he understood the risks involved. In retrospect it seems clear that he was ready for his friends and his community to know that he was gay. He had begun seeing a young man known to his friends to be a homosexual and he had even started dropping hints in his own way, trying to help them see who he was. But they didn't "connect the dots." Then one evening, the truth was finally revealed.

I was hanging out with this guy and a friend of ours saw us holding hands late at night walking down the street and so he told a friend of mine, and then my friend confronted me about it and then that's when I told him and you know that's when I made the decision. I was like "Okay, I need to tell my family and I need to tell my friends and everyone before they start hearing through other people," because that definitely wasn't the way I wanted it to happen.

While he didn't actually plan this as the moment he would "come out" to his friends, it was obvious that "coming out" was inevitable. As it turns out, his friends received this revelation quite well. Over the next days, he would talk not just with them, but also his friends back at college, telling every significant person in his life.

I think it was surprising, but it was also a little bit relieving because I knew I had to do it, I just had nothing to push me into doing it and I don't know how long it would have taken me if I hadn't been pushed like that. And it wasn't a bad push. It wasn't something that I wasn't ready for. I think it was something that needed to happen...

And then, he turned to his family.

P-6 was raised in a large family of three brothers and two sisters. He describes how his "coming out" to them unfolded:

I called all my older brothers and sisters, my younger ones I didn't tell until the next day...they were all super cool about it. There was obviously you know a lot of tears but I knew that they would be accepting of it

because you know I've seen them interact with homosexual people and I've seen how they handle it and I knew that they were very positive about it and they are very welcoming and open and that went well, but it was that night when I spoke to my older sister you know she was like, "Well did you tell mom and dad?" And I was like, "No." And that was when she was like, "Well you really need to tell them."

He was relieved to have the support of his siblings but telling his parents would be another matter.

So then it was either the next day or the day after that I decided to tell my parents. And that was a lot harder than I ever thought it would be. I knew it was going to be hard cause my dad is...I guess he is about two generations behind right now you know. He doesn't understand it, he doesn't get it...it was very hard for him. Um my mom on the other hand, I don't really know how she feels about it. I think she is okay with it, but she tends to agree with him. Um so she kind of sits back and just agrees with that, um...so yeah, it was very hard.

Following that initial conversation with his parents, his father really began to struggle with the issue. Later that night, he contacted their parish priest and then called the family together and became quite emotional. He stated that he was worried about the impact on the business he owned and how the community and the church would receive the news. A few weeks later, he blew up again, expressing his discomfort and concern. P-6 was predictably hurt by these incidents but took things in stride, anticipating this might occur. While his mom remained mostly quiet, agreeing with her husband she did, P-6 surmises, finally intervene growing concerned about her son and the cohesion of the family.

Well one of the biggest concerns of my mom's when I came out was that I was going to run away and never come home, you know like move away...because in her eyes that is what happens to any of the people that were gay in our community. You know they "come out" and then they never come home anymore. And so she didn't want to lose me as a son, or you know have me move off to some foreign city and never come home or never visit the family. Um, so that was her biggest concern.

Eventually, things would calm down and his father, though not discussing this his son's sexual identity, has tried to be more agreeable.

I think after going through the whole initial process maybe he realized that he was being you know, ridiculous about it and I don't know but I guess maybe that was his way of being nice before my mom so that I wouldn't feel put off from coming home or coming to visit or anything like that, so I guess that's kind of how I interpreted it.

While he would have hoped for more support from his parents, consistent with his personality he took it in and then moved on. It is not that he was immune to the risks and the difficulties of "coming out" but his greater motivation was to live a life that made sense to him...that was consistent and real. He had secured the acceptance and care of his friends and his siblings and was pointed in a new direction, a direction that would not include the Roman Catholic faith of his youth.

Today, P-6 maintains a deep, abiding faith in God and continuation of the very moral code he had been taught as a youngster in the church. But his experiences "coming out" as a gay man had changed his perspectives.

Once I was able to "come out" that's when I started to form my own ideas and insights and actually look at myself and think, "What do I believe?" You know I've been brought up with the Catholic background and the Catholic rules and all the Catholic traditions, but how much of that do I actually believe and how much of that do I actually agree with? You know I look back at it now and you know as of right now I believe in God, but I don't really practice any sort of Christian religion right now. I have my own beliefs and I feel like I'm a good person and you know I live by the moral standards that I want to...

He explains the rejection of his childhood religion this way:

You're always taught when you're younger, God loves you no matter how you are; if you're black, white you're different, anything like that, and it's just so contradictory for them to then pick and choose someone out of the human population where you know a certain amount of people are going

to be homosexual and to pick that whole set of people and just say we don't agree with this... You know they always teach forgiveness and all that but they can hold this out? So I guess as I grew older I just sort of realized you know, I'm not doing anything wrong...so I like a different sex than other people, I'm not hurting anyone by doing that...And that's where my disagreements with the church started to arise, and started to come up, it's just like, "Why?"

Once again, listening to his own heart, his own conscience, he took the steps necessary to care for himself live in an appropriate a healthy way...for him. There was not big declaration, no protest, no confrontation. He just grew up and found himself.

...it wasn't even the fact that it was because I "came out" or because I was a gay man but more of the fact that "coming out" and experiencing being more open to people has made [me] see the judgmentality...you know the people that are in these organized religions and some of the ridiculous thoughts and rules that they have in these religions and the way it's pushed on people to make them believe...I feel like it sets progression back as far as people accepting gay men and accepting homosexuality and things like that.

Chapter X

Participant Seven

Textural Analysis

Fundamentalist

P-7 was raised in a Christian fundamentalist church. Christian fundamentalists are religiously conservative and believe in a literal translation of the Bible. Their faith and doctrines are based on a “no-nonsense” ideological approach that stresses the basic fundamentals, hence their name.

We were non-denominational and I can still remember when my pastor said... ‘We’re Fundamentalists,’ ...he was just saying that we believe exactly what the Bible says, I mean there is only one thing you can be...you can do whatever you want to do as long as you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins. Then, that’s like your golden ticket to heaven.

But as a young boy, P-7 was not focused on doctrinal statements and ideological beliefs.

It was much simpler and perhaps, more profound. He recollects:

One of my first memories ever is being on a rocking chair with my stepmother and she was saying, ‘Do you have to be good to go to heaven?’ And I would say, ‘No.’ Do you have to be baptized to go to heaven?’ And I’d say, ‘No.’ ‘Do you have to...’ You know all the religious things. And then she would say, ‘Well what do you have to do to go to heaven?’ And I would say, ‘Believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins.’

This fond childhood recollection highlights, in many ways, the simplicity of the faith that he grew up with. All their teachings hinged on the historical and theological centrality of Jesus Christ being the founder of their faith and the savior and redeemer of their sins.

That was one of my first memories...it was like a basic foundational truth in my upbringing that in order to go to heaven, you have to believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins. And it was always, it’s always been a loving message to me...until I got older.

As a child and even an adolescent, P-7 didn't view his religion's emphasis on sin as a negative or a scary concept, because Christ was the answer. This was a message of hope to a people who believed they were fundamentally flawed. A message that said, "It doesn't matter what you've done, Jesus still loves you and suffered so that you would not have to be held eternally responsible for your mistakes." However, as he indicated, the simplicity would not last. Eventually, the pastor of his childhood church died, his family changed churches and slowly, as he grew and matured, he began to hear a different message:

...it was still very fundamentalist and even though they would say the same thing, that it doesn't matter what your sin is, you know, 'Jesus loves the sinner, not the sin...' But it was very strongly implied that if you are living a certain way, then you aren't really living for Christ, you aren't fulfilling what you are supposed to do in life. But you could still go to heaven but you aren't fulfilling your relationship with God.

These were discrepancies that would eventually call his very faith into question. But that was still years down the road. In the meanwhile, he states "...my mindset was Conservative Christian...I held very true to what my Dad and stepmom taught me...it was considered a Christian fundamental."

When P-7 left home and went to college, he sought out a community that would reinforce his strongly held spiritual beliefs:

When I came to [city where his college is located] and started to go to this one church...that's when I really got immersed...I had friends there and we all had the same ideas about homosexuality and it was just so far from my reality to be with a guy when I was going to church Wednesday and then there was college Bible studies on Fridays, you know I'd go two different days, you know two different services on Sunday.

His words are telling both because it reflects the strength of his spiritual convictions, the importance that having others who were like-minded around him and particularly, that this faith paradigm did not allow for homosexuality to be considered anything but a sin.

There were other hints of this along the way. He relates one such memory:

There was something on Dateline or some night news show about homosexuality and I can remember being like, ‘What’s wrong with that?’ My stepmom gave me two verses in the Bible: ‘It’s unnatural; it’s not what God meant it for...

It was that “simple.” Their teachings said that it was wrong and there was no other interpretation to be had. But what was not simple was the inner conflict posed by his own family: P-7’s mother is an “out” lesbian.

...my real mom is gay...and there was always that conflict in my head but, there is nothing wrong with my mom you know. I love her and she’s her and being with her was almost healthier than being with my stepmom and my dad. They had a lot of problems but it was just a healthier environment with my mom.

So, as a boy, he was torn: he had a mother who espoused a lifestyle that he was consistently told was wrong. In fact, he reflected that at the time, “I’d probably say if my mom ever asked me when I was really religious, ‘Do you approve of me and Michelle?’ I would have said, ‘No.’” Yet despite this, even at that age, he could see that there was a level of health and stability in his mother’s home and in her relationship with her lesbian partner, that he was not experiencing with his religiously devout father and stepmom.

Meanwhile, he continued to thrive in the college group:

I really enjoyed it. I socially had all these friends that went there and I loved my friends and I loved the teachings and my favorite part about Christ was how he reached out to the sinners and underdogs and told people, ‘Give up all your worldly possessions and be there for the poor

and the hungry and the starving...and also the message that we got: 'It's a free gift...' So yeah, I really did enjoy being there.

P-7's cherished religious upbringing and the community of like-minded Christians that embraced him in college were powerful forces in his life. He loved Jesus, he loved his father and step-mother, and he loved his friends. Yet, despite these incredibly strong emotions, a secret that he held deep within him since junior high school, would eventually force him to make a difficult and painful choice.

Middle School

P-7 has several memories from his early childhood that he thought might have been applicable to the issues of sexual orientation that he would deal with years later.

First was the recollection of experimentation:

I can remember being really young, before kindergarten and experimenting with a boy, he was my age...and I don't know what that's about because I also experimented with a girl, you know, playing doctor, it was that type of thing and it didn't really come up again.

While these early experiences could understandably be viewed as developmentally "normal" behavior, what wasn't so easily understood by a young man and what seemed to have a more significant effect on him came later in elementary school:

...throughout my whole elementary years, you know kids: 'Are you a girl?' 'You'd make a really good girl.' 'You kind of act like a girl.' 'You're weird.' I can always remember that...

The prodding, teasing and shame-inducing questions grew more painful in junior high:

When I went to middle school it felt like that was the start of when people were like, 'That's gay!' Or, "Are you a fag?" And that was the last thing you wanted to be in middle school.

The comments from those around him were exacerbated by the fact the he was experiencing his first crush on a boy. A behavior that, in middle school, is so typical and expected from a heterosexual standpoint, created tremendous fear for him:

Then the dreaded middle school years came and I can remember having a huge crush on this guy and being terrified, like knowing that that was different...I can remember one summer in middle school just praying and crying like, 'God, please, I don't...I don't want to be gay...take this away from me; take these feelings away from me.'

The memories of this awkward and painful time all seemed to culminate with a story he told:

At one point, I think I was in eighth grade I was in the car and my mom was pumping gas and...I had really been thinking about this guy a lot and like you know, I had been masturbating to stuff like that. But I remember just praying and going, 'Okay God, if I am meant to be gay for the rest of my life, will you have this song come on next on the radio?' And it came on! And I remember being like, 'Uhhh!' And I didn't talk all the way back, to my mom. I didn't tell her the story...

This poignant story reflects a complex process that was occurring within P-7: he was upset and hurting over the ongoing teasing at school, he was praying to a God that he loved and believed in, testing or bargaining as he wrestled with what was happening inside of him and throughout it all, he never spoke a word of it to anyone. A heavy burden for any middle-schooler to bear. His answer, for the time being, was to push his sexual awareness down even deeper, as he attempted to live a "straight life."

Ignorance is Bliss

P-7 headed into high school with the presence of his true sexual identity, deeply hidden and he would allow himself, virtually no true acceptance of this knowledge,

internally or otherwise. He relied on his trademark positive, light-hearted personality to simply deny the discoveries he had made:

I think it's also my demeanor and just my personality that I just, I just have a positive outlook...I always knew that was something there but it didn't...I'd never let it bother me too much...I felt like what I was doing was right.

To reinforce this self-imposed rejection of his emerging sexuality, he fell back on the ideal picture that had been “painted” for him over years of exposure to Christian fundamentalist teachings:

I was steeped in denial and [sigh]...I don't know why the term ‘Ignorance is bliss’ comes to mind but I was just like, ‘Yeah! Happy Christian guy!’ and, ‘Yeah, I'll have a wife.’

He knew the chosen route that was appropriate for a Christian boy: dating girls, falling in love, getting married, having a family. And so this is what he set out to do:

...after middle school, I knew that, ‘This [homosexuality] isn't going to work and so I tried really hard, I can remember thinking, ‘I've got to be attracted to girls, I have to be attracted to girls,’ and eventually, like I just made myself believe it... I had enjoyable relationships with the two girls that I had in high school and so then I never really thought about it much...[I] experimented with them and I never had sex but I was able to have a pleasurable sexual experience with them.

By sheer force of will, P-7 waded into the heterosexual world and began having relationships with girls. He even became intimate, on some level, with each. These instances seem to indicate that for him as with many others, his sexuality was on a spectrum and not easily defined. While he denied the side of himself that he was afraid to share with the world, he was at the same time, having meaningful relationships with girls. He derived pleasure from sexual activity and simply enjoyed being with them. But it is also evident that these occurrences...these relationships allowed him to avoid his

homosexual feelings and desires. He continued this pattern having two girlfriends in college as well. And again, he had positive experiences with these women.

Remembering the last relationship, he shares:

I thought that you know, 'This is it, I'm gonna get married, I'm going to you know, be a good Christian and do everything that I'm supposed to and be happy...and then we broke up.

Despite his best efforts, he ultimately did not derive the satisfaction he sought. He continues:

...the thing was, it was never...it just didn't fit. You know and with the guys that I have been with it just seems right. It doesn't make a lot of sense to most people.

And so after four relationships with women, during high school and college representing years of denying his attraction to men, he had essentially ended up where he had started: he wanted to be with men.

Exploring

Almost immediately after he broke up with his last girlfriend, the old familiar feelings came rushing back to the surface:

And I was kind of like, 'Whoa!' And something just went off in my brain and there was this boy that I knew earlier and I just started letting myself feel the way I did feel for him but I had been suppressing it before that.

Now single again, he began to allow himself to feel the attraction for a guy he knew and the intensity seemed to overwhelm him. But the attraction was a harbinger of a much greater realization that if he was going to allow himself to feel sexual attraction to men, his life was going to dramatically change. He reflected to himself at the time:

'Okay, you're not going to have the life you thought you were going to have,' and I came back from this trip and started hanging out with this boy

a lot and I just like, fell ‘head over heels for him.’ And that was kind of the start of me questioning, ‘What’s wrong with this?’ ‘Why is this such a big deal?’ And then even questioning, ‘Well is there a God?’ I questioned everything I had stood firm on.

Now it seems things began to topple. Foundational assumptions such as his very belief in God came into question. He was permitting himself, not just to explore his feelings for another man, but also, to question his own religion. Ironically, for all the powerful emotions and thoughts that this one man had triggered in P-7, the relationship itself never really came to fruition. But from those experiences, he seemed to change course and head in a new direction.

...nothing really happened with him. I think he’s still really in the “closet”...so that whole summer we hung out and that whole fall...nothing ever happened but I...deep down inside, I knew that I loved him.

The strongest of emotions had finally been granted permission to take hold. He loved another man. As his heart opened and the ancient restraining fears began to loosen their grip, he began to explore.

And then, so I was just exploring those feelings more and questioning what was wrong with it and I guess I was just ready. I was primed for what happened next...I went down to a friend’s birthday party and they had a gay friend and we got closer and closer through the night and um, kissed and kissed all night and then that was kind of the starting point for me.

However, despite the excitement of these newly entertained emotions and his first intimate experience with a man, he was not ready to declare himself “gay.”

And then, so when I finally made out with that guy in the spring I told two of my really close girlfriends that I made out with this guy and I was still apprehensive to...I wasn’t going to say I was gay...I was just exploring that side of me and stuff like that...I know I had some feelings for guys but, ‘It doesn’t mean that I’m gay and I don’t know what it means.’...I’ve just been exploring that side of me.

It is important to understand that these latest experiences for P-7 occurred within the last year. They are still fresh and he is still actively in the process of understanding what this all means to him. And not just that he is attracted to men, but now he is beginning to explore, what kind of men.

...so as far as who my partner is, I just want to find somebody with a good soul but I'm figuring out more that I want somebody that's male. And that it's more comfortable that way.

P-7 seems to be actively rediscovering himself. Teachings that once were beyond question are now being re-examined. And feelings that were once just being explored have now become an identity: "...and really, not until recently, I've been able to tell people, 'Yeah, I'm gay.'"

Safe

In the midst of all that was going on for P-7 during this time, decisions also had to be made as to who he would tell about the new life he was experiencing. He was beginning to overcome his own internalized fear of his sexuality and now, he had to determine who he could trust. Who would be safe enough to open up to?

I knew it [coming out] was just going to be an issue with a lot of people and it was scary to me...Looking back on it now, I came out first to somebody I was very comfortable with and knew that wouldn't be judgmental

This first person was his cousin Jessie. She was in a unique position to understand the worlds he found himself torn between and the risk he was assuming. He describes her:

...she was raised in the same religious background as me but she has always been liberal in her thinking. She didn't go to church every Sunday, she smoked weed, she was kind of this 'crazy cousin' that I had but I felt comfortable. She was safe for me and I told her earlier that I have feelings

for this guy and she was like, ‘Oh that is so exciting!’ And that was just what I needed at that time.

His decision-making process here lends critical insight into his thinking. Despite the fear he had of being judged and despite the apprehension he had struggled with for years in embracing his sexuality due to his faith, the first person he came out to was also a Christian who had been raised much like him. It seems that what P-7 was looking for in a confidant did not have so much to do with religion as it did worldview. He needed someone who would simply care and not hurt and reject him. He saw these qualities in Jessie and soon, he would seek out others who also presented themselves as “safe.”

Second step was my two girlfriends I came out to next. They also had gradually not been coming to church. I met them in church but they also had been having issues with the church. It was a step by step progression. It was somebody that I was very comfortable with, the two girls that I knew wouldn’t have an issue...then it was my sisters and my mother. I knew my mom wouldn’t have a problem with it.

Finally, he decided to speak to his sisters and his mom who, as mentioned earlier, is a lesbian. While he knew that his mom would be safe to “come out” to, he had struggled privately for quite a while trying to weigh the conservative religious messages of his father and step-mom with the “out” lifestyle of his mother. But that was the past. Now, as he began to make his own critical choices, one of which was to begin putting distance between himself and the church, his mom was a natural choice to share his life with:

There was always that conflict in my head but there is nothing wrong with my mom, you know? I love her and she’s her and being with her was almost healthier than being with my stepmom and dad. They had a lot of problems but it was just a healthier environment with my mom.

As P-7 shares this portion of his story, one can hear irony in his voice. The woman who was living the homosexual lifestyle had proved to be a healthier and stable resource for

him than the devoutly religious home of his dad and stepmom. This poignant realization stood in direct contradiction to the messages he had been given his entire life as a Christian.

However, everyone he told did not choose to embrace him fully and convey to him, the acceptance and love that he was longing for.

Love, but...

His sisters received the news in a much more qualified and subdued fashion. And while ultimately, they proclaimed their love for their brother, there were other messages given as well:

My sisters are very religious and their reactions are so funny. My older sister goes, 'Well, you know it's not a big surprise!'... We got to have a car ride home to talk about it and knew what their reactions would be then. 'We'll always love you, but it's a sin and we know that you know God's not going to honor that.' 'You're going to have misery in your life because of that; consequences.'

This was a far cry from the acceptance that he had experienced with his mom and his friends. Yet what was displayed was courage, not folly. He emphasizes that their reaction was not a surprise:

...it's what I expected. I had prepared myself for it. I could hear my sister saying that in my head for a long time so I had built up some "armor" at that point.

So, knowing that they would be critical and that their acceptance of him would be qualified at best, he still chose to tell them. Unfortunately, he would need that "armor" again.

I've been told this by several people in my religious group of friends that, you know, 'I will always love you, but I think that's wrong.' And I'm

okay with that. ‘You think that’s wrong, I don’t, but we can move past that.’

This portion of P-7’s story speaks to an inner strength that had taken hold of him and guided him through his “coming out” journey. But the discussion with his dad was still to come.

Dad

His father and stepmom’s moral beliefs had given P-7 every reason to be cautious, yet this was tempered by his desire to be truthful with them both. And so eventually, the moment came:

That was probably the scariest people to come out to cause, A) it’s your dad and you know that you’re crushing kind of the dream of the ideal son. I don’t know, that’s just the way I felt about it. I just know that was the fear; that I just didn’t want to let him down. You know there is so much of that...I’ve always wanted to have a close relationship with my dad but it really hasn’t been there and I just thought this would be another step backward.

He had concerns about their stated beliefs, he had concerns about “shattering” his dad’s dreams for him and he had concerns that a father he had never been able to be close to would move even further away. Yet he told his dad anyway...with surprising results:

...the good thing was that they took it really well. They said, ‘You know, God still loves you and we still love you; we believe in unconditional love’...my dad actually told me that. He was really good about it...I started off by telling him, ‘There is rumors going around town, some are true and some aren’t’...and I wanted to tell you before it got to you. I told him, ‘I have been dating men; questioning my sexuality (at that point, I still wasn’t able to say I was gay),’ but my dad said that, ‘You know, it would be hard to be in [the city where P-7 was living and attending college] with all the connections you have. I understand that.

If you need to go down to [a larger metropolitan area in the state he resided in], take off school and just figure out who you are on your own,

without sides pulling you, I'll support you 100 percent financially.' And that just meant so much to me that he would be willing to do that.

His father and stepmother had surprised him and shown him the "accepting love" that he was longing for.

There have been many challenges in P-7's "coming out" experience: deciding to be honest with himself and risking being honest with others. Some have embraced him wholeheartedly and others conditionally, yet his desire for an authentic life has kept him moving forward. Some barriers have been overcome now but others present an ongoing challenge. Perhaps the most significant is his faith.

A Different Pair of Glasses

While P-7 began adjusting to his new lifestyle, his spiritual life was reaching a breaking point:

...this last year, I sort of started questioning everything including my sexuality and exploring why I believe what I believe and what is wrong with homosexuality. And why just because the Bible says it's wrong, do I have...I just started seeing the ugly side of what I believed...

There is pain and reflection in P-7's voice as he reflects on this aspect of his journey.

And now I don't go anymore...I couldn't sit there anymore...every time the pastor said something I was questioning it. And it was basic beliefs I was questioning...so I couldn't just sit there and listen to other things. I just had a different pair of glasses on. I feel like the first 23 years of my life I was seeing the world in one viewpoint: the Bible being 100 percent true and now this last year I feel like I have taken on some many other viewpoints and I just don't think at this point that I can go back...

He is quick to point out that while he has rejected much of what his church had taught him, it is not as if he has a new constructed paradigm to replace it with. Rather, he could best be described as searching.

I guess right now I would probably identify as agnostic...I believe there is a God, I just don't know if the Bible is 100 percent true. And a lot of people will point and say, 'That just stems from...you just want to live your lifestyle the way you want to.' But no, I've been looking at what other people believe and what the Bible say and what's going on in the world and things just aren't matching up for me.

And there are still times when he struggles with doubt as to whether he is doing the "right thing."

There is still some apprehension there...I feel like there is still the pathway in my brain that's like, 'The Bible is 100 percent true; you are not doing what God would want you to do...I don't know.

And there are moments when what sounds like a "longing" can be heard:

I know it would be different if it was more accepted to be gay and have people from church be okay with that...

P-7's story is still fresh and "pages" are literally being written daily. He is a man who is growing increasingly comfortable with who he is, he is experiencing love and intimacy in a way that meets his needs, and he has a group of friends and family who are supporting him in a meaningful way. Yet there is also a sense that there is much that remains unsettled, not the least of which is his spiritual journey. Perhaps, the most appropriate description lies in his own words: "I have a lot more questions than I have answers right now."

Structural Analysis

"I Made Myself Believe It"

While one can admire P-7's inner strength and ability to compartmentalize his sexual identity at a time when he simply wasn't prepared to deal with it, this period of his life also evokes a level of sadness. Here was an adolescent boy, experiencing "rites of

passage” that for most are celebrated and reflected upon in later years with a sense of poignancy, yet for P-7, these were kept locked away deep inside of him. His first “crush” was a point of internal conflict. While his feelings felt pure and natural to him, they were being weighed in the balance with the teasing and ostracism he was periodically exposed to at school and the reinforcement of teachings at church and at home, that said this was not an acceptable path for him to travel. One can imagine the emotional, developmental and psychological consequences incurred by a young man who is bombarded with the central message that who he is...is wrong. Not only did it force him to remain silent, but it also redirected him towards a heterosexual lifestyle that he likely would not have pursued, had these outside pressures been absent. He describes himself during this time as being “steeped in denial,” as he began to date girls. He said that he literally forced himself to believe that he was “straight” and to believe that the traditional girlfriend, wife and kids, would all eventually follow as they were “supposed to. Yet it seems clear that despite his best efforts to change himself and the efforts of a family, a church and a culture that refused to accept him as gay, that the essence of who he was, was always present.

Apprehensions

It is interesting that P-7 was very particular with the words he used as he began to “come out” to others. Repeatedly, he stated that at the very time he was telling his closest friends about his intimate encounters with guys, he was also quick to tell them that he was “experimenting” while never uttering the word “gay.” It appears that even here, during his “coming out” process when for so many, this is a time of catharsis and

relief – relief to finally stop the lies – P-7 was “dipping his toe in the water,” gauging the reactions of his audience and all the while, leaving himself some “wiggle room.” If the people he told reacted negatively he could simply dismiss his own behavior as a phase or a curiosity rather than being instantly imprisoned within a label that could leave him incredibly vulnerable and damaged. One wonders if this was also not his own last vestige of denial as well. Was he *really* gay? Maybe he wondered if this was just a phase. Maybe he wanted to believe that the picture that had been painted for him by the heterosexual world around him was still a possibility. Certainly, this would hold the prospect of much less fear and turmoil for a young man who had no real knowledge of what it meant to be gay and no support network to fall back on.

Wanting More

P-7’s relationship with his father is poignant. First, there is the moving recollection he shares that the underlying concern he had at the time about his father discovering he was gay, is that it would “crush” the dreams that his dad had for him. Where would a young man develop such a notion? It is as if, even at his young age, he possessed an underlying assumption that being gay would not just be a surprise or a shock to his father, as someone receiving unexpected news, but more significantly, that somehow being gay would be the antithesis of what his father wanted for him. P-7 did not elaborate on this issue but it is likely that this was never an actual conversation they had: “Son, I don’t want you to be gay...that would crush my dreams for you.” But if not, was it a projection? Did P-7 assume that’s what a father would feel? His father? Or was it simply the culmination of years of associating homosexuality with sin and God’s

judgment? If he was to believe that his Heavenly Father was angry or disappointed that he was gay, it would not have been a stretch to assume his biological father might share the same sentiments.

Of course, what is known is that his father surprised him by responding in a very measured and accepting way. He listened to his son, he expressed his unconditional love and even went as far as suggesting that maybe P-7 should get away to a larger urban center where he could be free from the tight-knit church community he was involved with and ostensibly, to an environment that would be more open-minded and progressive. Yet there is still a sense of longing that one perceives listening to him discuss his dad. At one point he remarked, quite reflectively, that he had always wanted a closer relationship with his father yet this has never seemed to come to fruition. What if they had been closer? What if he had possessed a deeper connection? Might this have changed how all of this played out? And now that he is an “out” gay man, does this necessarily mean that the issue has passed? Could P-7 still pursue that long-desired relationship with his father, but with a new openness and truth between them?

Spiritual Joy – Spiritual Sadness

P-7 displayed remarkable resiliency and courage by choosing to finally break free from a religious tradition that he felt consistently judged him and condemned him for who he was. Currently, he is not regularly attending a church and describes himself as an agnostic, yet this is far from the end of the story. He continues to wrestle with double-messages and profound questions: How can spiritual salvation be a “free gift,” and at the same time, have so many conditions? Can the Bible, the sole foundation of his entire

religion, even be trusted? This is integral to his understanding of himself as a gay man and cannot be separated out when discussing his spirituality. He has no lived model of a faith that would accept him and embrace him as openly gay. So when grappling with these queries, he is trying to weigh a lifetime of belief in a loving God with the treatment he has personally received through the years -- the image of that god realized. He describes these ponderings as a “conflict” within him, so profound that he struggled when asked if he continues to see himself as a “sinner” today. With pause and reflection he responded with uncertainty.

One cannot help but be moved as he described the poignant childhood experience of sitting on his stepmother’s lap as she reinforced to him, the singular truth of God’s love. To this day, he recalls it with fondness. In fact, he possesses many positive memories of his years in the church. And, one cannot help but respect his honesty and forthrightness in firmly declaring himself as a man who is now searching for answers. He seems to have found a peace about where he is. It is clear that issues of faith and sexuality for P-7 are not simple. There don’t seem to be easy answers or convenient polarities. For him, there is no hero or villain. But what he does seem to be clear about, is that things have changed and he is embracing that change not knowing what will come.

A Good Soul

This journey has had its share of painful moments for P-7 and to be sure, it is likely not over. But what was unmistakably absent from his words or his intonations was any sense of anger. P-7 is a light-hearted, playful person. He has a positive outlook on life and this has served him well, particularly in the aforementioned difficult times.

Perhaps it may be this very mindset that could account for several moments during the interview when he waxed philosophical. Twice, he made reference to a “good soul.” One such instance was when he described the kind of partner that he wanted to have and he seemed, at this point, to transcend issues of religiosity and sexuality. It was as if he was simultaneously declaring what he really wanted in a person but also seemed to be asking, “Is that so unreasonable?” The simplicity of this statement is profound in its own way. In the midst of these large conversations about orientation and faith, there was a young man saying simply, “I desire goodness.” But not just in action – the term ‘soul’ connotes a much deeper and mystical component of a person. His thoughts here are particularly ironic when viewed in the larger context of a religion that preached goodness but fell far short of that in its treatment of P-7.

At another moment in the interview after being asked if he resented the treatment and conditional acceptance he received from so many, he again referred to the “good soul,” this time in describing his own aspirations as a man. He said that he wanted his sexuality to be just one part of a larger portrait of who he was. That beyond his orientation towards men, he wanted to be a good person that treated others well. He hasn’t lost much time, resenting the way he has been treated, but rather seems eager to embrace the authentic life he has now chosen for himself. These are admirable qualities and principles for anyone to live their life by, particularly moving, coming from one who has experienced more than his share of loneliness in his brief 24 years of life.

The Last Year...and the Years to Come

Finally, all that has been discussed regarding P-7's experiences truly must be heard within an understanding that he has only been "out" for a year. P-7 is a young man who is in the midst of exciting and at times, confusing transformational moments in his life. But he is also busy with his studies and no doubt, pursuing many goals for his future. This is the whole man. But there is no denying that his sexuality and his new-found freedom to be intimately involved with individuals who possess "good souls"...and also happen to be men, will continue to play a critical role for him in the days, weeks, months and years to come.

Textural-Structural

The teasing began when P-7 was still in elementary school. He was a self-described slender, effeminate boy and this did not escape the attention of his classmates.

...throughout my whole elementary years, you know kids: 'Are you a girl?' 'You'd make a really good girl.' 'You kind of act like a girl.' 'You're weird.' I can always remember that...

In middle school, the harassment worsened and it began to strike a deeper chord:

When I went to middle school it felt like that was the start of when people were like, 'That's gay!' Or, "Are you a fag?" And that was the last thing you wanted to be in middle school... I can remember having a huge crush on this guy and being terrified, like knowing that that was different...I can remember one summer...just praying and crying like, 'God, please, I don't...I don't want to be gay...take this away from me; take these feelings away from me.

His praying and pleading with God was literal. P-7 was raised in a conservative, Fundamentalist Christian home and his faith assumed a very important role in his life at an early age.

One of my first memories ever is being on a rocking chair with my stepmother and she was saying, 'Do you have to be good to go to heaven?' And I would say, 'No.' Do you have to be baptized to go to heaven?' And I'd say, 'No.' 'Do you have to...' You know all the religious things. And then she would say, 'Well what do you have to do to go to heaven?' And I would say, 'Believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins.'

P-7 believed in a real, personable God that wanted to have a relationship with him. And Jesus was the answer. Through Jesus Christ, P-7 found love and redemption. However, as a young boy, he had to balance the truth that he felt in his heart with the often nuanced double messages he heard from his church.

...even though they would say...it doesn't matter what your sin is, you know, 'Jesus loves the sinner, not the sin...' But it was very strongly implied that if you are living a certain way, then you aren't really living for Christ, you aren't fulfilling what you are supposed to do in life. But you could still go to heaven but you aren't fulfilling your relationship with God.

It didn't take very long for P-7 to realize that these "unwritten rules" included to the feelings he was having towards other boys. In a poignant recollection, he shared the "bargaining" he engaged in with God, as he tried to make sense of his spirituality and his sexuality through the limited understanding of an adolescent.

At one point, I think I was in eighth grade I was in the car and my mom was pumping gas and...I had really been thinking about this guy a lot and like you know, I had been masturbating to stuff like that. But I remember just praying and going, 'Okay God, if I am meant to be gay for the rest of my life, will you have this song come on next on the radio?' And it came on! And I remember being like, 'Uhhh!' And I didn't talk all the way back, to my mom. I didn't tell her the story...

Not knowing what to do and unwilling at this point, to share his secret with anyone, he tried to deny the tension he was experiencing and simply fit in with everyone else.

...after middle school, I knew that, ‘This [homosexuality] isn’t going to work and so I tried really hard, I can remember thinking, ‘I’ve got to be attracted to girls, I have to be attracted to girls,’ and eventually, like I just made myself believe it... I had enjoyable relationships with the two girls that I had in high school and so then I never really thought about it much...[I] experimented with them and I never had sex but I was able to have a pleasurable sexual experience with them.

He maintained this façade well into his college career. For P-7, the desire to fit in and the need to have a Christian community and escape their judgment outweighed the need to live as a gay man. However, as time passed, the same sex attractions didn’t. When he broke up with his second college girlfriend, he began to allow himself to experience those old feelings again.

And I was kind of like, ‘Whoa!’ And something just went off in my brain and there was this boy that I knew earlier and I just started letting myself feel the way I did feel for him but I had been suppressing it before that.

He realized that things were beginning to change, and increasingly, he was welcoming that change. He reflected to himself at the time.

‘Okay, you’re not going to have the life you thought you were going to have,’ and I came back from this trip and started hanging out with this boy a lot and I just like, fell ‘head over heels for him.’ And that was kind of the start of me questioning, ‘What’s wrong with this?’ ‘Why is this such a big deal?’ And then even questioning, ‘Well is there a God?’ I questioned everything I had stood firm on.

It seems that almost immediately after he began to embrace his sexuality, significant questions also surfaced regarding his spirituality. In a sense, he had repressed and denied both his attraction to men and his doubts about a religion that would condemn him for this.

Later, despite having a pleasurable intimate experience with a man, there was still a period where he wavered and thought that maybe he was just “experimenting.” In fact,

his eventual “coming out” has been a very recent occurrence, “...and really, not until recently, I’ve been able to tell people, ‘Yeah, I’m gay.’” He was quite intentional in choosing the first people he would “come out,” because there was still significant apprehension:

I knew it [coming out] was just going to be an issue with a lot of people and it was scary to me...Looking back on it now, I came out first to somebody I was very comfortable with and knew that wouldn’t be judgmental.

The first person to hear those words was his cousin Jessie. She could uniquely understand the risk he was taking because she came from the same world he did.

...she was raised in the same religious background as me but she has always been liberal in her thinking. She didn’t go to church every Sunday, she smoked weed, she was kind of this ‘crazy cousin’ that I had but I felt comfortable. She was safe for me and I told her earlier that I have feelings for this guy and she was like, ‘Oh that is so exciting!’ And that was just what I needed at that time.

Encouraged by the acceptance he felt from Jessie, he began to tell others. Each time, they were friends who had found their own distance from the church – people that P-7 deemed “safe.” And when he then went to his family, there was another very important person that he knew would understand and would be safe. While his father and stepmother were conservative Christians, his mother was actually an “out” lesbian. He spent time in both homes, but he reflects on the irony of coming to the realization that the lifestyle his mom had been living that was condemned by his church, had actually been a healthier environment for him, than the religious and moral home of his father.

...my real mom is gay...and there was always that conflict in my head but, there is nothing wrong with my mom you know. I love her and she’s her and being with her was almost healthier than being with my stepmom and

my dad. They had a lot of problems but it was just a healthier environment with my mom.

As expected, his mom fully supported him in his “coming out” process but not so with his sisters who responded in a much more qualified and subdued fashion.

My sisters are very religious and their reactions are so funny. My older sister goes, ‘Well, you know it’s not a big surprise!’...We got to have a car ride home to talk about it and knew what their reactions would be then. ‘We’ll always love you, but it’s a sin and we know that you know God’s not going to honor that.’ ‘You’re going to have misery in your life because of that; consequences.’

Sadly, this was not a surprise to him: “...it’s what I expected. I had prepared myself for it. I could hear my sister saying that in my head for a long time so I had built up some “armor” at that point.” However, the biggest surprise would come from his father. He had considerable anxiety at the thought of telling his dad and stepmom, not just because they were Christians but because he had longed for a closer connection:

That was probably the scariest people to come out to cause, it’s your dad and you know, that you’re crushing kind of the dream of the ideal son. I don’t know, that’s just the way I felt about it. I just know that was the fear; that I just didn’t want to let him down. You know there is so much of that...I’ve always wanted to have a close relationship with my dad but it really hasn’t been there and I just thought this would be another step backward.

His dad, contrary to his greatest fears, responded with a love and support that touched him at a deep level.

...the good thing was that they took it really well. They said, ‘You know, God still loves you and we still love you; we believe in unconditional love’...my dad actually told me that. He was really good about it...I told him, ‘I have been dating men; questioning my sexuality (at that point, I still wasn’t able to say I was gay),’ but my dad said that, ‘You know, it would be hard to be in [the city where P-7 was living & attending college] with all the connections you have. I understand that. If you need to go

down to [a larger metropolitan area in the state he resided in], take off school and just figure out who you are on your own, without sides pulling you, I'll support you 100 percent financially.' And that just meant so much to me that he would be willing to do that.

The little boy, who was so afraid to tell the world the truth about his sexual identity, was now a young man who had found the courage to reach out to those around him. Things were dramatically changing in his life and in the midst of this he also began to address a spirituality that was transforming as well.

...this last year, I sort of started questioning everything including my sexuality and exploring why I believe what I believe and what is wrong with homosexuality. And why just because the Bible says its wrong, do I have...I just started seeing the ugly side of what I believed...

There is pain in his voice as he continues...

And now I don't go anymore...I couldn't sit there anymore...every time the pastor said something I was questioning it. And it was basic beliefs I was questioning...so I couldn't just sit there and listen to other things. I just had a different pair of glasses on. I feel like the first 23 years of my life I was seeing the world in one viewpoint: the Bible being 100 percent true and now this last year I feel like I have taken on so many other viewpoints and I just don't think at this point that I can go back...

He has not abandoned his own personal spirituality however. He now describes himself as an agnostic. He continues to believe in God and explore new paths that are meaningful to him. Yet despite the courage he has shown to both "come out" of the closet as well as break free from a religious tradition that stands in judgment of this choice, there remains a bittersweet element to his story: "I know it would be different if it was more accepted to be gay and have people from church be okay with that..."

Chapter XI

Composite Description

The phenomenon of men “coming out” -- disclosing their gay identity -- in the context of being raised in a conservative Christian environment is understood or conceptualized through witnessing a critical encounter or conflict between two overarching *structures* in each of their lives: 1) the prevailing religious or moral authority in the individual’s life represented by the Church proper, the family, the community or a combination of one or more of these, and 2) the emerging and conflicted self within each individual gay man.

Subsumed within the two structures of this critical encounter or conflict are three identified *substructures* experienced, with some variation, by all seven men: 1) each experiences a moment or “season” of reckoning when they realize that they cannot continue with the status quo, the protective façade of their hidden or unspoken true sexual identity is torn away and the first step “out of the closet” is taken; 2) for each, this moment of reckoning results in a decision to reach out to a person, a number of individuals or even small groups deemed to be open, safe and accepting; 3) each individual, embracing the acceptance and reveling in the absence of judgment from these safe allies, now moves to reject the old prohibitive religious or moral authority. This can be manifested by complete rejection of the church/family/community, or an internal reframe that allows the individual to remain safely connected to the church/family/community on some new level but absent of the original conflict and free from any realized authority that would bind or impede.

The Moral or Religious Authority

Each of the participants acknowledged the existence of a moral or religious authority in their formative years that significantly influenced their emerging sense of self. The church, in a direct and realized way, was a representation of the very God they worshipped as well as a *way of life* that they were immersed in.

P-1: I grew up in a Covenant Church. It was a little bit more of the minimalist, kind of Puritan type, less is more, but worship God type. We had a really active youth group and growing up all of my older siblings went through youth group and it was something that we were all like striving to be able to do and to get confirmed in 8th grade. You'd be there for an hour and a half learning about the Bible, and then you'd take a half an hour break and then you'd go to the service and take sermon notes they were called. And, and all kinds of just in depth stuff.

P-2: I was born and raised Catholic. I went to Catholic Elementary School. Um, and continued on through Catechism classes until I was 18. I was confirmed Catholic... Then I came to college. I guess I could sum it up to, my mom told me before I left for college that um when I went to college I could be any religion I wanted as long as it was Christian. It seemed open-minded at the time, but it was kind of narrow.

P-3: Very, very Catholic. I did everything—Mass every Sunday, um whether I was at home or sometimes we would spend the weekend with my Grandmother ah we were always going to church. Ah religious holidays, we observed all of the, ah, Holy Days of Obligation. I went through and was Baptized, First Communion, Confirmation.

P-4: ...my father is a Lutheran Minister...we were on the mission field in Ethiopia, from when I was one to six... I went to confirmation, I did church camps, I was a camp counselor, I was a camp hand. I served on the first ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) synod for the Southwest.

P-5: I was very involved there...a lot of my core friends in high school were from the church and that is kind of how I got connected with the church... I actually would preach if the youth pastor was out of town and taught Sunday School for five and six year olds, every year did VBS [vacation Bible school]...so very, very involved; you know pretty much

when the doors were open, I was there helping out in some way or leading something or doing something...all through high school.

P-6: I was ah raised as a Catholic Christian. I grew up going to a Catholic grade school and I was born and raised in a small town in central [state where he was raised], basically where the majority of the population was Catholic. We did church every Sunday and holidays and all that and ah you know the whole family was raised that way.

P-7: ...even though they would say...it doesn't matter what your sin is, you know, 'Jesus loves the sinner, not the sin...' But it was very strongly implied that if you are living a certain way, then you aren't really living for Christ, you aren't fulfilling what you are supposed to do in life. But you could still go to heaven but you aren't fulfilling your relationship with God.

For the participants, often the lines between church, family, community and culture were not clearly demarcated. As young boys, their parents, siblings, neighbors and classmates could also represent an extension of the moral authority espoused by their church.

P-1: But there was, we'd often have conversations in the car about, like you know, anybody who would be gay would be choosing to live a life of sin...It was extremely difficult especially when we would have family discussions about the sermon because the sermons would preach against homosexuality and things like that, and so...when I would sit in church I wouldn't get upset, it was more when my family would be so in support of it.

P-2: I listened as my friends, like all twelve of them...instantly banished these 'horrible heathens' to the deepest sanctions of hell. And I remember at the time thinking that I didn't know anybody who was gay...like I didn't know what it meant [but] it seemed really judgmental to go that far that quickly. Because the deepest sanctions of hell, when you're raised Roman Catholic, is not a punishment that you put lightly on anybody.

P-3: I think the spiritual environment that I was raised in obviously, was something that has been in my, just the ideas and the principle of faith have been very strong in my family...I think it was a sense of obligation to family culture, particularly to my mom... I think culture is entwined, it's woven into Catholicism.

P-4: From the parishioners in the church it was quite evident that type of behavior [homosexuality] was not accepted, or tolerated in the community. And ah, there were a lot of regular, homophobic remarks at ah, youth events, or what not or sitting out in front of the church talking. And, ah, you know in the community as teenagers would come out, a lot of times they wound up being disowned by their families, and kicked out.

P-5: I knew what their beliefs were, and I knew my sister had had a friend that had come out and I sat home and listened to all of the behind-the-scenes conversations of what people really thought, and what people were really saying and had kind of a sneak peak of what my life would be like. And I was like I can never do that, I can't do that to them, I can't lose my whole family. "Is it really worth me embracing this one little part of me and leaving everything?"

P-6: I tried to do what everyone else was doing which was you know being straight and having girlfriends and doing all that stuff during high school. And I never thought about "coming out" during high school because I would have been doing it being that we lived in such a small community that was very Christian based and very, I guess everyone is pretty judgmental and things like that, so I never felt comfortable at that point.

P-7: My sisters are very religious...I knew we got to have a car ride home to talk about it and knew what their reactions would be then. "Well we'll always love you, but it's a sin, and...you know God's not going to honor that." "You will have, you're going to have some misery in your life because of that; or consequences."

The Emerging and Conflicted Self

In the midst of this context of moral and religious authority, each man was beginning to realize that from deep within, a homosexual identity was emerging. Most had a distinct, internal awareness of this as pre-adolescents, though often it was not named or formerly understood to be "gay."

P-1: And that was tough I mean, it was, because it was at that age when I was starting to kind of, realize, that I wasn't like everyone else...I just remember not realizing that it was a bad thing at first...and that's when I started to kind of realize it myself too, but that was like the furthest removed, I didn't think, like, "Oh I'm gay."

P-2: I didn't really think much about it, and then when I got to college, I met a guy, he lived across the hall from me in our residence life hall or whatever, and...we had this really great friendship...Eventually, after a year of being really good friends, he asked me out and I was pretty sure I was straight. I hadn't really thought about it before. And suddenly had all of these questions, that never was a question before. Um, and I gave it a shot, and it was confusing and messy...

P-3: To be honest I think I've always known that I was gay. I just didn't have a name for it. It just seemed normal. I really don't think it wasn't until I got into high school that I was able to put a finger on what this particular set of emotions and feelings were. You know if you want to describe it as a phenomenon, this is what I was feeling.

P-4: I looked at my mom and I asked her, I said,...I know how a boy can have sex with a girl, but how can that be [a boy having sex with a boy]? And she told me. And when she told me there was this like weight lifted off like, "Oh, cool, that's for me."

P-5: I hadn't really identified, I hadn't labeled myself, "Okay I'm homosexual, I'm a gay man, I'm attracted to men..." I mean now looking, it's funny because, like you don't really realize it until you realize it and then you're like, "Well I always knew it," I mean I definitely knew that I was attracted to men, had I ever called myself gay...no.

P-6: There is a lot of doubts you know and a lot of second guessing...there's always that time period where you question it and for me when I was going through high school it was always in the back of my mind. I always had those feelings, but I always chose not to deal with it at that time, and I chose not to accept it at that time.

P-7: And I was kind of like, "Whoa," and something just went off in my brain I feel like or something and there was this boy that I knew earlier and I just started letting myself feel the way I did feel for him but I was I had been suppressing it before that.

Now faced with this realization each young man, conflicted and struggling, experienced it, sought to understand it and ultimately dealt with it in his own way.

P-1: I knew what it was, I knew all of it, but at that point I'd get very defensive if anybody would make fun of me for, being, "Oh you're just the gay kid..." But, at the same time I guess it was one of those, I didn't want to believe it, I didn't want it to be true.

P-2: Completely off guard, because I mean I had no example growing up. So I didn't know, like if I was supposed to see something in myself, or like, how someone was meant to behave... there was a lot of secrecy and hiding and, with that came shame. Um, and so it got messy...

P-3: I think that's when I started the processing, you know me playing with the possibility that I am gay and then that everything else in terms of being heterosexual you know marrying a woman, having children started subsiding. Like I started saying, "No this is so much more what I feel." You know, who I am and I think that's when it started... and so by the time spring came around... I had already concluded, "Yeah I'm gay," because I started really, I was letting myself look at other boys and everything.

P-4: ...it was you know experimental in school. I had a couple of friends that had "come out," it was a lesbian girl at the high school and she was ridiculed and humiliated and ah, and you know I mean so it's scary for the rest of us. But there was still like the experimentation and what not on the side... You know we knew each other, but we kept secrets at school. Um, you know in high school I had a girlfriend that was a lesbian. That was my cover at school.

P-5: ...that's ultimately the struggle, is that when you're struggling with it you're like, "Oh there is no issue, it's not, it's just this little thing, that's not me," blah, blah, blah but then when, you kind of don't label yourself until you "come out."

P-6: I never thought about "coming out" during high school because I would have been uncomfortable doing it... I never felt comfortable at that point. I guess it wasn't really until about my senior year in high school when you know, I was pretty much sure about my sexuality, I just wasn't ready to bring it out to everyone else so yeah, I guess I kept it in until after my freshman year of college...

P-7: In high school after... I knew that I that this isn't going to work and so I tried really hard, I can remember thinking, "I've got to be attracted to girls, I have to be attracted to girls," and eventually like I just made myself believe it and... I had enjoyable relationships with the two girls that I had in high school and so then I never really thought about it much...

Reckoning

Within the dual contexts of a moral authority weighing heavily upon them and an emerging and conflicted sexual identity, each man experienced a reckoning – a moment

in time or a season in life where they realized that they could not simply continue with the status quo. These moments were critical because it was here that they weighed the risks and potential consequences of “coming out,” versus continuing to live a lie. These could aptly be described as their *moments of truth*.

P-1: I think the big things in my high school career that made me want to come out was doing all of the traveling for speech and different things like that and seeing other people from different schools and seeing all these different perspectives, and seeing people who were “out,” and then being asked if I was, and then me saying “No.” And not being able to be comfortable enough with myself to say yes. And still having those kinds of feelings of, not doubt, but of wanting it not to be. I was at a specific tournament with some of my friends... a friend that I was close with, that hadn’t been “out” previously had now “come out,” and he asked me specifically if I was gay. And I told him no again but that made me go home that time and really say, “Why won’t I say yes, why can’t it be, be something good?”

P-2: I remember that the conflict for me wasn’t trying to make my sexuality work with faith; it was trying to make my faith work with that idea. And I knew that that wasn’t how I felt about homosexuality, like I knew that that seemed too harsh. I remember being told that it was wrong. I remember being told that it was a terrible thing... And that was mostly what I was most uncomfortable with... so that’s kind of setting the scene for when I first came out...

P-3: Yeah it was in my first year in college. I think in high school I was still under the impression that I was going to get married and have children. It wasn’t until my first year in college ah that I saw kind of like the diversity in terms of the people that were out there. And I started kind of talking to myself and I started catching myself looking at other guys. So I think that really did it.

P-4: ... sophomore year, I was getting ready, you know I was about to be twenty and I was just decided like, you know what, if my parents don’t support me for who I am then they shouldn’t have to support me financially. And that was what I used for the justification in my head.

P-5: In college I actually met with a couple different counselors and was fairly honest with, “This is what I’m dealing with,” and trying to pray through some things you know, in the midst of severe depression... so,

then I kind of just hit...I guess for a lack of a better word like the bottom you know, but um, got to a place where life as I knew it was falling apart... And then at the core of everything was this ultimate issue of, "Who am I, am I horrible, like what is wrong with me? I have been trying to get rid of this; it won't go away."

P-6: I had a large group of friends and about five or six...were all going up to [a city in his home state] to go to school, and you know they all wanted me to go obviously. One of my best friends was actually quite upset when I decided not to, but you know I knew I needed to make that choice for myself...I needed to step away from that...core group that was holding you back because of you know the um implications of what they would think of you and all of that I mean so I ended up going to school pretty much by myself without anybody that I knew and I wanted to do that to make new friends, and to explore you know different parts of my life and the world I guess.

P-7: ...this last year I sort of started questioning everything including my sexuality and exploring why I believe what I believe and you know, "What is wrong with homosexuality? And why, you know just because the Bible says it's wrong, do I have...I just started seeing you know the ugly side of what I believed and stuff like that.

Reaching Out

After years of repression and keeping their true sexual identity in "the closet," after enduring the burden of having to live a hidden life; after weighing the risks and consequences involved in telling the truth, each man ultimately decided to reach out to a person or several individuals and "came out of the closet." The decision on who to tell was carefully considered and the determination, in one form or another, was based on who they believed would be most likely to embrace them and accept them without judgment.

P-1: ...that is the first time that I opened up to one of my close friends in high school and told her how I felt, and, because I needed someone to talk to about it. Kind of, at first I was like, "Well, I think I might be," but she kind of really did some of the probing questions like, "What do you mean you "think" you might be?" And it was through her that I started to really

become comfortable with things because after you talk about it so much, I started to be able to articulate how I felt and then realizing as I was saying things that, it wasn't just a, "I might be," it was that I was. So then I started telling some other friends who were in the same circle of friends in high school.

P-2: I first came out to my older sister, who was in college at the time. She was okay with it, to a point. Like it was something she knew she didn't understand...but she knew that it was something that was a big deal to me when I told her... and she knew that it was something that I wouldn't know how to tell the rest of my family so, she was fairly supportive from the beginning...my younger brother...found out the same sort of time frame, roughly...it just became another thing on the list of, "Well you do that and I do this." And that was all the farther he thought about it...that was the extent of our conversation.

P-3: ...the first person I came out to was my best friend in high school who also happened to be gay, but I think was a little further behind on the timeline. So when I came out to him, I was expecting to hear, "Oh, I'm gay too!" And instead I got, "Oh I experiment." So it was like kind of a letdown because I was like hoping to hear you know that he would say the same thing, but ah it was pretty good. I think in terms of my friends, I was very comfortable...I'd been very blessed in terms of all the people I came out to...of my friends there was never an issue. I never lost a friendship over it. No one treated me differently. It was just ideal friendships all the way through.

P-4: I told my sister a year before I told my parents...she came to my school to go party with me, she's older than I was and I told her when we were getting ready to go out to the bars. And she'd never been to a gay bar and she did not go. She went home. Ah, she just couldn't believe it...

P-5: ...one of my best friends, who had been one of my roommates in college...called me one day...And my friend was like, well actually my wife's brother just "came out" to us and told us that he is gay, so she is like flying down to like go tell their parents with him because they are they were a very conservative Christian family, and it's not going to go well, so she was coming to be a support for him... then he was like, "Well how are you?"... And it all just kind of came flooding out. You know and I was like, "I'm gay too, I've been struggling with this."... And in that conversation I just remember a physical weight being lifted off of my shoulders and a calming peace and I remember sleeping that night and I hadn't slept well for so long and I remember hanging up from that conversation and thinking, "Oh, this is what it feels like to be me."

P-6: I was seeing this guy and we were hanging out quite a bit and I always knew I needed to do it at some point...I just was flirting with the idea of doing it for about a month as we were seeing each other and what actually ended up happening is that I was hanging out with this guy and a friend of ours saw us holding hands late at night walking down the street, and so he told a friend of mine, and then my friend confronted me about it; and then that's when I told him and you know that's when I made the decision... I knew I had to do it, I just had nothing to push me into doing it and I don't know how long it would have taken me...It wasn't something that I wasn't ready for. I think it was something that needed to happen...it was funny because before all that happened I was actually trying to hint towards my friends of what was going on with me and my boyfriend at the time because they knew him as a gay man and he was "out" and everything. And so I would hint to them, "Oh yeah, I'm going to hang out with so and so tonight." And they'd be like, "Oh really, I didn't know you guys were friends." You know and they never got it...I definitely was shocked I guess that he found out that way and I was very surprised that he was you know brave enough to confront me about it, but yeah, it definitely was also relieving.

P-7: Looking back on it now, I came out first to somebody I was very comfortable with and knew that wouldn't be judgmental...she was raised in the same religious background as me but she has always been liberal in her thinking. She didn't go to church every Sunday, she smoked weed, she was kind of this 'crazy cousin' that I had but I felt comfortable. She was safe for me and I told her earlier that I have feelings for this guy and she was like, 'Oh that is so exciting!' And that was just what I needed at that time.

These initial acts of reaching out...of "coming out" to trusted individuals in their lives, seemed to empower them to tell others. For most of the participants this secondary group of people posed a greater risk or a greater level of unknown, yet they continued to speak, at times, with incredibly painful consequences.

P-1: I decided to tell my mom...before I told anybody else in my family because of that comfort that I had always felt. When I told her, she was a little bit shocked, but not unsupportive. She, you know, told me right away that she loved me, and that she would be there with me. So she was very supportive, and I was glad to be able to have one of my parents know... It was at that point that I decided to tell my father cause until I told my family, I would be living in the closet...I don't know how to

describe his reaction exactly. My father is a very analytical thinker, so he immediately like, “Well, are you sure? This kind of stuff, well it’s probably just a phase. We could get you some counseling.” Those kinds of things... That was in the moment; things started to change and I started getting treated differently than my other siblings at my house... It was at that point that I decided that I didn’t want to live with them anymore. And so I told my dad and that was really hard. Because he got very, very upset and my stepmom did, and I got kicked out of the house that day because I told them that I wanted to, and so then it was, ‘Well then leave,’ pretty much. And so the day before the first day of my junior year I had to move in with my mom in a suitcase. So that was the hardest part of the whole coming out process for me.

P-2: My mom kind of pulled it out of me with a series of questions... she was really not happy when I told her. Her first question after I said I had a boyfriend, was asking if I was sexually active with him which was an awkward sort of like, lead in question. I thought that, there should have been other questions first. But then, it kind of went from there to the classic, like, “I think you’re going through a phase,” sort of conversation and, “Now I’m not going to get grandchildren,” conversation and she was really upset because she thought I was at risk for a lot of diseases, like that’s cause her knowledge of what homosexuality was that it was nothing, but a way to get AIDS...she was immediately very, very scared and very upset, so that didn’t really go well.

P-3: ...the first person I came out to [in his family] was my mom. We were watching a movie that had a stereotypical gay character. And it was, it was not a very good movie, so you know I think we just were kind of talking of different things as the movie was going on in their home and then she asked me, you know, “Are you like him?” And I’m like, you know I don’t even remember what the name of the character, “Like him?” and she was like, “Yeah, are you like him? Do you like men?” And I was like very quiet and I kind of knew this was the moment. And I just said, “What do you think? I think you know the answer to that.” And she said, “Well I need to hear it from you.” And I said, “Well, yeah I’m gay.” And she asked, “Are you sure?” And I said, “Yes.” And she said, “It’s because you haven’t met the right woman.” I said, “No, you know I’ve had girlfriends through high school.” And we kind of left it at that...

P-4: And then when I got home and was telling ma, and I was just like, “I just thought you need to know in case you don’t support me.” And she said, “That is not” She said, “You’re telling us because you want us to be a part of your life,” “ You want us to be a part...you don’t want to lie to us, you want us to be supportive of course and that’s what you’re hoping

and we are.”...[However], my sister won’t let her children come and see me. Even if they come with grandma and grandpa...it’s a severed relationship with my sister.

P-5: I flew home and I told my family and both my parents, my sisters and my little brother and um, all in all it was, it was, very difficult, but it was good, it was a good experience...but the hardest one of course was my mom. And that was like a four hour conversation. And some of it was just ridiculous. And um, I remember a couple of things from it, but one thing I remember her saying was, um “Well I think God was preparing me, cause from the minute you got off the plane I was like, I hope he’s not here to tell me he’s gay. And the whole trip I was like, I hope he’s not telling me this, I hope he’s not telling me this.” She was like, “The only reason I thought that you weren’t going to was just because you seem very very calm.” And I said, “Well ultimately that is because it doesn’t really matter what you say and before it always has,” and, “I am happy and I am free and that’s more important to me than if I hurt you. And I don’t want to lose you, and I am afraid of what you’re going to say, but ultimately I have to choose my happiness over your happiness.”

P-6: And so then it was either the next day or the day after that I decided to tell my parents. And that was a lot harder than I ever thought it would be, I knew it was going to be hard, um cause my dad is...I guess he is about two generations behind right now you know. He doesn’t understand it, he doesn’t get it. He, you know, it was very hard for him. Um my mom on the other hand, I don’t really know how she feels about it. I think she is okay with it, but she tends to agree with him... He was you know really upset about it and he brought all of my younger brothers and sisters up and we talked and he was concerned it was going to affect his business in town. And he was concerned that the church wasn’t going to accept me anymore...he actually went and spoke to the priest that night to get like guidance from him and to see what he thought about it. When I look at it I think it’s comical like looking back at it, but yeah he really he didn’t know how to deal with it.

P-7: ... “coming out” to my dad and my stepmom that was, that was probably the scariest people to “come out” to cause, A) It’s your dad and you can just, you know that you’re crushing kind of the dream of you know, or the ideal son, I don’t know, that’s just the way I felt about it. I just know that was the fear; that I just didn’t want to let him down. You know there is so much to that... but the good thing was that they took it really well...they said, “You know, God still loves you and we still love you; we believe in unconditional love.” He was really good about it and he just um, because I had, I started off by telling him you know there’s,

there is rumors going around town ah about me, um some are true, some aren't and it's been getting; because they went to a church that was a sister church to the one in [the city where he attended church]. They were kind of really closely connected. And the people there um were talking, and it was like getting really close to somebody else is going to tell them.

Rejection

Each man clearly experienced a transformation in his sexual identity. However, enduring the tumultuous process of telling others that they were gay was not the end of the “coming out” phenomenon. It became clear that each man also experienced a spiritual transformation as well. In each case, this transformation resulted in a rejection of the moral authority – represented by their actual religious institution, judgmental family members or conservative members of the community -- and the formulation of a new locus of authority. For some, this meant an outright renunciation of that authority but in other cases, it meant maintaining a relationship with the authority but re-conceptualizing that relationship in such a way that limited its power over the man, therefore diminishing its negative or harmful influence.

P-1: I think I've come to terms with the term “agnostic” as I am starting to learn more about things. I happen to be against established religion, because I really don't like, the pressure that it puts on people to be a certain way...I've come to the conclusion that that is probably the best description of where I am at in my faith. I guess the way that I've interpreted, that it is kind of a belief in a higher Power. But not really needing to understand exactly what it is. And just being able to be at peace with that and doing the things that I believe should be done in human nature; things that we should do to help each other, because...we should help humankind.

P-2: I actually do distinctly remember that I started to lose faith in Roman Catholicism when I was a senior in high school... and in my freshman year of college, um, so the year before I came out, I actually, stopped practicing Catholicism so I kind of had this year of like weaning off of Catholicism... After coming out, I did join a student group on campus and

through that group for the first time I met somebody who was Buddhist, somebody who was Jewish and somebody who was, you know, who had been born and raised atheist...so I had more examples of more religions for the first time and people that I actually identified with...as close peers and close friends and so through them I've actually been exposed to different Jewish holidays and and celebrations and what not. And so I've been exposed to more traditions of more religions so, I've recoiled out of Catholicism and ended up in a sort of somewhere between an agnostic and atheist sort of space.

P-3: For me...when I was coming out...the idea of religion and how I'm viewed was actually a very, very small part of the whole process. The reason I say that is because...I've always felt that it is a personal relationship between God and myself. And I believe the stances and the particular point that the church takes on homosexuality...I find that to be political. I believe that that is man's influence on the church...honestly there was very little tension...I know that I'm loved, I know that I have been blessed because -- I tell this to anyone that knows me and whenever religion, particularly Catholicism comes up -- I know that that there is a God, because there is no way I would have been blessed with someone like [his partner]. To me that that is the ultimate confirmation that I would need that I am loved... I've found that there are a lot of gay men who are practicing Catholics and I feel comforted knowing that I'm not the only one...

P-4: Well, I think part of the deal when I was coming out and struggling with it, was how the church as a whole, views orientation in their discriminatory practices. And so it made me become more judgmental of it and more skeptical of the practices of Christianity... I think of myself as Agnostic...I'm spiritual to some extent...you know I stand on my deck and I look out and I see the real beauty of nature and I have a physical reaction to it. You know like bumps, or energy running through me. And I believe that there is a balance of energy in the cosmos and such...

P-5: The last three years has just been lots and lots of conversations with all members of my family and it's been a really amazing process to watch them try and deal with it and then ultimately God giving me grace to listen to everything and understand that they're coming from no information, and trying to get to where I've spent many, many years getting. They've made me a better person in those conversations and I hope that I've helped them like at least vocalize things or think through things...I wrote a letter coming out to my aunts and uncles. And in the letter I remember saying, "I make no claims to having any answers; and I make no blanket statements about homosexuality, all I want you to know is my journey and where I

am at. This is what I believe and I believe that God and me are still okay. And that is all I know right now.”

P-6: Once I was able to “come out” that’s when I started to form my own ideas and insights and actually look at myself and think, “What do I believe?” You know I’ve been brought up with the Catholic background and the Catholic rules and all the Catholic traditions, but how much of that do I actually believe and how much of that do I actually agree with? You know I look back at it now and you know as of right now I believe in God, but I don’t really practice any sort of Christian religion. I have my own beliefs and I feel like I’m a good person and you know I live by the moral standards that I want to...

P-7: I’ve been told this by several people in my religious group of friends that, you know, ‘I will always love you, but I think that’s wrong.’ And I’m okay with that. ‘You think that’s wrong, I don’t, but we can move past that.’ ...this last year, I sort of started questioning everything including my sexuality and exploring why I believe what I believe and what is wrong with homosexuality. And why just because the Bible says its wrong, do I have...I just started seeing the ugly side of what I believed... I guess right now I would probably identify as agnostic...I believe there is a God, I just don’t know if the Bible is 100 percent true. And a lot of people will point and say, ‘That just stems from...you just want to live your lifestyle the way you want to.’ But no, I’ve been looking at what other people believe and what the Bible says and what’s going on in the world and things just aren’t matching up for me.

Arising from a thorough examination of the structures and substructures within which the participants experienced the “coming out” process, are the *themes* or essential *essences* of the phenomenon as experienced by these seven men. Quoting Husserl, Moustakas (1994) states:

The final step in the phenomenological research process is the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole. (p. 100)

Three critical essences will be discussed here: critical consciousness, determination and authenticity.

Critical Consciousness

Consciousness is the deeply internal process that each man underwent, beginning with a personal recognition that there was something unique about him that was not included in the dominant social discourses of his formative years. Being born and raised in a predominantly heterosexual culture dictates that most people view a young child through heterosexist lenses and assume the child is, and will be, “straight.” These assumptions are realized even at an early age, by the child himself, and integrated at a subconscious level. Additionally, the child is exposed through their environment in virtually every way possible, to heterosexuality and is unintentionally positively reinforced for acting in a way that the dominant culture deems to be “normal.”

Consciousness as used in this analysis, therefore, began with the participant’s ability to discern the difference between being heterosexual (as represented by the majority culture) and homosexual, which was the *other* or different from what they had been taught, exposed to and rewarded for and, that it applied to them.

A conscious awareness that homosexuality has relevance to themselves and their behavior marks the beginning of the identity formation process. In other words, simply to encounter information on homosexuality is not enough to begin the developmental process. The process begins when P is able to label P’s own behavior and say, “My behavior may be called homosexual.”...P’s perception of P’s own behavior is now at odds with both the perception of self as heterosexual and the perception of others’ view of P as heterosexual. (Cass, 1979, p. 222)

These moments, for a young boy, are often fraught with powerful emotions. This is known in the research as *affective incongruency*:

As a result of this incongruency, P experiences confusion and turmoil, and is forced to ask the question “If my behavior may be called homosexual,

does this mean that I am a homosexual?” P arrives at a self-identity *potentially* that of a homosexual. Since this is at odds with the previous view of self as nonhomosexual and heterosexual, P begins to experience doubts. “Who am I?” is the burning question. Feelings of personal alienation are paramount. (Cass, 1979, p. 223)

As a child or adolescent or even a young adult, the participants in this study had virtually no resources from which to draw important information about sexual orientation and sexual identity development. They have stated that virtually without exception, they grew up never seeing legitimate gay characters depicted in the media, they personally knew no one that was openly gay and they had no gay role models which they could look up to for some insight or reference point to inform them as to who they were and what they were experiencing. Additionally, and this cannot be overemphasized, they were each fully immersed in religious and conservative cultures that actively and blatantly taught and preached against homosexuality, condemning it as abnormal and a sin against God. It was in this context, that each man, at some point, began to realize that they might fit that description...that they might be gay.

Therefore, within a context filled with confusing and painful emotions, possessing virtually no resources and living with the fear of judgment by their religious faith traditions that often were personally represented to them, not just by the church itself, but also by their family and their friends, each young man stood at a crossroads. For most, their earliest response to these profoundly difficult circumstances was to keep their emerging sexual identity a secret. For some, they would go further by denying that they were gay and even actively pursuing a heterosexual identity. But ultimately, each man

realized in his own way that this would not work. This realization is seen as an awakening consciousness.

Ignacio Martín-Baró, the El Salvadoran liberation psychologist reflecting on consciousness, states:

Consciousness is not simply the private, subjective knowledge and feelings of individuals. More than anything, it represents the confines within which each person encounters the reflexive impact of his or her being and actions in society, where people take on and work out a knowledge about the self and about reality that permits them to be somebody, to have a personal and social identity. Consciousness is the knowing or not knowing of the self, through the world and through others... (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 38)

Each participant in their “coming out” process had to ultimately face the reality that despite their silence, their denials and their attempts to create false personas, that they were, in fact, gay and in order to live and thrive, they were going to have to accept this into their own consciousness. The culminating act of acknowledging, owning and integrating their true sexual identity into their consciousness is what liberation psychologists have uniquely termed *conscientización* or *critical* consciousness. There are three aspects to critical consciousness:

1. The human being is transformed through changing his or her reality...an active process that cannot be taught by imposition but only through dialogue.
2. Through the gradual decoding of their world, people grasp the mechanisms of oppression and dehumanization...This critical consciousness of others and of the surrounding reality brings with it the possibility of a new praxis, which at the same time makes possible new forms of consciousness.
3. People’s new knowledge of their surrounding reality carries them to a new understanding of themselves and, most important, of their social identity...All this allows them to discover not only the roots of what they are but also the horizon, what they can become. (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 40)

Critical consciousness, as taught by the central and south American liberation psychologists is a major turning point in the life of an individual, gay or straight. In the context of this research, it is a fitting description of the private journeys of these seven men. With all the odds against them, each man found his own way to recognize a difference, accept this difference as truth, and ultimately, to act on this new-found reality by choosing to tell the world. This is the essence of critical consciousness – a man transformed by his own changing reality and in the process, seeing with new eyes, the oppression and dehumanization he has been subjected to throughout his life. Armed with this realization, he now moves forward, not only with a clearer understanding of his own identity and the environmental limitations that he was forced to live with, but he possess a new hope of who he will become and of what could be.

Determination

Empowered by a new a conscious acceptance of being gay, each man now determined to convey this to the people around them. “Coming out,” while initially an internal process, must also, by definition, eventually include risking backlash and negative consequences by telling others the truth of who they are. While members of the LGBT community share many experiences of oppression and discrimination with other under-represented minority groups, there are some aspects that are unique to being sexual minorities.

Homosexuality is not an obvious part of one’s identity that reveals itself to others in every social or work interaction. The gay individual must continually decide whether to disclose this information in some way to other persons. While an individual’s sexual orientation is not a matter of choice, the gay person does make a choice concerning whether to live openly as a homosexual or, by hiding this identity, to let others draw the

socially-learned assumption that he or she is heterosexual. (Schope, 2002, pp. 1-2)

While certainly, there is a significant burden on members of ethnic or racial minority groups that can be visually recognized, there is a unique stress placed on every LGBT individual because they have to *choose* to suffer in anonymity or risk the consequences of disclosing their minority status. There is a cost to bearing this burden:

It has been shown that gay men and lesbians represent one of the most stressed groups of individuals in society. The prevalence of stress among gay men and lesbians is considered as a result of societal discrimination and lack of social and institutional supports...In addition, a high degree of stress may be experienced by those who feel they must hide their sexual identity, which, in turn can have negative health effects...Other key unique factors include the context of homophobia and heterosexism...Sanders and Kroll (2000) emphasized that the key risk factor or danger to lesbians and gay men stems from the socio-cultural system. They noted, 'it is the pervasiveness of the heterosexuality belief that homosexuality is less valid, less fulfilling, less celebratory than heterosexuality, which is the larger social problem.' (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007, pp. 299-300)

Yet despite all of this, each man eventually spoke up.

From their stories, it is evident the moment of disclosure for each, was not a spontaneous act of desperation. Rather, every man struggled for years in making his final determination. There were myriad factors that were considered, including the teachings of their churches, prior viewpoints and opinions expressed by family and loved ones, their observations of, or hearing stories about, other LGBT people who had "come out," and an awareness of incidents of harassment, gay-bashing and hate crimes portrayed in the media. In addition to the context of all of these factors, was the added stress of having to *project* the potential future fall-out of their disclosures. Would they be ridiculed? Would their families reject them? Would their roommates want to move out?

Would they be subject to threats and physical violence? Would their future partners ever be accepted into the family dynamic? And ultimately, could they ever have a “normal” life?

The decision whether to disclose to others presents the gay person with the very real need to calculate potential gains and losses. Moreover, this becomes a continual and almost oppressive task that must be repeated in every new situation and with every new audience. If the person decided to disclose, they find themselves constantly trying to control information and behaviors in every interaction with people who do not know their sexual orientation. Since most gay men and lesbians are typically out to some people and closeted with others, this creates enormous stress when members of these two groups overlap. (Schope, 2002, p. 2)

So not only do all of the contextual issues, personal emotions, and potential threats have to be weighed, but the process has to be repeated with every individual in their circle.

And if they determine that some people are not safe enough to “come out” to, they now have to control information that might be passed from those who know to those who do not. And, they have to literally change personas depending on the awareness of their audience. It is difficult for any person who is not a sexual minority to fully understand the toll that this kind of anxiety can take on an individual. Yet for the participants of this study, it doesn’t end there. Every man here was also raised in a conservative Christian environment that held positions in clear opposition to homosexuality. So now, in addition to all of the aforementioned considerations, there were deeper and even more profound questions: Will my religious community shun me? Will the church excommunicate me? Will God reject me?

Studies have shown that membership in a fundamentalist or conservative religion is related to homophobic attitudes. Thus the gay individual raised with a very religious upbringing has to deal with an enormous amount of

conflict as he or she tries to reconcile religious beliefs with sexual identity. (Schope, 2002, p. 7)

It was in this environment, under this profound stress, that each man now convinced that he was in fact, gay, stepped out of the “closet,” and began to speak his own truth. The initial reactions of the first people the men disclosed to were almost universally positive. This could be reasonably expected, given the careful consideration of the men before “coming out,” and the fact that these first recipients were deemed to be safe individuals. However, this initial acceptance and catharsis was usually followed by incredibly painful moments with other friends, family members and religious individuals who were not nearly as gracious. There were arguments, accusations, judgments, tears, irrational fears and even suggestions that the men were mistaken and confused. Yet they pressed on.

Even a casual observer can recognize the courage and strength required for young men, consumed in anxiety and fear, to take such heroic steps. It cannot be known whether these men possessed such qualities innately or if they developed such internal fortitude as a necessary requirement for living as “out” gay men in a homophobic, heterosexist world. What is clear, is that each man possessed a single-minded determination to “come out” of the “closet” so that they might live lives of authenticity.

Authenticity

Now, having traveled their own private journeys in accepting their true sexual identity; now, having assumed the considerable risks and exercised the tremendous courage required to disclose to others in their world who they really are; now, each man ventures into a new life – a new way of living – that they have created for themselves.

Nietzsche describes this as the “will to live,” and the renowned existential psychotherapist Rollo May, elaborates in stating that the will to live is...

...not simply the instinct for self-preservation, but the will to accept the fact that one is one's self, and to accept responsibility for fulfilling one's own destiny, which in turn, implies accepting the fact that one must make his basic choices himself. (May, 1953, p. 169)

This new life, achieved through hard choices and many moments of decision, is based on the truth of their real sexual identity and lived consistent with the values that are literally being recreated every day based in an authentic process.

Living in authenticity seems to represent for these men, at least two different but related experiences. First, authenticity is a psychological way of being and an emotional state of existence. There is now a measureable sense of wholeness with each of these men. The long-suffered dissonance is now collapsed and in its place is a new cohesion experienced both intrapersonally and interpersonally. The desired “life consistency” is now achieved with each man expressing not just relief but a transcendent peace that had been absent for so long. By no means is it suggested that their lives are now trouble-free. It is likely that each will continue to, at times, experience prejudice and discrimination. However, even living in the context of a largely heterosexist culture and an often homophobic society, they are still experiencing a freedom that is new to their “out” identities. They are now able to move forward in life creating new space, making new friends and entering into new intimacies – all within a context of truthfulness. While at times, that will inherently mean rejection, the key is that those who embrace them and accept them and love them now do so based in part, on the knowledge that they are also gay men.

Secondly, each man though injured or limited to some degree by the conservative religious tradition of his youth, continues to view himself as a spiritual being. Most have rejected their early religious affiliations but all still claim the presence of spirituality in their lives, manifested now in a variety of ways. This irony points to the fact that each man realized at some point, that he could reclaim his spirituality and recreate it into a presence that was affirming to his sexuality rather than condemning. And in fact, it also points to the possibility that for religious or spiritually-oriented gay individuals, the “coming out” process itself is spiritual:

Most writers on gay and lesbian spirituality mention coming out of the closet as one of those spiritual experiences. This often demands considerable personal self-reflection, presumes some degree of self-appropriation, and may demand that the gay and lesbian person renegotiate family and other intimate relationships. In the sense that one’s spiritual life is the deepening of all the challenges and calls to greater humanization which are found in incipient form in coming out to self and others, this is a specific mark of gay/lesbian spirituality. (Empereur, 2007, p.58)

So what appears to be required in the end was not that each man, because he was gay, had to reject himself as a spiritual being, but rather, he had to redefine his spirituality so that it became a vehicle for healing, in and of itself.

...healing here means a creative revisioning which is based on the experience of themselves as gay persons...Gays take possession of their pain, appropriate the experience that comes from their oppression, and present their impasse to God in their depths. Spirituality for gays and lesbians here equals pursuing the spiritual path in terms of their marginal status and the suffering that is brought about by their confrontation with limits. Healing takes place when the impasse and marginalization...move them along the more positive path of embracing their goodness as human beings, of enjoying how their bodies are epiphanies of the presence of the spirit and how having a luminal status in society and church carries with it a prophetic role. (Empereur, 2007, p.60).

In conclusion, the purpose of phenomenological research is to closely examine a given experience or phenomenon and through an extensive process of data gathering and analysis, attempt to ascertain and then convey, what the essential essence or essences of that phenomenon were. In this study, the “coming out” experiences of gay men raised in conservative Christian environments, it has been posited that there were at least three essential essences experienced by the men being studied. Each entered into a process of critical consciousness where they had to embrace the reality that they were, in fact, gay. Each man then displayed remarkable determination in overcoming systemic barriers and limitations in their objective to tell others the truth of who they were. Finally, each man, empowered by this life-changing experience, entered into a new and authentic way of life that brought with it relief, meaning, and the ability to relate to others in an honest and loving way.

Perhaps, the essences of this incredible phenomenon might be best summarized again, by the stylistic and profound words of May (1953):

It is as though for a moment, one stood on a mountain peak, and viewed his life from that wide and unlimited perspective. One gets his sense of direction from his view from the peak and sketches a mental map which guides him for weeks of patient plodding up and down the lesser hills when effort is dull and “inspiration” is conspicuous in its absence. For the fact that at some instant we have been able to see truth unclouded by our own prejudices, to love other persons without demand for ourselves, and to create ecstasy that occurs when we are totally absorbed in what we are doing – the fact that we have had these glimpses gives us a basis of meaning and direction for all our later actions. (pp. 141-142)

Chapter XII

Conclusion

Discussion

“Coming out of the “closet” was the targeted phenomenon of this study. Specifically, the experiences of gay men raised in conservative Christian environments and how this unique backdrop influenced their process. For each participant, there is presented an overview of the personal life context preceding their “coming out,” a rich description of the structures and substructures that characterized their actual disclosure to others and finally, an examination of the aftermath.

Each participant was born and raised in the context of a conservative Christian faith tradition. Whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, their formative years in the church consisted of weekly gatherings for worship, formal educational programs designed to teach them the fundamentals of their religion and age-appropriate activities incorporated to entertain and build a cohesive, family environment within their church, parish or congregation. The principles and teachings they received in church were then reflected and reinforced by their families at home, their friends at school and their neighbors in their communities. All of this resulted in not just a stated religious affiliation or a mechanical adherence to a dogma or set of beliefs. This created a realized culture that they lived and dwelt within; a culture that reflected the mores and values of their religion and the teachings of their individual ministers and priests. Years later, every participant still possessed positive memories of experiences in the church, indicating that although each would eventually break from at least their religion’s

teachings pertaining to homosexuality, that the presence of religion in their lives was a complex relationship including both beneficial and detrimental qualities.

The participants all eventually arrived at an internal realization that they identified as homosexuals, rather than heterosexuals. This realization came at different ages for each man and the characteristics of their respective journeys that led them to this determination varied according to the distinctive qualities of their complex lives. It is clear in each case that this realization, which set them apart from the dominant culture, created both an existential burden and ultimately, a need to act. One by one, each man made the decision to tell another individual the truth about his sexual identity and at this point, the “coming out” process was fully engaged. The factors that were considered in committing to disclosure were many, including but not limited to: strained or lost relationships with friends and family, sanctions from the moral authorities in their lives, social ostracization and other acts of discrimination. Despite all of this, each man proceeded and their lived experiences, profound emotions as well as the particular details and verbatim accounts of their individual stories are documented here.

In the aftermath of their disclosures, the participants continued to deal with unique issues and circumstances. For each participant, there was a tangible emotional cost incurred, with several experiencing significant symptoms including fear, anxiety, depression and even suicidal ideation requiring medication, therapy and/or hospitalization. In some cases, relationships with family and loved ones were strained and required at times, years to heal if at all. And in every case, there was a marked shift in their view of and adherence to the religious authority in their lives. Some completely

rejected the faith traditions of their youth, eventually choosing to define themselves as religiously agnostic, but searching and remaining open to other spiritual perspectives. Others maintained distinct aspects of their religious upbringing but altered their beliefs to allow for their homosexuality. And several remained active in the church but allowed the occasion of their newly embraced sexual identities to free them from what they perceived to be the far-reaching constraints of the church and in essence, shifted the locus of authority from without to within.

Each man conveyed relief and a profound personal satisfaction over the decision to “come out” and none conveyed any sense that they regretted having done so. However, this is not to suggest that the pain and turmoil experienced during this process does not remain in the aftermath. For some, certainly those whose “coming out” process is more recent, there are still open wounds and some relationships damaged during this time have yet to recover. While many have settled into their new identities and lives as gay men and entered into long-term committed relationships, others are still discovering what being gay means to them and how to navigate relationships and even daily living.

Significance

The following discussion on significance will evaluate the results of this current study in light of the literature review, highlighting similarities as well as differences.

The stories of each man evidenced the inherent difficulties of being homosexual in a heterosexual world. Their lived experiences concurred with Herek’s (2004) belief that homosexuality is considered inferior, and Smith, Foley & Chaney’s (2008) assertion that affectional identities other than heterosexual are devalued through the privilege and

power of the dominant culture. Initial fear and reluctance on the part of each participant to speak about their emerging gay identities suggests that there was an underlying message received that it was wrong, stigmatizing and potentially dangerous to not be heterosexual. This study also confirmed Iwasaki and Ristock's (2007) research indicating that the LGBT community is currently one of the most stressed groups of individuals in society. Their detailing of the physical and psychological ramifications of being gay, including depression, anxiety, affective disorders and even suicidal behavior, were present amongst the current participants. Also confirmed were Harper & Schnieder's (2003) findings that LGBT individuals that remain in the closet show higher rates of stress than those who are "out." Each participant described an immediate relief and long-term positive effects stemming from their choice to "come out," despite the difficulties inherent in doing so. Regarding the concept of internalized homophobia, defined by Williamson (2000) as the adoption of negative attitudes by LGBT people towards their own sexuality, the current study found that while some participants did exhibit these tendencies, several never internalized society's negative conceptions rather, they experienced a consistent pride and belief in themselves as gay men, despite messages to the contrary. Observing the actual process of "coming out" for the current participants, there was significant correlation with Eli Coleman's (1982) groundbreaking stage model. These men evidenced similar characteristics outlined by Coleman in all five stages: Pre-Coming Out, Coming Out, Exploration, First Relationships and Integration. Variations occurred based on their age, particular circumstances and how recently they had "come out." Several of the younger participants whose disclosures were more recent,

only reflected characteristics of Coleman's early stages and it is yet to be seen how closely they would mirror the research as they progress. For the current participants, the myriad factors considered in the decision to "come out" and the relative weight of such a decision coincided with Schope's (2002) findings that the process can be incredibly complex and oppressive. Finally, as has been mentioned, each of the participants experienced some level of stress and anxiety while seriously assessing how their lives might be impacted on multiple levels, as suggested by Cowie & Rivers (2000). However, every individual in this study also manifested positive outcomes such as those suggested in McDonald's (1982) research, including the critical integration of feelings and behavior that result in a positive gay identity.

The spiritual experiences of the participants mirrored in many ways, findings in the current body of literature. Specifically, the conservative Christian religious context that these participants were raised in reflected findings by Bassett, Kirnan, Hill & Schultz (2005) who reported that religious fundamentalism predicted homonegativism. Every individual in this study reported some level of discomfort based on the teachings of their churches regarding homosexuality. A majority personally felt pain and shame as a result of their churches stances, as well as experiencing judgment and discrimination directed at them by parishioners. The negative attitudes these men encountered bore resemblance to opinions expressed by Gagnon (2005) common to many conservative religious adherents, that homosexuality is a choice, a lifestyle that is condemned by God and simply *being* gay is directly associated with sexually transmitted diseases, the absence of monogamy and higher rates of depression and substance abuse. These troubling viewpoints and the

subsequent tensions they create for both gay men and the church result in what Zahniser & Boyd (2008) refer to as a "...growing muddled middle of people," who are not certain how to view or conceptualize gay Christians. This was reflected in several of the men's stories who have received messages, or have adopted personal stances indicating that even if they were not in sin by simply being gay, that there was nonetheless an expectation that they would not be allowed to enter into homosexual relationships and that the "holy alternative" would be celibacy. Ultimately, as Roseborough (2006) suggests, it really depends on the individual as to whether this type of environment "...lead[s] to either emotional growth, or if unsuccessfully resolved, to despair." In this study, each man reflected unique differences in their navigation of these turbulent waters based on their personalities, the relative strength of their own psychological constitutions and the presence of support or lack thereof.

Conversely, Yip (2003) reports that in his sampling of 565 gay Christians, 80% found their sexuality compatible with their Christian faith. In this study, four of the seven men would still characterize themselves as Christian but only two of those four are still attending a Christian church. Three of the participants have rejected Christianity, yet still consider themselves agnostic and to varying degrees, spiritual. This phenomenon of "out" gays rejecting their faith based on the perception that their faith tradition has rejected them has been recognized in the literature (Empereur, 2007; Shallenberger, 1996) and identified by Yip (1999) as "counter-rejection." And Walton, (2006) suggests that many gay Christians can achieve identity integration, not just despite anti-gay bias in the church but also because of it, as an act of defiance and self-advocacy. This was

reflected by every individual in the current study. In the expression of this counter-rejection or defiance, each created a new locus of moral and spiritual authority. Some participants, desiring an ongoing communal aspect to their faith expression found that certain Christian faith traditions that were historically more progressive and other eastern religions offered safe and comfortable alternatives for religious participation. One participant, a devout Roman Catholic, rejected the church's stance against homosexual behavior as "political" and has purposely sought out particular parishes where the priest does not actively teach against homosexuality thus allowing him to actively participate in the church without any internal dissonance. And several participants have rejected organized religion and Christianity all together and instead choose to remain personally and privately, spiritual.

Research

As indicated in chapter three, the intent of phenomenological research is not to test a hypothesis but rather to ask a question and allow the data surrounding the phenomenon to speak for themselves (Morrissette, 1999). Ultimately, the purpose of this unique research design is to produce "clear, precise and systematic descriptions of the meaning..." of the phenomenon being examined (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45). The central research question posed for this study was: "What is the essence of the experience of "coming out" for gay men from conservative Christian backgrounds?" The research and specific results from the stories of this study's seven participants found the following essential elements common to their "coming out" experiences: critical consciousness, determination and authenticity. Critical consciousness speaks to the ultimate realization

each man arrived at that he was in fact, not a heterosexual but a homosexual. This understanding had to be achieved in the midst of a heterosexist and often homophobic society and in the absence of any significant definitions of homosexuality, personal connections to “out” gays and any role models to which the individual might have looked to for guidance. Determination refers to the remarkable courage and persistence displayed by each participant during the “coming out” process, despite the very real presence of their own powerful emotions such as fear, pain and shame. From others, they also experienced strong emotions and actions such as anger, confusion, avoidance, denial and even rejection. Yet in the midst of all of this, each man continued, motivated by a desire to tell the truth, and to be able to live consistent with who they knew themselves to be. Finally, authenticity describes the way of life that each has found in the wake of their “coming out.” While by no means have the difficulties of being a sexual minority disappeared, without exception, each participant reports a significant relief and new-found hope for what the future holds for them as “out” gay men.

Several identified strengths and possible limitations to this study are now presented. It is noted at the outset, and in chapter three, that specific steps were taken to prevent direct initial contact between this researcher and potential participants utilizing individuals connected with the LGBT community who forwarded the information on to potentially interested subjects. Individuals then took it upon themselves to contact this researcher. However, it is plausible to conjecture that those who did take the initiative and responded to the call for participants might well reflect a demographic of “out” gay men who were eager to share and potentially more curious and articulate than many

others who might be at earlier stages in the process or who are still dealing with the fear and trauma of the “coming out” experience.

This study included a good age range, from men in their late 30’s and 40’s to young men in their early to late 20’s. Additionally and not necessarily correlating with chronological age, there was also a range in how long each participant had been living as an “out” gay man. Both of these factors provided a rich perspective highlighting the impact that age can have when enduring such difficult circumstances and the impact on the relative state of each individual’s “coming out” status based on how much time had transpired. Additionally, the differences in geographic locations provided for an interesting study in how environment and culture potentially impact the “coming out” process. Four participants were located in the upper Midwest of the United States and largely represented rural, small communities. Their experiences differed from two participants who “came out” in the south and one who was living in a western state. While the diversity of age and geographic location were strengths, the ethnic and racial makeup of the participants was not as diverse. Five of the participants identified as Caucasian, one as Latino and one as racially mixed with predominantly Filipino ancestry. A more racially diverse participant base would offer insights as to how race and ethnicity might impact “coming out.” An additional strength of the study was the extensive interview process. While geography prevented all interviews from being face-to-face, three of the seven participants did interview in person. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes which allowed for a productive and rich conversation and each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant was then interviewed a second

time which qualitative research describes as a member check. Each man was given the opportunity to review the complete textural and structural analyses of their stories and then provided ample time for feedback and corrections. While there were virtually no significant corrections requested each participant knew that they did have the option to give additional input. It is the belief of this researcher that this assisted in creating an environment of trust between the researcher and the research subject and also served as professional accountability for the researcher in that there was a persistent awareness that the analyses would be reviewed by the men themselves, prior to final submission and publication, thus addressing issues of trustworthiness in qualitative studies. However, it might have been beneficial to include several more questions in the interview protocol. While the questions utilized produced a thick and rich description of each man's experience, questions soliciting further information about how they view their lives currently and how they are now interacting interpersonally in same sex relationships might have provided a more vivid picture of life in the aftermath of "coming out."

The question of generalization of findings is one that must be rejected by the very nature of qualitative research. Due to the unique factors involved in person-centered research and the examination here of a phenomenon, one cannot legitimately posit that these finding might be replicated in order to prove validity. Rather, Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that validity in phenomenological (qualitative) research must be approached from a broader perspective.

Researchers must persuade readers that the two types of inferences that they have made in reaching their findings are powerfully supported: (a) the transformation of the raw data into psychological expressions and (b)

the synthesis of the transformed meaning units into a general structural description. (p. 57)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that the key issue is *trustworthiness*. Namely, can the researcher persuade his audience that the findings are worth paying attention to and worth taking account of? Therefore, while the findings in this study cannot be replicated in a more traditional, quantitative sense, it is nevertheless this researcher's opinion that this study contributed to the growing body of work focusing on LGBT issues. Further, this study contributed to a smaller body of work specifically addressing how the counseling profession interacts with the LGBT community. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, this work contributes to a relatively small canon of work devoted specifically to the convergence of homosexuality, spirituality and mental health.

Implications and Recommendations

Counselor Education

1. A general recommendation is made that counselor educators and counselor education curriculums must establish, or further a commitment to integrating education about the LGBT community and mental health issues unique to that community, into their body of work and their programs.
2. It is critical that counselor educators take the time, consistent with broadly accepted multicultural counseling standards, to examine their own beliefs about homosexuality, identifying any potential biases that might be expressed in their teaching and research and then to encourage their students to engage in a similar level of introspection.

3. LGBT issues should be better represented in multicultural counseling texts and materials and given a more significant place in the syllabi of multicultural counseling courses of many programs that remain deficient in their attention to sexual minorities.
4. As issues of spirituality become more evident in the curriculums and discourses of counselor education programs, it is imperative that faculty and students understand the unique history and relationship that the LGBT community has with religion and how spiritually-oriented LGBT persons can often feel trapped and forced to make decisions between their sexuality and their spirituality.

Counseling Practice

1. It must be recognized that many LGBT people are hesitant to seek out counseling services based on a lifetime of fear and repression. Counselors must be prepared to be patient and empathetic in attempting to understand their deep-seated concerns. While one does not have to be lesbian or gay to effectively assist LGBT persons in their journey, the clinician must be committed to providing a safe environment and maintaining a current list of local resources who can support both the client and the counselor in the therapeutic process.
2. It is essential that the counselor recognizes that our profession's history in dealing with the LGBT community has at times, been dehumanizing to homosexuals by labeling them as mentally ill based solely on their sexual orientation. And despite the denunciation by virtually every major helping organization in the U.S., there still exists a minority of faith-based counselors who continue to practice so-called

reparative therapy that seeks to change one's sexual orientation. It imperative to have an open and honest discussion with LGBT clients about the nature of therapy and the ethical guidelines incorporated for their protection.

3. Current research suggests that there no longer exists, if it ever did, a strong dichotomy that would position LGBT individuals at one end of the spectrum and religion at the other. There are simply too many variables for such a simplistic conceptualization and it is reasonable to expect that clinicians working with lesbian and gay clients will eventually need to address issues of spirituality. Today's lesbian or gay man demands more options than simply rejecting their faith outright or attending what is labeled a "gay church." The desire for LGBT individuals to be a part of safe, mainstream religious communities is an aspect of a healthy acculturation process and should be honored.

Clergy

1. Clergy in progressive or what is often referred to as "open and welcoming" faith traditions, are encouraged to continue to their work of advocacy on behalf of the LGBT community and realize that as spiritual figures, they possess a unique ability in assisting lesbian and gay individuals in the journey of healing.
2. Clergy must be aware that "coming out" is a complex process that can span years, and due to their history of oppression and fear, as well as the possibility of direct discrimination, LGBT parishioners may need the additional assistance of mental health professionals. Therefore it is incumbent on ministers, priests, rabbis and shamans to be aware of organizations, support groups and professional counselors

in their communities that can assist the local churches in providing compassionate care.

Future Research

The findings of this current work lend themselves to possible ongoing research opportunities. Several areas for future investigation that this researcher will be considering are included here. First, there would seem to be merit in examining more closely, the spiritual conceptualizations and faith journeys of men who are now “out” and identified as gay. The findings of this study indicated that all seven participants continued to seek out spiritual and religious experiences, despite experiencing oppression in the religious environments in which they were raised in. A future study might focus on the pursuit and re-creation of the spiritual lives of gay men after they have “come out” of the closet. Secondly, this research clearly indicated that, as part of the “coming out” phenomenon, each man desired and eventually sought out close, caring relationships with both homosexual and heterosexual individuals, who they deemed to be safe and nurturing. A future study might focus on how openly identified LGBT individuals pursue and engage interpersonally in the wake of their “coming out” experiences and the potential impact, if any, that years of deception and subterfuge might have on their present ability to engage in meaningful intimate and plutonic relationships.

Summary

The specific life experiences of these seven men while unique to them, speak broader truths and principles that when applied, better the lives of all people. Every person deserves the right to develop in a way that is natural and true to her or him. Every person has the right to be afforded a basic level of respect and dignity, living and thriving without the fear of judgment, prejudice and discrimination. Every person, straight or gay, has a right to respectfully express their thoughts and beliefs without threat of retribution. Every person has the right to develop and deepen their spiritual life and to share their values, morals and beliefs as an expression of their own spiritual journey to the betterment of the larger spiritual community. And every individual has the right to seek love and acceptance in mutually consensual relationships.

It is the sincere desire of this researcher, himself a counselor educator, former therapist, former minister and gay spiritual man, that this work and the stories of these remarkable seven men, might forward the cause of the aforementioned ideals.

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Appendix A

Script: Academician, Clinical Expert or LGBT Community Leader

Dear

My name is Terry D. McGlasson. I am a Licensed Professional Counselor, Senior Lecturer in Community Counseling in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Wisconsin – Superior and a Ph.D. candidate at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. I am in the process of recruiting participants for my dissertation research, which is an exploratory study investigating the “coming out” experiences of gay men who were raised in conservative Christian environments.

Due to your level of expertise in and knowledge of the LGBT community, I would like to ask for your help in the recruitment of participants for my study. The criteria for participation are: gay men, between the ages of 20-40 years old, who were raised in conservative Christian environments. These men need to be known as gay (“out”) to those around them. They do not necessarily need to be affiliated with a religion or faith tradition currently but would have spent their formative years in a Christian conservative environment. If you know men who meet these criteria I would appreciate it if you would make contact with them informing them of this study and forwarding to them the attached participant contact information form and the consent form regarding the research. Please indicate to the prospective participant that his participation is strictly voluntary and if he is interested he may contact me directly. My email address is: tmcglass@uwsuper.edu. My phone number is (715) 394-8150.

The research design for this investigation is a qualitative approach, specifically a phenomenological study. The study will include two, 60 minute taped, face-to-face interviews with participants (phone interviews may be used if face-to-face is prohibitive). Additionally, participants will be asked to review the transcripts from the first interview. This should take 30 minutes to 1 hour. Total time commitment for participants will be 2.5 to 3 hours over an approximately two month time period.

I appreciate your help with this research which will advocate for the affirmative care of LGBT persons, add to the body of literature related LGBT issues and contribute to enhanced training of counselors and counselor educators.

Thank you in advance for your support and assistance.

Appendix B

Participation Script: Initial Contact with Participants

Thank you for inquiring about my research into the “coming out” experiences of gay men who were raised in conservative Christian environments. I will be investigating your memories and perceptions of personal experiences surrounding both the faith/religious traditions of your formative years, as well as your sexual identity.

As a participant you will be asked to participate in two, audio-taped face-to-face interviews (or phone interviews if face-to-face is prohibitive), each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Additionally, you will be asked to review the transcripts from the first interview to assure accuracy. This may take an additional 30 minutes to 1 hour. The tapes will be transcribed and then destroyed. Your total time commitment to this investigation would be approximately 2.5 – 3 hours over an approximately two month period.

It is important that the results are trustworthy, that is, that they match your experiences. Therefore, I will be asking you to review my results to check for accuracy and that my perceptions of your responses are accurate.

The results from this research will be used for my Ph.D. dissertation. They may also be used for future publication. Your identity and identifying information will be kept strictly confidential.

Your participation is voluntary. If at any time you do not wish to respond to a question or if you desire to withdraw from the study, you have the freedom to do so.

Do you have any questions about this research study?

Would you like to participate in this research study?

We can also speak further on the phone, before scheduling an interview, if this would assist you in making a decision. Just let me know how you would like to proceed.

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Project Title: A Phenomenological Study of the “Coming Out” Experience of Gay Men Raised in Conservative Christian Environments

Principal Investigator: Deborah Rubel, Ph.D., Department of Teacher and Counselor Education – Oregon State University

Student Researcher: Terry D. McGlasson, MA, LPC, Department of Teacher and Counselor Education – Oregon State University

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in a research study designed to investigate the “coming out” experiences of gay men who were raised in conservative Christian environments. We are studying this because the literature indicates a need for further research regarding the training of therapists and counselor educators in the area of affirmative care for those in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered community. Additionally, this information will be used for a student dissertation and possibly, for future publication.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether you would like to participate in this study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all of your questions have been answered, you can then decide whether you will participate.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you have been identified as a gay man between the ages of 20-40 years old, who was raised in a conservative Christian environment.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in two face-to-face interviews lasting 60 minutes each. If face-to-face interviews are prohibitive, phone interviews will be utilized. The interviews will take place once per month for two months. Additionally, you will also be asked to review the transcripts of the first interview in order to help ensure the trustworthiness of the data. This process should not take more than 30 minutes to 1 hour. If you agree to take part in this study, your total involvement will consist of approximately 2.5 – 3 hours, over the span of approximately two months.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?

The interviews associated with this investigation pose **minimal** risk to participants economically and physically. The interviews are confidential and the data generated from the interviews will be reported in such a way as to avoid participant identification, posing **minimal** social or professional risk. The greatest potential risk will be psychological. Participants will be asked to discuss their memories and perceptions of personal experiences involving their faith and their sexual identity. While the interview questions are not intended to be threatening, they do require a level of introspection and reflection. Such reflection may evoke emotional reactions in participants. Should this occur in any interview, the interview will be paused to allow the participant to decide if he wants to continue. During this pause, the tape recorder will be turned off and no data will be collected. The researcher is a Licensed Professional Counselor and is trained to process strong emotional reactions as they arise in order to ensure participant stability. If necessary, the participant will be referred to a professional counselor or therapist in his area, however this level of emotional distress is **highly unlikely**. The interview questions are designed to be broad and biographical, and as such are not likely to cause distress.

All data associated with this study will be labeled only with a participant number. No other individuals will have access to participant names and corresponding participant numbers.

A qualified individual will be employed to transcribe the interview tapes. This individual will sign a confidentiality agreement and will not have access to participants' names or contact information.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

There are no known direct benefits to participating in this investigation. The indirect benefits to participation include contributing to the health and well being of the LGBT community, contributing to the professions of counseling, counselor education and supervision, and to informing clinical work in the specialized area of affirmative care for LGBT persons.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for participating in this research study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. The confidentiality of participants will be protected throughout the sampling, data collection, analysis, and writing procedures. An audio recorder will be used during the interviews to record the verbal data shared by participants. You will be asked not to reveal any identifying information, or identifying information of anyone else you mention during the interviews. Once the interviews are transcribed and checked for accuracy, the tapes will be destroyed. All other data, such as the transcription of tapes will be labeled only with the participant's assigned number. No other individuals will have access to participant names or corresponding numbers. All forms and data will be stored separately in a locked file cabinet in the offices of the Department of Teacher and Counselor Education at Oregon State University for a minimum of six years. Only the researchers will have access to the data. If the results of this project are published your identity will not be made public.

DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you truly want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question or if you want to stop an interview, you are free to do so. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact:

Deborah J. Rubel, Ph.D. at: 541-737-5973. Email: Deborah.rubel@oregonstate.edu or,

Terry D. McGlasson, MA, LPC at: 715-394-8150. Email: tmcglass@uwsuper.edu.

If you decide to participate in this study, you may contact me at the phone or email listed above and we will schedule our first interview. Please bring the participant contact form with you to the first interview. You may also ask any additional questions you might have at that time. You may also bring this form with you or there will be additional forms available.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. Approximately how long have you been “out” as a gay man?
3. Describe the spiritual or religious environment you were raised in.
4. Could you describe the circumstances surrounding you “coming out?”
5. What was it like to have the spiritual/religious beliefs that you had while coming to the realization that you were gay
6. What was it like to have had your spiritual or religious upbringing while you were “coming out?”
7. How did the process of “coming out” affect your spiritual/religious beliefs? Your religious affiliation?
8. Is there anything else about your religious/spiritual upbringing and your experience of “coming out” that you would like to add?

