

Coming Out As Spiritual Practice

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
Lake Street Church
Evanston, IL
June 30, 2013

Coming out serves as a universal experience, thus a sacrament in which we are all welcome to participate. Our own coming out invites others to share their secret selves, to risk intimate disclosure. Historically, many individuals and groups have come out of hiding or anonymity to declare their unique identities, understandings, beliefs, and visions.

- Chris Glaser, *Coming Out As Sacrament*

Ancient Witness: John 11:17, 43-44

Today is our annual Gay Pride worship service, our celebration of LGBTQ equality. And I don't think we could have timed it any better this year. I'm talking about, of course, the Supreme Court decisions this week finding the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) unconstitutional and upholding a lower court decision that overturned Proposition 8, making California the 13th state where same-sex marriage legal!

Like many, many others, including some of you here, I have been involved in this struggle for decades. And over 10 years ago I found myself dealing with newspaper reporters, T.V. cameras and radio shows during my celebrated trial in the courts of the Presbyterian Church, eventually losing my job, my standing and my church over this issue. It made the national news, and the story was picked up by the Associated Press, New York Times, The Advocate, who did a large piece and others. And because of this, people contacted me from all over the country, overwhelmingly supportive and grateful. It was then that I received a letter from a friend that I hadn't seen for over 25 years.

Mark was my best friend in high school. We both did well academically – we took the most difficult courses together. We played in the Youth Symphony together, were on the debate team together. We both were advanced, taking college courses our junior and senior years, but he was absolutely brilliant – scored a perfect 1600 on his SAT's. (Really made me sick!) I was still kind of a slacker in comparison, while he got a scholarship to an Ivy League school, graduating from Princeton in three years and then Columbia Law. And we just lost contact – went our separate ways.

In our senior year Mark came out to me and his parents. I remember how his parents went crazy and sent him to a therapist to “fix” him. Mark, who had hopes of being president one day – a goal that was, in his case, realistic – saw all of those dreams of political ambition dashed. For in the 1970's being gay meant the end of one's political career. I remember the brief awkwardness of Mark's physical attraction to me, of my inability to return those same feelings, and us emerging still buddies, still the best of friends. Friendships are so hard anyway, when the hormones are raging. And now what I remember is the incredible risk he took to come out to

me. What if I had turned on him? Laughed at him? Rejected him? I try to imagine what this might have felt like, but cannot.

And so I get this letter 10 years ago that starts out, "Hello, old friend." He tells me that he's single and living with AIDS out East. He tells me about his life and hopes that life is good for me. He writes,

I saw your wife with you in a picture accompanying the article. I hope your family is well.

Steve, it means so much to gay people when righteous straights stand up for us and with us. A loving "thank-you" from me and thousands of others who will never write you but read about you.

*Love,
Mark*

I have been so blessed! I have been learning so much about myself, about faith, about God.

An article that appeared in *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* by Tim McFeely, entitled "Coming Out As Spiritual Revelation." He writes about how coming out is an act of love. Not content to interact with others in a superficial way any longer, the lesbian or gay man reaches out to another person and opens up her or his soul, not as an act of defiance, but of love. It is an act of risk, vulnerability and trust.

McFeely writes:

I believe the underlying cause of negative reaction from family members upon learning that a son or a sister is gay is the realization that there had been such complete concealment for so many years. The pain and shock are centered around the past deception rather than on the current disclosure. Given time, most family and friends come to see our coming out as a testament to our trust and love for them

Again and again I have seen gay people, previously alienated from their parents as a result of the fear and deception of the closet, forge an unusual closeness once that closet door has been opened.

Gay and lesbian people have taught me so much about what it means to be a Christian. I have, and continue to be, so blessed. In spite of tremendous risk, in the face of injustice and violence, I have seen people struggle to be themselves and demonstrate remarkable courage to become vulnerable to others.

In his book, *Coming Out As Sacrament*, Chris Glaser talks about the unique gifts that gay and lesbian persons have to offer the church, if only the church would be wise enough to accept them. He writes,

Our own coming out invites others to share their secret selves, to risk intimate disclosure.

I think of it this way. You know, we celebrate communion, but the church doesn't do a great job of encouraging communion. The church is often content with a pale imitation. Because to commune with someone is to be in an intimate relationship. It is when we offer our true selves to each other. Communion means coming out to each other, and this is why gay and lesbian people can help the church move toward deeper and deeper levels of communion. We straight folks can learn a lot about what it takes to experience communion if we are willing to listen.

Another way that I think of this is that gay and lesbian people have helped me understand better about living lives of integrity, honesty and authenticity. God calls all of us to live lives in which our inward state matches our outward actions.

While many of us straight persons can avoid grappling with integrity, this is an issue with which gay and lesbian persons are confronted from day one. And so they help me continue to learn about the struggle to be authentic, a basic question of faith.

It seems to me that God calls all of us to live lives in which our inward state matches our outward actions. This reminds me of something that the great civil rights pioneer, Rosa Parks, once said:

I will no longer act on the outside in way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.

I want to underscore an important point that Glaser makes in a footnote in his book. In talking about the destructiveness of the closet he wants to make sure he is not misunderstood as blaming the victim:

I understand that the closet may be, depending on circumstance or stage of development, a necessary, healthy, and even a moral choice for some at various points in time. But I believe it has implications for the person's overall health and moral well-being. The closet essentially wounds its occupant

I also believe that coming out may be something one chooses with some and not with others

McFeely makes a similar point. He wrote,

Coming out does not necessarily result in spiritual happiness, but for those who are searching for spiritual insight, coming out is a sine qua non of the quest

A successful spiritual search is unattainable from a closeted environment.

As a straight man, as a minister, I read McFeely's comments and realize that my own spiritual search depends upon me coming out of my own closet. Again, this is a blessing I've received

from gay and lesbian people.

William Sloane Coffin once was talking about how we are all unique and diverse, but that no human being's identity is exhausted by one's race, gender or sexual orientation. He said,

Human beings are fully human only when they find the universal in the particular, when they recognize that all people have more in common than they have in conflict.

So there are some things about being gay that I will never understand, some things about that closet that I can never comprehend. The closet is a gay experience, but it is also a human experience. It is particular, but it is also universal. We are taught that honesty is a virtue and so experience shame and guilt when we withhold essential parts of ourselves. Any closet makes a person feel dishonest. Shame is internalized and the person feels there is "something to hide." Coming out is something that can speak to us all, if we let it. As McFeely says,

We never stop coming out; and the unquenchable thirst for truth is itself the core of our spirituality

Coming out ends the concealment, ameliorates the fear, and starts a process of shrinking the cancer of shame.

Actually, if the church would take a close look at its own history, it is full of examples of groups and individuals who came out in a broad, universal sense. These were people who showed great courage and conviction in sharing their unique and deeply held truths in the face of intimidation and power.

And finally, coming out can lead us to accept, without shame, those things in us about which we are not proud, too. There's a saying in the recovering community: "We are only as sick as our secrets." In other words, when we are not real to others, it is very hard to be real and authentic to ourselves. And we stop growing, emotionally and spiritually.

This reminds me of that great line from Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*:

No man quite understands his own artful dodges from the grim shadow of self-knowledge.

Coming out is about embracing our *whole selves*. This doesn't mean that we present an edited, false view of ourselves. Quite the opposite. If coming out means that we need to be perfect, no one would do it. It is an unreasonable requirement. It is about living with greater transparency, and with less shame and guilt. It is a spiritual path toward integrity and healing.

Coming out, for me, is akin to Jesus' image of abundant life, a life that is fearless, free and joyful. A raised up, a resurrected life. A life that Jesus wished for all people to have. A life desiring full and deep communion with all.

When I think of Jesus, there was someone who had come out fully – in the universal human sense – about who he was, what he believed – at great personal risk. I am amazed and inspired

by people who do this. Sure, it strikes chords of my own personal inadequacies and inability to do it, but it also gives me hope that this kind of abundant life is available to me, too.

And the wisdom reflected in Jesus calls us all out of our tombs of fear to be ourselves without fear, shame or guilt. To an awareness that God's love is with us no matter what, and that this love can give us the strength to move mountains. As with Lazarus, he yells, "Come Out!" to a life of openness and sunlight, to take off the death cloth that binds us, to be free, to be raised up!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online and on CD at the church, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment:

*Though you have done nothing shameful,
they will want you to be ashamed.
They will want you to kneel and weep
and say you should have been like them.
And once you say you are ashamed,
reading the page they hold out to you,
Then such light as you have made
in your history will leave you.
They will no longer need to pursue you.
You will pursue them, begging forgiveness.
They will not forgive you.
There is no power against them.
It is only candor that is aloof from them,
only an inward charity, unashamed,
They cannot reach. Be ready.
When their light has picked you out
and their questions are asked, say to them:
"I am not ashamed." A sure horizon
will come around you. The heron will begin
his evening flight from the hilltop.*

Wendell Berry, "Do Not Be Ashamed," from *Collected Poems 1957-1982*