

# A Coming Out Narrative: Discovering My Queer Voice, My Social Worker Superpower

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**Abstract:** This narrative offers my reflection as a gay social worker on coming out. I highlight my struggle to find, embrace and exercise my queer voice, as well as examine how my family of origin informed both this personal and professional journey. It is the embracing of these once perceived obstacles that have enriched my life, given meaning to my professional development as a social worker, and ultimately were adopted as my social worker superpowers. I begin by sharing my coming out story to provide a backdrop. Then, I explore how my own lived experiences and my family of origin helped co-author my professional narrative. I discuss how multiple factors had a hand in: a.) my decision to enter the profession of social work, b.) my choice of practice settings and served populations, c.) the theoretical perspectives that ground me, and d.) the importance of my role as an advocate. I end the narrative by outlining the contrast and similarities between my past and current practice. I hope that in considering the ways that this biographical disruption has significantly contributed to my identity as a teacher, practitioner, and scholar, readers might appreciate their own search for authenticity, and the lessons learned.

**Keywords:** coming out, LGBTQ, gay social worker, sexual shame, healing

Coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) is often associated with a major event in a person's life. Known as a biographical disruption, Bury (1982) refers to this as a redefining of one's original concept of self in the face of a new understanding often due to an interruption in a person's life story. For LGBTQ social workers, the act of coming out – particularly the reactions of the family of origin leading up to, during and afterwards – can inform, impact and influence their professional identity.

My own journey had collected a concert of damning recordings in play for as long as I can remember. Messages of “you are sinful,” “you have little value,” “you are flawed or damaged goods,” “you are bad,” and “you are not a real man” were as much a part of my self-concept as the color of my hair. But, where did this self-deprecation start? More importantly, how did a voice filled with pride emerge from this trauma? How did the journey through these landmines shape my professional career? These are some of the questions that I explore in this paper.

My story illuminates a life that deviated from familial and societal expectations by challenging my parents' views on education, gender roles, heteronormativity, and sexuality. By sharing my narrative, I own my story and the power to tell it. As an author, I bring legitimacy to my narrative and its

use in making sense of the relationships that I have with the various stakeholders. Through storytelling, I engage in “... a dynamic process of incremental refinement of [my] stories of new events as well as on-going interpretations of culturally sacred story lines” (Czarniawska, 2014, p.38). This is not my first time telling this particular story, but it is the first time that I am sharing it as a scholarly endeavor.

This is a re-creation of my experience, polished and presented. Like most stories, mine is a work in progress. I employ a post-modern lens in that my story is not a pursuit of one truth. It is my truth, but like every story, there are untold, minimized, and exaggerated elements. This is not done to mislead the reader, but it is an acknowledgment that storytelling can be likened to a fun-house of mirrors under constant remodeling. Like most storytellers, I often position myself in a favorable light; I spice up my recollections with specific anecdotes to fit my audience; I filter nuances of my memory through the ever-changing present “me.” I tailor messages for consumption; I trim and edit as dictated by outside rules or boundaries. These are the ingredients of storytelling. Thus, this reflection is a creation of a new version of my story. It is a co-created enterprise with you. It is my search for wholeness. It is my realization of an authentic life.

## **Coming Out: A Revolutionary Act of Defiance And Healing**

In reflecting on my coming out story, I recall pivotal moments that informed my choice to become a social worker. They are the brick pavers on my road to graduate school. These once painful and challenging moments have shaped me into the social worker that I am. What follows are some of the many life moments that moved me closer to choosing social work.

### **Challenging My Sexual Shame**

I learned to recognize the power of words early in my childhood. “Sissy!” “Queer!” “Pussy!” “Faggot!” Even today, these schoolyard tools of domination slice through me like jagged broken glass. Furthermore, they provide the foundation for my narrative, a historical landmark for why I have chosen the profession of social work. And, while I could easily skate on the surface of my past or the incredibly warm, stable and good aspects of my youth (and there were many), they are not alone in the formation of me. My story has a past steeped in shame, guilt and darkness. My journey to me, my journey to help others is one of finding my own queer voice, the acceptance of my sexuality, and the beauty of who we all are as sexual people.

### **Combating Heteronormativity**

This expedition to discover one’s sexuality is a common story filled with developmental milestones. I remember very clearly, at a young age, thinking that Tarzan was gorgeous. Sitting there on our living room floor with my brother, Tom, and my dad in his black, duct taped-worn, Lazy-Boy recliner, I knew not to share those feelings. When does a child learn to hide their truth? How do we as caring adults contribute to this inauthenticity?

### **Combating Binary Gender Role Expectations**

I never felt at home in a masculine skin. The script conferred upon me called for being rough, independent, non-expressive, and valuing-thinking over feeling. Seemingly, it was everything I was not. And more disturbing, it vehemently demanded that I abandon those supposedly feminine characteristics that were more natural to me, i.e., listening,

creativity, sensitivity, reflexivity, and caring. I was lost between two worlds: not feeling at home with the masculine script and not allowed to own my feminine strengths. It is the pursuit of this feminine energy, the integration of this half of me, that I have embraced as my way of living wholeheartedly (Brown, 2012).

I was young when I realized that I was different, but I had no words to describe this awareness. The things I liked, the ways in which I acted, the thoughts I had, the feelings I experienced – jumping rope, reading, giggling with the girls – all were not appropriate for little boys. Of course appropriate was pre-determined by my culture, my family, my neighborhood, and the environment in which I was immersed. All of these influences had expectations of how a little boy should behave, and they provided subtle and not so subtle clues about how I should follow those gender role norms.

One particular example I remember vividly was a Christmas of secrets. As tradition dictated, my younger brother, Tom, and I had for weeks gleefully searched all the department store catalogues: JC Penny, Sears, and Montgomery Wards, and dutifully circled our most prized wish list items. We updated, edited, and ranked these items nightly after dinner, practically drooling at the visual stimulation. What I wanted more than any other gift was a head and shoulder Barbie hair model. I believe it came with a mini-brush and comb, but what sticks in my memory was that Barbie had this long, silky, blond hair. And, like a Siren from Greek mythology, Barbie swooned me from the glossy pages of every catalogue.

This sense of wondering why I liked girl things and, if I was gay, highlighted by denial and internal turmoil, is known as “identity confusion” and is the first step in the gay and lesbian identity model (Cass, 1979). At some level, I knew that this was a wrong Christmas present, but I wanted her. I persisted, circling Barbie with a big red line each and every night. The bold red marks screamed (because I could not) like a fire alarm from the page, “I am queer!” Then it happened. My mother took me aside and calmly and quietly told me, “Santa may not be able to bring you everything on your list.” Who was she kidding? This wasn’t my first Christmas. I knew the ropes: make sure that your must-haves were known by everyone – most easily through bright red markers – and ask for plenty of fillers to ensure a great haul. But then, Mom got

serious. “Santa might not bring Barbies to little boys.” Who was this woman? I did not know her. Something had possessed my mother; it was as if a mad scientist had invaded her normally nurturing disposition. I was devastated. As this invader obliterated my hopes for a Barbie, it was as if its real target was to methodically cut away the unnatural, unholy part, feminine part of my being. Message received: hide this side of yourself. I periodically got to glance at this monster in others. Without question, they all followed its bidding. It had an evil plot, a social curriculum on how to be a boy. The onslaught was merciless. Lessons had to be learned. And, it was delivered by the hands of well-meaning, loving people in my life.

That Christmas, though I ripped wrapping paper with excitement, I was a bit less excited knowing that Barbie was not going to be a part of the booty that year. The Christmas secret happened very subtly after the floor was littered with rainbows of colored paper. Mom snuck behind the tree when no one else was looking and brought me a little box. She whispered to me, “Santa wanted you to have this.” Then with a pause she added, “but he doesn’t want you to tell your dad.” And with that, I found a full body doll with long blond hair. It wasn’t Barbie and I knew it was a cheap knock-off doll from our local dime store, but somehow I felt loved. I was seen. I was heard. My truth was acknowledged, in secret and only in part, but that was good enough at the moment.

### **Protecting the Child with No Voice**

I grew up avoiding the other boys and I didn’t like sports. They inevitably wanted to argue and fight in some archaic ritual of sizing each other up. It was as if they could inherently sense my weakness. I recall running home every day after school, away from Frank and Scotty (names changed). I felt alone during those grade school fights, then later it was the name-calling on the bus and the verbal harassment in high school. I knew at some level that I could not share my terror with anyone. Beyond the fear of physical danger every day was the trauma of feeling abandoned. I would ask, “Why?” but I knew why. I knew at a gut level that boys were supposed to fight. I knew that I had no desire to fight and I knew I was broken, wrong and weak. I was like a girl. Thinking now, I wonder, *Where was the school? Where were*

*my parents? Who was protecting me?* At some level I believed that I did not deserve protection. Where and when did I learn that I was unworthy?

A child expects to be protected by adults. I had good people in my life, but why didn’t they know about this abuse? Why weren’t they there for me? I have to believe that they just didn’t know. This is why I went into social work, and why I teach new social workers now: to help, to heal and to inform. For that small child was me and every other child, I chose social work so that all kids will know that adults care and will protect them.

### **Helping Youth Become Sexually Literate**

Schools changed through the years. The bullying got more sophisticated, but I still felt alone. I learned to associate my femininity and sexual orientation as one and the same. I saw myself as immoral, sick and inferior. My emotionality, effeminate behaviors ...these parts of me were viewed as liabilities to be managed. I believe this guilt and shame was the foundation for me becoming sexually active with girls. This was a violent attack on myself: that inner voice, the self-loathing script, reminded me that I was not a real man. I was not human. I was not valued. It was this self-hatred, that demanded, that I “fuck away the faggot” in me! Using those girls, my friends, became a warped manipulative game that I still count as one of my most shameful acts. I feel such anger at a school system that helped create a boy who felt the need to prove his masculinity. I’m grateful that there were no pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), because I sure wasn’t informed enough to buy contraceptives.

### **Seeds of Social Justice**

It wasn’t until my Junior-Senior year, that I met Lee, the first person that I was able to come out to as gay. We became friends and lovers and like the Velveteen Rabbit, I became real. For the first time in my life, someone knew I was gay. Lee saw me, and he loved me. I felt alive. I felt like I knew me.

That whirlwind summer was my coming out party, a first step to integrating my gay identity, or the acceptance stage according to Cass (1979). During the summer after graduating high school, I met Matt. With his dark complexion, punk-rock hair that must have

stood 12” straight-up, and soft-spoken voice, he was a rock star. Unknowingly, it was Matt who planted the spirit of social justice in my life. He nudged me into my quest to become a social worker and more specifically a sexuality expert. Matt was one of the many queer kids who hung out at “The Mall,” the nickname we gave the Liberty Memorial, a park in Kansas City known for gay men cruising for sex. It’s a sad commentary that the only place LGBTQ teens could socialize with other queer youth was in close proximity to adult sexual activity. One night, Matt was missing. I learned that his mother had placed him in a psychiatric ward for being gay. I was floored with disbelief. Could parents really condemn their kids to this kind of punishment? Could mine? When Matt returned I couldn’t believe my eyes. Matt, with slurred speech and an obvious stagger, shared with a wink, “I’m no longer gay!” He recounted his stay in the hospital, detailing the medications and reparative therapy treatment. A sense of helplessness settled over me as I realized that could be me. Matt never seemed the same. Horrified at the game he had to play to earn his release, I was infuriated that the abuse was never going to end for him or me. But, I was scared too. I vowed then to learn as much as I could about being gay. I needed to become an expert on sexuality. I needed to protect myself. I pledged to stop this vicious onslaught of abuse disguised in misinformation, myths, and blatant ignorance. I don’t know whatever happened to Matt, but the seeds of gay rights advocacy were sown there. I acknowledge him and his tragedy at the hands of the mental health system for sparking my interest in social justice and zeal for positive sex education.

### **Balanced, Authentic, Me**

In retrospect, I could have easily become a statistic and dropped out of high school to avoid the physical harassment. Or during the summer after graduation, surrounded by the lost boys and girls at the Mall, I could have turned to the easily available drugs and alcohol to numb the emotional wounds. Likewise, I could have sought out the pseudo comfort and validation of sex from the men trolling the park. Instead, it was a bad breakup from my first boyfriend, Eddie, which led me to escape. I ran away by enrolling in a college in Ohio, the first in my family to go to college. There I met Lisa, the first person who was introduced to me knowing that I

was gay. Lisa saw the real me and most importantly, she accepted me. She was my anchor, a life-long friend who also became a social worker, a sex therapist and my business partner. My academic career was launched.

My introduction to Lisa was in stark contrast to an earlier coming-out attempt. I had come out to my friend after high school, a person who I had known since 1st grade, and she never talked to me again. I think this had something to do with why I didn’t disclose my sexual orientation to my family until I was in my 30s. I was out in all other aspects of my life and I remember telling my family that I was tired of only being able to talk about the weather. I had systematically edited out anything from my life that could be linked to gay. So dating, vacations, political views, TV shows, research projects, awards, professional goals... it was all off limits. By coming out, I allowed my family to know me. I allowed them to struggle, to grow, to re-tell their narrative of me. It also allowed me to begin the process of integrating my life into one voice; one balanced, authentic me.

### **Helping Men Live Wholeheartedly**

I now feel a sense of pride and ownership of my feminine energy and use it in my work with people. It has become a source of strength that allows me to facilitate people’s healing. This was not always the case. Why are boys taught to ignore their emotions? I was more anxious with male bravado, physicality, and competitiveness. I was much more comfortable with girls. I enjoyed the sharing of emotions, quiet reflection, and social support. It felt like home to me.

For years, heterosexual men scared me. The mere thought of an all-heterosexual, male environment sent shivers down my spine, partly because I don’t know the rules of engagement. The rules I do know, I don’t like or don’t follow well. I often heard the bullying behavior shrugged off with a well-rehearsed recording of “boys will be boys.” What does that mean... emotionally disconnected, violent? That’s what we want for our boys? We violate our boys by denying them of their feminine energy, and not encouraging relationship skills like communication, listening, empathy, and romance – and then wonder why they fail in healthy relationships. Because we are afraid of seeing these female characteristics in males (because they might be gay!), we view them as weak, defective,

and undesirable. Thus with the precision of a surgeon we socially castrate an innate part of our boys, tossing it away like garbage, leaving them disingenuous, incomplete, and often lost as men. In some ways, I'm lucky. A gay man is expected to gravitate toward the feminine. But, the straight man is made to shed that side of his wholeness.

### **My Decision to Enter the Profession of Social Work**

I began working in the field of intellectual disabilities while studying for my undergraduate degree in psychology. There I came across my clients, adults with developmental disabilities, who were seemingly so different from me; their physical limitations and cognitive challenges kept them a world away from me. But I came to quickly see that we had much in common. They, like me, were often seen as either asexual or sexually deviant, something to be controlled and pitied; their true sexual selves were often overlooked and discounted. Through the loving ignorance of well-meaning adults, these people, because of their sexual illiteracy, were continually placed in harm's way. I quickly noted the rampant infantilism perpetrated in the name of safety. In addition, it seemed that there was a cauldron of agendas dictated by the staff du jour. Clients, who were promised self-determination, were not allowed to develop a sexual voice or have it respected (Turner, 2012).

I was initially drawn to the discipline of social work because it provided me a means to an end: becoming a psychotherapist with a clinical license. It was not until later that I appreciated the fit. Social work embodied core values with which I could easily align: service to disenfranchised groups, advocacy for marginalized communities, social justice around oppression; it was the feminine energy of social work that really spoke to me. It embraced the very thing that I loathed for so long – my caring and empathetic nature, my listening skills, my sense of community, connectivity, and relationship. This was my natural voice.

### **My Choice of Setting and Populations Served**

As a practitioner, the issues that have been most central to me have been sexual rights. The influence of my family of origin can easily be seen in this

professional practice choice. Simply, sex was never talked about in my family. Aside from the jokes and sexual innuendos volleyed around at family gatherings, sex education was non-existent and rested on a bedrock of myths and shame.

Two pivotal moments are branded in my memory. I use to joke with my mother, that one of the reasons that I went into sex education was the dismal quality of the sexuality education I received during my youth. Given that my mother and I never spoke about sex, she was easily embarrassed when I was speaking to groups and credited her as my reason to venturing into sexuality education. The first memory is of my mom, who I'm sure had the best of intentions, leaving a sex ed pamphlet on my pillow. I recall being mortified of it being in my room. Somehow it magnified my own shame. Sexuality education had never seen the light of day in my family. But now, not only had it been spoken by the placement of that pamphlet on my pillow, but it had cast a spotlight on me and my sexuality.

The second memory is from fourth grade when I was herded off with the other boys from 5th and 6th grade to a room with Mr. Jackson. There, a film highlighted male puberty. Glaringly missing was any mention of the female anatomy; like the girls in my class, it was absent from the room. I noted that the girls had absconded to a private room with Mrs. Rivers. They later erupted with notable excitement and a sisterly bond. Most annoying was that they had secrets, and they were not sharing. As the identified sissy in my class, all my friends were girls. Girls were told to exclude me (and the other boys) from the contents of their meeting. Thus, my outsider status was highlighted once again. I left our gendered experience embarrassed by the locker room camaraderie of my male counterparts, and abandoned by the girls. Besides, I wanted to know what the girls knew that I didn't.

### **Theoretical Perspectives That Ground Me**

I rely on the Bowenian family systems perspective and the differentiation of self in my clinical work, as well as the strength perspective (Poulin, 2010). Integrating client resilience and their resources is a focus on my strengths-based practice. Early as a social worker, I consumed every book, workshop, and resource available in an effort to concoct a cookbook of

helping. I needed to know there was a recipe within arm's reach in the event a client presented a problem I could not fix. Still uncomfortable with my feminine energy, I grasped for certainty in science (masculine energy), resisting the more artful navigation and uncertainty of relationships (feminine energy). I have evolved to understand that it is not enough to rely on knowledge and skill in the helping relationship; the heart of helping is eliciting genuine human caring, compassion, and connection. Narrative therapy values bringing our full humanness to the client-helper journey, believing this transparency with clients facilitates change and growth (Freedman & Combs, 1996). I strive to bring a more authentic representation of myself to the helping relationship. Fickey and Grimm (1998) not only encourage a more honest sharing of self, but add that there are few risks of this self-disclosure that cannot be addressed through professional boundaries and supervision.

### **My Role as an Advocate**

While my professional career has largely focused on micro-level practice, I like to highlight for my students how social workers often traverse between micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level practice. Often my first advocacy efforts are educating fellow social workers that sexual justice is more than reproductive choice. As important as this area is, the umbrella of sexual justice includes an array of diverse topics including but not limited to: increasing access to sexual health care; reducing LGBTQ health disparities; combating school bullying; fighting for trans-inclusivity; continuing the fight for marriage equality and gay adoption laws; providing comprehensive, medically accurate and shame free sexuality education; calling for representation of marginalized sexualities in the media; normalizing breastfeeding; eliminating rape culture; legitimizing sexuality pleasure; reducing sexuality negativity; and expanding overall sexual literacy. Sexuality is a social justice issue. It can be challenging for even social workers to connect social justice and sexual justice.

I showcase to my practice class how social workers navigate along the continuum of practice by sharing a story of when I engaged with state lawmakers around a policy that did not allow the word "sex" on a Missouri license plate. I use this story as an

example of macro social work in my practice class to demonstrate for students how social workers often ground their advocacy, tying it to larger policy implications and to social justice. The World Association for Sexual Health's Declaration of Sexual Rights (WAS; 2014), states, "Sexual rights are grounded in universal human rights" (p. 1). I further ground the discussion within current events to demonstrate that sexual justice is social justice. As a social worker, I know that sex negativity can often be used to fuel oppression, leading to the silencing of sexuality around breastfeeding mothers (Burns, 2013), survivors of sexual trauma (Adler, 2013), and even social work dissertations (Hayoun, 2015). I work to eliminate toxic messages and repressive policies that ban positive sexuality education and knowledge to the shadows. Silencing sexuality creates an environment ripe for sexism, misogyny, homophobia, trans-violence, and sexual misuse. My sexuality advocacy acknowledges sexuality as a human right and strives to illuminate communities beyond the sexual dysfunction, disease, and disaster model (McGee, 2003).

The license plate policy as it stood was vague, biased, non-representative and sex negative. Furthermore, I argued that the policy contributes to a culture of sexual shame, keeping people, specifically my clients, from seeking sexual health care. I could have easily become frustrated with the state's bureaucratic process. I connect that to how social workers are called to change oppressive systems. My privilege allowed me to accept the invitation to present my case in our state capital. However, I was intimidated. Again, I challenge students to see this as an example of how one person can make a change. I highlight that my training as a social worker prepared me to support my arguments through research. We process what makes advocacy effective. Students appreciate my speaking first-hand about my attempts to normalize sexuality, to advocate for sexual health care and to give voice to my clients' struggles around sexuality. By sharing this story from my own life, I made advocacy tangible, social policy meaningful, and social justice real.

I begin my story in 2014, when I won a one and a half-year battle with the State of Missouri over a personalized license plate. My petition was rejected in 2013, for a personalized plate, SEX DOC, on the basis that the word "sex" was "obscene and patently offensive." After several failed attempts to appeal by

phone and letter, in January 2014 I argued my case in the state capital, Jefferson City.

The commission reviewing applications had no guidelines to make these decisions, but unilaterally rejected all applications with the word “sex.” By advocating for a governmental body to not contribute to the stigmatizing problems related to sexual health and to not make policy based on personal, sex negative views, is social justice work. For me, this became about reclaiming the dialogue from one of sexual shame to sexual literacy. Putting SEX DOC out there is a way to help people start a conversation. Too often, others are trying to silence conversations on sexuality. My clients suffer from this shaming and I didn’t think the state of Missouri had any place in perpetuating this kind of psychological harm.

One of the two attorneys for the state asked, “how do you explain that to a five-year old?” As a sexuality educator, I saw this as a great opportunity to expand the conversation into real and practical applications. I gently tried to show the attorney how that could be a teachable moment, one where he as the parent could pass along his own views and values about sexuality. I think he, like many parents, was scared and not sure how he would approach a potentially uncomfortable topic with his child. So I shared the book “It’s Perfectly Normal,” (Harris, 2009) which is a phenomenal sex-ed tool for families. In some ways, this felt like another day at the office; providing sexually accurate information so that parents can raise sexually literate children. Most parents want what is best for their children and most want better sex-ed than they had. They just don’t have the comfort or skills. That’s where I often come into the picture to help parents craft a message and plan for talking with their kids.

One of the attorney’s stated, “There’s a lot of questions out there, when you put the word ‘sex’ out there in public... That’s really the gist of it and why we denied it.” Addressing this concern, I responded, “The word sex is already out in public.” I believe his statements were based on fear and that he saw this as a personal duty to protect children, his children. It also echoed a common myth about sexuality education: that it is one big conversation about reproduction at some ambiguous age when the youth is old enough. However, censoring my license plate

because of your discomfort with sexuality is akin to putting your head in the sand. I empathized with the attorney, sharing his concern for providing a safe community for children, but also expressed my belief that ignorance is not an effective strategy. Thus, it should not be the basis of public policy.

### **Contrast and Similarities of My Past and Current Practice**

I am a licensed clinical social worker and certified sex therapist (American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists) with over 20 years of practice experience. I have an active private practice specializing in sexual health, where I provide sex therapy. I work with couples and individuals on a variety of sexuality issues, including painful intercourse, erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, coming out, infertility, infidelity, fantasy negotiations, and body image, to name a few. My own sex education and sexual shame are clearly instrumental in directing my clinical specialty.

### **Clinical**

During the early years of my practice, despite the research that acknowledges that self-disclosure of a helper to clients can be useful (Frost, 1998), I was less differentiated and hiding my gay identity was very much on the agenda. Additionally, I desperately desired to be perfect – to have all the answers. This was a direct result of my own internalized homophobia. Perfection had long been my strategy to counter my own sense of inferiority. Perfection is the illusion of control, and control often seemed like power. I desperately sought power during times of uncertainty and fear. And nothing unleashed those demons of anxiety like a straight, blue collar, hyper-masculine, male client. This was my kryptonite. Also, I recognize that I can have strong reactions to characteristics or values that I associate with lower socio-economic communities. They can provoke strong emotions within me. At warp speed, my childhood can flood my present, washing over me the memories of that rural, impoverished community along the Missouri River where I spent my formative years. These embodied responses are sewn into the fabric of my professional identity. They can be a source of pain, but they can also be a light to profound social work.

When (and I am humbly aware that this is a conscious deliberate action, not one that is organic for me), but when I allow my whole self, including my queer self, to join the therapeutic process, then I am more present and more effective in facilitating growth. Constantly judging where to hide the gay stuff is a distraction. It spurs into action a fight-or-flight reaction. Without the distraction of my own stuff in the way, I am able to join clients in an intimate relationship of healing. This vulnerability is powerful and being able to model it for clients is my social work superpower. That doesn't mean I always get it right, but I have gotten better at getting back to center when I veer off my truth. As I practice my truth, a sort of queasiness gurgles in my body now, when disingenuousness creeps into my voice. It is my call to bring balance back into the interactions with my clients. I continue to hone the skill of listening to my voice, not the distortions. Calling upon my queer voice, a balance of the masculine and feminine energy, to nurture the relationship with my clients, is good social work. This is fundamental about intimacy: a willingness to be known by others, to take a risk and to be vulnerable.

How is my practice different now? I focus less on using a therapeutic technique or the notion that it is my job to lead my clients to a cure. I understand better the concept of use of self (Dewane, 2006) and feel freer to harness the power within this social work tool. By bringing my authentic whole self, I am more present. I am more relaxed. I allow myself to be flawed. I do not need to hide behind professional boundaries and can utilize self-disclosure as a powerful healing tool. When I move from intellectualizing (masculine energy) towards wholeheartedness, I acknowledge and embrace my feminine energy. I feel more connected to my clients. I often feel raw and struggle to stay in this place of vulnerability. My client and I can mutually search to identify challenges and strengths without expecting me to have all the answers. We are both mutually responsible for the journey. Keep in mind that remnants of some ill-founded sense of professionalism (masculine energy) will often whisper to me during my work. Like a school-yard bully, it scours the recesses of my insecurities, wielding them like a bat to taunt me. Old self-doubt can give rise to an army of voices chastising me with, "Don't get too close," "Helpers never self-disclose," and "You must have all the answers."

## Teaching

I teach a large undergraduate course in human sexuality. It is here that I believe a more balanced, authentic queer voice impacts my teaching in a unique way. I bring my entire self into the room, including my gay self. Others have discussed coming out as a teaching tool and its benefits for students (Gates, 2011; Newman, Bogo & Daley, 2008; Satterly & Dyson, 1998). I come out to my class officially during the seventh week—the LGBTQ lecture. Despite the fact that this is but one class during the semester, I believe that I trigger a reaction in many of my students. For some, my coming out is seen as a negative. This is often heard in comments on student evaluations stating that I am "pushing a homosexual agenda." These students wrestle with the idea of an out professor and that manifests in a variety of ways, including that any attempt at a balanced representation is viewed as a "gay agenda." This distortion is easily understood in that most students have been socialized in a heteronormative educational setting, shielded from diverse points of view and any acknowledgment of people who are LGBTQ. For other students, my transparency is welcomed. In every class, I have had students who are themselves struggling with coming out, approach me tearfully to say, "thank you." I'd like to think that my honesty and genuineness has made a difference in their lives.

And it isn't just gay kids that resonate with me bringing a more authentic voice to my teaching. Inevitably, I have students struggling with sexual dysfunction, shame, and insecurity who approach me and express gratitude for the sharing of sexual knowledge. Last semester, a female approached me after class as I was preparing to leave the lecture hall. I was erasing the whiteboard, my back to her, and I heard her voice drop and I knew that it was coming. I put down my eraser, turned around and leaned in. She barely got two words out and the tears began to roll down her cheek. She said that she had thought that she was broken. She and her husband had been trying to become pregnant and they had failed. She indicated that they were unaware that penetrative intercourse was needed. Another young woman embarrassingly confessed that after our last lecture she had apologized to her boyfriend for sexually shaming him. Both students share some version of their own search, a journey to wholeness. I believe that it is my choice to live authentically, bringing my queer voice into the



classroom, that has spurred those students' journeys.

In my social work practice classes, I bring this awareness of a balanced, sex-positive, feminine/masculine voice to my students. I try to help them discover their full voice. I've noted how receptive students are to this approach, particularly the male social work students. They often acknowledge their own struggles to find a fit in a predominantly female profession. So we explore how males can reclaim their feminine voice. I also draw connections for my students to the messiness of social work. Using the vitriol verbiage of the school-yard bullying I endured, I ask students to wrestle with their discomfort with swear words. This is often the vehicle for clients to express themselves. Will we connect or become offended by their choice of words, annoyed in their inability to speak proper English, lost in their loudness, impatient with their silence, or afraid of their difference? Additionally, I share that social workers are often invited to witness a client's pain and it is often ugly. A client sharing, "I felt that I had to fuck the faggot out of me," as I had as a teen, is being vulnerable, not intentionally inappropriate. Clients can share horrendous accounts of self-hatred, abuse, trauma, and woundedness. It can be scary for us as professionals and may trigger our own traumatic memories. Pain can look like anger, fear, violence, and a host of other uncomfortable expressions. As social workers, we learn to manage our own anxiety as we sit in a space of our client's pain. I hope to prepare new social workers to look beyond a client's outbursts and to see the client, hear their voice and honor their story.

Often I attempt to facilitate a discussion-based learning environment to build students' critical thinking skills, and to help them shape well-structured views. I recognize that the power imbalance between me and my students is always in play. Instead I choose the benefits that being my authentic self brings to the learning environment over the façade that I am maintaining some sort of blank slate for learning to organically unfold. Interjecting myself into the classroom is a huge responsibility.

### **Scholarship**

I have what some have labeled a saucy vocabulary. My dad was an over-the-road, truck driver, and my

uncle was a Methodist minister, so I'm sure that there are some family genetics for the passionate weaving of moral messages within colorful truck-stop tall tales. It is my voice, and as a social worker, it is one of my gifts that facilitates rapport building.

As a qualitative researcher, I am a storyteller. In the pursuit of others' stories, I seek to discover or facilitate marginalized voices in my research. It is here that I honor the saucy vocabulary of others, their dictionary, and the importance of not sanitizing voices. Voices can be vulgar, insensitive, angry, uneducated, and hurt. My goal is to elicit the authentic voice of others and I have come to embrace that it is through my own authentic queer voice, a voice that affirms both the feminine and masculine within, a holistic energy that brings me closest to that goal.

The addition to my professional identity as a researcher brings me back to old scripts, messages that somehow discount my gifts as a clinician (feminine energy) in favor of more scientific and valid academic pursuits (masculine energy). Even my choice of qualitative research over quantitative methods may be viewed with a sense of sexist devaluing. Yet, my scholarship focuses on voice and it feels like home to me. My research is grounded in a feminist and emancipatory paradigm, guided by an interest in how systems of privilege impact the intersection of race, class, ability, gender, and sexual orientation. Through an exploration of voice, my goal is to illuminate the lived experiences of disenfranchised groups and to expose meaning where little or none existed.

My dissertation research (Turner, 2012) and current scholarship draws upon my own search for voice as I attempt to illuminate the experiences of adults with intellectual disability and a sexual voice, (Turner & Crane, 2016, in press). The importance of sexuality within my professional development as a social worker also informs a line of scholarly inquiry exploring how social work can solidify sexuality as a substantive sub-field. My line of research inquiry will continue to explore the normalization of sexual pleasure (Turner & Crane, 2016) and illuminating voice. Both are easily traced to my own personal narrative and the influence of my family of origin.

### **Conclusion**

Implications from this narrative include using

qualitative research to: a.) identify how marginalized communities and individuals find their authentic voices and cross-analyze for common themes, b.) illuminate the factors that contribute to a gay child or gender non-confirming child feeling like they are accepted and celebrated as part of the family, c.) explore why men do or do not feel welcomed into a female-dominated profession such as social work, and finally d.) highlight the landscape of questioning youth as part of childhood identity development.

As a social worker, I have come to value my disrupted biography as a clinical tool and inspiration for my scholarship. In the re-telling of your story, you exercise your voice; you claim your power; you claim your authentic self. My objective was to share my story, “the long-lived narrative” in an attempt to sift through the “sediments of norms and practices” (Czarniawka, 2014, p 45). It is this process of illuminating the stories of clients and listening to their unheard voices that has inspired me to become a social worker. In searching to honor the voices of others, I recognize that I must be vigilant to honor my own. It is my own search for wholeness that allows me to be of use to my clients. Stepping out of the lie, a life that was only half-fulfilled, a life that was fraudulent, I abandon a cultural norm that socialized boys (and girls too) to be incomplete, to embrace only half of their humanity. By tapping into my own journey, I tap into my own social work superpower. The search for authenticity is a universal theme. It is the commonality shared with my clients. In searching to reach my full human potential to capture my queer voice, I can be a guide. My queer voice allows me to be fully recognized; it recognizes the richness of my human potential. That is why I am social worker. I lay claim to my queer voice. And, while I sometimes am fearful of being whole, both masculine and feminine, and I sometimes quiet my queer voice out of shame or I over-correct and try to butch it up, I honor my voice today and share it with you.

I’m still a work in process. Ironically, sitting here on National Coming Out Day, October 11, penning this manuscript, it dawns on me that my internalized homophobia continues to bully me. Doubt hides in my shadows, whispering into a frenzy the taunts of my childhood. With the ease of an unwelcomed house guest, my shame-demons cozy right up to my self-esteem. They casually urge me to weigh the

potential risks of coming out in academia. My old nemesis, self-hatred, who was never fully banished, but had only slunk to the depths of my psyche, leaps to the opportunity to criticize me, asking insidiously, “What will be unleashed if your story becomes known? Consider the consequences!” and “Faggot, you don’t matter!” It happens so organically that I often don’t note its presence. Yet, today, I elude their assault. Today I am strong. Today, I share my authentic self—a queer, male, social worker. Today they fail to silence me. Today my social worker superpower, my queer voice, is victorious!

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