

COMING OUT AT WORK: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Ann M. Callahan Ph.D., Lincoln Memorial University

This narrative describes the author's experience of revealing her sexual orientation as a social work student, clinician, and professor. Her personal faith was integral to inspiring and guiding her through the coming-out process, which led to a greater sense of wholeness in her life. The process also inspired new insight into the role of spiritual discernment in coming out.

"And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

John 8:32 NIV

I was in the vesting room preparing for church. Several teenagers were in the room socializing. One of the girls started teasing a boy about wearing plaid deck shoes. She summed it up by saying, "That is so gay." I could not tell if she meant it as an insult or an attempt at flirtation. Nevertheless, my immediate thought was to say that there was nothing wrong with being gay.

I had to think twice before I silently walked away from the situation. I did not feel it was my place to lecture them on being more sensitive to diversity, but I worried about how vulnerable gay teens felt when they heard such comments. I was thankful for feeling comfortable with my sexual orientation, which might have been threatened if not for years of personal growth.

Personal growth has led to professional growth in revealing my sexual orientation at work. Previously, I regularly felt on guard about sharing my personal life at work for fear of rejection. However, hiding my sexual orientation only alienated me from myself and others. Once I started acknowledging my sexual orientation at work, I found that such authenticity helped me forge better relationships with my co-workers.

Therefore, authenticity at work required that I learn how to balance vulnerability and detachment so that I could embrace all of me all the time. At times it was difficult to come out at work, but the benefits have outweighed the consequences. This narrative shows how

I have engaged in the coming-out process at work. I share my story so that others may feel inspired to come out in their own way.

A Spiritual Call to Come Out

The integration of my personal identity with my professional identity has been the product of an active spiritual life rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition. Such growth would not have been possible without two realizations: first, I came to believe in a personal God that loved me despite condemnation by others; and second, I felt that I had to live my life as God called me to live, which would require coming out.

My first, most influential, realization was that I believed God knew my heart and only He would determine my salvation. I did not feel condemned by God but, rather, that God created me this way. Through the process of prayer, I determined that one of my spiritual tasks was to accept my sexual orientation. I begged God to save me from this call, but I knew that I had to accept it despite an uncertain future.

The comfort of my contemplative life also needed to give way to the fruition of this call. This second realization meant that I had to fully engage in cultivating authentic relationships with others by coming out. I believed that in order to achieve deeper emotional intimacy with God I had to be more authentic with others. Therefore, I had to risk being open about my sexual orientation with others in order to grow.

It was not until I began to acknowledge my sexual orientation that I learned about the stages of coming out as part of identity

formation. Cass's (1979) Homosexual Identity Model is most comparable to my experience. This model suggests that a person's homosexual identity develops across the following stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.

I seemed to experience each stage with a return to previous stages depending on the circumstances. Even though my coming out was not always consistent with a linear trajectory (Swann & Anastas, 2003), Cass's stage model is most descriptive of my experience (Stevens, 2004). Hence, this model will be used to frame my remaining reflection on coming out at work as a social work student, clinician, and professor.

Identity Comparison

I always felt different from others, but it was not until after my second year of college that I started to realize why. I was home for the summer when I began to have intense feelings for a co-worker. During our lunch hour, after much trepidation, I gave her the following poem:

Closets

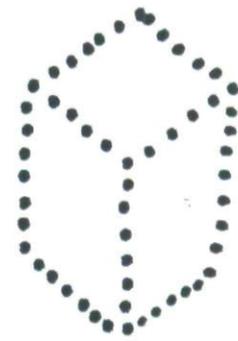
*Are you alone with mixed feelings
buried in every empty room
that echoes back at you?
I will show a thousand empty spaces
if you dare to enter.
One must be so careful these days
or fall too deeply
into sudden frost
that could bury our bodies
in the closets
of those one thousand empty rooms.*

Anonymous (1989)

She said she could understand and gave me a knowing look. I proceeded to tell her how I felt about her, which was the first time that I acknowledged having feelings for another woman. I never really thought about the consequences of revealing such

information, but I felt compelled to express my feelings somehow.

My co-worker admitted her affection for me, but she said she was already in a relationship with another woman. I was so overwhelmed by my feelings and the experience of acknowledging them that her lack of availability seemed of little consequence. For so many years I had tried to hide my feelings for women that I learned to tolerate the isolation that came with it. I realized that I felt more alive by allowing my feelings to flow, even though I did not consider myself to be homosexual at the time.



Identity Tolerance

I felt a sense of liberation in being able to share my feelings with my co-worker, but liberation quickly turned to isolation when I returned to college at the end of the summer. I did not know whom I could talk to about my experience. Within days, I saw an acquaintance of mine who seemed distraught. I asked her what was wrong and she finally admitted that she and her girlfriend had broken up. As we walked and talked, I shared my own story. We were both overjoyed about being able to confide in each other.

The risk of engagement cemented our new friendship. She introduced me to other people in the gay community. I officially came out on Memorial Day, called "Booms Day" in our area, by going to a party in the gay community. It was powerful to be around people who were open about their sexual orientation. The people I met seemed to be just like everyone else. Some were even open about their sexual orientation in the larger community, which I could not image doing at the time.

Identity Acceptance

I solicited therapy at the university's student counseling center to help me deal with my sexual orientation. By the second session, my therapist encouraged me to explore my feelings by having a homosexual relationship. I told her that I could not do so because it was forbidden by my religion. Furthermore, I did not want to engage in homosexual behavior, as it was not consistent with the type of person I wanted to be. I never returned to the counseling center again.

I prayed with my whole heart for God to take away my homosexual feelings. I realized that Jesus prayed to avoid persecution and, perhaps, that homosexuality was my cross to bear. I also knew that God had a plan for my salvation and would not call me to live a life of suffering. I had to trust God to go where He seemed to be calling me. From then on, I believed God loved every part of me, which included my sexual orientation. I still had to learn to accept my homosexuality, though.

Eventually, I decided that morally I had to stop dating men. I felt guilty for not connecting with men as they seemed to connect with me. I continued to meet other people in the gay community and went on a couple of dates with women. I struggled to accept my sexual orientation. I spent a lot of time working at my church as a student leader. There, I met another female student who was just as passionate about engaging in church ministry as I was. She became my first love.

Identity Pride

During my undergraduate years, I had a clear distinction between my personal identity and my professional identity. This distinction was easy because most of my jobs were either part-time or summer jobs that demanded very little engagement. Even after graduation, I kept my personal life hidden from others at work. I had many gay friends and had gotten more active in the gay community, but my co-workers never knew about this aspect of me.

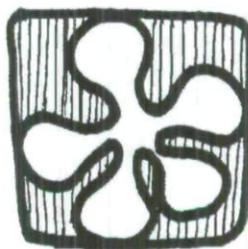
Upon going to graduate school, I wrote a paper about my sexual orientation and shared this information with my classmates. This incident was the first time I came out in a

professional environment. Thankfully, my professor and most of my classmates were supportive; however, one classmate said she could not support my sexual orientation for religious reasons. I was shocked by her immediate rejection, but I was able to remain confident despite this experience.

I proceeded to get involved in the university's gay and lesbian student group. Through this group, I visited classes with other group members to talk about the coming-out process. This activity was intimidating, but it was a wonderful experience. It helped me realize that I could share my experience with others to help them understand homosexuality and to help me come to terms with it myself. As I described my coming-out process, my sexual orientation seemed natural in the broader context of my life.

Self-acceptance eventually turned into gay pride. I continued to be open about my sexual orientation at school and more politically active in the gay community. I realized that being true to me was more important than denying myself in order to gain external validation. Gay pride challenged the internalized shame that I had felt for so long as the result of homophobia and heterosexism. I even received an award for community service from a local gay pride organization.

After graduate school, I decided to come out at work. My supervisor was already open about her sexual orientation; therefore, I felt the freedom to come out as well. My co-workers also seemed to be comfortable with my supervisor's honesty, so I did not think I would be ostracized in the process. Coming out was a wonderful experience, particularly because I could finally share with my co-workers about my significant other. My willingness to be open only seemed to help strengthen our work relationships.



Identity Synthesis

When I started pursuing my doctoral degree, I was open about my sexual orientation at school. I wrote a proposal to conduct research on how homosexuals coped with rejection by religious organizations. This proposal was well received by my major professor. Nevertheless, when a visiting professor asked about my research, I felt incredibly embarrassed but forced myself to be open about my interest. He appeared to be shocked and then followed up with questions. This incident was the only time I felt uncomfortable.

My first academic position required that I move out of state to a rural community. I commuted four hours each way on the weekends to visit my significant other. I was open with my co-workers about my sexual orientation, but I never discussed it with my department chair. It was likely that he knew, given my weekly commutes and periodic visits from my significant other. By the second year, I started having medical problems, which left me feeling even more homesick.

I was offered a good job back home where opportunities were few. It seemed I had to choose either my academic career, which I had prepared for most of my life, or my significant other, whom I had hoped for most of my life. I decided to move back home even though I felt deeply disturbed by the thought of negative consequences for my university and my academic career. Nevertheless, I knew that my relationship would die if I did not return home, as it was not feasible for my significant other to move to my location.

Despite efforts to fully embrace my work in clinical practice, I yearned for my old life in academe. A year later, nearby universities started soliciting applicants for social work faculty. I tried to describe my reasons for leaving my previous academic position in each cover letter. During my interviews, I further explained what precipitated my decision to move back to the state. I acknowledged that I wanted to be closer to my family, which included my significant other.

When I was offered a faculty position, no less at the closest university, I accepted the job immediately. I was amazed to see how

this circuitous path led me back to where I had started. My significant other and I were overjoyed at the turn of events because it meant that we could have the best of both worlds by my working at a university close to home. We were convinced that God had made this possible. Now, two years later, I have continued to feel deeply grateful for my job at this university.

Hearing the Call to Come Out

Bodo's (1988) description of how Saint Francis heard God's call to ministry reflects how I heard God's call to come out. Francis began his ministry by going into the city to become a warrior. During the journey, Francis realized that this warrior path was not God's desire. He felt that God wanted him to return home. Upon returning to Assisi, Francis felt ostracized and depressed. He called out to God. According to Bodo (1988):

During these long, terrifying months, Francis used to go to a little cave in the hill opposite of Mount Subasio and try to think out what was happening to him. He went to the cave every day until it became home for him, the only place in which he felt comfortable...It was in the cave that Francis met Jesus and saw himself for the first time. Up to that time his voices and dreams always seemed to come from without, from a great distance. But during the agonizing hours in the cave, he began to hear a voice inside himself, a deeper, clearer voice that was like discovering a part of himself he did not know was there. The more he prayed and turned to Christ for inspiration, the deeper he plunged toward some inner force that gave him strength and peace. (p. 7-8)

Similar to this experience, I had to detach from the judgment of others and engage in prayer to hear God's call. I believe God called me to integrate my sexual orientation with my personal identity by coming out. I wanted to avoid this call, but God gave me the strength and courage to follow through. Bodo continues:

Softly speaking into the soft cave's ear, Francis experienced the parched joy of release. The protective shield of dark made it easier to whisper hushed secrets into the emptiness, or to scream his pain at the cold damp walls. Every day it became harder to leave his cave and meet the harsh light of all the staring world. The farther into the cave he retreated, the more comfortably insulated he felt. "Lord Jesus, let me stay here; let me hide in the womb of this wet earth sponging me in soft, gentle mud." But everyday he was driven outside again by the panic that the light would not be there to blind him. (p. 8)

The time came to integrate my personal identity with my professional identity. I found that I could bring my inner self to the surface and simultaneously retain emotional safety by asking God to direct the process. Coming out enabled me to have more authentic relationships. God made me whole through my coming out.

Final Thoughts

It may not be feasible or necessary for every homosexual person to come out at work. The key is to determine whether the professional cost of coming out outweighs the personal cost of staying in the closet. Even though people in my profession were likely to respond respectfully, coming out was still a harrowing experience, given my upbringing to be a people pleaser and internalization of a stigmatized sexual identity. However, I felt that

I had to come out for my own spiritual and emotional health.

Now, coming out to my co-workers is like sharing any other aspect of my life. It has been helpful to have my life partner attend university events so my colleagues could meet her personally. I have come out to my students when my experience would lend insight into the lecture material. The timing of this disclosure has been an issue of continuous deliberation. I try to answer questions and provide mentorship but not to evoke student discomfort or disrespect their religious beliefs.

I have also been slow to acknowledge my sexual orientation with top university administrators. Such personal questions are not usually a topic of discussion, but I still feel a degree of discomfort when we spontaneously engage in small talk. I am reassured, though, that my university has a non-discrimination policy that protects employees based on sexual orientation. Nevertheless, I strive to be open about my sexual orientation.

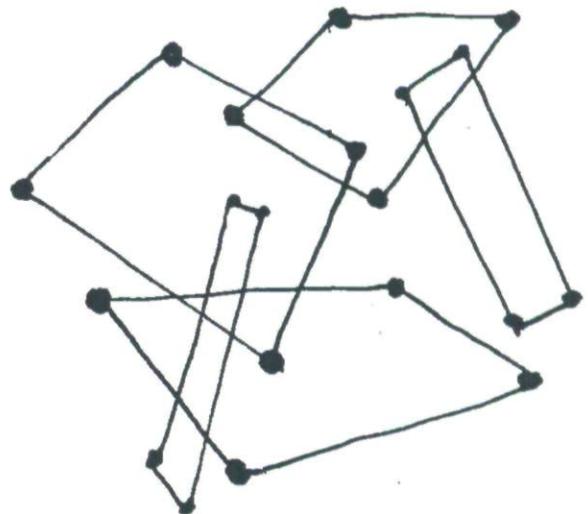
Coming out has taught me that accepting myself, rather than soliciting the acceptance of others, is most important. Each time I have acknowledged my sexual orientation at work, I have felt my self-confidence grow. As I have come to accept my sexual orientation, I have also felt less threatened by people who have trouble dealing with that part of me. Additionally, I have been able to enjoy deeper relationships with people by allowing them to get to know me and love me as I am.

The love of God and others has given me the strength to acknowledge my sexual orientation throughout my career. I have to admit, though, that I still feel a hint of anxiety before I come out to my students and university administrators. However, now I consider my sexual orientation to be less of a discriminating characteristic than one of many things that I share with the greater human kind: a foundation for a significant love relationship. Peace to all those who embark on this journey.

References

- Anonymous (1989, unknown month and day). Closets. *Arkansas Democrat*, Unknown page and section number.
- Bodo, M. (1988). *Francis: The Journey and the Dream*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press.
- Cass, V.C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4(3), 219-235.
- Stevens, Jr., R.A. (2004). Understanding gay identity development within the college environment. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(2), 185-206.
- Swann, S.K., & Anastas, J.W. (2003). Dimensions of lesbian identity during adolescence and young adulthood. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 15, 1-2, 109-125.

Ann M. Callahan Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Social Work at Lincoln Memorial University in Tennessee. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: ann.callahan@lmunet.edu



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.