



Coming Out: What it Means, Where to Start, Why it is Important

Revealing oneself—coming out of a closet—has always been courageous and dangerous, exhilarating and exhausting. As with anything important, coming out is not easy. And it isn't possible for everyone because of life circumstances. But it is undeniably rewarding. These thoughts are not intended to threaten or frighten you if you haven't come out, or to convince you simply to remain closeted.

Coming out has been characterized as an act of love by psychologist Rob Eichberg, who wrote an excellent book on this subject. More often, it is seen as threatening the well-being of one's family and of church and society. For many of us, coming out is a vital link to healthy self-esteem and the key to a happy and fulfilling life. Coming out as a homosexual, bisexual or transgendered person often becomes the center point of swirling controversy. It is a sign of inner strength and maturity when we are able to manage this controversy and improve—rather than harm—our relationships.

Coming out is a very personal thing. Every one of us approaches it differently, and lives through it in our own unique way. It can be foolish to suppose there is a “one size fits all” pattern for working through the issues and the details of coming out.

If you are thinking about, or in the process of coming out—to yourself, your family, friends, or co-workers, here are a few things to think through carefully:

- It is a unique process for every one of us. You make the decisions about how and when and to whom. You're entitled to stay in control of the process. If you have other “out” friends who are prodding for you to do it the way they did, remind yourself (and them) that while you appreciate their advice and experience, you still make the decisions about your life.
- You deserve the freedom, wholeness, and healthiness of living in the open, and being enjoyed, appreciated and accepted for who you really are. Concealing so much of your real life and personality may be a means for survival in some circumstances, but it need not be a permanent way of life.
- Your secret may already be known to some of the people you are preparing to tell. You can't calculate every possible outcome of self-disclosure—like many other things in life. Sometimes, your loved ones may not be surprised at all! But be prepared to learn that others “suspected” or “just knew” for a long time before your official “coming out.”
- Sharing your secret has its consequences. But keeping it secret also has its consequences. In the closet, you may have been experiencing strains and problems in relationships with friends, family or co-workers. Coming out may either “break” relationships which are already strained, or it may help to improve relationships that do better where there is more openness, honesty and spontaneity.

You may hear two very different responses: “Why did you have to tell me?” and “Why didn't you tell me sooner?”

- If a relationship seems to be destroyed or damaged because of your self-disclosure, all is not lost! Be prepared for the long view of your friendships and relationships: try to continue to be the same person you have always been. Don't react with anger at other people's first reactions. Practice greater patience with people who don't accept your coming out right away. They will change their attitudes over time.
- Trust your own good judgment more than someone else's shock, anger or shaming. If you're not sure you trust your own perceptions and ideas about coming out, find someone you do trust to talk it over. Look for competent and professional help. Contact Lutherans Concerned or other organizations who are ready to help you, including PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays).¹
- Coming out is a process, which takes time, energy, commitment, and nerves of steel. It doesn't have to happen all at once. In fact, it never does, because as new circumstances come about and new people come into your life, you discover that you must come out over and over again. Ask for, and expect, confidentiality from others if you are attempting to come out in stages or to control the circle of people with whom you are sharing your story.

Ending the Life-Long Secret

If you're reading this, chances are that you—like many of us—were raised in the church by a faithful family who nurtured us in the Christian faith. At some point, however, when we began to come to terms with our inner lives, including our inner feelings and longings—as soon as we discovered our true orientation or gender identity—inside, we quietly understood that we needed to keep this self-knowledge secret.

So we didn't tell our families, especially when we were just coming to terms with it ourselves. But the task of making sense of our new discovery seemed impossibly difficult, especially if we couldn't talk to anybody about it.

We certainly didn't tell anyone in the church! Both church and society put out enough negative messages and judgmental signals that we quickly knew it was in everyone's best interests if we said nothing about our inner turmoil.

Rob Eichberg's book *Coming Out: An Act of Love* is very insightful about the “church problem”, in his chapter “Religion and Spirituality.”

So many people have a difficult time integrating their sexuality with their religious beliefs—a difficulty that is magnified when one is homosexual. Most people were brought up with religious beliefs that had little room for the truth—particularly if one is homosexual. While the word love may be used frequently in a religious context, it is generally used so conditionally that it rarely captures the spiritual essence of love.²

Eichberg's primary purpose isn't about religion, but because religion is important for so many people, he offers a thoughtful focus on the places where conflict and difficulty arise for many of us:

Spirituality teaches that love is unconditional. Some religions teach that love, even God's love, is conditional. . . . Ideally, religion teaches us spirituality, yet too often religious institutions teach primarily about social order and social control. . . .

Many people have a great deal of trouble moving through the coming-out process because they are struggling with how to integrate the truth about who they are with their religious beliefs. When the truth is that you are homosexual, integrating your religion may be difficult. . . . Since the personal cost of hiding one's sexuality is so great, I strongly encourage lesbians and gay men to come out even in the context of their religions. While I realize that this might be threatening, and raise many of the types of fears already discussed in this book, I once again encourage you to trust yourself to deal effectively with the consequences. By doing so you will either create room for your religion to embrace you, or you will create the freedom for you to discover a spiritual basis for your life that has room for you to integrate all of who you are. I do not pretend that this process will be an easy one, since our religious beliefs are often very strong, and many beliefs have been predicated on a fear of reprisal for not adhering to them. Your religious beliefs may not change, though the power that you give to those beliefs may.³

We Thought We Were Hiding “It” From God

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. (Psalm 85:8, 10-11)

Almost all of us who are homosexual, bisexual or transgender—and who grew up or spent a significant part of our lives in a religious context—have suffered some dissonance, conflict, and pain. One way in which we coped with inner conflict was in thinking we were keeping *it* a secret from God. If we thought about *it* we hoped either God didn't notice, or didn't mind. More often, when we thought about *it*, we stopped thinking about God for a while (as if there were two separate, parallel universes!).

But what inner peace and self-respect we lost in the process of keeping *it* a secret! Without *it* every escaping our heads, without *it* ever crossing our lips, *it* was tearing us apart inside.

The Christian faith has spanned 2,000 years and tens of thousands of miles, and has adapted to many different cultures. The Gospel has been told in many different languages. It has become a “big tent” under which a lot of variation occurs because of time, culture and language. And while we are often scolded by fundamentalists for “relativizing” the biblical message, the fact is that the Christian faith does have a tremendous diversity under its big tent.

Many of us are very familiar with two dark corners of this “big tent”:

- ***Pessimism.*** The underlying negativity not only about human life but also about faith. God is seen as impossible to please, judgmental, even angry, and offering love only under very narrow conditions. The faith that all people are justified by God's grace through faith is overshadowed by the fear that God will damn anyone who doesn't measure up.
- ***Asceticism.*** The view that personal happiness and pleasure, and especially sensual pleasure, is improper if not morally wrong, or inferior to other human experiences which are not related to the human body.

Not all the expressions of the Christian faith, however, are marked with this pessimism and asceticism. The original enthusiasm behind the growth of the Church in the First Century was that the coming of Jesus is Good News—or Gospel. It was Good News that God sent his son. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned.” (John 3:17-18, NIV) This good news was in stark contrast to the pessimism within Judaism and other contemporary religions that had become cynical and distrustful of the world and of human life.

We belong to God! That God has made us his children, in Christ, is a cause for the greatest joy, not pessimism! (Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:4-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:8; 1 John 3:1-3). Similarly, the entire Christian tradition is not trapped in asceticism.

And God knows us, inside and out! God is described in the New Testament as the “Knower of the Heart” (*kardiognostes*).⁴

St. Peter explains this where he advises other Christian leaders not to expect Gentile converts to keep the Law of Moses:

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:8-11)

So if no one has any secrets before God, let's start by realizing that God knows I am homosexual, and that God has always known. In fact, the Bible suggests that my inmost thoughts and desires were known to God even before I myself knew them. Thirty years ago, the founding pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church, Rev. Troy Perry, used this truth as the title of his book, *The Lord is My Shepherd And He Knows I'm Gay*.⁵

If God knows I'm Gay/Lesbian, am I already doomed or damned?

Not at all, because my relationship to God isn't built on what kind of person I am—what I try to be, what I've accomplished, what I've avoided or felt sorry about or even repented. My relationship to God is built first, last and only upon what kind of savior God is.

Our God is a God of love and a God of grace. In Jesus Christ, I am already reconciled to God—not because of my good deeds or best intentions—but because of Christ's all-sufficient act of love in giving his life for me upon the Cross.

Of course, I don't deserve this. But no one “deserves” God's love! That is why Christians call it “grace”—a completely undeserved gift from God. Jesus is called the Savior not because we are lost, or have been thrown away, but because we have been found.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned.” (John 3:16-18.)

But doesn't my homosexuality put the skids on God's grace?

It might be easy to think that all manner of sins come between us and God's love. And that is so, yet the cross of Christ brought down the walls of sin and wrong-doing that divided us from God Almighty. Don't forget one great truth from Romans 3: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” If sin alone causes doom or damnation, then every human being is lost! Paul is saying every human being falls shorts: fails, doesn't measure up.

The Scripture also says that no one can be acquitted of his or her failings by trying to “measure up,” in keeping all of the laws or commandments. In Acts 13, Paul tells the people in the city of Antioch: “Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

Isn't my being gay/lesbian a worse sin than everybody else's?

Being what you are and were created to be isn't either the root or the symptom of sin. Since we are human beings, gay and lesbian people *are* sinners, because all human beings are sinners. But in self-examination, we should see where our sins really are: in harming others, in lacking love, in seeking only our own comforts, pleasures and power.

Doesn't the Bible say plainly that we are terrible sinners?

Bible scholar George Edwards has pointed out that Paul's critical remarks in Romans 1 are part of a long rhetorical address aimed at his readers to entrap them cleverly. “Isn't it awful?” he suggests all throughout this chapter—and names terrible sin after sin after sin—as examples of all the horrible things people do. But Paul's point is wrapped up in 2:1, “Therefore you have no excuse...” His point was not to condemn gay and lesbian people or other people whom he mentions in passing, but to condemn the self-righteousness of his readers who were pointing the finger at all these “terrible” things. The word in Romans 2 still condemns self-righteousness. It is not the path to God's favor (for that is already wide open to all by grace alone). People who are self-righteous are only erecting

their own barriers to God's free grace (as the laborers did who begrudged the landlord's generosity in Matthew 20:1-16).

Many gay and lesbian people are sexually active—even Christian gay and lesbian people! But we believe it is not sexual intimacy, in and of itself, which is sinful when expressed between persons of the same gender. Certainly, our motives and our sexual behavior can be “right” or “wrong”. If I am expressing love to another human being, my love is no more or less God-pleasing than that of heterosexual people. But if I am abusing someone else, taking advantage of another, using sexual acts just as a recreational outlet regardless of the harm done to another, then my behavior is way overdue for self-examination and repentance.

Why should I come out?

Here are a couple of brief thoughts:

(1) Because truth is befitting for the Christian. Need we say more? Living a lie is not right for a Christian. But telling the truth about ourselves often seems to be the very thing which could alienated us forever from other Christians. Coming out in this sense is not merely the “telling” of our big, terrible sexual secret, but the “integrating” of the sexual truth about our own lives with the eternal truths of our faith in God.

(2) Because falsehood is like a slow annihilation of my self-respect and self-esteem and self-confidence. Nathaniel Branden⁶ calls this “disowning the self.” Our emotional and spiritual health will benefit from the self-trust and self-honesty of being Out. Anything is a slow death.

If I'm not ready to come out, *that's okay*, because each step along the way of coming out should be deliberate and carefully planned, not only to show love and care for the people in my life who are dear to me, but also that I gain from coming out. Each step can be enormous because of the way in which the truth challenges and changes the relationships in my life. And with each step I have to work through a lot of feelings and ideas in order to know how to take the next gigantic step.

So I must measure my risks and plan my steps, not because I have no spine, but because the process of self-disclosure, honesty, and investing myself in relationships should be thoughtful and successful.

And if I come out to God, knowing that God knows all about me, this realization hits me as nothing less than a “conversion experience.”

What are the risks?

If you share your true self with another person, he or she may not like knowing something that had previously been unknown. It is unsettling to some people—not to all—to learn something about you which they had preferred to ignore or to deny. Your personal growth, in coming out to yourself and others, can force another person to confront his or her personal growth, in the readiness and willingness to accept you as you really are.

The risk that you take in coming out to another is that he or she may prefer not to deal with this new knowledge because it confronts his or her ignorance, denial, discomfort, or prejudice. The risk is that coming out may result in a lost or weakened friendship or family relationship.

But the risk of *not* coming out at all is that your valued relationships with family and friends will never grow, will continue to stand on the condition of illusions and false premises (based on secrets, not truths), or will remain shallow and superficial.

How do I begin to come out? To whom?

The first steps in coming out are talking to people you trust very much, whether a family member or one or two close friends. If you already have friends or acquaintances you think might be lesbian or gay, they may be helpful to you. But don't make assumptions about others unless they offer information about themselves; start with your own ability to share what you feel about yourself. It may be a risk to do so, but it is also an opportunity for the other person to share their feelings or their self-awareness.

Where do I find help?

If you do look for professional psychological counseling, here are some pointers:

- Some services are free; some professionals will set their fees and prices on a “sliding scale” based on your ability to pay.
- Ask for referrals from others who might know how to find a good psychologist, psychiatrist or counselor.
- Read the other information about the expressed views of the American Psychological Association and American Psychiatric Association. Visit their web sites for more general information.
- Review and use other links and resources mentioned here.
- Ask questions over the phone before you sit down for a full session. Make sure that any counselor or therapist will regard you in a professional manner, not pass judgment on you or upon issues of sexual orientation.
- Because Christian faith is important to you, make sure that the counselor you select is comfortable and respectful of your religious faith, and will not belittle Christianity or try to convince you to give up your faith.

But coming out is irreversible. What if I regret it later?

I once asked myself this question, and my fear and dread kept me intimidated for years. After taking the risk to share more and more of my real self with people, I was surprised to realize that I had no regrets. Finally, I learned that asking the question “will I regret this...?” was not a helpful question at all.

Life takes many turns. It is full of surprises, troubles, thrills, worries, and rewards. A human being cannot live two lives at once, planning each one differently and compare the outcome later! But, there are risks and possible regrets even to get out of bed each morning! The best I can say from experience is that the risks are manageable and the regrets are relatively short-lived. Yes, some things in life have taken a different course than if I had stayed in the dark with my mouth shut. But the road I have traveled, as an “out” person—and an “out” Christian and pastor of the church—has been paved with so much grace and healing. I have come to know so much more of God and the Gospel that I would never go back, or want to reverse my decision, or dream of locking myself away again with the secrets that are too heavy to bear.

I salute your courage to ask questions about coming out, and to seek honest and empowering answers. Trust yourself. Do the right things. Embrace the love of God and of human beings who, knowing your most important secrets, are able and ready to give you love. Then move on in life with confidence that grace and peace will be your companions.

—Rev. Dan Hooper
Lutherans Concerned/ Los Angeles



Notes

1. How to reach PFLAG:
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
1726 M St., N.W., Ste. 400
Washington, DC 20036
202/467-8180
web site: <http://www.pflag.org>
e-mail: info@pflag.org
2. Rob Eichberg, *Coming Out: An Act of Love* [New York: Dutton (Penguin Books), 1990; 279 pp.], p. 100.
3. Eichberg, pp. 101-102.
4. Dt. 8:2, 13:3; 1 Sam 16:7; 2 Sam. 7:20-22 = 1 Chron 17:18-20; especially: 1 Chron 28:9, 29:17; 2 Chron 32:31; Psalm 139:23: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Also Acts 1:24; 15:8.
5. Troy D. Perry, *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I’m Gay* [New York: Bantam Books, 1972].
6. Nathaniel Branden, *Honoring the Self: Personal Integrity and the Heroic Potentials of Human Nature* [Los Angeles, Jeremy Tarcher, 1983; 273 pp.].