

Coming Out as a Process of Spiritual Growth

Amanda Udis-Kessler, All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church, July 17, 2005 (Colorado Springs PrideFest Service)

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, “Religion is for those who fear hell. Spirituality is for those who have been there.” Sometimes bumper stickers really speak the truth, and I believe that this one does. Specifically, today, I’d like to note that religion, particularly conservative religion, puts bisexual, trans, lesbian and gay people in hell – both literally and figuratively – and then I’d like to consider how spirituality can be a response to being put there. The key to understanding coming out as a spiritual process, I’ll claim, is that it is about authenticity and acceptance – acceptance of our authentic, deeply rooted, undeniable, LGBT, queer, loving and lusty selves. Acceptance that we may never be accepted by those people who seem to thrive on hating us. And acceptance that the universe, or the Goddess, or God, or the Spirit not only accepts us utterly but loves us deeply.

While we LGBT folks face oppression, discrimination, hatred and fear on many fronts, these days it seems that religion in general, and conservative religious people in particular, are especially conspiring to make our lives a living hell, perhaps because they are convinced that we are headed for hell after we die anyway and they would like us to get some practice living in it. Over the next few minutes, we’ll touch on some of the manifestations of that hell.

Now, there are some LGBTQ people who never come out, even to themselves, or who come only part-way out. There are some who, in response to the spiritual violence of homophobia and heterosexism, give up and give in and live lives of bitterness. Perhaps these days there are even some LGBTQ folks who don’t come out because they were never in – they have always been open about who they are and they have faced fewer penalties than in previous times. This message may be of interest to these groups of people, but it may be more useful to those of us who have come out, have suffered because of it, and wonder what could possibly be spiritual about that. It’s also aimed at our allies in the sanctuary today, who want to understand how we come to be who we are.

Spiritual growth isn’t just something that everyone does routinely in our society. Our days are full of hassles, or they are full of small joys that suffice. And so, we don’t tend to do the hard work of confronting our demons unless we’re really dissatisfied, unhappy, empty, or in need of something that doesn’t come out of a bottle or can’t be charged on a credit card. My sense, though, is that LGBTQ people, especially those my age and up, can testify to some of that sense of dissatisfaction, emptiness, or – let’s just say it – pain. Pain that comes from living in a society that does not merely privilege heterosexuality but that actively attacks, degrades, disparages and devalues homosexuality, bisexuality, transness, and people who fall into these categories. Colorado Springs is ground zero, or one of the key ground zeroes, for religious homophobia. But homophobia is everywhere.

What's it like to come out in such a context? To realize that one is different in a way that society does not, by and large, view positively? To tell other people about this difference? First, coming out is at base about authenticity and acceptance. To come out is to grasp that our past understandings of ourselves do not fit who we now know ourselves to be. There are more possibilities than the inherited forms of truth with which we began, and we are coming into one that is truer and deeper. Coming out to ourselves, in short, is about being all that we can be. Coming out to others is about revealing our authentic selves in love, trust, and often at least some fear, so that we can have profoundly honest relationships.

Well and good. But what happens when, having come out, we start to confront the depths of heterosexism and homophobia? When we realize that the dream of success with which we were presented as children doesn't fully apply to us and never was meant to? When we realize that if we are fully out, we may well not be able to hold the job we want, serve in the military, adopt, be a minister in many denominations, do work that involves serving children directly, be a professional athlete, etc., etc., etc.? When some of us lose our friends, our families, our jobs, our religious communities, our faith? When we realize that we don't have the same rights as others?

When I first came out to my parents as a teenager, my mother didn't talk to me for a year, or at least she didn't say anything nice. My father wouldn't get off the topic, and he didn't say anything nice either. They blamed each other constantly. Mom sent me to a therapist, who incidentally said that I was fine but that my mother needed therapy! Everyone in my class at school ostracized me. Everyone. Thank God there were some people in other class years who were either queer or open-minded. And this was in New York City in the 1980s! When I came out to my fellow camp counselors one summer in Connecticut, they made no secret of their hatred of me for the rest of the summer. In trying to prove my heterosexuality in the face of their hostility, I took sexual risks with men that could easily have had me dead of AIDS long before now.

Things are certainly better these days, but only somewhat. And lots of people are trying, in the name of God, to make things worse for us again. So, what is the proper response to all this? Well, we can be angry, and many of us are. But it's hard to sustain anger forever. Sooner or later, lots of us come to grief. Literally. Why me, we scream into the abyss, or whisper tearfully in bed, or grumble in the morning. Why do I have to face daily the potential of emotional, physical and spiritual violence because of who I happen to love or because my body and my gendered spirit aren't identical? Why me? For plenty of us, the spiritual growth part really takes off when that first "why me" comes out of our mouths, or even just runs through our minds, when we realize that our acceptance of our authentic selves is directly at odds with the rejection from those who think that homosexuality, bisexuality and transness just don't exist, or that they are morally wrong or indicate psychological sickness.

Christian tradition talks about the dark night of the soul, the period when one feels abandoned by the universe and convinced that the holy has no place for us, or indeed that there is nothing holy out there. Like a good Unitarian Universalist, I'm uncomfortable

with this strictly negative use of darkness imagery, but the sense of abandonment seems to me a correct description. Told by our birthright religious traditions that we are sinners or abominations, excommunicated or simply ostracized, it becomes easy to believe that the holy hates us too. This is why so many LGBTQ people simply give up on both religion and spirituality. God gave us the finger? We can flip God off right back. To hell with that, we may say. And for some of us, that's the end of the story. On with life we go. God is a myth concocted by bigots to justify hatred.

But for others of us, the loss of friends or family or religion or divinity, the horrifying moment of clarity when we lose a job or first hear a fag joke or get beaten up, brings us deeply into the sense of abandonment. And that's where the interesting part of the story begins.

We find, as folksinger Lui Collins wrote, that in this baptism of fire, the only way out is through. So, we go ahead and confront our deepest demons, our most profound fears. We may be awash in sadness. We give up the hope of living in a completely homo-celebrating world, even if we are still activists. We sense that our victories will always be partial and reversible. It seems that doing the best we can, will not finally bring the world we ache for. Oh, how we ache for it. But we can't control making it happen. If we can avoid distracting ourselves with workaholicism or substance abuse or aerobics or some other such mechanism, we reach a new level of acceptance. We accept our dark night of the soul. We accept the fact, to use another image from Western religious tradition, that we are exiled in the wilderness of our grief and loneliness.

But in this moment of loss and grief, some of us have what can only be called a strange encounter. We meet the spirit of the desert, the holy in exile. And this spirit is not the enemy, does not condemn us. Never did condemn us. But we had to get to the desert, to the dark night, to figure that out. We find that we are accepted, totally accepted. More than that, we are loved, cherished, celebrated. We find this out in the unconditional love of our friends or lovers or community, or in experiences that we have in solitude. Something happens, and it can happen in a hundred different ways, but the outcome is that we know we are both accepted and loved. And once we know, deep down, for sure, forever, that we are loved, we are free to live our lives. This is the final level of acceptance. Having accepted ourselves, having sought the world's acceptance and found condemnation, we finally find a level of acceptance that goes deeper than Focus on the Family, deeper than our parents and our childhood friends and our churches of origin.

From our encounters with this acceptance, we return to the world from the desert of exile as prophets, as truth-tellers. As we emerge from the dark night of the soul, our senses awaken, our reason sharpens, our compassion blooms, our conscience becomes deeper and broader, and our vision becomes powerful. We come bearing – dare I say it? – spiritual authority. We know that there is always someone out there who hates us, but that doesn't stop us from being free to give and love, to work for justice, to enjoy life. Let those people say that it's wrong. We know, deeply, fully, permanently, that it's not wrong. Let those people say that no one is “really” lesbian or gay or bisexual or trans. We know, deeply, fully, permanently, that we are. And that it is good.

We reject lies and embrace the truth, regardless of the consequences. In becoming our authentic selves, we relinquish our self-protection. We experience deeply both the pain and the joy of being LGBTQ people in the world, but perhaps the most important point is that we do experience deeply. We live fully. We see all the colors. [pull out rainbow boa, put it on] *All* the colors. We build community, and we celebrate. On this day of days, PrideFest Day in Colorado Springs, oh how we celebrate. And if that's not a spiritual journey, I don't know what is. And by the way, the rainbow boa that I just put on was sent to me by my mother, who has now attended New York Pride for the past 20 years, and who picked up the boa for me there. We all have our spiritual journeys of acceptance.

So, for those of you in the sanctuary today who haven't been on this journey, because you haven't needed to, because you've been afraid to start, we offer you the gift of our lives, of our witnesses. We invite you to join us in whatever your own version of the journey of authenticity and acceptance may be, and we delight in learning from your journey wisdom just as we seek to share our own. May the journeys of all of our lives be deeply grounded in joy, faith and trust, and may they always lead us home to love.

So may it be.