

## The Politics of Visibility

### Healing from Homophobia in Faith Communities

*Christine Gindi*

DEAR ALEX, it's difficult to know where to start, but I'll do it by saying sorry. I'm sorry I left you, I'm sorry I broke the promise. You helped me so much, but when pain reaches the limit it all means nothing. You know that.

Next I want to say thank you. You dedicated your life to me, and I failed. You were my shoulder to cry on. You got me off the stuff, but here I sit pumped full of it. I'm not as strong as you

I have written a note to my mum telling her everything. I wanted her to know how much you helped me.

Sorry, and I love you."

This letter is taken from a website that was created by Alex as a memorial for the author of this letter, his boyfriend Darren.<sup>1</sup> This letter was also Darren's suicide note. Alex believes that Darren killed himself because of his inability to cope with the overwhelming trauma of homophobia he experienced. There were numerous incidents that made Darren miserable specifically because of his gay identity. Everyone else either avoided him because of his sexuality, or constantly abused him. Alex and Darren were always being violently beaten up or having obscenities screamed at them, and their harassment was never-ending.

Research indicates that Alex and Darren are by no means alone. Verbal and physical harassment is not just limited to the gay community, because often people are attacked just because someone *suspects* that they are gay. There are countless memorial and tribute websites on the internet for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, particularly teens, who have committed suicide.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) populations are more susceptible to substance abuse, depression, and suicide because the trauma of homophobia and heterosexism prevents them from living their lives fully. The rates of suicide, substance abuse, and depression in the GLBT community are extremely high. A 1989 study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services showed gays and lesbians are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexuals. Thirty percent of completed suicides annually are committed

by lesbian and gay youth, and suicide is their leading cause of death.<sup>2</sup> In the Hammelman study of depression in the gay community, researchers also found depression strikes gays four to five times more severely than their non-gay peers.<sup>3</sup> The Hunter study of 1992 reports that 68 percent of gay males use alcohol and 44 percent use other drugs; 83 percent of lesbians use alcohol and 56 percent use other drugs.<sup>4</sup> Forty-five percent of gay males and 20 percent of lesbians report having experienced verbal harassment and/or physical violence during high school as a result of their sexual orientation.<sup>5</sup> Our society has developed such negative attitudes about homosexuality that many people grow to fear or hate homosexuality within themselves—whether they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, or transgender. This fear or hatred is called internalized homophobia, and it makes it very difficult for people to develop intimate relationships with their sex partners. It can also create great fear that they will have to practice abstinence throughout their lives, or pretend to be heterosexual and force themselves to have frustrating and disappointing relationships with people of the other gender.

In a conversation that I had with a twenty-nine-year-old, Midwestern, born-again Christian, she described how, during her high school years, she would get drunk in order to have sex with men in order to prove that she wasn't a lesbian to her peers, and especially to herself. She was grappling with the homophobia of her society and her own internalized homophobia. She felt a lot of guilt and shame surrounding her lesbian identity, and she used alcohol in order to medicate her anxiety so that she could even face having sex with a male. For some members of the GLBT community, the outcomes of dealing with the trauma of homophobia and heterosexism may include resorting to self-destructive behavior and self-medicating the pain with alcohol or drugs, which then evolves into an addiction. When I attended a service at Metropolitan Community Church, a Christian Protestant wel-

coming church, it was announced that grape juice is used instead of wine for the communion service, out of respect for those who were in recovery. This announcement indicated that alcohol abuse was an issue, not only within their congregation, but possibly within the context of the GLBT community.

Even though alcohol or drug addiction might be the most tangible ways for many people to identify physical damage in someone dealing with the traumas of homophobia and heterosexism, I soon discovered, through various interviews, that stress also affects the body in other ways. A thirty-four-year-old Catholic man, who had a wife and three children at the time he was confronting his gay sexuality, related various stories about how he had physically suffered. He had stomach and heart pains so great that he became disabled and lost his job. He attempted suicide repeatedly. He consulted counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists, and neither the depression nor his homosexual feelings had gone away. After the fourteenth shock treatment in an attempt to transform his sexual identity from being homosexual to heterosexual, he finally accepted his gay sexuality. He describes his physical and emotional journey toward real human intimacy in a gay relationship “as having been to hell.”

When I began this project, I was interested in how the trauma of homophobia and heterosexism manifested itself. How did that isolation, hatred, judgment—whether out loud or silent—seep into the marrow of peoples’ bones? Imagine constantly hearing that being gay is “wrong,” “nasty,” “unnatural,” “sinful,” at your high school, your college, your workplace; or from your mom, implicitly: “I’d rather my daughter was dead than be one of those lesbians”; or from your dad, explicitly: “You’re a homo. Get out of my house.” Now imagine that you heard these labels and opinions from your priest, your rabbi, at your synagogue, at your church, at your mosque. Religion is usually the first source that people use to justify the bigotry and oppression of sexual prejudice, and it is religious homophobia that has a profound impact on internal homophobia, societal homophobia, and social change.

A twenty-seven-year-old Christian Orthodox man related that he gets the same reaction from both the straight and gay communities when he tells them that he’s an Orthodox Christian: “You’re gay *and* Orthodox? How could you possibly reconcile being gay with Orthodoxy?” A twenty-eight-year-old Pakistani Muslim told how his family’s initial reaction to his coming out was, “You need to go to the mosque every day and pray.” Most religious traditions regard the GLBT community as practicing a

gay, and therefore sinful, lifestyle. They do not regard homosexuality as a natural state, but as a chosen lifestyle. When I asked how this gay Orthodox man does reconcile his gay identity with his Orthodox faith, he simply told me that he didn’t choose to be gay, and when discussions center around a “lifestyle choice” he doesn’t believe that that discussion is even relevant to him. Being gay was not his “lifestyle choice,” and therefore the church’s views on this lifestyle did not apply to him because he didn’t choose to be gay.

At the outset of this project, the question of why people returned to religion for spiritual healing of homophobic trauma seemed paradoxical. How and why would a member of the GLBT community embrace religious communities, especially faith communities which have historically sanctioned homophobia and heterosexism, as a source of healing from these very same traumas? Just as most religions reject members of the GLBT community, members of the GLBT community likewise reject most homophobic religions. Angry people, wanting to fight back after suffering years of oppression, find an obvious enemy in homophobic religion, which often so brazenly proclaims its sexual prejudice. Some of the people interviewed used to view religion as a “straight thing”—gay people may have been religious when they were younger, but after coming out they should’ve left religion behind. And yet, in spite of this often mutual hostility, and in spite of the virtual taboo around certain types of religiosity in some queer contexts, there are many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people for whom their historically homophobic religion serves as not only a source of strength and joy, but as a source of healing for the trauma of homophobia and heterosexism.

My methodology involved open-ended interviews with eleven people I had found through personal contacts and through *Bay Windows*, New England’s largest gay and lesbian newspaper. I located religious and spiritual congregations and support groups. I attended two religious support groups for GLBT people, Buddha Buddies (four times) and Axios (Eastern Orthodox) (three times). I attended services at welcoming congregations: Metropolitan Community Church, Am Tikva (Jewish GLBT), Dignity Boston (Catholic), Episcopal Trinity Church, Old Cambridge Baptist Church, the First Church (Unitarian Universalist), Old South Church (United Church of Christ), and the Jesuit Urban Center (Catholic). The eleven people I interviewed ranged from Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian—Catholic and Protestant—traditions.

The narratives presented stem from these interviews, with people mostly in their late twenties to early thirties.

During my fieldwork, I also encountered religious traditions that attempt to heal a queer's person's trauma of homophobia and heterosexism, by "curing" their homosexuality. These support groups never granted me an interview. There are some religious support groups in the Boston area that encourage prayer and heterosexual marriage as a solution to the "problem" of homosexuality. I find it interesting that responses to the Catholic Church sex scandal also call for heterosexual marriage as a solution to the problem of sex abuse within the church, and I also believe there is a scapegoating of the gay community because gay priests and homosexuality in general are being held responsible for the sex abuse scandal.

In order to discuss healing from the trauma of homophobia and heterosexism, it is first necessary to discuss homophobia and heterosexism. These topics are of course unbelievably complex, and a short discussion of these topics by no means covers the impact of these issues on peoples' lives. Homophobia is the irrational hatred, intolerance, and fear of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transexuals. These prejudicial feelings fuel the myths, stereotypes, and discrimination against people who are lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transexual. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who are socialized in our homophobic society often internalize these negative stereotypes and develop some degree of shame and guilt. This is what is meant by *internalized homophobia*. Some effects of internalized homophobia are low self-esteem and drug and alcohol abuse and/or other self-destructive or abusive behaviors. In order to cope with the pain and dysfunction of homophobia, an addiction driven by the pain becomes another source of pain and dysfunction. A substance like alcohol or drugs could be used to medicate anxiety in order for an individual to engage in sex at all. And to the alcoholic contemplating abstinence, the prospect of not being able to have, or function in, sober intimacy can be a motivation to and justification for not staying sober. It should be emphasized that homosexuality is not—just as heterosexuality is not—a cause of substance abuse. GLBT populations are more susceptible to substance abuse, depression, and suicide because the trauma of homophobia and heterosexism inhibits their lives. Homophobia is further reinforced by the biased belief that heterosexuality is the only legitimate form of human intimacy. Heterosexism is reinforced again and again in religion in the belief

that the only form *romantic* relationship and family can take is heterosexual and nuclear. Although usage of the words "homophobia" and "heterosexism" has not been uniform, homophobia has typically been employed to describe individual antigay attitudes and behaviors, whereas heterosexism has referred to societal-level ideologies and patterns of institutionalized oppression of nonheterosexual people.

The coming-out process is one of being accepting and open about one's sexual orientation and gender identity, and it is also the process of challenging social and internalized homophobia. The Pakistani man I interviewed who was told to go to the mosque every day was also told by his parents that they should never have brought him to America, and that his homosexuality was a disease he got from an American, Western culture. The young Midwestern Christian fundamentalist told me that when she came out to her mom as a lesbian, the first thing she was asked was if she had seen a doctor. The one narrative illustrates the attitude that homosexuality is a lifestyle, one mostly accepted by the West, as seen by the eyes of the Pakistani immigrants. The belief that homosexuality is a mental disorder is illustrated by the young Midwestern girl's mother's response and by the attempts of the Catholic man to consult doctors and endure shock therapy in order to change himself into a heterosexual. All of these people turned to faith communities in order to heal from the trauma of homophobia they experienced. Most of the participants turned to faith communities for spiritual healing in order to heal spiritual brokenness.

The people interviewed view religion as contributing to their healing in a wide variety of ways. The Catholic man who had struggled with doctors, electric shock treatments, and repeated suicide attempts talked a great deal about how the religious route saved his life. He talked with a priest who set him up with a volunteer program where he would be mentoring and supporting someone who was having severe problems. He felt that helping somebody would somehow empower him in his life. He fell in love with the man he was mentoring and they've been together for three years now. This man's narrative serves as an example of how some view their gay relationship as having been sent by God in order to teach them about love, and therefore about the love of God.

Another way that people view religion as contributing to their healing is by participating in faith communities which utilize a reinterpretation of religious homophobic text. That the use of religious texts that are modified to include gender neutral

language is a help was a common theme among the people I interviewed. For instance, the Jewish GLBT community group Am Tikva uses gender-neutral language in all their *Sidrim* (prayer books). Metropolitan Community Church—like other GLBT welcoming religious communities—uses gender-neutral language. A twenty-seven-year-old Jewish woman at Am Tikva related how she could finally see her face in God and God’s face in hers through a gender-neutral prayer book, and it was extremely healing for her not to be worshipping God in a heterosexist way that excluded her.

Another approach to religious healing for the trauma of homophobia is that people turn to prayers of compassion and forgiveness for their homophobic society and their own internalized homophobia. Prayers for the trauma of homophobia were being used by virtually all the religious and spiritual support groups and services that I visited. At a service by Buddha Buddies, a Buddhist support group for the GLBT community, I was struck by the emphasis on compassion and forgiveness, not just for society, but for themselves for internalizing homophobia. This Buddhist support group held a discussion that specifically dealt with how other religions project homophobia onto God, and how this projection, as well as the internalized homophobia of the group, was an obstacle on their spiritual path. Attachment to the projection of homophobia was considered an obstacle toward enlightenment.

Citing one’s culture, ethnicity, or family as giving certain religious texts a sexually prejudicial interpretation, because of that culture’s (or that ethnicity’s or family’s) own homophobia, is very healing. It was very healing for the Pakistani Muslim to realize that it was not God who judged him, but his society. His family background and ethnicity lay in Pakistan, where Section 377 of the Pakistani penal code says that two men having intercourse can be stoned to death. He came to understand that it was his culture that was homophobic, not God. The born-again Christian likewise understood this about her fundamentalist upbringing.

Belonging to an all gay congregation like Metropolitan Community Church, where all of the leaders of the service are gay, which creates a non-heterosexual context and lessens the possibility of heterosexism, can also contribute to healing. A thirty-two-year-old Catholic female member of this congregation stated that even within some welcoming churches there is still a lack of freedom to be able to cuddle with your partner in church. As she looked out at her congregation and saw gay couples with

their arms around each other and holding hands, she felt a real freedom in the house of the Lord. When I visited MCC, I was surprised by the level of physical intimacy between gay couples in the church. I had not seen that behavior before in other welcoming churches, and it was very refreshing to see physical closeness in the context of a religious setting.

A forty-two-year-old Buddhist spoke of embracing a God who wanted him to be healthy. He had exercised in order to make himself physically more visible, through his bulging muscles, as a form of rebellion against a society he perceived as resenting his existence. Once he realized that he was no longer resented by God, there was a shift from living *in spite of* God to living *because of* God. The perception of his body being against God was transformed into a perception that he already had a divine spark within him; being physically fit in order to be more visually visible and healthy in the face of the society he believed wanted to kill him had, over the years, become a heavy burden. His Buddhist practice of identifying attachments grew into an awareness of the attachment he had to his body, and more specifically of *why* he was attached to his body’s health and visibility.

A fifty-seven-year-old African American Baptist woman identified her rolfer and her Reiki guide as her main sources of spiritual support. She described Rolfig as body work that seeks to relieve emotional wounds that are stored in the body and Reiki as energy work that aims to clear energy blockages in the body. Although these practices are not specifically connected to her Baptist tradition, they are heavily connected to her spirituality. While many do not view Rolfig or Reiki as spiritual, this woman identified going to alternative care practitioners who emphasize spirituality, and viewing this as spiritual support, as very healing of her homophobic experiences. She described these modalities as healing her body and soul and as teaching her about a loving God. She considers her rolfer a type of minister because of the emotional and spiritual support she receives during her sessions. She also added that the physical contact she had during her Rolfig sessions was extremely therapeutic to her because she began to feel less physically threatened by the heterosexual community, and it had helped that her rolfer was heterosexual. Her rolfer provided not only spiritual support, but physical support as well.

People also find healing of their homophobia through congregations that are deeply involved in GLBT politics and legislation, and many found activism and being very visible in the context of reli-

gion very healing. The fact that a congregation pushes for such legislation as legalizing gay marriage and adoption, as a community and from the pulpit, is a very powerful experience for many GLBT people. When I attended an MCC service, the pastor pointed out couples in the congregation who had been together for over twenty years, and whose union was still not recognized by the state. This issue was not just an issue people discussed on the street, but one acknowledged in God's house, as part of worshipping God.

I offer these narratives to illustrate a paradigm of eight ways people heal from homophobia in a religious community: 1) The reinterpretation of religious texts, and the use of religious texts that are modified to include gender-neutral language; 2) Citing one's culture, ethnicity, or family as exaggerating certain religious texts with sexual prejudice, because of their own homophobia, and realizing that it is their society, not God, which judges them; 3) Offering prayers of compassion and forgiveness for a homophobic society and one's own internalized homophobia; 4) Belonging to an all-gay congregation where all of the leaders of the service are gay, in order to create a nonheterosexual context and lessen the possibility of heterosexism; 5) Embracing a God who wants you to be healthy, with a shift from living *in spite of* God to living *because of* God; 6) Going to alternative care practitioners who emphasize spirituality and viewing this care as spir-

itual support; 7) Viewing one's gay relationship as having been sent by God in order to teach one about love, and therefore about the love of God; and 8) Belonging to a congregation deeply involved with GLBT politics and legislation, and healing through activism and being very visible within the context of religion.

At the beginning of this project, I thought it paradoxical that people who had been traumatized by homophobia, especially by the homophobia of their religious traditions, often return to those same traditions for healing. I have since learned that they do not view their return to their religious traditions as a contradiction, but as the most powerful way of healing.

### Notes

1. <http://members.tripod.com/~DarrenBF/index2.html>
2. M. Feinlab, ed., *Prevention and Intervention in Youth Suicide (Report to the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide)*, vol. 3, pp. 110–42. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).
3. T. L. Hammelman, "Gay and Lesbian Youth: Contributing Factors to Serious Attempts or Considerations of Suicide," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy* 2, no. 1 (1990): 77–89.
4. J. Hunter, Columbia University HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies, 1992.
5. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, "National Anti-Gay/Lesbian Victimization Report," 1984.