

The Thrice-Tied Knot The Story of a Late Bloomer

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This is the story of a personal journey. There is a developing genre of "coming out stories"; this is my contribution, my personal Odyssey. Certainly, a good proportion of people are at various stages of being in or out of one closet or another, but I think there are a couple of things that make my story different: first, I waited a damned long time to come out, and second, I did it while I was a professor at BYU.

I came out of the closet in 1996. And all though it didn't happen suddenly or all at once, it didn't take a very long time. My coming out was rather quickly done.

Geographically, it wasn't a very long trip either—it took me only from Provo to Ogden.

In addition to describing how I came to get out of the closet, I also want to disclose something about how I got into the closet in the first place. That was a much longer journey.

To start, let me share part of a poem by the unofficial gay laureate of American poetry, Walt Whitman. This one is called "One hour to madness and joy."¹

O confine me not!...

O savage and tender achings!...

O to be yielded to you whoever you are, and you to be yielded to me in defiance of the world!

O to draw you to me, to plant on you for the first time the lips of a determin'd man.

O the puzzle, the thrice-tied knot, the deep and dark pool, all untied and illumin'd!

O to speed where there is space enough and air enough at last!

To be absolv'd from previous ties and conventions,

To have the gag remov'd from one's mouth!

To have the feeling today or any day I am sufficient as I am.

To ascend, to leap to the heavens of the love indicated to me!

To be lost if it must be so!

To feed the remainder of life with one hour of fulness and freedom!

With one brief hour of madness and joy.

Walt Whitman

The thrice-tied knot

I adore Whitman's image of a thrice-tied knot. It took me a long time to get into the

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¹ Whitman, W. (1979). "One hour to madness and joy" p. 100. In Leaves of Grass. Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library.

closet--to tie myself up. It is common today for gays and lesbians to insist that they were born that way. Perhaps I was born gay, but I was also born unaware. Sex was predictably meaningless to me as a child, then alternately confusing and frightening to me as an adolescent, and finally it was a vexing horror to me as an adult.

The first knot

The first knot I used to bind myself into the closet came with the simple but devastating realization that I was different, knowing that I was "abnormal." Moreover it was learning that I had secrets. I have very few memories of my early childhood. I remember being baptized when I was eight years old. I remember failing PE in the second grade. The note that came home with my report card read "Tommy refuses to participate in games with the other boys." I remember being told by my mother that I would need to repeat the third grade. I remember hearing the word "dyslexia" and knowing that it applied to me, but not having any idea what it meant. I was told I would be going to a new school--St. Augustine's Episcopal Day-School. I remember wondering why Mom was making such a big deal out of it. I realize now that my being "retained" was much more traumatic for my parents than it was for me. I knew at the time, however, that flunking was something I shouldn't mention to anybody. I understood that it was shameful and that shameful things should be kept private.

I took ballet lessons when I was in the third grade (the second time I was in the third grade). One afternoon each week my sister and I spend an hour "studying" dance with a dozen or so other kids. My uniform was black tights and a white T-shirt. I remember mostly just running and jumping. The girls were expected to be delicate and to tiptoe. We boys were not expected to do much but run and jump, and if possible, do it in time to the music. My ballet lessons lasted only a year, if that, and I have no bad memories of the experience. I really quite enjoyed it. I have long forgotten all the French names for leaps and foot positions, but I have not forgotten the lesson of the closet. Perhaps instinctively, perhaps because someone told me, I knew that I should not tell my friends at school that I was taking ballet lessons. I don't know whether I was embarrassed or ashamed, or afraid of ridicule, but somehow I know that I had to keep it quiet. I don't believe I ever told anybody about my having taken ballet until I was in college.

Before I knew anything about sex, I had learned well to keep things to myself. I was used to having secrets.

By the time I was in junior high school I was still a year older than most of my classmates, but I was also smaller than most of them and terribly naïve. Four years cloistered in a parochial school had not prepared me for what lay ahead. That's not really fair; academically I had been very well trained. But socially I was inept. I was a loner and found no friends to replace those that I'd had in elementary school.

In the seventh and eighth grades I was taunted and bullied. I studied alone. I ate alone. I don't believe that in those two years I made even a casual friend. I was regularly one of the last to be chosen for team sports. At St. Augustine's we had spend an hour a day kicking a ball around a small parking lot. That, with a few jumping jacks, was the extent of our physical education. Now I was expected to play real games: football, softball, soccer. I had no skill at all, and I didn't know most of the rules. The most dreadful part of that experience, however, now that I was a budding adolescent, was that we were

expected to shower before changing back into our street clothes. The locker room was a frightening place. On the playground and after school some boys regularly knocked me down, kicked me, and sometimes spit on me. They called me a "faggot" and a "queer." I wasn't the only one to get that treatment. But what would they call me if they found out they were right? What would they do if they knew that I got an immediate erection every time I say guys naked in the locker room? I made it my habit to change my clothes quickly and get out of there.

Throughout my years in high school, I kept thinking I would just grow up. I knew what was supposed to happen and I just kept hoping that the hormones would kick in and that I'd be normal.

My senior year I dated a girl named Jennie. She was a member of the Mormon church and my sister's best friend. We went to see a movie once called "Jeremy"; it starred Robbie Benson. Anyway, there was a bit of a sex scene and I was horrified to realize that even there in the theater, I was only interested in watching Robbie Benson and totally ignored the naked girl he was with, and needless to say, the girl I was with.

After high school I got a patriarchal blessing and it promised that I would get married and have a family. I felt a great relief because I believed it was right.

When I turned 19, I went on a mission. That had always been in the plan and I would have gone no matter what. When I left though, I only hoped for one thing. I wanted God to make me normal. I wanted to develop the feelings I was supposed to have, and if I couldn't, I wanted the Lord to take me while I was there, and not make me come home. I know this sounds rather melodramatic, but I would rather have died on my mission than come home gay. I would have been a martyr. My parents would have been sad, but proud, and I would have gone to heaven. During the last half of my mission I realized that neither thing was going to happen.

My mission was a generally good experience. I was able to teach the Gospel with some conviction, so long as I didn't try to figure out how it all applied to me and my life. If I kept my testimony in the abstract, speaking of principles and eternal truths, I had no problem, but when I tried to imagine my own life in an eternal scheme, it made no sense at all. I held tight to the scripture that reads: "To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. . . . To others it is given to believe on their words. . ." ² I could only be a believer, but people that I respected knew it was true. These were intelligent and wonderful people: my father, my mission president, even my companions. If they knew the Gospel was true, then I could believe. In essence, however, what I found myself doing was wearing a mask. In fact I had two: an old one, to hide my shameful attractions and affections; and this new one to conceal my doubts about God and the Church.

This life, I was taught, is a probation and a time for me to prove myself. My mission, by analogy was a smaller probation, a shorter time of testing. In the mission field I was reminded that we would be made stronger through our trials. "The fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff;" ³ "For he is like a refiner's fire, and he shall purify the sons of Levi." ⁴ I was unconvinced. I often felt like I was walking along the edge

² D&C 46: 13-14

³ Isaiah 5:24

⁴ Malachi 3:2

of a great cliff, struggling against unpredictable winds and blinding rain. It was only a matter of time before I would be blown over the edge or sucked away by the wind. I feared that at any moment I would do or say something that would allow someone to see what I really was. I was afraid that I would not survive the test, that my masks would be ripped off, and that I would fall and shatter.

"I shall dash you to pieces like a potter's vessel."⁵

I felt fragile and weak.

There were times on my mission when I thought of jumping in front of a car or a truck, or throwing myself down in front of a subway train. It was the first time in my life when I consistently wanted to die.

The first knot binding me into the closet was a knot of secrecy tied up in fear.

The second knot

The second knot tightened when I fell in love for the first time. During my junior year in college, at Weber State in Ogden, Utah, I met Mark. He had just completed a mission also. He and I carpooled to school and afterward to work. We were active at church. We went to the temple about once a week, often with other friends, but more often just the two of us. I thought about him constantly. It seemed I was happy only when I was with him; I was miserable and lonely and jealous when I was not with him. We spent an inordinate amount of time together, and I fell in love. I had no doubt that this was real love. It was something I had never felt before, and although I knew I was not supposed to be in love with another man, the feelings I had matched what I had read of in novels, seen portrayed in the movies, and heard exalted in poetry.

Whenever Mark touched me, for any reason, I felt sparks. For the first time in my life I saw that I could fall in love and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

Mark often talked of his desire to get married, but he seldom dated. Eventually I told him how I felt—I loved him and I wanted to be with him always. (I didn't say that I was "gay;" I was no where near ready to use that word to describe myself, not even to myself). But he understood me and it scared him to death. He got out of my life as fast as he could. He was married in a matter of months.

I then realized that God's plans for me most certainly did not include marriage, but rather a life of shame and loneliness, I went home from class one afternoon, and I tried to kill myself. I believe in God, because He wouldn't let me do it. I remember very little of the experience, except that I lay on my bed and held a loaded gun to my head, trying to do it, arguing with God to let me do it, and He wouldn't.

But the potter's vessel had been broken; I'd been shattered and was now useless. I felt for years that the pieces would never quite fit back together. The second knot was very tightly secured.

The third knot

By the time I was through graduate school I had come to accept the fact that I was "same-sex attracted" and that that was never going to change. In the intervening years I

⁵ Psalm 2:9

had discussed my homosexuality with only three people: two Mormon bishops and a therapist, also LDS. The advice they gave me was consistent and useless. Each of them suggested that I get married and that the "love of a good woman" would turn me around. That poor and unworkable advice let me know that, so far as the Church was concerned, I was on my own. My solution was to deny both my homosexuality and my religion. This denial dovetailed quite well with my profession. As a teacher in a secular country there was no need for me to discuss my faith or my sexual orientation at work. By and large, I did all I could to ignore both of them.

Eventually, however, I came to miss my religious culture. So one summer, after a temporary one-year job at Illinois State University, I packed up and moved to Salt Lake City. The only family I had in Salt Lake was my sister, along with a brother who was in jail. Mom and my step-dad were in Argentina on a mission. I had no job and no prospect of one. And I had done nothing on my dissertation in a year. I really felt, though, that I wanted to get home—to my Church.

I see the Mormon Church as a community of faith, a family. It is my tradition and my culture. It is as much a part of me, and I a part of it, as any other family which intertwines itself in its members' lives. The importance of the Church to me is not that it presents a body of doctrine or a list of commandments, but rather, that it offers me a place where I feel at home. I'm not always pleased with the way the Church treats me. I'm often as lonely there as I have been anywhere else. In the past two years, I was notified by both my Bishop and my Stake President that by speaking publicly about gay issues I was moving inexorably toward apostasy. Last year, I had my name removed from Church records as a pre-emptive strike on my part to avoid excommunication. So, although I'm no longer a "member" of the Church, I still consider myself to be, in every respect, a Mormon, and proudly so. I am a Mormon, because it's what my family has been about for seven generations. It's part of me and I couldn't be anything else.

Incredibly, after moving to Salt Lake City and teaching part-time at the U for a year, I got a job at BYU. It was the only job I applied for that year. I was not quite done with my dissertation and was planning on doing a real job search the following year, but when I saw a job in my field advertised at BYU, I went ahead and sent in my CV. The interviews all went very smoothly and I was overwhelmed when they offered me the job. I found a place to live in "Happy Valley" with no difficulty and started working there in the fall of 1991. I really felt that this was the place I was supposed to be. I had made up my mind that I was going to dedicate the rest of my life to being a Spanish teacher and to staying close to the Church. Oh, and completely denying any thought of sexuality.

I was ready to dedicate myself. I would obey the commandments and stay celibate the rest of my life. My secret would remain mine alone. I would never come out. That was my sincere intent. But as the years passed at BYU, a series of feelings, events and influences changed my mind. I love teaching, but I came to realize that being a teacher is not enough. I could no longer survive in the closet: the burden was too heavy; the darkness was too cold; the enduring solitude was more than I can bear.

Untying the knot

Untying the thrice-tied knot wasn't nearly the ordeal that lacing it up had been. My first contract to work at BYU was fairly routine. It said nothing about standards or honor.

The next year, however, a new paragraph had been inserted into the annual contract. The final sentence of that paragraph read:

"All faculty are expected to be **ROLE MODELS** for a life that combines the quest for intellectual rigor with spiritual values and **PERSONAL INTEGRITY**."⁶

The first time I read that, in 1993, I felt a bit uneasy. The next year, in 1994, I felt incredibly guilty. I was expected to be a role model of personal integrity. How I wish that when I was in college I had found some sort of role model. I do not remember seeing any gay men as I grew up. There were none who could have helped me sort out my feelings and decide how to survive in a healthy way.

Now at BYU, I was expected to display personal integrity when I had never yet been able to honestly integrate myself into my family or my community. But I had started thinking the unthinkable: about coming out.

In September of 1992, the University approved a new document on academic freedom. The policy provided that BYU faculty could be terminated if their "behavior or expression **SERIOUSLY AND ADVERSELY AFFECTS** the University mission or the Church. Examples would include. . . expression [that] is dishonest, illegal, unchaste, profane, or unduly disrespectful of others."⁷ Would my coming out to the university community, including students, adversely affect the University? Or would it be a benefit for the University? Would my disclosure be seen as the courage to be honest? Or would I be judged as dishonest, unchaste, and profane? Frankly, before I went to BYU, I had never considered the possibility of coming out. Now I was obsessed with it.

On May 8, 1993, Elder Boyd K. Packer gave a speech at an "All-Church Coordinating Council Meeting." The manuscript of the speech was widely circulated. He said:

"There are three areas where members of the Church, influenced by social and political unrest, are being caught up and led away. I chose these three because they have made major invasions into the membership of the Church. . . . The dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement, . . . and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals."⁸

I do consider myself a scholar (so-called or otherwise) and also a feminist. I had been too ashamed to be part of the gay rights movement. But Elder Packer's comments made me feel more duplicitous than ever before. If I represented all three of his dangerous groups, I should have the courage to step forward and identify myself. I had done nothing wrong, and I resent being called an enemy of my own Church due to someone else's fear and ignorance. I realized that Elder Packer would be able to stay in his closet until cowards like me had the nerve to show him the way out.

Sometime during this period, BYU President Rex Lee decided to argue, in the US Supreme Court, in favor of Colorado's bigoted anti-gay Amendment 2.

In 1994, the Church declared its political opposition to the same-sex marriage issue in the Hawaiian court. Church leaders in Hawaii petitioned the court for the right to

⁶ BYU faculty contract for 1992-1993. (Emphasis mine)

⁷ Statement on Academic Freedom at Brigham Young University. Adopted September 14, 1992. (Emphasis mine). [<http://www.byu.edu/response/freedom.htm>]

⁸ Packer, B. K. (1993). Talk to the All-Church Coordinating Council, May 18. [<http://www.lds-mormon.com/face.shtml>]

be named co-defendant with the state in order to show a compelling state interest in denying the right to same-sex marriages. As spelled out in my BYU contract, I was not to "contradict or oppose. . . fundamental Church doctrine or policy."⁹ When I was hired I didn't know they were going to establish a policy which I had to oppose.

In February, 1994, I renewed my temple recommend with my Bishop, a colleague, who had recruited me to serve as clerk in his student ward. He properly asked only the questions required for the interview. I had a year before shared with him, without details, my lack of interest in dating and my sincere belief that I should never marry. The same afternoon, I went to be interviewed by a counselor in the Stake Presidency. This man is also a professor at BYU, but when he saw on my recommend that I was in the BYU 53rd Ward, a single's ward, he assumed that I was a student and not a colleague. He asked me the proper questions and I gave the proper and honest answers. But then he went on. He asked me if I had a girlfriend. I said no. He asked if I date. I said no. He asked why not. (What should I have said? Told him what I had told no one? That I'm gay? No, I lied.) I told him I don't really have the time. He then lectured me on my priesthood duty to marry and told me that if I wanted to find a girl to marry I must date twice a week. TWICE A WEEK! My guess is that he gives the same speech to every young man who isn't dating regularly—he certainly wasn't responding to the Spirit in my case.

I left the interview, temple recommend in hand, feeling two distinct emotions. I felt disheartened and sad that although I was worthy for a temple recommend, I had again found it necessary to lie in order to get it. I had, at least, dissembled. The other emotion I felt was anger, almost rage. It was not fair of this arrogant man to put me in a position where I had to lie to him and to deceive him. True, I'd been put in this position all my life—by Church leaders, by good meaning friends and colleagues who joke about dating and marriage, by my parents—and I'd become good and smooth at getting by. But that didn't make me feel good, or whole, or honest.

On November 15, 1994, Elder James E. Faust spoke at the weekly BYU Devotional. He railed against homosexuality. I was lucky I didn't go up to the Marriott Center, something I had been doing that semester because President Lee was pushing faculty attendance at the devotionals. That day I stayed in my office and listened to Elder Faust on the radio. I wept through the last half of his speech, and then, disconsolate, left school and went home. He said:

"There is some widely accepted theory extant that homosexuality is inherited. No scientific evidence demonstrates absolutely that this is so. . . . If it were so, it would frustrate the whole plan of mortal happiness."¹⁰

That's just the point. I THINK IT IS SO! I've always felt that way. If my personality is eternal (and if my personality isn't a big part of what makes up my spirit, I don't know what does) then the drives I feel, the fantasies I have, the aching that I can't get rid of, that all has to be just as eternal. I can't believe that all I've felt in this life, that the few substantial relationships I've had, and that what I've learned from all of this endless endurance is going to be for naught, and that in the next life I'll be somebody else, with different

⁹ Statement on Academic Freedom at Brigham Young University.

¹⁰ Faust, J. E. (1994). "Serving the Lord and resisting the Devil." BYU Devotional: November 15. Reprinted in The Ensign, September 1995, First Presidency Message.

affections, passions and motivations.

In the fall of 1994, I finally made the decision that I must come out if I was to survive. The words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired me: "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of. . . blackness and corroding despair."¹¹

Coming out of the closet was the most frightening experience of my life. There were actually, in addition to the changing environment at BYU, many forces working on me, convincing me that I had to take that step: I felt a growing sense of personal dishonesty; a despair at the thought of being alone the rest of my life; a feeling that time was running out and that I must make changes if I was to survive; a realization that there are gay people who share many of the same values that I do; and knowledge of an underground, yet vigorous, support system for LDS people who are homosexual.

Beginning in early 1995, I began actively telling people that I am gay whenever the subject came up, even indirectly. I did not wait for them to ask me. If they said something, even in jest, about marriage or dating, or if they told some stupid gay joke, or used some epithet, I told them. Soon, of course, the "rumor" was out of my hands.

In early April my department chair, John Rosenberg, told me that he had heard through the grapevine that I was telling people, including students, that I am homosexual. I admitted that what he had heard was true and I told him that I would not stop speaking the truth about myself. He actually took it quite well, and fully aware of the "publicity" that was likely to result, thought it "might be fun."

In early summer I heard again from John. He called me from Spain, where he was doing research, and told me that my name had been turned in to one of the Apostles. The report was that I had announced in a linguistics class that I am gay. Of course, it didn't happen. But I had mentioned to two students from that class the previous semester that I am gay. Anyway, the Apostles gave the job to Elder Eyring, Church Commissioner of Education, and he send the problem down to President Lee. From there it was brought up in the Presidents Council and decided that I needed to talk to the Provost, or Associate Provost. They didn't want to summon me, for fear that they would appear confrontational, so they had John call from Spain and tell me to set up an appointment.

On June 30, I talked to Todd Britsch. He had interviewed me when I was applying here for a job. He's a good man. Although we did not discuss it, it was my understanding that his gay son committed suicide about a year before. Todd was quite relieved to hear that I had already made a decision to leave BYU as soon as I found another job. I'm sure that this declared intention on my part kept me from being fired outright. Through the following year I did do a job search and was extremely fortunate to find a job at Weber State, my old Alma Mater.

My status at BYU, as the gay professor, was novel at least, but my personal experiences with coming out to the BYU community were almost universally positive. My colleagues were tremendously supportive and my students (the minority that wasn't oblivious) were understanding and often supportive. In one class, after an Associated Press article about me was in the Universe (the BYU student paper) two students wanted

¹¹. King, M. L., Jr. (1986). "Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963) p. 89. In I have a dream: Writings and speeches that changed the world. J. M. Washington, Editor. San Francisco: Harper.

to drop my class. They talked to another professor who taught the same course, and good for him, he told them to repent and leave him alone. They then went to my department chair, who told them that to drop my class they'd have to talk to me. My colleagues told me about this, but I never heard from the students, and no one dropped my class. So I figure they felt it was easier to hide on the back row of a class taught by a queer than it was to actually talk to one.

Nevertheless, my status as a celibate gay professor at BYU caused a considerable amount of comment. President Rex Lee admitted to the press that the situation had been uncomfortable for the University. Some negative editorials appeared in local papers, and a local ultra conservative radio talk-show host dedicated most of an hour to a discussion of me.

The unspeakable gift

I have not regretted for an instant coming out of the closet. The activities of my life are not much different than what they were before. I still live alone and spend my days planning and teaching classes in Spanish. But it is liberating to be honest.

When I first began teaching at BYU, there was a policy there that I adored. Whereas in most of our secular system of public education, teachers must hide any heartfelt or personally meaningful references to religion, at BYU sharing faith was encouraged. All my life I had felt that talking about religion at school, at least in any personal way, was a taboo. At BYU I grew quite accustomed to making references to my own faith in the classroom. What I could not talk about was sexual orientation.

I now, happily, find myself in a situation where I feel rather free to talk about both. One of the factors in my decision to come to WSU was the official policy that exists here prohibiting discrimination on account of sexual orientation. It is a joy to work in a place where I don't have to hide as a Gay Mormon.

Jesus told a parable of a man with several servants. To each of them he gave talents of gold. Most of the servants invested the money and when the master returned they were able to show him a profit. But a wicked and unprofitable servant buried his talent in the earth and kept it hidden.¹² I feel that I have been given a talent, and that for too long I kept it buried and hidden. As a gay man, I have been given a gift, and through shame and fear I long set it away and never used it. The Apostle Paul tells me: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee."¹³

Some people see gifts from God and blessing in odd things. I have often been puzzled by people who see blessings in misfortune. I once knew a couple that had raised a son with Down's Syndrome. The boy was in his mid-twenties and his parents were past retirement. They'd spent their lives caring for him. His mother once told me that their son's condition had been a great blessing. I have heard the same from other parents with children who are physically or mentally disabled. They insist that these children have a special gift. In college I know a blind woman who likewise felt that her blindness was a gift from God.

I believe that I too have a gift, but that for most of my life, it was unmentionable.

^{12.} Matthew 25:15-30; Luke 19:12-27

^{13.} I Timothy 4:14

Instead of valuing who I am, I consumed and digested my culture's hate and fear. Coming out of the closet was not for me a process of letting a few people in on a dirty little secret. By the time I finally did it, I was read to make a strong affirmation.

I have told everyone who is important to me that I am gay. Anybody who knows me very well, but whom I didn't personally tell, certainly read about me in the paper. I am as out in Utah as a gay man can be and not be a professional agitator.

I've called this essay the story of a late bloomer. I waited until my late 30s to open up, and it seems that the springtime has finally arrived.

In closing, read another poem by Walt Whitman. Called "All is truth," he wrote this one for me:¹⁴

O me, man of slack faith so long,
 Standing aloof, denying portions so long,
 Only aware today of compact all-diffused truth,
 Discovering today there is no lie or form of lie, and can be none, but grows as
 inevitably upon itself as the truth does upon itself...

Meditating among liars and retreating sternly into myself, I see that there are really
 no liars or lies after all. . .

And that the truth includes all. . .

And henceforth I will go celebrate any thing I see or am,

And sing and laugh and deny nothing.

Walt Whitman

¹⁴. Whitman, W. (1979). "All is truth" p. 457. In Leaves of Grass. Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library.