

10/11/09 Sermon

"The Best and Worst It Could Ever Be"

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Until I came out at the age of 45, I never believed that two total opposite feelings could exist in the same space and time.

I lived in a claustrophobic closet, a prison of my own making for 33 years. Each day warped my spirit; impaired my mental, physical and emotional health; and contradicted my sense of myself as a person of integrity. There wasn't a day free of the struggle to keep my secret, to keep that lie – "I'm straight" – to myself, to those I loved and the world. It was exhausting and so, so unnecessary!

Early on as a young teenager, I had no language to describe who I was. Besides, I would grow out of it. It was a passing phase after all. Wasn't it? As expected, I got married and had two sons – and now two grandchildren.

The feeling however, continued and intensified over the decades. But I soldiered on. I couldn't bear hurting my wife and children. I was petrified at the possibilities of so much loss – my wife, my family, my job, what little self-esteem I had left. But especially the loss of my children. They were everything. My identity as a family man. I thought that without those personas, I had no identity. At all cost, the real "me" had to stay hidden or I was lost.

Finally, one October, 20 years ago, I hit the wall. I broke. I had attended a workshop dealing with issues of self-identity and respect. A group of men like myself, gay and married, young and older – and *much older* – engaged in trust-building exercises, workshops. It was then that I came face to face with the real "me." It was illuminating, shattering, sad beyond enduring, the most traumatic and life altering experience of my life.

It seemed like I sobbed for an eternity.

When I finally could breathe, I experienced a wave of joy ... calm ... peace ... that I had never experienced before. It was as if my inner spirit, my soul, the wounded and hidden me, was healed in some profound way. Tears of grief for what was and yet to be were now mixed with self-love and acceptance. It felt so good, so liberating. I wanted to shout from the highest mountain – "*I am free!*"

But there was still agonizing work to do. I still had to reveal myself, to drop the mask of deceit that I wore so well for 33 years. Not wanting to ruin the holidays, I waited in agony, wanting to crawl out of my skin ... and finally kicked open the closet door and told my wife on January 4th, 1991. You see, you never forget the day your life changed forever. The world I knew was no longer. Only mystery and wonder awaited the aftermath.

It was weeks later that we decided to tell our sons. The divorce announcement was unpleasant and sad enough of a surprise for one day. The boys reacted with the emotions you would expect. There were lots of tears and hugs all around. Jane and I were bound and determined to reassure them and not use them as pawns between us. In that, we succeeded and eventually had the Oprah divorce – non-contentious and respectful. Our relationship remains civil and reasonably loving to this day.

Regrets, yes I have a few – the pain ... the lie at the core of my being ... the fact that I hurt anybody. But with repentance for being out of right relationship, forgiveness was eventually offered.

No, I would not trade my relationship or children for living freely all that time. I made my choice and am the better for the marriage and children. My wife, in the most kind way, said it best, “We learned all we could from each other and it was time to move on.”

We were both free to live more complete lives. Jane remarried and lives with a delightful man and I have been in two short and loving partnerships.

Yes, I wish I had come out earlier. My UU faith and values surely called me to a life of authenticity. It only took half a lifetime to grow into the heart of my faith. Guess I am a slow learner! I know in hindsight that without my faith and friends, I would never have survived this journey.

The lessons of all this are many and varied. The path is calling anyone who lives in a closet of their own making. Remember today is National Coming Out Day. “Come out, come out, whomever you are.” Hide your addiction, illness – mental or physical. Your victimhood or history as a perpetrator only prolong the agony, delays your healing, prevents you from getting help and moving on. There is forgiveness, hope and love waiting for you. There is wholeness, too, and peace. I know this because I have come to accept my failing, understand my weakness, and revel in the joy and self-acceptance I feel every day of my new life.

While this is my unique story, you have your own struggles. In your own struggle, be certain of one thing: our faith will guide you, and this

community will be there to sustain you on your path to freedom and wholeness.

In the end, this is not a tragedy, but a celebration of hope and joy, a triumph of the spirit over fear and loathing. Ultimately this is a love story.

Blessed be.