Gay, Explained

History, Science, Culture and Spirit

Preston Grant

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for My People —
near,
far,
gone,
and yet to come

Out beyond ideas
of wrong-doing
and right-doing,
there is a field.

I will meet you there.

~ *Rumi*

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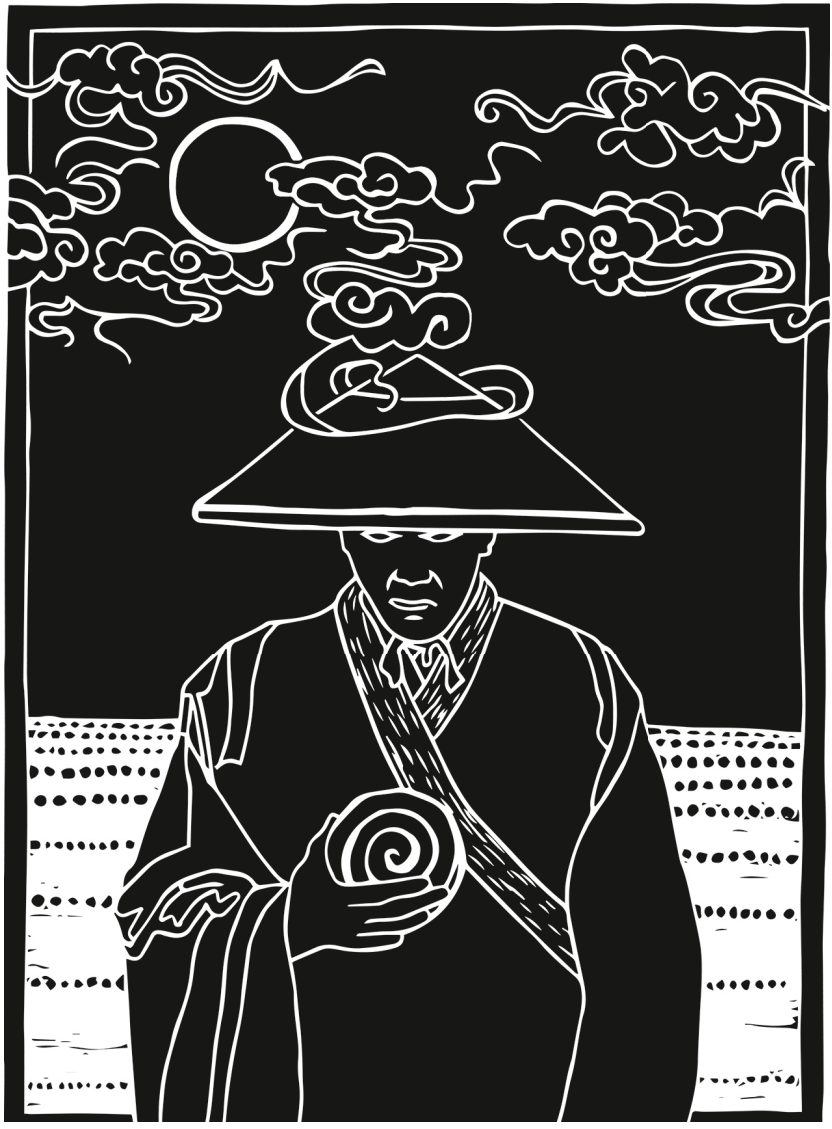


ONE

The Names

> There are some things
> you learn best in calm,
> and some in storm.
>
> ~ *Willa Cather*

I WAS TWENTY-NINE years old when a great quilt was unrolled across the lawn in front of the White House, and people started to read the names. As a volunteer on the grief support team I dressed in white and walked the quilt offering solace to those who needed it; and there were many. This is back when people around me were dying of AIDS. Lots of people. But it was 1989, a time when it seemed like no one else in the country cared.

To memorialize the dead and make a statement that gay lives mattered, an activist named Cleve Jones created the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Each

panel was made of fabric, three by six feet, the size of a grave. Friends and family created individual panels representing the life of a departed loved one, adorning it with color, words, fabrics, and quirky memorabilia. Then each of those individual panels was stitched together with others into large squares, and those squares were stitched together with each other and with walkways, until thousands of little fabric grave sites covered the memorial lawn in front of a White House that was busy ignoring that any of us existed at all.

Off to the side of the quilt was a small white podium where parents, friends, and lovers climbed the short flight of steps to the dais, walked up to a microphone, and read the names of the dead. They each read a few names from the official list of people represented in the panels, and then, more personally, they read the names of their own loved one they had come to grieve: "…and my beloved son, Jonathan. We miss you Johnny, and think of you every day. You are forever in our hearts."

It was my job to stand at the foot of those podium stairs and help those who had just read the names. Many had supporters with them, but others came alone. Hour after hour, morning to night, people from across America came to read the names, struggled through sharing the name of their own dead lovers and sons, and then returned back down the stairs where I stood waiting as they collapsed into my arms. The majority of the people I helped were grieving mothers who shared stories of small towns where they could not tell anyone in their community how their beloved child passed, of husbands unable or unwilling to speak of the tragedy, and of their travels alone to Washington to say aloud the name of their dead child.

My technique was simple. I stood at the base of the stairs offering those coming down a hand, while simultaneously throwing out a shoulder for them to brace themselves if they needed it. I am a tall man, and solid, and when I wordlessly offered my shoulder, most of those grieving mothers took it, burying their face in my chest as they wept uncontrollably. All I could do was hold them till the sobs subsided, then turn to help the next person coming down the stairs.

After hours at this post I came to feel like a porter at some melancholy train station, taking a bit of the emotional baggage from the hands of these mothers, metaphorically lifting off some of their burdens, and putting them down on the ground as they walked away, in preparation to relieve the next grieving mother of some small piece of her sorrows. Over the hours this grief

accumulated, forming a pool that felt like it was surrounding me and beginning to pull me under. Overwhelmed by it all, I had another volunteer stand in for me as I walked out onto the fresh green grass of the nation's capital, sat down on the lawn with my back to the quilt, and to the names, and to all those grieving friends and families and lovers, and wept my own tears for what was happening around me. I despaired for my country at those times, wondering at the way community disappeared when misplaced moralism took over.

There is more to discuss about AIDS in a later chapter, but I share this moment to place my life within the larger gay story. I was born a child of the 1960s, just as gay liberation was born. I grew into the confusion of my teenage sexuality during the culture upheavals of the 1970s. I came out fully as a gay adult just as AIDS hit in the 1980s. I watched with dismay as the fight for our civil rights foundered in the early 2000s, and I have ridden the waves of joy as gay lives have grown increasingly recognized, respected, and integrated into the cultural mainstream. My life paralleled the larger gay experience each step of the way. Wanting to tell that bigger story of my people, initial drafts of this book left out my own stories, but early readers convinced me that was wrong. At its root, being gay is something so intensely personal that the only story I could tell with the necessary depth was my own. The next chapter introduces me as your narrator, before launching into the bigger history of my people, the science behind how we got here, and much more.

The world today looks very different from the one I grew up in. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are going from success to success, our lights shining ever more brightly for all to see. There is much work left to be done, but the way ahead is clear. Now, as we enjoy these victories, it is time to pause, and gather those who love us around, and read the list of the names. Not just the names of people dead from AIDS, but the names of all the gay people previous histories bypassed, ignored, killed, and shunned. Our lives have spanned times of darkness, times of light, and times of exceptional brilliance, far beyond what I can capture in these briefest of sketches. But with each name, and each story, the thread of one life is woven with that of another, and each of those patches is then sewn together with all the others. With the addition of each piece the perspective widens, and a larger picture becomes visible. It is a picture that includes every person alive on the planet today, and everyone who has ever lived, and everyone who ever will live, all

knit together into the great quilt of the human family. This book is a testament to the power of that quilt, and the importance of all those names.

TWO

Who I Am

We're here for a reason.
I believe a bit of the reason
is to throw little torches out
to lead people through the dark.

~ *Whoopi Goldberg*

MY NAME IS PRESTON GRANT, and I was born gay and Mormon. I am now an ex-Mormon, as my church excommunicated me for being gay, and I now have neither an affiliation with, nor much interest in, the Mormon church. Yet my youth as a faithful Mormon remains one of the things that defines me, and my heritage is part of me in a way that most closely resembles an ethnicity. I am a descendant of some of the original families that founded the church and built the state of Utah. My ancestors were in the first wagons

that arrived in the valley of the Great Salt Lake, and I bear the last name of one of the church's great prophets. I grew up proud of my history, studied it deeply, and carried inside me the kind of confidence in Mormonism that only narrow adherence can bring. I was raised with the expectation that I would be one of the Mormon cultural elite, part of the unfolding zeitgeist of Mormon truth that was expanding and spreading and destined to take over the earth. The majority of my vast family, and most of the people I grew up with, continue to support the church. Most members of my large and extended family follow their leaders faithfully, donate their time and energy to promote Mormon culture, and fund the church through a tithe of 10% of their gross incomes to promote its global operations and expansion.

When I was ten my family moved from my native San Francisco back to our ancestral home in Salt Lake City, the place the Mormons call Zion. Decades later, as I sought therapy to help me understand what went so wrong in my childhood, a counselor guided me through a meditation where I closed my eyes and pictured myself slowly descending a staircase, moving with each step deeper and deeper into the past, until I was standing in front of a door at the bottom of the stairs. On the other side of that door would be the place where I needed to be to understand my confusion, wherever that was. At the count of three I was to open that door, look around, and report where I was, and what I saw there. One — Two — Three.

Deep in my imagination, I opened the door and walked out onto my childhood playground in Salt Lake City, just after I moved there in the third grade. The playground looked the way I remembered it — asphalt, chain link fence, surrounding trees, and the ever-present Wasatch mountains towering behind. Although I was standing there alone, with no one else in sight, I was deluged by a cacophony of voices filling my ears. Criticism. Nagging. Teasing. Disapproval. My ears rang with the sound of voices so loud I could not think. From every direction I heard voices telling me I was wrong. I was wrong in the way I walked. Wrong in the way I sat. Wrong in how much I liked to talk and wrong in what I talked about. I was wrong in what I liked. Wrong in what I cared about. I was wrong in the way I dealt with conflict, and wrong in the way I played schoolyard games. Completely alone, bereft of any companionship or support, I felt buried in the din of voices surrounding me, all telling me that every aspect of my being was bad and wrong, and making clear I was far too weird to be part of their society.

Reflecting back now, more than forty years later, I remember one story that exemplifies that time of my life. It happened one afternoon after church when I was about eleven. After returning home from Sunday services, I got a telephone call asking me to come back to the church building. Confused about why, I returned and found all the boys of my age, along with our adult leaders, gathered in a classroom. The purpose of this unprecedented meeting was to clarify the ways I was unacceptable to the group and to make suggestions on how I could improve myself. A boy a year older than I led the discussion of my failings as they listed my faults on the chalkboard, and then brainstormed things I could do to make myself more acceptable to the group. The only result I remember from that meeting was that I was supposed to be more athletic and take up jogging. The verdict against me was unanimous. I was too odd and queer for my peers, and I had to change or be rejected. No one was there to stand up for me. There were no positive attributes listed on that board. I walked home crushed by my church's official disapproval and tried jogging for a week or so, feeling as if I carried the weight of my shame with every step.

The chorus of disapproval that surrounded me through my life in Utah left lasting scars, although I will never be able to communicate fully what happened there. My recollections of those years remain scattered and chaotic, with many parts missing or incoherent. The lingering results, on the other hand, are more clear. For decades I was overly self conscious of my body, as my every move felt faulty. It also left me unsure of my thoughts and opinions, as they never seemed to mesh with anyone around me. A common legacy from trauma is an inability to simply feel what we feel when we feel it. Part of my problem came from living in a world where no one could reflect me back to myself accurately. The effect was like growing up in a funhouse of curving mirrors. The vision of who I was, displayed back by those around me, always made me into something weird and distorted.

Doing my best to survive conditions I was taught were normal, healthy, superior to mainstream society, and absolutely God's will, I came to live a life of pain. Over time I learned to contort body and spirit to try to fit in and please those around me. I cannot say that strategy was much of a success, but I had few options. My primary survival mechanism was to cringe up tight inside my body, protect my overly sensitive heart as best I could, and then try to mold my outside to fit the world I lived in.

Within a few years my body began the transformations of puberty, and I became curious about sex. Mormons of the time believed being gay was a choice, and therefore an important moral issue, but I am clear I never chose to be gay. It felt more like my sexuality chose me. It found me on a warm spring afternoon in that same schoolyard of Rosslyn Heights Elementary School when I was in the fifth grade. We were outside playing a game during afternoon recess when a sixth grader took his shirt off. With an odd awareness, I found myself staring at his athletic torso and suddenly something new happened inside me. With unnerving clarity I realized I was attracted to this boy, and more specifically, to his body. To translate for straight people, this must be something like the disruptive moment straight boys feel when a woman's breasts shift from the warmly maternal to the unnervingly erotic. Puberty's first thunderings arrived as attraction to a boy I only remember from that one searing image. And from that day on I looked at men differently.

I was not choosing to be gay. I was not giving in to an indulgent experience of decadent pleasure, as that old view of homosexuality would have it. I was only eleven. I was not even old enough, in those pre-internet days, to understand the concept of sex at all, and certainly not gay sex — a fact best demonstrated when the mean girl in class teased me for not knowing what the word "gay" meant. I was absolutely sure it meant happy, and was baffled when she laughed at my naiveté. While the debate over homosexuality pivoted on whether my sexual attractions were my choice, I cannot see how my full-bodied reaction to another boy at age eleven was something I could choose. I think it was just adolescence. Choice came later when I had to decide what to do about those feelings.

By age thirteen I had learned far too many things about sex from the bizarrely erroneous *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex, but were Afraid to Ask*, and being both tall and precocious for my age, I set out to find the kind of sex described in that book. I had no idea where to meet gay men, but being a nerdish kid who lived next to a university campus I started with the college bookstore. My innovative technique for picking up a gay man who might be interested in me was to stand in the bookstore's magazine section with the newly published *Playgirl* tucked inside another magazine, and when a gay looking man stood nearby I would open my magazine wide enough that he could see it was nude men I was secretly looking at. It eventually worked, and I ended up enjoying a delightfully nervous sexual encounter

with a man who was muscular and covered in furry blonde hair. Together we walked up to a forest clearing of a nearby nature preserve. The fooling around part was pretty elementary, but the thing I remember best was his silver mirrored aviator sunglasses, so popular in the 1970s, and how I nervously reached up to take them off of him so I could see into his eyes. I guess my lack of experience showed because on our walk back to campus he asked me if I was really in college, as I seemed younger than that. I did not dare tell him I was still in Junior High.

I walked home from that encounter in a daze. Having sex, out of doors, with a virile man, was a dazzling experience for a thirteen-year-old Mormon boy. I was left with the unfamiliar sensation that my actions felt both right and wrong at the same time, my first experience of what would come to be a common sensation when my internal moral compass differed so dramatically from the ethics of my religion.

A few months later, I was riding a city bus home from the downtown library when a conspicuously gay man got on. I gave him a interested look, and he chose the seat next to me. I do not remember if we talked or just flirted wordlessly, but when the bus reached my stop I got off, walked home, and forgot about him. What happened next was never quite clear to me, but somehow that man turned me in to the Mormon authorities, pointing me out to a Bishop (the Mormon equivalent of a pastor) who called me into his office to confront me about being gay. I was not quite fourteen, and what I remember best about that meeting was the way the gray walls of the Bishop's office began to quiver and melt around me as the world of my childhood disintegrated.

The Bishop told my parents, and like most members of their generation, they had no clue what to do. They showed their love for me by keeping the connection solid, but society had provided them with no guidelines for how to parent a gay child. They were of the generation where there was a specific ideal for men, and a specific ideal for women, and a defined trajectory for relationships, marriage, and family that applied to everyone equally. Homosexuality was not discussed, even by people who were clearly and obviously gay. Gender variation was not even a topic, except for the general confusion around long-haired hippies. So my parents' solution was to ask me what was going on. They would sit me down and we would discuss my "problem," and they would ask me for my feelings about it. But there was a

flaw in that approach, as I did not know what I felt or why I felt it, which in retrospect is a central aspect of puberty. My adolescence as a young gay kid, long before society could discuss gay issues, left us all adrift in murky ignorance and flawed misinformation. Unfortunately for me, the Mormon church thought it did understand homosexuality, and how to handle homosexual behavior in young church members. Like many Christians to this day, Mormons believed homosexuality was curable through the application of enough effort, prayer, and negative stimulus.

Young Mormons are taught that they should not have personal boundaries between themselves and church leaders — every private thought that is not in conformance with church doctrine must be confessed to the male authorities. Withholding anything as private or personal is considered a moral flaw in resistance to God's authority. I therefore submitted to the weekly self-criticism sessions my Bishop established. Every Sunday after church I would go to his office and confess any homosexual feelings or acts from the previous week. If my level of description was insufficient, he would ask me to repeat my stories in more detail, expressing his disapproval while he was clearly fascinated to hear more. He would then declare his disgust at me, telling me I was dirty and unfit to be in association with other members of the church.

To make sure I knew how negatively God viewed me, my Bishop had me read aloud from the words of the Mormon Prophet: "Homosexuality is an ugly sin, repugnant to those who find no temptation in it," and, "All such deviations from normal, proper heterosexual relationships are not merely unnatural but wrong in the sight of God. Like adultery, incest, and bestiality they carried the death penalty under the Mosaic law."[1] The Prophet of my youth declared homosexuals unworthy of life by divine decree, a distressing thought at fourteen, but fitting in a church that routinely said homosexuality was a crime next to murder in severity. When I complained to my parents about this treatment, they deferred to the sacred authority of the church's leaders, so week after week I was sent back for more.

When strict spiritual guidance and humiliating criticism failed to cure me of my attractions towards men, I was sent to specialist. That was how, at sixteen, I ended up in aversion therapy. Long discredited outside of Utah, aversion therapy looked like the scene in the movie *A Clockwork Orange* where they pin Malcolm McDowell's eyes open and make him watch horrific movies while the nurse puts drops in his eyes. The primary difference was that

I was there voluntarily, so there was no need to hold my eyes open, and the Mormon version added a measuring device wrapped around my genitals to display my state of arousal on a dial next to the therapist's chair.

At the beginning of each session I put the plethysmograph around my privates, zipped up my trousers, and sat down in a chair with arms. The plethysmograph's wires ran out the top of my pants and back to a monitor dial mounted next to the therapist's chair and the stand holding the movie projectors. (And no, I was not wearing the Mormon sacred undergarments, as those come later in life.) The therapist then came in and placed electrodes on my arms and strapped me to the chair. Sitting back in his seat, the therapist then showed me movies depicting gay pornographic scenes, while monitoring any changes in my erection on the dial. If I had an erection, I was jolted with electricity and he switched the film to straight pornography. The theory behind aversion therapy said that by applying negative stimulus while viewing the "wrong" images, the brain would learn to avoid those specific thoughts, and by switching the film while aroused, the "correct" erotic images would be imprinted, reprogramming the mind to a more appropriate sexuality.

This was 1976, well before video tapes made pornography common, so I had never seen anything like the movies that played out on the therapist's screen from clicking reel-to-reel Super 8 projectors. The first movie I saw was of a stockily furry man wearing only jeans and leaning against a motorcycle. He seemed shy or reserved, but he slowly caressed his sculpted body, and unbuttoned his fly. The plethysmograph measured my physiological reaction, so the doctor shocked me repeatedly and then flipped to the other projector. Now a young straight couple was walking down a path in the woods holding hands, an image I was supposed to find erotic. My therapist feared showing me hard core pornography because of my young age, so all the straight pornography I saw was soft core. He did not have soft core gay pornography, as no one was making such a thing back then, so all the gay porn I saw was incredibly graphic. In the dark of that therapist's office I watched orgies of well endowed young men over and over, accompanied by more and more electric shocks that could not penetrate my awe at the imagery, alternating with straight 1970s couples fondling on a various shaggy carpets in front of all different kinds of fireplaces.

Needless to say, even this level of torture did not cure me of being gay, so buttons were added to the chair. While viewing the gay pornography and

being shocked to short-circuit my body's attractions, I was supposed to push the buttons in a particular sequence. The added complexity was supposed to help override any sexual thoughts. The intensity of the shocks rose and the complexity of the required button pushing sequences increased, but nothing changed my attraction to the male sexual images. What those weekly sessions did was leave me horny, emotionally twisted, and deeply humiliated by the bright red marks that lingered on my arms as I drove around in my car for hours afterwards waiting for the redness to fade.

Church authorities said this was good for me. The therapist was a man I saw at church meetings, and my parents never asked the details of the therapy I was receiving, deferring to the supposed experts. As for me, I spoke of it as little as possible, as I was lost in a morass of internalized pain and the deepest of shame without an ally in any direction or any sense of where solid ground might lie. At some point the pain of it all grew to be too much, and after a year or so of treatment I finally pretended I was cured and quit.

Decades later, the emotional scars of that time were overwhelming me, and I finally got actual therapeutic help in sorting things out and making sense of it all. Peeling back the layers, I realized that I had an earlier violation. As a young boy I was sexually molested by a male friend of the family, a fact that scarred me deeply. I liked this man and appreciated his attention, so his violation, although not physically dramatic, was emotionally devastating. Clarity around this younger abuse helped explain why I was so sexual at such a young age. Sexually abused children are exposed to adult sexual energy, which has no place to go in a child's body. When puberty hits, the sexual wiring comes on already filled with all that energy, and acting out is common.

The combination of being sexually abused when young, and then systematic abuse by church elders, left me with at least three lasting effects. First, I learned to split my deeper self from my feelings. To survive in that social world I learned to hide the deepest sense of my truth from the mindless criticisms and cruelties of those around me. Even now, decades later, I sometimes suffer crippling body pains in my gut, down my arms, and throughout my body, along with severe bouts of PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, from all that torture. At the depths of my pain I found thoughts of suicide helpful — it was comforting to know there was at least one way out of my internal hell. As an adult I thought living with a body filled with physical pain was normal. To this day, so many decades after those core experiences, panic

attacks and depression remain my regular companions. At this point I view them as chronic conditions I will never be free of, but try to manage. I now live in the sunshine many days, with regular dips back into the depths to remind me of how deep the dark can be.

The second lesson I learned is something all torture victims learn, that there is some inner Me that is impenetrable to outside forces. You can hurt my body and you can hurt my mind, but there is some essential part of my consciousness that is even deeper and remains untouched, an inviolable essence of self not completely linked to my physical body or rational mind. It may have been at that point I became clear on the existence of the soul, the spirit that animates our bodies. I know from personal experience the truth of Teilhard de Chardin's saying that "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience."[2] It is a strange but powerful lesson to learn from torture.

The third thing I learned was that I was inalterably attracted to men. No amount of pain, shaming, or diabolical torture therapy would change that. At such a young age I did not fully understand the implications, but I knew any future would have to include the part of myself that loved men. The ideas of gay liberation were new back then and far distant from my life in 1970s Salt Lake City. My indoctrination within the Mormon world was so absolute I could not even form the thought of leaving for a very long time; but I had the vision that some day I would become an integrated person, with all the seemingly disparate parts of myself converging into a harmonious whole. I just had no idea how to make that happen.

While I never got the chance to choose, or un-choose, my sexuality, I still had to decide what to do with my life. After high school I went to a year of college, then decided to give my culture's wisdom one last great try, so I volunteered for a two-year stint serving a Mormon mission overseas. After a thoroughly religious adolescence with gay stuff running on the side, I wanted to commit completely to my church's teachings, run the experiment fully, and see what happened. So for two full years, from nineteen to twenty-one, I lived a life of prayer, service, religious study, complete submittal to authority, and absolute celibacy. The result was a profoundly enlivening cultural and linguistic experience living in Tokyo, Japan and a profoundly unfulfilling experience serving as a door-to-door salesman for the church. Most importantly, this most intensive attempt to shift my sexuality left me utterly clear

that the experiment failed. There was no effective path from where I was to where the church said I was supposed to be. So I gave up on being Mormon, moved to Washington, DC for graduate school, found a boyfriend, and started to live as an open and honest gay man. The church followed up by officially excommunicating me for the crime of being gay and honest about it.

Because every gay person has to find their own path through life, outside of the societal norms, it is part of our culture to share our coming out stories. When I told other gay people I was writing this book, the most common response was, "Well you should hear my story!" Almost every one of us has a significant story to share, filled with pathos, joy, and powerful insights into the human condition. And now you know mine.

This book is the voice of a single individual. I write from my experience as a fifty-something, white, American, relatively masculine, gay man. I celebrate all of who I am, but that also means my ability to speak for women, younger, older, gender variant, bisexuals, people of different races, and many others is limited. My hope is that honesty about my own experiences will help reveal the deeper truths universal to us all. This book is my attempt to share what I have learned about the great distinction that separated me from the mainstream, the signature quality that marked me as unique, different, special, eccentric, and queer — the fact that I was born gay.

It was only well into the project that I realized how directly the roots of this book date back to my troubled youth. I remember long lonely nights sitting in my bedroom, lost in sadness, looking out my window at the street below and feeling baffled that no one had ever traveled this road before and left me a trail of breadcrumbs to help me find my way out. In the midst of that teenage despair I swore that if I ever made it through to the light, I would mark the path for others. Although I did not realize it when I started writing, this book is my fulfillment of that teenage commitment. I have been in the dark forest. I have found my way out. And now I have marked the path.

A couple of quick notes: I describe people of the "opposite sex" as the other-sex, both to mirror the term same-sex and because men and women are not opposites in any meaningful way. I use the term "gay" to represent the LGBT and related communities, as well as for animals and other natural phenomena because it is easier than the alphabet soup of the fullest possible inclusion, and is the word most often used in common speech. All scriptures are King James Version unless otherwise noted. And finally, I use the word

God to honor the sacred and transcendent. Read it as figurative or literal and the meaning should remain the same.

And so the most personal chapter of the book comes to an end. The remainder is a diverse collection of topics divided into short chapters. Wanting to warm up a work that could seem too serious, I created icons and illustrations to illuminate and enliven the text. I hope you enjoy them. The next chapter expands into my community as a prelude to discussing some of the diverse stories that help explain what it is to be gay, and how our existence affects everyone in the human family.

THREE

Who We Are

When we remember
we are all mad,
the mysteries disappear
and life stands explained.

~ *Mark Twain*

WHEN I STEPPED OUT of the narrow Mormon world of my youth I entered the raucous cacophony of the gay community, and I have considered myself gay ever since. Yet all these years later, I still cannot define with precision what it means to be gay. The realities of life are so much more complex than any single label can communicate.

Personally, I like the term gay as an umbrella category, without too much attachment to exactly what it means. In my ears the word sounds positive and

joyful, with a touch of a smirk embedded into it. I have the image of a "gay" man being someone who is expressive and effusive in whatever way seems appropriate to the moment, without the constraints many straight men seem to feel.

Over time the implication that gay referred to men became a problem, as gay men tended to hog the spotlight. As I remember the story, we separated out Lesbians back in the 1980s so that gay women would be acknowledged more explicitly and not as some women's auxiliary to the men's club; and then we added Bisexuals to cover the middle ground. That made us the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual community. While that more or less covered sexuality, it left out the interrelated issues of gender, or the ways individuals relate to their own masculinity and femininity, so the GLBs added the T to represent transgender people and all the other gender variations, and putting women first, we became the LGBT community.

Even thus defined, it remains an odd sort of club. By circumstances of my birth, I am a part of a community formed by drawing a circle around everyone who feels a mainstream sense of sexuality and gender, and then declaring solidarity with everyone born outside that circle. While there are endless divisions and sub-groups within the LGBT community, at our grandest we are a group of people defined by our inclusiveness for the excluded.

Wanting to make sure every variation felt welcome, we kept adding letters. We added Q for Queer people who were simply different, and another Q for Questioning people who were wondering about their true sexuality. For those who were loving but not sexual we added an A for Asexual. For those born physically outside the male-female norms we added an I for Intersex. We tried to honor every gender or sexual variation in the human experience with its own letter, but acronyms like LGBTQQAI were such tongue twisters that most of us retreated back to the simplicity of saying gay, LGBT, LGBTQ, or increasingly, queer. There may never be a singular label that covers such a disparate community, so the most important thing is the welcome offered to anyone who wants in. If you feel you are part of the club, or just have affinity for the rest of us non-mainstream folk, then consider yourself welcome, and call us by whatever name works best for you.

I like labels, and consider them important. They are useful little tags that help sort out different kinds of people: funny, Flemish, pedestrian, liberal, Lutheran, quadriplegic, motherly, Eagle Scout, plumber, redhead, wise, short,

rich, acerbic, girly, suburban, Hindu, intelligent, centered, African, kind, athletic, American, and obstinate. Of course any label can also be offensive when used to hurt, and labels are only valid when their limitations are respected, so no one label ever tells the whole truth about a person. Applying the label Mormon or even ex-Mormon to me, for example, does not begin to convey the complexity of my story. The same is true for the label gay. I am gay, but the image conjured in someone's mind when they hear that label may not match the real me. I am my labels, and I am so much more, and so is everybody else.

The core nature of humanity is probably pretty consistent over time, but as the collective understanding of the human condition grows and changes, the labels must evolve as well. The concept of heterosexuality, for example, was invented in the late 1800s. Heterosexual sexuality had always existed, but it was only in the Victorian age that people decided they needed a label for people attracted to the other sex. This conceptualization of heterosexuality arrived as the corollary to the equally new idea that some people could be labeled homosexual, another new social label for a timeless sexuality. Both of these labels came from the period when science was trying to name and categorize everything in the natural world, a process led by people like Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud.

Originally, the homosexual label was used as a description of a mental illness-like malady, as the medical establishment considered homosexuals sick and deviant. That began to change in the twentieth century as gay people gathered in large cities and started sharing our stories with each other. Together we developed a collective sense of who we were and what made us different, and began pushing back against the prevailing norms. Over time we became clear that we experienced our homosexuality and sense of gender as inborn parts of ourselves, and therefore society was wrong to label those variations a sickness. With that shift in perspective came the need for a new label, so we dropped the clinical sounding homosexual, and started calling ourselves gay.

No one really knows when the word gay first came to mean someone who loves another person of the same sex. The word originally meant carefree or uninhibited, and someone being extremely carefree and uninhibited was probably doing something immoral. Chaucer used the word gay in that sense

in the 1630s.[1] In his time a gay woman was a prostitute, so maybe a gay man was a roughly equivalent breaker of sexual rules.

By the 1920s the word gay was showing up among homosexual men in New York, but it was not the most common term of the time. In describing pre-World War II culture in his wonderful book *Gay New York,* historian George Chauncey noted that newspaper and court records routinely used three different terms for men who had sex with men: fairies, queens, and trade.[2] Fairies were the obviously and outwardly gay, mincing and lisping and often considered low class figures living outside of polite society. Queens were the secretly gay men who could pass as straight in public, often living with their wives and children and conducting their gay relationships in private on the side. Trade is the category most unfamiliar to modern Americans, as trade were straight men who occasionally had sex with gay men, usually in the "masculine" sexual position. The classic image of trade was the sailor on shore leave looking for a little sexy something before a long sea voyage, and better the sexual ministrations of another man than nothing at all.

This layered conceptualization of human sexuality solidified into a singular gay identity in the 1970s as the gay community became adamant that anyone who ever had any sexual contact with anyone of the same sex was gay, and straight American men stopped fooling around in the gray zones for fear of being tarred with a negative label. As part of early gay liberation, gay came to mean a singular identity, inborn and intrinsic for an identifiable minority of the population, a label to be worn as a declaration of a proud and positive sense of self. Today that meaning has softened, and usage varies by community and speaker.

This idea that everyone who had sex with a same-sex partner must be gay was a culturally-defined boundary. In much of the world it was considered normal for a man to have sex with other men once in a while. Gay friends in Brazil, for example, tell me that most straight Brazilian men are available for male-male sex, as long as it is discreet. Gay travelers to parts of the outwardly anti-gay Muslim world bring back stories of secretive male-male behavior so common it can feel threatening. Some of the best stories of this heteroflexibility, to use the modern term, came from British gay men who enjoyed dalliances with "straight" American soldiers in the darkened alleys of London during the Blitz of World War II.[3] Their heightened sense that life could end at any moment stripped away man soldiers' traditional inhibitions.

Gender studies scholar Eve Sedgwick provided a framework for understanding these various perspectives by defining two ways of looking at being gay, the minority view and the universal view.[4] The minoritizing view declares gay people a distinct minority with definable traits, while the universalizing view sees sexuality as a continuum where everyone has a bit of heterosexuality and homosexuality in them, varying from full-on queer to barely a whiff.

The more activist members of the gay community tended to prefer the minoritizing view. Defining ourselves as a well-delineated group made us into a class of citizens who could be researched and protected, and gained us clear analogues with other racial and ethnic minorities. It simplified the discussion to say that some people are gay, some are not, and leave it at that. Many individuals found it comfortable to claim these labels in a similarly rigid way, as it was easier to identify as 100% straight or 100% gay and ignore any fuzzy bits around the edges.

Comforting as that kind of black and white thinking can be, the minoritizing view fails in its ability to define a clean bright line separating who belongs in which category. The universalizing view solves that problem by declaring sexuality a spectrum, placing everyone somewhere on a gay-straight continuum. As societies became more honest about sexuality, this perspective seemed to be gaining, as it helped explain the straight guy who had a man crush in college and the straight woman who wondered if she loves her female friends more than her husband. Seen from this universal perspective, the idea that homosexuality only exists in some easily definable minority group is nonsense, as there is a little sugar in all of us.

Psychologist Lisa Diamond added a helpful distinction in her book *Sexual Fluidity*, as she teased out ways the traditional gay-straight distinction worked differently in women. Diamond found that many women did not sort so easily into the gay-straight-bi categories of the LGBT paradigm. In fact, she suggests that the whole idea of a persistent sexual orientation that can be labeled L, G, or B may be more of a male paradigm than a female one. As Diamond describes it, many women have attractions that are clear and un-choosable in the moment, but may be more fluid over time.[5]

Diamond's descriptions of a fluid female sexuality fits the commonly heard stories of women who live their lives happily married to a man, but when that marriage ends, find themselves in love with a woman. I recently met a middle-aged woman who had married a man, and liked sexual relations

with men, but had a lingering sadness that her most emotionally intimate relationship had been with another woman earlier in her life. I find it astonishing how many straight female friends tell similar stories, and how few men.

It should not be surprising that the cycles of male and female sexuality can be different. Women and men are physically different, emotionally different, and differently socialized. To give one concrete example, men shown pornographic images while hooked up to machines that measure arousal displayed strong responses to pictures of either one sex or the other. Even men who claim to be bisexual tend to show physical arousal to only one of the sexes. Women's bodies, on the other hand, showed sexual arousal to both sexes. So it appears that men's minds and bodies have a more focused and targeted sexuality, while women are more generally sexual.[6] Women's sexual preferences also seem to broaden as they age, while men's narrow.[7]

Having brought up bisexuality, I should note that I seldom use the term, but that is not because I consider it invalid. Quite the opposite. I tend to find the universalizing view more useful, so I see everyone on a spectrum. That means that for me the term bisexual applies to so many people, to such widely varying degrees, and in so many different ways, that I find it difficult to use meaningfully. To illustrate the problem, sex researcher Alfred Kinsey used a six-point scale for sexuality, from one for perfectly and completely heterosexual to six for perfectly and completely homosexual. That means from the moment a person steps off of one, all the way until they arrive firmly on six, they are in bisexual territory. In addition, a lot of young gay people call themselves bisexual for a time. It is a more socially neutral term than gay, and it may be a more accurate description of the state they are in as their bodies and souls work out the nature of their still-emerging adult sexuality.

All of that said, truly bisexual people do exist. Tests of pupil dilations in response to male and female imagery have proven that bisexual men have a clearly biological response to both genders.[8] Analyzing people's personal behaviors online, however, the dating site OKCupid found that only 23% of declared bisexuals actually sent messages to both sexes.[9] Add in the previously mentioned data that bisexual men are typically aroused by just one of the sexes, and it appears that the nature of human attractions is complex indeed.

To get out of this tangle of labels, younger people often use the word queer. Older people tend to cringe at the word for its stings of schoolyard bullying, but younger generations are adopting it as a generalized and

affirming umbrella label for everyone whose sexual or gender life is outside the mainstream. It is a great example of reclaiming a hate word and putting a positive spin on it. Personally, I like the word, as I love embracing the traditional meaning — that someone queer is curious, funny, eccentric, different, singular, odd, or surprising, all descriptions I proudly claim for myself. Queer people are the ones who live beyond the normal boundaries, playfully deviating from what is usual and expected. To my ears, the word has an edgy political spin with a tang of defiance about it, while remaining broadly inclusive, a nice combination to my way of thinking.

One nice thing about the word queer comes from the fact that it does not infer anything particular about a person's sexuality or gender. It just means they are different. To say someone has a queer spirit, for example, means they have the depth and insight to see the quirks of life from broader and deeper perspectives than the mainstream, without implying anything more.

Another great but underused word is homophile, meaning same-loving, which stands in contrast to homosexual, which means same-sexual. To step outside the stand-off between the sex-obsessives and the sex-phobic, I think homophile, and the related terms homophilic, heterophile, and heterophilic, could communicate more clearly the difference between love and sex, a valuable distinction. Maybe someday.

Straight, on the other hand, is a rather strange term because of its judgmental origins. Straight came to mean heterosexual because a straight person did not deviate from the usual, normal, and conventional. Someone who "goes straight" after a life of crime or drug abuse becomes ethical, honest, and honorable. Gay people, by contrast, were considered bent, twisted, and immoral. As with the word queer, I hear straight differently now. To me it means the people who walk the default path, while the non-straight are the sinuous folk who celebrate curlicues, meanderings, spirals, and curves — the road less traveled, if you will.

And while celebrating all the diversity in humanity, I also want to honor straight people, and everyone who considers themselves to be normal or average. It is OK to be straight. It is a beautiful thing to be a feminine woman or a masculine man. It is wonderful to love someone of the other sex. Marriages between one man and one woman are powerful commitments and an important part of the social structure, to be honored and celebrated whenever possible. I take those truths as givens, important and integral norms

that define the bulk of society, and I say hurrah to each and every person who fits comfortably into the mainstream. I am even a little jealous. I cannot imagine a life where I fit easily into society's expectations without struggle, thought, or effort. It must be a wonderful feeling to feel "normal," devoid of variations that cause hate and disgust in the people around you. But I do not begrudge those who can live happily in the slipstream of life. Oh heck no — I celebrate your sexuality, your relationships, your families, and your lives! There is nothing that is true about my life that could possibly rob you of what is honorable and beautiful about yours. This is not a contest with winners and losers. It is life, where the more who thrive, the more life there is to celebrate.

Having considered some of the variations that make up the LGBT community, persistent questions remain about our numbers. It can be hard to get an accurate count of the gay population because not everyone agrees on what is being counted. In the biggest survey of LGBT people ever conducted, Gallup asked over 120,000 Americans one simple question: "Do you, personally, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender?" Out of the entire population, 3.4% said yes. More interestingly, the answer among eighteen to twenty-nine year olds was 6.4%, and among women of that age group 8.3% said yes.[10] As the closeted generations fade and more people are honest, it looks like those numbers are going to rise. Summarizing the studies to date, *Time Magazine* concluded that 5% of the population is LGBT. They also noted that a third of millennials do not consider themselves strictly straight or gay, but rather somewhere in the middle.[11] That is part of the change now unfolding, as people learn to include all of who they are, and not just the dominant parts.

In this book I use the 5% number as it is important for another reason: voters. According to exit polling from America's 2012 elections, when confronted by a pollster with a clipboard outside of voting booths, 5% of the American electorate self-identified as LGBT.[12] That is 5% of actively engaged citizens, so it is a number that matters. By comparison, the US Census says Mormons are 1.9% of the population, Jews are 1.7%, and Southern Baptists are 6.7%. Latinos make up almost 17% of the country, while Blacks are 13% and Asians 5%.[13] At 5%, the population of gay Americans equals the populations of Wyoming, Vermont, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alaska, Delaware, Montana, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine, Hawaii, Idaho, West

Virginia, Nebraska, and New Mexico combined. In any random group of twenty Americans, one is LGBT.

Equitable distribution, then, would say that one in twenty television kisses should be between two people of the same sex, one in twenty families in advertising should be LGBT, and one in twenty Senators should be gay. If the loose coalition we call the gay community constitutes 5% of humanity, then of seven billion people alive today, 350 million of us are gay, or one third of a billion souls. That means there are more gay people on the planet than there are citizens of the United States. We are many.

Yet even that is not every queer person, as pretty much every human being is unique in some special way. There is something that makes every person an individual, something about every one of us at least a teeny tiny bit… queer. For some it is our sexuality or relationship to gender, but for others it may be the brightness of our eyes, that funky part of our bodies, the pain of past relationships, sadly tangled family histories, or our idiosyncratic paths to peace, success, and meaning in life. As I get older I increasingly realize that no one feels completely normal, free of momentary doubts or insecurities, and the ones most puffed up and rigid about their "normalcy" tend to be the most fragile on the inside. While 5% may be a nice round number for the LGBT community, pretty much 100% of human individuals vary in some discernible way.

Every quality I can use to define the gay population exists in even larger quantities among straight people. When I try to define gay lives, what I am pointing to are propensities, the likelihood a trait will show up in a particular group. Very little of it is exclusive. As Bill Clinton said, "There is no them; there's only us."[14] It is my deepest hope that every reader — straight, gay, or other — will be able to see aspects of themselves mirrored in almost everything discussed in this book. At its root this is simply the stuff of life.

In the end, the numbers of who is gay and who is straight do not matter. The arguments about what makes a person gay, or even what defines gay, do not matter. The labels do not matter. What matters is the sanctity of a human life, and the value of the person living it. For a visceral experience of this truism, I recommend the TED talk of the artist iO Tillett Wright, called *Fifty Shades of Gay,* available at www.ted.com. Not only does she articulate the complexity of this thing called gay in a delightfully personal way, but more importantly, she links the abstract concepts of this conversation to specific

photographs of individual faces in a way that is both enlightening and empowering. The only way to understand this experience of being human comes from seeing all that is true about unique individuals while grasping what is true about the greater mass of collective humanity at the same time.

ANCESTORS

FOUR

Ancients

> The further back you look,
> the further forward you can see.
>
> ~ *Winston Churchill*

MODERN GAY PEOPLE have a backstory. We have a history. Some of our stories were documented and are still visible in the historical record, but more often we were left out. It is said that history is written by the victors, so the common people, the less powerful, and the vanquished got left out. In a world where straight people dominated, the stories of gay lives were often neglected or ignored. Even when our histories were chronicled or represented through art in more tolerant and inclusive times, that evidence was later destroyed disapproving cultures. As a 1979 flyer for the San Francisco Gay History project declared: "Our letters were burned, our names blotted out, our books

censored, our love declared unspeakable, our very existence denied."[1] Until recently, most of the great repositories of culture — the libraries, museums, archives, and universities — rejected the records of our existence. Even now the scant documentation, photographs, and personal memorabilia from the early years of gay liberation are being lost as the last survivors of that pivotal generation fade away with little evidence archived before their passing.

Because the records of our lives where so systematically ignored and destroyed, it can appear as if the world has always been straight, with only the occasional sightings of anyone different. Without the knowledge that gay people existed in other times and places, homosexuality seems like another fad of the 1960s, like lava lamps or bell-bottom pants. Knowing that we are a people with a history can shift that perspective, as it becomes clear that what happened in the 1960s was not just a revolution in sex, but also a change in the culture's ability to speak truthfully about sex, including variations that have existed across all time.

Depictions of same-sex sexuality date back to the earliest art drawn on the walls of caves by primitive humanity. Twelve thousand years ago, humans entered the darkness of the Addaura caves in Sicily and carved ritualistic scenes on the cavern walls. The drawings showed men in bird masks with genitals displayed, dancing in a circle. In the center of the circle were two men, the erect penis of the man above connected by parallel lines with the buttocks of the man below. Modern tour guides describe the figures as acrobats, as if the men of 10,000 BC went deep into dark caves, circled up, pulled out their erections, and did cartwheels together. The cave's original discoverer offered the likelier, but more controversial, explanation, that they were drawings of homoerotic initiation rituals.[2]

If that incredibly ancient example remains open to interpretation, more blatant sexual graffiti was recently found on a remote Greek island. Scrawled on the rocks there are two large phalluses and an inscription written in bold letters: "Nikasitimos was here mounting Timiona."[3] Loud and proud from 2,500 years ago.

An even more intriguing example comes from petroglyphs found in the remote deserts of northwest China. Carved into rock more than 3,000 years ago, the Kangjiashimenji petroglyphs portray over a hundred figures in one of humanity's oldest representations of sexual intercourse, and the participants include some rather obviously two-gendered people.[4] Drawn like fancy

stick figures, some larger than life size, each individual is depicted with their arms stretched out, every one of them with their right arm bent up and their left arm bent down. The males have triangular bodies, often with distinct erections, while the females have hourglass figures, often with explicit vulvas. Along with males and females are numerous bi-gender figures combining male and female elements, with female headwear and dress along with erections, possibly indicating gender-variant shamans. The gender and sexual combinations depicted in these ancient petroglyphs are fascinating. A clearly female body has a large penis. A female figure is shown giving birth to a series of smaller figures next to a bi-gender figure who was about to penetrate a female. A female is being penetrated by a male and a bi-gender while men with erections dance along with another bi-gender figure. And these kinds of depictions were not unique to western China, as similar dual-sexed figures occur in Neolithic and Bronze Age petroglyphs around the Mediterranean.[5]

A more tangible example of gender variation came from a tribe of early Bronze Age people living five thousand years ago near modern Prague in the Czech Republic. Their custom was to bury their men on their right sides with their heads facing east along with weapons, tools, and flint knives, and buried their women with their heads facing west with their jewelry, pets, and distinctive egg shaped jars. In 2011, archaeologists dug up a male skeleton buried in the female position, without weapons, but with household jugs and the egg shaped jar at his feet.[6] There is no way to know how this man lived his life — if he was gay or lived his life as a woman. All we know is that when he died, his people gave his male body a respectful burial in the manner of a woman, probably reflecting something about how he lived his life.

Humanity invented written language about four thousand years ago, and humanity's oldest literature is the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Found in fragments of cuneiform on ancient clay tablets, the epic tells of the adventures of King Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the wild man he loved. Both men were sexual with women, but they formed a lasting bond with each other from the time they met. Most of the surviving fragments center on the king's grief after Enkidu's death, describing in long and poetic detail the king tearing his hair and clothes, wearing animal skins, and journeying far from his kingdom in grief and terror over his own mortality. Bereft at the loss of his friend's body, the gods finally allowed Gilgamesh to speak to his dead friend, who tells the grieving monarch: "That which you cherished, Enkidu then confided, that

which you caressed and which brought happiness to your heart, now, like an old garment, it is devoured by the worms. That which you cherished, that which you caressed and which made your heart glad, is today covered in dust. It is all plunged to dust."[7]

If *Gilgamesh* is the oldest human story, the earliest portrait of a same-sex couple is even older. Early Egyptians rarely portrayed sex. The most intimate figures on the walls of Egyptian tombs depicted couples with faces turned nose to nose, arms holding each other in that wonderfully stiff Egyptian style. In a tomb where two males were found buried together in the custom of a married couple, a portrait on the wall showed the two men holding each other, arms intertwined and nose to nose. Their names reveal their bond, as one is named Niankhkhnum which means "joined to life" and the other is Khnumhotep meaning "joined to 'the blessed state of the dead.'" So together their names mean "joined in life and joined in death."[8] No "till death do us part" for this couple.

For a more evocative story, one night in 2300 BC, Pharaoh Neferkare left his palace and walked to the house of a general named Sisene. Standing outside in the street, the records say that Neferkare tossed a stone at the house and stamped his foot until a ladder was lowered for him to climb up for the evening. The story mentions love, but also clarified that the king was motivated to see the general "because there was no woman [meaning wife] there with him."[9] What a crazily visual scene that makes — a Pharaoh roaming darkened streets over 4,300 years ago in search of intimacy with another man.

A millennia and a half later a more complex story unfolded around the famous figures of King Tutankhamen, Queen Nefertiti, and Pharaoh Akhenaten. Nefertiti, as portrayed in a limestone bust discovered in 1912, is considered one of history's most iconic beauties. She was married to Pharaoh Akhenaten, who was often depicted with curving feminine hips, thick rounded thighs, and pronounced sagging breasts. Akhenaten may also have been the father of King Tut, an otherwise unimportant boy king made famous by his tomb of well-preserved art, although the familial connections remain uncertain. In the fourteenth year of Akhenaten's reign, Nefertiti's name disappeared from the official records and a new male figure named Smenkhkare appeared as Akhenaten's co-ruler and apparent lover. Images of the two show them physically intimate. In one image the older king caressed young

Smenkhkare's chin, and in others the youth poured the king wine or sat in the king's lap.

While there is no definitive version of the story, Egyptologists used to think Smenkhkare was Akhenaten's son, but the records list only daughters. Tomb objects were inscribed "Smenkhkare beloved of Akhenaten" and "Akhenaten beloved of Smenkhkare."[10] Another theory hypothesized that Queen Nefertiti became co-Pharoah and took the male name Smenkhkare to enhance her legitimacy. A more straightforward answer may be that the androgynous Akhenaten fell in love with a young man named Smenkhkare and left Nefertiti behind. If it is true that Akhenaten openly loved a young man named Smenkhkare, then they are the earliest gay couple in history whose proper names are known to us today.

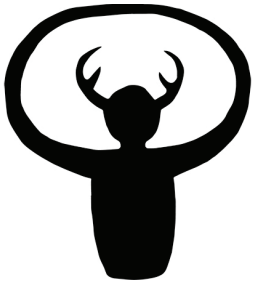
Much more is known about another Egyptian Pharaoh who lived blatantly across gender lines. Pharaoh Hatshepsut was born female, rose to the throne around 1479 BC, and was considered one of the most successful rulers in all of Egypt's long history. As part of her claim to traditionally male power, she often donned the accoutrement of male rulers. The monolithic statues honoring her reign sometimes depicted her as male, sometimes as female, and often as a mixture of both, including a false beard. The sprawling Temple of Hatshepsut is one of the greatest monuments of ancient Egypt, still standing strong on the banks of the Nile at Luxor, bearing witness that gender shifting is a very old tradition indeed.

All of these stories come from thousands of years ago. Long before modern labels like gay, straight, and transgender existed, people drew depictions of gender variations and same-sex sexuality on cave walls and ancient tombs, displayed their respect for human variations in their burial customs, wrote the stories of same-sex love in the earliest epics, and recorded our existence in the oldest human records; yet none of these people were gay in the modern sense. For them, same-sex sexuality and gender variations were just another part of human existence. As pre-modern gay people they loved whom they loved, and lived how they lived, and left a trail of evidence for later generations to decipher. Once that code is unlocked around the way these gay lives are represented in such ancient times, the entire lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender spectrum is revealed, even when those terms were still thousands of years away.

Pre-modern gay people were not so visible because they lived in villages. People today think cities are normal, as half the world's population now lives in urban areas, but that is a recent phenomenon. Classical Athens had around sixty thousand adult male citizens, and ancient Rome at its height had less than half a million people. By 1800, the two largest cities on Earth were London and Beijing with around a million people each.[11] So until about a hundred-and-something years ago, pretty much every human being lived in a village-like social structure of five to thirty families, or seventy-five to 150 people, numbers consistent across European forests, African savannas, and Pacific islands.[12] In small human clusters, the 5% who varied, in often subtle ways, may not have been so visible. In a community of one hundred, one might have been a married bisexual woman, another an effeminate older man, a third an androgynous teen, a fourth an unmarried lesbian, and a fifth a newborn child. In that scenario, there is no way for those people to see a common thread in their life experiences. It was only later when humanity gathered into larger cities that these more subtle variation patterns became more visible.

As gay people we form a sort of loose tribe, for lack of a better term. Seldom related by blood, we are not an ethnicity, a religion, or a racial group. What differentiates us from the mainstream is not family heritage, spiritual beliefs, skin color, eye folds, or nationality. The entire concept of using sexuality and gender as a way to categorize people is distinctly modern, yet we have always existed with shared experiences and a shared history. Nature made us different, but our experiences bring us together. When I consider all those people living their varying lives across time and geography, I think of them as my queer ancestors. They are the ancient members of my tribe, the misty progenitors of my modern life.

Having covered some of the oldest examples, the next chapters discuss a diversity of archetypal ways we show up in historic and modern lives, a collection I think of as my village people: shamans, two spirits, Amazons, monks, minstrels, and married couples, among others, a variety of gay manifestations that helped create the world we live in today.



FIVE

Shamans

> Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God:
> But only he who sees takes off his shoes.
>
> ~ *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

BEFORE THE ARRIVAL of large organized religions, the intermediaries between humanity and the larger everything-else were called shamans, and many of those shamans were gay. One of my favorite stories from this tradition comes from an African shaman named Malidoma Somé, who goes by his first name which means "friend of the enemy-stranger." Malidoma is an amazing man. After finishing his education in France, the elders of his tribe told him to leave the village and his people and go live in the West, taking

their spiritual traditions abroad to help heal the ailing modern cultures, declaring, "The village will be reborn in the heart and soul of the culture that is destroying the village."[1]

I had the good fortune to meet Malidoma, an energetic and charismatic man with an incredible life story he shares in his book, *Of Water and the Spirit*.[2] Born into a family of shamans in the Dagara tribe of Burkina Faso, Malidoma was kidnapped at four years of age by French Jesuits who raised him to be a priest. The priests gave him a Western education in French and banned all knowledge and discussion of his native language and culture. At fifteen Malidoma escaped and made his way back to his village. On his return, his elders viewed him as an outsider because of his strange upbringing. From their perspective, his Westernized education had left him with so little soul in his body that they feared he could not survive the traditional initiation rituals that marked the passage of young men into adulthood.

With great difficulty, Malidoma passed his initiation, a series of tests and experiences led by a group of men the Dagara call gatekeepers. In their otherwise open culture, only the gatekeepers were allowed to operate in secret. According to the Dagara's traditions, gatekeepers were essential to the health of the overall community, standing in the doorways between this life and the spirit worlds, keeping the gates open for the energies to flow back and forth. Once a year, the gatekeepers went out of their village to do the sacred rituals that made them gatekeepers. Rituals so important, the Dagara believed, that if the gatekeepers did not go out and do them, the village might not survive another year. Rituals so sacred and secret that the gatekeepers had the right to kill any outsiders who observed them.

As a young adult, Malidoma went to Paris to attend the Sorbonne university for the first of his several doctorates. While living in Paris he met gay people, and as he puts it, he recognized their vibrations. On a return visit to his village Malidoma went to the gatekeeper who had guided him through his initiation and asked the gatekeeper if he had sexual attractions to other men. The man was shocked, asking back, "How do you know that?!" adding, "This is *our* business as gatekeepers."[3] Gay people existed in Malidoma's village society, and even had their own socially-recognized grouping, but they were not called by the LGBT names we use in the West.

In the traditional world Malidoma grew up in, everyone married and had children. There were no "gay people" in the modern sense, but there were

children born with slightly different vibrations, a quality that allowed the elders to identify those children as gatekeepers. They were like any other child on the outside, but a young male gatekeeper vibrated female energy and a young female gatekeeper vibrated male energy. In the Dagara world it was those vibrations, and not genitalia, that determined gender. They were just regular people with differing vibrations that allowed them to connect with the planet's highest vibrational points, the places where the gates between worlds were located. In the cultural understanding of these ancient people, gatekeepers were essential to the health and survival of the planet. Only by caring for the gatekeepers, and making sure they were at their posts, could the earth and humanity survive.

The Dagara had a cultural understanding of gay people that transcended individual villagers' lifetimes, carrying a deeper understanding across generations. My heart sighs at the idea of grandmothers experienced at identifying their gay children, parents with the cultural knowledge of how to raise those children into their unique strengths, and circles of gay adults who gathered to nurture those strengths in each other. I cannot imagine how different modern society will be when cultural institutions like churches and schools recognize the children who vibrate a little differently, and know how to teach those children to understand where they fit into life, society, and the greater forces of the universe.

Malidoma's story also illustrates how difficult it can be to map same-sex sexuality across cultures. Some of my queer ancestors thrived as a respected subset of a prominent African tribe, but they were labeled with spiritual and social labels that did not automatically ring the LGBT bell. Even Malidoma and the people of his village, who knew each other's lives intimately, did not view their gatekeepers through the gay-straight lens. But not wearing a modern label does not mean they were not there, an important fact to remember when political and religious leaders claim there are no gay people in their cultures. We are always there, even when our neighbors cannot see us.

[For the full interview with Malidoma Somé, see Gatekeepers on page 301.]

Stories of African shamans can feel foreign, as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam moved the gods out of the earth, animals, and plants and consolidated the divine into a single supreme deity living in the sky. Understanding the magic of this earlier world, however, is essential to understanding the

importance of shamans. In his breathtaking essay, *The Ecology of Magic*, David Abrams explained this ancient paradigm in ways that resonated strongly for me as a gay person, starting from his first-hand experience with the shamans of Bali in Indonesia.[4] As he tells the story, Balinese shamans live on the edge of their villages, or just outside of the community, and are viewed as a little scary. This physical distance and fearful respect kept people from bothering the shaman too much with their petty needs, but also represented the role they played.

I have always thought of shamans as mediating between this world and the spirit world, more in the way Malidoma describes. But the concept of spirit is problematic, as each individual carries their own definition or understanding of what it means. In Abrams's explanation, shamans lived at the balancing point between the world of humanity and the world of everything else — nature, animals, crops, weather, the land, and the forces beyond. Illness in this traditional world was believed to be rooted in an imbalance, and it was the shaman's job to live at the edge and ensure the human life force and the natural energies flowed back and forth in a balanced manner, for the wellness of both and the overall prosperity of the people. Scholars of pre-modern religions like Mircea Eliade pointed out the importance of androgyny and varying sexuality in identifying those with shamanic energy.[5]

Standing at the border of masculine and feminine, gay and differently gendered healers understood the relationship between human lives and the rest of nature, and between human beings and the supernatural, in a different way than anyone else in the tribe. As the medicine women and men, we were often the village healers. Working through magic and dance, song and touch, journeying and trances, we bridged the worlds and healed souls, bodies, and the earth. As the people who walked between worlds, we looked across energetic divides and wove the disparate elements together into a healthier life for everyone.

With their God up in the heavens, later religions needed people who could mediate between this earthly life and their God above, so gay people became the priests and nuns. Our sensitivity to human needs informed our earthly ministries, and our healing compassion and bridging natures connected our flocks to the higher truths. As an added bonus, we excelled at theater and marketing, making us particularly effective in organized church services and hierarchical religious structures.

Tragically, those of us born today with this kind of shamanic understanding can find ourselves blocked from using these gifts by the dissociations of modern life. To manage the disconnect between the cold world we live in and the deeper truths we feel, the sensitive often turn to the coping mechanisms of modern culture like drugs, alcohol, sex, and materialism. Looking at the modern gay community I see the social problems but I also see a community of people denied their birthright and doing the best they can. "In a society that is profoundly dysfunctional," Malidoma explained, "what happens is that peoples' life purposes are taken away, and what is left is this kind of sexual orientation which, in turn, is disturbing to the very society that created it." He called out Christianity in particular for making gay people into "a disempowered person, a person who has lost his job from birth onward, and now society just wants to fire him out of life. This is not justice. It's not justice. It is a terrible harm done to an energy that could save the world, that could save us. [...] The gatekeepers have been fired from their job. They have been fired! They have nothing to do! And because they have been fired, we accuse them for not doing anything. This is not fair!"[6]

For those who have the powers to see, gay people are much more than our sexuality. I once drew a picture of myself standing on the earth, but bent over sideways at the waist. One arm stretched far up into the sky until it touched the highest point of the heavens, while my other arm stretched down into the earth until it touched the deepest dark of the underworld. That is what it feels like to hold that shamanic energy, spanning the light and the dark at the same time. A healthy humanity includes all the light and all the dark, which makes the people who can span those contradictions essential, in opposition to the forces that threaten to rip us apart.

Anyone can have this power to span contradictions. It is not a gay or straight quality, but it is a gift many gay people have — this willingness to wrap our arms around all that is sacred, and all that is profane (meaning the not-sacred, or earthy), and then attempt to balance through the ebbs and flows of life. That is the shamanic energy. That is the power many gay people, and queer spirits of every different kind, have running through our bodies. If the earth and society are out of balance, then it is time to draw on some of humanity's most ancient wisdom, and give the shamanic people their jobs back.

One very different example of the shamanic temperament is hidden in fairy tales. In many old European tales there is a self-empowered individual who lived outside the village circle, balancing light and dark energies, known for healing and other powers, but routinely labeled evil because she was a woman who threatened the all-male power structure. The stories always start the same way: Once upon a time… a wrinkled old woman lived in a crooked little house in the deep dark of the forest. She lived there alone, far from the other people of the village, which was daring and brave in those dangerous times.

For reasons usually unstated in the story, this was a woman confident in her own strengths, using the fears of others to gain some independent living in much the way Abrams noted in Balinese shamans. These women, derided as evil witches by the ignorant, lived without a man, a powerful clue to her true nature. The modern tellings often made her ugly, but in older versions she could be beautiful and seductive, but indifferent to men. Most importantly, the stories tell of her powers in potions and healing, and how she was someone people, and often other women, would go to as a last resort in times of trouble.

Taking off the fairy tale glasses and putting on modern lenses, many of these "witches" were lesbian or women profoundly queer in some other way. In response to their powers, the Christian churches demonized them, made them into figures of scorn and fear, and burned them alive.[7]

Disney's films did a lot to popularize this single-minded picture of the witch as evil, but even Disney Corporation is now embracing fuller versions of the archetype in recent movies like *Maleficent* and *Into The Woods*. These newer witches remain unmarried and childless and can still be careless with their hair, but they retain their powers and are thoughtful, passionate, and strong. As the narrator declares at the end of *Maleficent*, the story behind the witch in Sleeping Beauty: "In the end, my kingdom was not united by a hero or a villain as legend predicted, but by one who was both hero and villain."[8] That is the world that I live in, where powerful people meld the light and the dark energies to benefit all, a quality honored in the archetype of the shaman.

SIX

Two Spirits

Nothing is as strong
as gentleness,
Nothing as gentle
as real strength.

~ *St. Francis De Sales*

IN THE SPRING OF 1886, President Grover Cleveland formally received a representative from the Zuni nation of the American Southwest, a "princess," as the newspapers called her, named We'wha (pronounced WAY-wah). On arriving in Washington she was presented to members of the Senate, the Congress, and the Supreme Court and became friends with the speaker of the House and his wife.[1] Over the summer she spent there, We'wha gave demonstrations of Zuni weaving and consulted with anthropologists at the

Smithsonian Institution. She had much to teach, as she was considered one of the greatest living experts on the Zuni religion. And We'wha was born physically male.

In the Zuni tradition, there was a place for people who differed from the gender norms, people they called two spirits. Not only was We'wha an elegant woman, she was also six feet tall and square jawed, with a sturdy build. Photos of We'wha show her as strong, dressed in traditional clothing that mixed male and female elements, along with the traditional female Zuni hair style and elegant jewelry. Anthropologists used to use the offensive French term *berdache* for third gender North American natives, but today two spirit is preferred.

Some people of the time said We'wha was a man trying to pass as a woman, as if being two spirit was some kind of trick. Americans of the time lived in a world that recognized only two human genders, but in We'wha's world being a two spirit was a blessing, the result of divine intent. She was honored by her tribe, serving as a mediator and as the Kolhamana Kachina who brought rain and good fortune, before becoming a cultural ambassador to white America.

In a way nearly incomprehensible to many people even today, We'wha was not considered either a man or a woman in her culture, as she represented a third category altogether. While believed to embody male and female elements, two spirits were often larger and stronger than other men, and could be fierce warriors, notably aggressive and even hyper-masculine. Lakota and Ojibway warriors thought it pumped up their masculinity to have sex with a two spirit to take in some of that excess masculinity,[2] and the early Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca wrote that he saw among the natives in Florida: "a man married to another. Such are impotent and womanish beings, who dress like women and perform the office of women, but use the bow and carry big loads. Among these Indians we saw many of them; they are more robust than the other men, taller, and can bear heavy burdens."[3]

There is no place to map this Native American conceptualization of a third gender into the modern West's dualistic views of gender and sexuality because third gender people were neither male nor female, and neither straight nor gay. The best way to understand is to consider an indigenous American male partnering with a male-born two spirit. Neither partner would

then be considered homosexual because their coupling was between a man and a third gender, and not between a man and another man.[4]

The power of this tradition arose in cultures that knew how to nurture their variant children. The Tohono O'odham, or Papago, of the Sonora desert would notice if a boy was not interested in typical boyish play and give him a test. They constructed a circle of brush, putting a man's bow and a woman's basket in the center. The boy was then told to go in and retrieve one of them, and when he did, the bushes were set on fire. If he brought out the women's object, he was deemed a two-spirit.[5] The Mojave did a similar test through a community ritual of song and dance. A hidden singer would sing the ritual songs, and if the boy danced in the manner of a woman, he was a two-spirit. If it was in his nature, they believed, "he cannot help it."[6] Anthropologist Will Roscoe has identified at least 150 tribes across North America who honored their two spirits including the Lakota, Mohave, Crow, Cheyenne, Zuni, Pueblo, and Navajo.[7]

Women too could be two spirits, adopting male roles and serving as warriors. One famous example was a woman named Pine Leaf, born to the Gros Ventre tribe in 1806. After her twin brother was killed by the Blackfoot tribe, she swore vengeance and became such a successful warrior that she continually rose in rank until she became part of the Council of Chiefs of the Crow people where she was known as Woman Chief, leading the Crow from 1830 to 1851. She even hired other women to do the female duties that did not interest her. White Americans who met her were confused by this powerful woman, and called her the Absaroka Amazon, *absaroka* being the native name for the sparrow hawk mistranslated as "crow."

In the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca there are Zapotec indigenous communities where the two-spirit tradition survives to this day. Referred to as *muxes*, a word derived from the Spanish *mujer* for woman, *muxes* are physically male but dress and live as a third gender, mixing male and female elements. Not only do they find employment in traditionally female fields, but they are accepted by their communities and valued by their families because of their tendency to stay home and care for their parents.[8]

Outside of cultural considerations, a child's body at birth can place some people in the category of third gender, as they are born with ambiguous genitalia, or the genitalia of both sexes, a physical condition called intersex. In traditional India, intersex people formed an entire caste called *hijras*, another

label without Western counterpart. As part of their third gender identification, it was traditional for *hijras* to remove any vestigial male genitalia. Like North American two spirits, South Asian culture viewed *hijras* as neither male nor female, but a third gender category of their own, but unlike the Native American reverence for two spirits, India's *hijras* were rejected by mainstream society. Shunned by their families and villages, *hijras* formed their own communities for solidarity and support.

To understand their world, consider an intersex baby born with ambiguous genitalia among the poor of India or Pakistan. Given a baby whose body did not fit the gender norms, parents might abandon their newborn on a local *hijras*' doorstep. Although usually extremely poor and of low social status, the *hijras*' tribal solidarity drives them to take these children in as one of their own, feed them, and help them learn to live their life performing ceremonies, begging in the streets, and serving as sex workers.[9]

Given the timelessness of their tradition, it was exciting news recently when India's Supreme Court, which was not generally favorable to gay rights, honored the historic role of *hijras* in their culture and ruled for transgender rights, allowing them to legally identify as third gender, ruling: "It is the right of every human being to choose their gender," and, "...the Constitution states that all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, which includes one's right to expression of his self-identified gender. Self-identified gender can be expressed through dress, words, action or behavior or any other form."[10]

I find the way these terms and categories from various cultures resist easy translation fascinating, as one culture's understandings of gender is transported to another culture and changed along the way. A famous example is the Buddhist bodhisattva, or enlightened being, named Guanyin. I first fell in love with her as a white porcelain statue sitting in the roots of a tree next to my favorite hot springs, which was perfect as she represents compassion, mercy, and healing. In the typical depictions in Chinese art, Guanyin was an elegant woman in beautiful flowing robes, but in India, where her legend started, Guanyin was a male figure called Avalokitesvara, who was depicted as an androgynous young man. As the images and stories of Avalokitesvara moved east with the spread of Buddhism into China, they entered a culture that lacked the concept of a third gender, so the Chinese mistook the feminine androgyny of the male Avalokitesvara for a woman. Classical

Chinese also considered compassion and mercy to be feminine virtues, so in East Asia Guanyin became a woman, making her the only female Buddhist deity. To this day, the figure of Guanyin is one of the most popular in Asia, and because of her story, some transgender people consider her their patron saint.[11]

Most of my own experiences of distinctly third gender people in other cultures were with the *kathoey*, or ladyboys, of Thailand, a group that has been part of that culture for centuries. I have met ladyboys who varied from highly effeminate men to others who seemed to have a more complex transexual or intersex nature. Travelers to Thailand often note that many ladyboys are authentically effeminate and lovely. The first ladyboy I met in Thailand was working in a suburban market in Bangkok and was more like We'wha, tall and broad shouldered but impeccable in her conservative dress and makeup, and deeply shy. I later got to know a more gregarious ladyboy working as a waitress at a beachside restaurant after she became smitten with me when I showed her kindness. I felt bad when she was crestfallen after I confessed I did not in fact have a thing for ladyboys in the ways she had hoped.

In contrast to every stereotype, one of Thailand's most famous *kathoey* was Nong Tum, who became a national celebrity as a champion kickboxer in Muay Thai, one of the world's fiercest fighting forms. The movie *Beautiful Boxer* tells his inspiring story of rising through the fighting world to get out of rural poverty and win enough money for sexual reassignment surgery. Nong Tum now lives her life as the beautiful woman she felt she was born to be.[12]

Another culture famous for honoring its third gender people is visible in the South Pacific's *fa'afafine* tradition of the Samoan islands. Usually born male, *fa'afafine* means "in the manner of a woman" and the *fa'afafine* balance masculine and feminine elements. Like other third gender people, they were not necessarily gay or homosexual in the Western sense, but live in another third gender category altogether.[13] Traditional *fa'afafine* were considered an essential part of Samoa's large communal family system where their combination of masculine strength and feminine skills were highly valued, and to honor their importance, the Prime Minister of Samoa, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, recently declared to a group of *fa'afafine*: "You are just another shining example of the glorious miracles and creations of our Lord."[14]

A similar tradition existed in the islands of Hawaii where the in-between people were called mahu and considered part of the spiritual tradition of aloha, embracing love and respect for all.[15] Although largely suppressed after the arrival of Christian missionaries, the concept of the mahu remains striking. Imagine a large and powerful Polynesian native Hawaiian, born male or intersex and enlivened by a culture that honored her embodiment of all the masculine and feminine energies. Picture her standing strong on a warm sand beach, wrapped in a sarong with a flower in her hair, dancing and teaching the interweaving hand motions, steps, and undulations of the hula beneath a setting tropical sun. For me that scene embodies the power of the two spirits, reaching out to us today in a language that is exotic, primal, elegant, and delicately beautiful, all at the same time.

SEVEN

Amazons

> Well-behaved women
> seldom make history.
>
> ~ *Laurel Thatcher Ulrich*

AFTER CONQUERING THE INCAS from the Pacific, the Spanish conquistadors crossed the Andes mountains and descended into the great jungle basin that fills the center of the South American continent. Finding the region inhospitable, and food growing scarce, a group of fifty men including a Dominican priest named Gaspar de Carvajal, built boats and set off down the river in search of food.[1] After traveling downstream for a few days they realized they had gone too far and would not be able to get back up the river, so they decided to keep going downstream and see where it led.

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