

REAL  
TALK  
*about*  
LGBTQIAP

*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer,  
Intersex, Asexual, and Pansexual*

**Tara Y. Coyt**

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Love.  
Equality.  
Personal Truth.



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“Knowledge is learning something every day.  
Wisdom is letting go of something every day.”  
–Zen proverb





## CHAPTER ONE

---

# WHY?

“Ernest [Hemingway] called for everyone to write truly, to write so that readers would feel themselves in the stories, to write only about whatever they believed to be the thing we ought most to care about.”

—Meg Waite Clayton<sup>1</sup>

“**W**hy?” was one of my favorite questions when I was a little girl, and as an adult it remains a question I ask daily. *Why do we think this way? Why do we behave this way? Why is this happening?* “Why?” is also a question people ask of *me*, after hearing I’ve written this book. They wonder why I spent four years researching and writing a book about LGBTQIAP—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and pansexual—when I don’t identify as any of those labels. The reasons are many.

I am a curious person who enjoys investigating, researching, learning, and trying to make sense of things. I am also a writer. My curiosity fuels my writing. Combining these factors has made me a writer whose role is to share information and to help others make sense of things.

In part, it was because I had a growing list of unanswered questions. *Why are some people homosexual and others heterosexual or bisexual? What does queer mean? What determines a person’s gender identity?* I also had questions about how we respond to and treat each other. *Why would a*

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*religious leader preach that someone should be killed because they are gay? How could a parent reject their child for being transgender, gay, etc.? Why is there so much fear of and hate for people because of their sexuality or gender identity?*

Like most people, I had formed some opinions about sexuality and gender identity. Also like most people, I had never taken the time to delve into the details to determine if any of my opinions were misguided. Perhaps this lack of examination is how so many misperceptions have come to exist in the world. Once we begin to examine our feelings and beliefs, we may discover that some are unwarranted. We might discover there's no factual or scientific substantiation for thinking about and treating people with disdain. I wondered what I would discover. How much of what is believed, reported, and propagated about LGBTQIAP is fact-based and what is only propped up by our personal fears and biases?

One way to gain a better understanding is to have candid conversations: to ask questions and to listen. Talking about human sexuality and gender identity can be difficult terrain. Once we put a question out there, we run the risk of hearing a response that we won't like or that will challenge our understanding of the world. There's a chance the answer will offend us. There's also a chance our question will offend someone else. As a result, we are inclined to avoid having the conversations.

I avoided the conversation 30 years ago after my best friend Robyn confided that she had a crush on a female coworker. Robyn and I were "ride-or-die" friends; however, I was reluctant to ask more about her attraction to women because it made me uncomfortable. Though we talked about how things were progressing with this new relationship, I never inquired into Robyn's thoughts and feelings about her sexuality.

A couple of years later, another opportunity for a similar discussion came and went unanswered. That time it was with my housemate Norma, who was twice-divorced and the mother of two adult children. I presumed Norma was heterosexual, until I saw her in an intimate situation with another woman. A few days later, Norma said she and the woman were in a relationship. I wondered if that meant she was bisexual or homosexual. I wondered if she had always been attracted to women. I wondered if that was why she'd gotten divorced.

Instead of asking Norma any of those questions, I did what many heterosexuals do when they want to learn about homosexuality or

bisexuality—I asked other heterosexuals. Instead of going to the source, so to speak, I chose to chat it up with people who knew just as little, or less, than I did about the subject. Over the years, I have learned how this approach didn't advance my knowledge and understanding.

The need for a different, more effective approach became increasingly important to me. I realized that if I wanted a better understanding of sexuality and gender identity, one of the first things I needed to do was talk to people whose experiences and identities differed from mine. I would also need to do something my parents often told me to do: “look it up.” In order to better understand sexuality, gender identity, and biological sex, I needed to examine history, science, and previous research. That's what I did. I set out on this path expecting to finish within in a year; it took four.

Just a few months before completing this book, I received a holiday greeting card from my mother that seemed to reinforce my pursuit. It read:

*Dear Daughter,*

*My wish for you is that you'll always know a little bit more today than you knew yesterday—about life, about yourself, about what you can do and create in this world.*

This value of knowing “a little bit more today than you knew yesterday” is one I inherited from my parents. They were curious and interested in the world around them, in the things they could and could not see. My father was an avid viewer of the local Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station and enjoyed programs about history, science, and the animal kingdom. Both parents took continuing education courses in their respective fields, and they spent time every day reading the newspapers and magazines to which they subscribed. My brother and I joined them as soon as we could read.

Thanks to my parents' examples, I have been an active learner throughout my life. I was that kid who read books in the summer of my own volition. I routinely plucked an encyclopedia off the shelf and read a random page just to see what else I could learn that day. Discovering something new that expands my understanding gives me a natural high. Knowing a little more each day helps to broaden our perspectives. Understanding a bit more about ourselves, each other, and the world around us can bring us closer. I

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hope that learning more about LGBTQIAP will help fill the chasms that currently exist between people of different sexualities and gender identities.

This is not my first time tackling a project that required expanding my horizons. Every job I've held has been an adventure that required me to dive in, learn something new, and share the knowledge. I've written books on single parenting from a male perspective, dentistry, 90s West Coast hip hop, basketball, personal development, and Southern culture. I have written articles on wealth management from a spiritual perspective and articles reporting on Food and Drug Administration (FDA) research and regulations.

What distinguishes this book from the others I have written is that I am the sole author writing on a subject that I am passionate about. This is not solely an intellectual pursuit. It is also a pursuit of the heart. What remains the same is that I have always poured a bit of what I've learned about myself, others, and the world around me into my projects. As my mother's greeting card encouraged, I continue to learn something new every day.

Some people have difficulty understanding why a heterosexual woman would get so involved in investigating something that appears not to be her own. Most of us, after all, are not in the habit of sticking our noses into groups, situations, or causes that don't directly involve us. I have a different view. These conversations and issues do involve me because, although not a member of the LGBTQIAP community, I am a member of the human race.

For me, that means I'm as connected to humans who resemble me in various ways as I am to those with whom I do not share common attributes. Additionally, I am committed to equality and the universal pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. How, then, can I witness LGBTQIAP individuals being denied those rights and not cry out? History has repeatedly shown us that things do not end well when we rationalize or dismiss hatred, discrimination, and violence. When I think about people who remained silent while witnessing crimes against Native Americans, African Americans, Jews, Chinese people, and others, I know that I do not want to be that type of person, turning a blind eye simply because I am not part of the group being persecuted or abused. I would like to think that had I been a white person during the era of chattel slavery or a Gentile

during the Holocaust, I would have said or done something to help end the atrocities, but I will never know for sure. What I can be sure of are my actions in this lifetime.

In presenting this book, I hope to give faces and heartbeats to the real people behind the letters LGBTQIAP by exploring and sharing their realities. I have tried to present questions and answers in a way that reflects what people are thinking, feeling, and pondering, even when it might feel uncomfortable or impolite. Some of the answers come from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and pansexual people I have met along the way. Other information comes from studies, articles, healthcare professionals, medical professionals, historians, and LGBTQIAP organizations. This discussion is far too complex for this to be an all-inclusive exploration. While I have tried to be thorough, no examination can be 100 percent complete. There are additional questions and concerns to be addressed. My intention is for this book to be a starting point for further discussion and exploration.



## CHAPTER TWO

---

# ASKING QUESTIONS

“The art and science of asking questions  
is the source of all knowledge.”

—Thomas Berger.<sup>2</sup>

Asking questions is one of the ways we learn. Making assumptions keeps us in the dark. Asking questions is crucial to understanding ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. I recognize that in personal matters such as sexuality, gender identity, and biological sex, asking questions can be tricky and intimidating, as these are intensely personal and emotional matters. Knowing what to ask, how to ask, when to ask, and who to ask presents a daunting challenge. Should you risk offending your child, cousin, best friend, or coworker by asking about their sexuality or gender identity? Or should you leave it be and trade the risk of offense for the cost of relying on your assumptions? I believe we should ask questions of ourselves and others. I hope this book can serve as a framework to make our questions more thoughtful, respectful, and relevant.

I wondered how the people interviewed for this book felt about being approached with questions about their sexuality, gender identity, and biological sex. As with most things in life, there were differing opinions. Some people welcomed questions, viewing them as an opportunity to educate and inform. Other people believed that you shouldn't ask others

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anything you wouldn't want to be asked. If you would be offended or feel that your privacy had been violated by a question, then how fair is it to ask someone else to endure the same? Similarly, some said that if you wouldn't ask a heterosexual person about an aspect of their sexuality, then why ask anyone else? With regard to questions about their sex life, an anonymous person posting on [asexuality.org](http://asexuality.org) writes, "It's nobody's business but my own. If I feel I know you well enough to tell you things about my sex life and history, I'll tell you. If I don't, then under any circumstances it's just rude to ask."

The notion of boundaries was echoed by an Atlanta-area doctor who identifies as queer. They suggested that there are limits to the types of questions a person should be expected to entertain.

*If you want to ask about my experiences, that is pretty personal; and so that is not something I necessarily want to talk about with just anyone. I wouldn't expect someone who is not a close friend to ask those types of questions.*

—Anne, emergency physician, married,  
gender queer, queer sexuality, 35 years old

Another person I spoke with, a transgender woman who is a former naval officer, seemed more willing to answer questions, but she also had limits.

*There are certain things I won't talk about. And if they're actually rude questions, like questions about my genitals, questions that you wouldn't ask any other person, then I bluntly turn those away and explain why they're impolite. But generally speaking, I try to be fairly open. I try to understand that they are curious about these things, so I try to meet all questions with compassion, whether or not I am willing to answer them.*

—Vandy Beth Glenn, writer, single,  
transgender, lesbian, age undisclosed

Then there was Fredis, pronounced Freddy, who welcomed all questions, as long as they were asked in a respectful way.



## ASKING QUESTIONS

*I'd much rather have somebody ask me than assume. With anything, it's so much better to ask than just assume.*

–Fredis, makeup artist, single, cisgender, gay, 35 years old

My impression was that Fredis saw this openness as an ambassadorship of sorts. He also offered the following advice about asking sensitive questions:

*If you want to know, then ask a question, and you work out by body language whether somebody is receptive or not. If you ask a question, and you feel like they cringe, then obviously drop the subject and move on because they're not comfortable. If you ask somebody, "Are you gay?" it depends what tone you take with it, if they feel like they're being judged. It's very tricky. Some people will be okay with answering, some are not.*

–Fredis

Sometimes, asking questions is necessary to provide proper service to someone or to complete a task. Doctor Isabel "Izzy" Lowell, who founded a healthcare service for transgender and non-binary patients, and established a transgender clinic at Emory University Hospital, had to guide hospital staff in respectful ways to ask questions and communicate with patients.

*The best thing you can do is, if you're not sure by looking at somebody who they are, you can say, "What's your preferred gender? What's your preferred name?" And that's an okay question to ask. I think knowing that you're allowed to ask that is all most people need to be able to kind of relax about it. And I say to patients, "Nobody's perfect. My staff may not, you know, adhere 100 percent to what you prefer, and I may not either, but we're all trying, and we're all welcoming."*

–Isabel "Izzy" Lowell, MD, Founder, QMed, married, gender queer, lesbian, 35 years old

An elected official I spoke with noted that she had fielded countless questions over the years in her capacity as a county commissioner, advocate

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for lesbian rights, and volunteer. She too welcomed questions but added a very important consideration for the person asking those questions.

*You have to be comfortable hearing the answer.*

—Joan P. Garner, Fulton County Commission Co-Chair,  
married, cisgender, lesbian, 63 years old

I interpreted Commissioner Garner's observation as saying that if we want to ask a question, we must be willing to listen and then explore and examine new information. In other words, we should approach these discussions with kindness, an open mind, and an open heart. If we are not prepared to take in new information, then why ask? Asking questions suggests that we are interested in learning more about the person and the subject. It suggests that we are willing to consider that things might be different than we previously presumed.

Let's agree to ask questions of ourselves and others and listen to the answers. Learning more about what makes us different can ease the discomfort, doubts, and fears we have about our differences. Taking the time to try to understand our differences can move us from a place of ignorance and fear to a place of knowledge and acceptance of the many expressions of humanity. It can also help us see our inter-connectedness and the things that make us the same.

This world we live in is not simple, and many things are still unfolding, but that does not have to be frightening. Jennifer Finney Boylan, National Co-chair for GLAAD's Board of Directors, observed, "If the world is not as simple as we thought, the world is also more wondrous and full of variety and miracles. And we should celebrate that."<sup>3</sup>

Let's celebrate our differences in biological sex, sexuality, and gender identity.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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# BREATHING THE SAME AIR

“It’s your thing. Do what you want to do.  
I can’t tell you who to sock it to.”  
—Isley Brothers<sup>402</sup>

### Intro

**W**e all have a different set of circumstances, which I like to think of as our individual expressions of humanity. Human characteristics like race, sex, religion, sexuality, and gender identity should neither elevate our status in society nor should they diminish it. For me to believe my humanity is on equal standing with anyone else’s requires me to think and act as if no other human warrants better or worse treatment than I do.

Every human being should have the freedom and safety to live their truth and express their humanity without being discriminated against, attacked, punished, or killed for it. David Letterman once asked, “Who are you to throw a log in the road of someone who has a different set of difficulties in life?” None of us has that right. None of us has the right to make life difficult for another human being just because their circumstances and realities differ from ours. None of us has the right to tell someone they shouldn’t be themselves. We also don’t have the right to tell consenting adults who to love, or as the Isley Brothers put it, “Who to sock it to.”

## *What motivates fear and hatred of people who identify as LGBTQIAP?*

Psychologists say hatred can be driven by differences, and more specifically, by love of the group we belong to and aggression toward groups that differ from ours. In early humanity, in times of scarce resources, this might have been helpful for the survival of tribes, clans, families, etc. I wonder how well that serves us now, considering that differing sexualities and gender identities do not encroach upon our survival. Psychologists also say we don't just hate because things are different; we hate because we *fear* things that are different.

Fear of homosexuals has been named “homophobia,” a term coined in the 1960s by heterosexual psychologist George Weinberg. The Pride Resource Center at Colorado State University describes homophobia as pervasive and irrational. Internalized homophobia refers to homosexuals whose self-hatred and self-denial of homosexuality are a product of being taught to view themselves as sick, sinful, and criminal. Homophobia includes fear of mannerisms, actions, or feelings that might suggest homosexuality and a corresponding desire to suppress or wipe out homosexuality. Homophobia can be exhibited by a person of any sexuality.

*Something deeper inside you triggers hatred toward others. A lot of times, it's someone who is hiding their sexuality, and they hate homosexuals because they see too much of themselves in that person. You see things, traits of your personality, that you don't like about yourself; so therefore, you immediately feel as if you don't like the person. Otherwise, why would you care who I sleep with? Why would you instantly hate on somebody just because of their sexuality?*

–Fredis

“The things people hate about others are the things that they fear within themselves,” according to clinical psychologist Dana Harron.<sup>403</sup> This doesn't necessarily mean every person who hates homosexuals fears they are homosexual. It could mean they recognize some personality traits or characteristics within themselves that might stereotypically be identified with homosexuality. For instance, a man who likes to dress, speak, or

behave in a way that has been associated with homosexuality might be fearful that people will presume he is homosexual, even if he isn't. Because he doesn't want to be presumed homosexual, he might respond negatively to seeing those same traits in a gay man. Some people react negatively to homosexuals because they want to make sure others won't think they are homosexual.

*Once, while at a club with my husband, a dancer asked if I wanted a lap dance. I was so uncomfortable with this idea of a lesbian interaction, or that she thought I might enjoy it, I got angry with the girl, and I snapped at her. I felt threatened because I didn't want people in that bar to think that I was a lesbian.*

–Raman

Anne shared her opinions on why people express fear, hate, or discomfort about gender-nonconforming people.

*I think that there are probably a number of things. One is we live in a culture where we have these nice neat boxes of man and woman, as opposed to some other cultures where they might have a third gender box. We live in a place that has a very rigid gender idea. I think that makes it hard as Americans. Some of the North American native people have two-spirit persons who embody both genders. Another place is Southeast Asia where there is more flexibility. Additionally, I think it is an experience that has not been very shared, so it is something that people don't know about, and they don't have any experience with. It is something that is incredibly hard to talk about. I can say from my own experience it is incredibly difficult to bring this up with people. Thirdly, I think there is just a general lack of language around it. People don't know how to ask questions about it.*

–Anne

Glenn shared her perspective on why some people have difficulty accepting transgender people.

## REAL TALK ABOUT LGBTQIA+P

*Gender and sex is something that hits people at a very deep level. There's something in our reptile brains that makes people uncomfortable with that and hateful toward any sort of gender nonconformity. It's basically a phobia. When we were a primitive species living in savannas, we lived in tribes, and you liked the people in your own tribe, but it was safe to dislike people outside your own tribe. I guess, just because gender nonconformity is unfamiliar to most people, it makes it uncomfortable, and it makes them hateful.*

—Glenn

Demetrius offered another perspective.

*It's like an alien to them, and they don't understand. And things that we don't understand, we shy away from and look at from afar instead of trying to understand what we're about.*

—Demetrius

Creating lies and stereotypes is one of the tools we use to feed our fears and hatred of others. They help us to create further separation between ourselves and others. Lies and stereotypes give us more reasons to view others as less than human—less than worthy of love, compassion, and understanding.

*I think the most damaging misconception is that we are different, that we are outside of what is normal, that we are somehow defective. The whole stigma of mental illness that was cast upon us for so many years has only recently started to be pulled away. I think that is the most damaging part of it... People being exposed to it and thinking and believing those things.*

—Emily

Fear has been our pattern for responding to the unknown. Fear can be a rite of passage if we use it to make ourselves smarter and better people. Conversely, clinging to fear can make us ignorant and hateful, with appalling results. Clinging to fear rather than seeking true understanding led to the Salem witch trials. Little girls and young women were hanged

because people feared their unexplained “fits” and convulsions. We now look back on that era with shame, knowing that this mysterious behavior was the product of natural physiological functions. How will we feel about ourselves upon realizing that a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity is simply a matter of natural physiological functions?

The antidote to fear and hate is compassion for ourselves and others. The key to overcoming fear of the unknown or unfamiliar is information and education.

*It’s probably just lack of understanding, or reflects what they’ve been taught to think about people who are different. It would be helpful if everybody could understand that their reactions to other people are coming from themselves, not from the other person, in anything, whatever it is. It would be helpful to get to the root of it by asking, “Why do I feel this way about that person, even though they’ve done nothing to me and aren’t planning to?” Unless somebody is coming after you with a knife or something, that’s different, but to hate somebody who has no way of possibly harming you doesn’t make sense. My partner and I can’t harm anyone by doing what we want in our own house. It would be helpful to recognize that the response, whatever response we are having to somebody who’s not able to harm us in any way, is coming from purely within ourselves. We would all be better off if people could see that and start from that place, in terms of trying to interact with that person and learn about them, and ask, “What is causing this from within me? Where am I getting this? And why and what does it actually have to do with that person?”*

–Dr. Lowell

Glenn believed overcoming fear and hate could be as simple as recognizing our commonalities.

*We’re just like them, and we want nothing more than to be treated as the ordinary people we are.*

–Glenn

## REAL TALK ABOUT LGBTQIAP

Professor Wright agreed that more people recognizing their sameness would eliminate the fear that drives hatred and phobias.

*There's a lot more commonalities in our differences than we realize, and if we can find a way to embrace them and not necessarily fear them, then I think that would go a long way. I'd love it for our society.*

–Professor Wright

### *What is the harm in accepting all sexualities and gender identities?*

It's tempting to simply answer, "There is no harm," and move on to another question. Instead, I would like to address some of the reasons why people would say there is harm.

#### Family Values

One argument offered is that acceptance of LGBTQIAP people harms family values. Let's examine this for a moment. What are "family values?" Generally, values are principles or standards of behavior. When we talk about family values, we refer to principles and standards of behavior for families. Perhaps the first and most important topic in a discussion of family values is valuing family. If we say we value family, then doesn't that mean that having a family is important to us? If we value family, then shouldn't each member of the family be important to us? Additionally, if we profess to value family, then keeping the family together should be important. If we claim to value family, then isn't it contradictory to want to *prevent* people from having a family, raising a family, and taking care of a family? If we say we value family, then we should encourage people to build families. If we value family, then the harm comes in preventing the building and nurturing of families.

Let's also consider that marriage can be a gateway to family, and that disallowing marriage for a segment of the population is also anti-family.

*If you at all believe that discrimination is inherently bad, then why would you completely disallow a population to have the ability to be happy in a society that revolves around having*



*a family, and having children, seeing your children grow up, and knowing that they're going out into the world to replace you, when you're gone? Your legacy. How could you disallow that to an entire population? If family values are what built the country, then great, let us have families. If you say, we're a nation based on family values, then, let us have a family.*

–Perry

Valuing family is not the sole domain of heterosexual cisgender people. People of any sexuality or gender identity can value family. There is no data-based or factual support for the belief that sexuality or gender identity could prevent people from valuing family. Families led by one or two people who identify as LGBTQIAP are just as healthy, happy, or dysfunctional as families led by heterosexual cisgender people. That's because sexuality and gender identity don't determine how much a person loves their family or how well they are able to care for their family. We've seen enough heterosexual and cisgender dead-beat dads and abusive moms, for instance, to know that being gay, bi, trans, etc. isn't what makes a bad parent or spouse.

Another way to interpret the term “family values” is that it refers to the values that individual families hold. Every family has a right to its own set of values. Some of your family's values are likely to differ from some of my family's values. Does that mean my families' values are good and correct and yours are bad and wrong? Not necessarily. Each family is free to define their own values as long as they do not encroach on the values and well-being of others.

### Moral Decay

A claim has also been made that the acceptance of LGBTQIAP individuals contributes to a decline of morals. Let's take a look at this. The general definition of morals explains it as a standard of behaviors or beliefs about what is acceptable behavior. Morals impact how we behave in society. They dictate things like whether we think it's okay to lie, steal, rape, pillage, plunder, kill, or commit adultery. Heterosexual cisgender people have been known to commit heinous and immoral acts without the help or influence of LGBTQIAP individuals. There is no evidence that LGBTQIAP

individuals commit these acts with a greater frequency than heterosexual cisgender people. In fact, when it comes to immoral acts like rape and child molestation, heterosexual cisgender males are the predominant perpetrators. How is it then that being homosexual, transgender, or queer, for instance, is tagged as cultivating immorality but heterosexuality is not?

### Plot Against Black Males

There has also been a growing cry among some African Americans that homosexuality is a harmful plot to destroy black males. There is no truth to this. A black person's sexuality is not a plot, secret plan, or scheme to accomplish an especially hostile, unlawful, or evil purpose. Homosexuality is a naturally occurring sexuality. Additionally, sexuality does not harm or diminish a person's race. On the contrary. Not being allowed to be yourself is what destroys a human being. Being gay, bi, or trans does not prevent a person from being black, white, Asian, or any other racial construct. A black male who is homosexual is still black. A black male who is homosexual is still male. Most importantly, an openly gay black man is a person who can love himself. He is a person who can live a productive life, build a family, and contribute to society.

### Threat to Cisgender Women

There are also heterosexual and lesbian women who believe that transgender women pose a threat to cisgender women. This came to my attention when a Facebook friend posted that transgender people are delusional.

*That group of women who consider themselves radical feminists is called by other feminists 'terfs' or 'trans-exclusionary radical feminists,' and basically, they believe that trans women in particular are trying to, like, ape femininity, mock femininity, are trying to take women-only space, are trying to destroy sacred, divine, feminine stuff. This all has come to a head over many years. I mean it is interesting because this is, like, a very lesbian feminist infight that then straight people got wind of. The Michigan Women's Music Festival was sort of like the ground zero of this fight. The Michigan Women's Music Festival was part of a broader movement but was the most successful of these*

*kinds of festivals that were about lesbian and women separate in space. There are many things about this that were really beautiful. It was, like, women need a place to go to be away from male violence, to not to have to deal with patriarchal culture for a little while. And Michigan lasted for forty-five, forty-six years and was very, very successful in lots of ways. A lot of lesbian feminists felt like that was a utopian ideal, but they had a non-transwoman policy. They did not have a no trans men policy. To be specific, they had a women-born-women-only policy. And a lot of people were, like, it is really fucked up for you to decide who is a woman based only on gender roles... All of these ideas, it is a very essentialist and frankly negative way, I think, to a certain extent of thinking about womanhood... It is this very backwards and monolithic of thinking about who trans people are, mostly who trans women are, but it is a very painful fight as a feminist institution, for us, seeing sister feminist institutions with a lot of history go down in flames because they can't accept trans women has been really, really hard and really sad... They look at trans women and they are like, you are making a mockery of femininity. You are making a mockery of us. It is, like, no, actually. These women are more invested in womanhood than just about anybody because they are trying so fucking hard to live their truth. They are more your sisters than anybody.*

—Anderson

We are all trying to live our truths. I can live my truth without negating your individual truth. My truth as a woman is not the same as your truth, but that doesn't negate either of our realities. My truth as a heterosexual is not impacted by another person's truth as lesbian, gay, bi or pan. My truth as a cisgender person is not impacted by another person's truth as queer or trans.

### Harmful to Children

There are also those who claim that accepting LGBTQIAP identities is harmful to children. This is also unfounded. Children are not negatively

affected by interacting with LGBTQIAP individuals. Nor can a child's sexual orientation be changed by interacting with someone who is LGBTQIAP. As stated earlier, we are born with our sexuality and gender identity. If a child is heterosexual, they cannot be "turned" into some other sexuality. If a child is cisgender, their gender identity will not be altered by interacting with someone who is not cisgender. It is also important to restate that children are much more at risk of being molested by a heterosexual cisgender male than by someone of any other sexuality or gender identity.

The bottom line is there is no harm in accepting all sexualities and gender identities. The sexuality or gender identity of another human being has no adverse impact on my life or yours. Two women having sex in the comfort and privacy of their home does not harm me or you or anyone else. My neighbor's sexuality doesn't stop me from going to work or walking the dog or loving my family. A transgender woman's presence in the women's bathroom does not stop me from using the restroom. The presence of LGBTQIAP individuals does not impact my or your ability to earn a living, raise a family, take a vacation, buy a home, etc.

### *Is there any harm in not accepting LGBTQIAP?*

What is the harm in discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQIAP individuals? According to the APA, individuals and society are harmed. And "any discrimination based on gender identity or expression, real or perceived, is damaging to the socioemotional health of children, families, and society," according to the AAP.<sup>404</sup> On the social level, prejudice and discrimination are reflected in the everyday stereotypes that persist even though they are not supported by evidence. These stereotypes can be most harmful when they are used to condone unequal treatment, diminish the quality of people's lives, and deny civil liberties, housing, employment, healthcare, etc.<sup>405</sup>

Even if an individual learns to cope with the social stigma against their sexuality or gender identity, a pattern of prejudice can gravely affect their health and wellbeing. Sexual prejudice, sexual orientation discrimination, and antigay violence are major sources of stress for LGBTQ people and are significant mental health concerns. It has been shown that people who don't come out can have higher degrees of stress and mental health

challenges than those who do come out. The child subjected to verbal ridicule at school or at home and the adult who is demeaned at work because of sexuality and/or gender identity is likely to experience emotional stress and lowered self-esteem. We've already discussed how these situations can lead to mental health problems, cutting, running away from home, and suicide. Unfair treatment like job and housing discrimination also heightens an individual's stress, fuels self-doubt, diminishes quality of life, and erodes faith in humanity. Physical violence that stems from prejudice has obvious health concerns such as internal and external injuries, and worst of all, death. Lack of acceptance can lead to an ever-present threat of violence that adversely affects children and adults.

"The real harm to individuals and society occurs when people are not accepted for who they are," according to Shankar Vedantam, host of *Hidden Brain*.<sup>406</sup> He goes on to say, "Stereotypes are powerful because the stories we tell about ourselves are powerful. They shape how we see the world and how the world sees us. But in the end, they are only stories, and stories, we can rewrite them." My hope is that we stop writing and telling stories that demean a group of people because they differ from us in some way. Instead, let us turn toward stories that help us all be happy, hopeful, kind, and loving.

### *Is acceptance of LGBTQIAP increasing?*

Some, including President Barack Obama, believe it is. He says, "American society has changed; the attitudes of young people in particular has changed."<sup>407</sup>

Research supports the belief that acceptance is increasing. Ninety-two percent of LGBT adults surveyed by Pew Research say society is more accepting of transgender, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people than it was ten years ago. Overall, homosexuality is more accepted in the US now than at any time in the past, according to General Social Survey (GSS), National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, Gallup, and Pew Research. Additionally, one survey showed that in 1993, 63 percent of Americans thought homosexuality was "always wrong." By 2010, more than 50 percent of the population thought homosexuality was "never wrong." Another indicator of increasing acceptance is seen in perceptions about employment. Support for equal rights in job opportunities increased

from 56 percent in 1977 to 89 percent in 2008. The percentage of people who believed that school boards should be able to fire teachers who are known homosexuals went from 51 percent in 1987 to 28 percent in 2009.

Most LGBT individuals attribute the changes to a variety of factors, including people knowing and interacting with someone who is LGBT, advocacy on their behalf by high-profile public figures including celebrities and non-LGBT leaders, and the growing visibility of LGBT adults raising families.<sup>408</sup>

The people I spoke with also felt there is definitely an increased acceptance and visibility.

*When I started teaching thirty years ago, when I asked a question about homosexuality, I had people say overtly in class, "I hate fags. All gay people should be dead," and things like this. Two weeks ago, in class, I asked a similar question and the students didn't seem to have any negative conceptions about LGBT people. So, something's shifting really dramatically. When you look back over thirty years, it really is a dramatically different place... A transgender person in my study group said somebody who was transgender a generation ago would never have thought about coming out as quickly as she did because she didn't see the same negative social consequences to doing what she was doing. It's interesting how the world really is changing or being more open-minded. I also think this may be a stressful period as we're sort of trying to grapple with diversity in a new way.*

—Professor Wright

*I wish I would've been born two generations after me, because people are accepting this now, to a certain degree. Not everybody, but the conversation is out there. They're killing some of us, but it's not like it was.*

—Sabrina

Sabrina's chilling and tragically true statement, "They're killing some of us," serves as a reminder that hazards continue to exist. There is still work to be done as long as LGBTQIAP children and adults are being assaulted, murdered, discriminated against, and oppressed. While attitudes

are changing and conditions are improving, there are still plenty of people who feel justified in setting a gay teenager on fire or murdering a transgender woman. Progress has been made, but as President Obama also cautioned, “That doesn’t mean there aren’t going to be some fights that are important. Legal issues, issues surrounding transgender persons. There is *[sic]* still going to be some battles that still need to take place.”<sup>409</sup>

According to GLAAD, 14 percent of the US population still disapproves of LGBT people, and 33 percent remain unsure. Statistics also show that conservative, religious people are more likely to disapprove. The South tends to be less accepting, and its states are less likely to have laws that prevent discrimination.

*While other parts of the country have been gaining rights, that has not taken place in the South. When you look at the most recent polling that asks “Are you okay with gay marriage?” the places where acceptance is less than 50 percent are in the South. Also, when you look at where funding goes for LGBT efforts, the South has the least amount of funding going toward research. The highest proportion of LGBT people out of all the regions in the country—Midwest, Southeast, etc.—are based in the South. We have more LGBT people than any other region of the country. We also have more LGBT people raising families than any other region of the country. However, if you look at the fourteen states that make up the US South, none of those states have had any statewide non-discrimination policy that protects LGBT people [as of 2017].*

—Roemerman

Professor Wright, who moved from the Midwest a few years ago, was surprised at the level of anti-gay sentiment he has experienced in the South.

*What I’ve been befuddled by here in Georgia is the people who are anti-gay are really anti-gay and are willing to be out there on the internet or in your face. That’s kind of striking to me because I really thought there was this Southern politeness thing going on here.*

—Professor Wright

The South has a long history of mistreating people they consider outsiders based on religion, race, sexuality, gender identity, and so on. However, this is not a Southern issue; it is a universal issue. Acceptance remains a challenge that must be addressed.

*If you don't identify with LGBTQIAP, then why should you care about how they are treated?*

“Until we are all free, none of us are free.”<sup>410</sup> Or as actor Asia Kate Dillon says, “Until the most marginalized among us, black, indigenous, and people of color, especially trans, intersex, and genderqueer folks, are held up as essential assets toward the survival of us all, no one will be free.”<sup>411</sup> As long as LGBTQIAP individuals are discriminated against, marginalized, and denied full rights and protections under the law, they are not free, and therefore, none of us are. How can we claim to live in a free society when a segment of that society is not free?

Think about what it feels like to be on the receiving end of discrimination. As actress Jameela Jamil suggests, “I think it’s very important that if you know what it feels like to be left out for any reason, that you start to think about all the other people who are left out, even those who don’t look like you or who aren’t like you.”<sup>412</sup> If that still doesn’t do it for you, then consider a family member or friend who has considered or attempted suicide because their sexuality or gender identity isn’t accepted by family, friends, and society. Do you have some duty to try and ensure their well-being, survival, and happiness?

If you are wondering how one person can make a difference without joining a march or giving money to an organization, look to your immediate surroundings. There’s a good chance that a situation will arise among your family, friends, and coworkers to make it known that you don’t support discrimination against LGBTQIAP individuals, or that you don’t agree with stereotypical or anti-LGBTQIAP statements. It doesn’t require challenging anyone to a duel or citing a list of data. It can be as simple as saying, “I haven’t found that to be true,” or asking, “Why do you believe that to be true?” For myself, I think, “If this is something that I believe with my heart and soul, and I do and say nothing, then I am not living up to my philosophy, values, and morals.” When I’m in a room and I hear someone make an ugly statement, then it is my duty to question or



challenge the statement. In that setting, it can be much more impactful coming from me than the person being disparaged. It's more difficult for my family, friends, or associates to dismiss me because I'm inside their group; I'm one of them. Sometimes that makes people stop and think about what they're saying and what they feel and believe. If nothing else, it makes them reluctant to spew hate speech, which is a start.

*The biggest thing straight people might be able to do is help their straight friends understand it better. It's very powerful when someone who is not the subject of the prejudice stands up for that person. It's one thing for a gay person to say, "Don't hate me because I'm gay." It's a cool and slightly different thing for a straight person to say, "You shouldn't talk to that person that way because they're the same as we are."*

—Dr. Lowell

We all need allies to stand up for us at some point in our lives.

### *What is a straight ally?*

A straight ally is a heterosexual cisgender person who is an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and/or pansexual people and their rights. I didn't know what a straight ally was, or that I was one, until I came across WeAreStraightAllies.com, an organization founded by an associate of mine, Chevara Orrin. We Are Straight Allies works to end the discrimination and violence directed at the LGBT community.

A GLAAD survey reports that at least 53 percent of the US population are LGBT allies. Straight allies are found in all walks of life and include people like Beyoncé, Willie Nelson, A\$AP Rocky, Jay-Z, Brad Pitt, and Cindy Lauper. Writer and comedian Larry Wilmore says, "I realized it's important for me to be an advocate for issues that aren't necessarily my own... I'm not a homosexual, but if I can be an ally for that issue, I think it's fantastic."<sup>413</sup>

Like Larry Wilmore, I believe it's important for me to advocate for issues that aren't necessarily my own. Some people are puzzled by this. Some assume I am on the verge of coming out. To them I say, I am coming

out as a straight ally. I know that in some instances I will be misunderstood or viewed as peculiar. That's okay with me. I accept that, "If you're going to stand up for what's right, sometimes you got to stand apart."<sup>414</sup> I cannot allow the judgment and perceptions of others to interfere with this work. I am willing to "stand apart" if it means that one day, we can all stand together. I am willing to "stand apart" if it means that one day, everyone, regardless of sexuality or gender identity, will have equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The APA suggests that there are a number of ways heterosexual cisgender individuals can help eradicate discrimination, starting with "examine their own response to antigay stereotypes and prejudice."<sup>415</sup> Other suggestions include working with these individuals and communities to combat prejudice and discrimination and to encourage nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation and working to make coming out safe. It has been proven that straight allies can have an impact.

*We're also starting to find an ally marketplace. It's friends and family who won't frequent businesses and restaurants and things like that if they're not LGBT friendly. That is five times as large as the LGBT community, so it's a huge segment of the population, which is why we're seeing—for example, when Indiana tried to find a way not to deal with gay couples and screen against them, you saw businesses immediately responding because the tipping point has occurred.*

—Roemeran

Historically, we have seen the value of involvement by those who may not be directly affected by the discrimination of another group. When the larger community becomes involved and flexes its muscles on behalf of the oppressed group, it can provide efficient and effective leverage.

### ***What will it take to change perspectives about LGBTQIAP?***

As heartbreaking as it is for me to admit, some people will never change their perspectives. Fortunately, for humanity's sake, those people are not the majority.

Changing perspectives must be addressed on numerous fronts. Danielle Moodie-Mills, former Center for American Progress Advisor for LGBT Racial Policy and Justice, believes it's important to present positive images of LGBT people and that policies need to evolve with our cultural shift, especially employment nondiscrimination.

Respect and compassion for basic matters, like identification, are necessary.

*I think treating everybody with respect is what it comes down to. Just trying to get regular care, there are huge barriers. A patient of mine couldn't change her name on her insurance card, so she's in the waiting room waiting to see me, and then they call out "Jim," and she has to stand up and say, "That's me." Things like that and changes to the whole check-in process are needed. So now we have a form that says, "preferred name," and then my nurses know to call that name. That solved it in my office, but not in other offices that didn't think about that. That's just one example of all the different minefields that there are, and it can be dangerous for somebody in a large group of people, in a waiting room, to be identified as someone with a name that doesn't match their gender. They could be at risk going out to their car later, you know? There are higher stakes to some of these things than is readily obvious. There are so many barriers like that to coming to the doctor.*

—Dr. Lowell

Some of these issues need to be addressed legally or legislatively to implement change in policy to then influence personal thoughts and behavior. Making it illegal to ask an employee about their gender identity could dissuade employers and service providers from asking invasive questions. Employers, staff, and service providers would think twice about doing so if they knew there were legal ramifications that would impact their businesses and jobs. It has been proven that laws can impact how we extend to others the respect and compassion we all desire for ourselves.

Anne reiterated the belief that focusing on what we as humans have in common can overcome the negativity toward LGBTQIAP people.

## REAL TALK ABOUT LGBTQIAP

*Mostly, there is more sameness than difference. The same comfort they get to feel at being their authentic selves is the same comfort and need that we get in being our authentic selves; people living their authentic lives.*

–Anne

Anne also expressed a belief that straight people having more personal interactions with LGBTQIAP individuals could be a primary agent for changing hearts and minds.

*There is nothing that changes someone's mind like having someone in their life, who they really love, who is gay or queer or trans. There is nothing that changes people's minds more than that.*

–Anne

This is not just wishful thinking. According to the APA, “Studies of prejudice, including prejudice against gay people, consistently show that prejudice declines when members of the majority group interact with members of a minority group.”<sup>416</sup> The APA also stated that having personal contact with an openly gay person is one of the most powerful influences on heterosexuals’ acceptance of homosexuals. Antigay attitudes are far less common among members of the population who have a close friend or family member who is lesbian or gay, especially if the gay person has directly come out to the heterosexual person.

*For me, what it is about is coming to the table. The more we demonstrate that we are human beings and have one-on-one conversations, I think that will help. I have to credit Mayor Maynard Jackson. He was the first to say, “I want you be on this board and I want you to do that and I want you to be the liaison.” He said, “Get out there and do it,” and I had to do it. I think people's perceptions will change when they have real experiences. It takes building those personal relationships and demonstrating who you are. A lot of laws get changed because of people.*

–Commissioner Garner

Changing our perceptions also permits people to shift in the direction of greater inclusion, more justice, and more peace. I turn to David Letterman again, who says, “Look, you’re a human; I’m a human. We’re breathing the same air. We have the same problems. We’re trying to get through our day.”<sup>417</sup> As humans, we should allow for and embrace each individual’s expression of humanity. When we see and treat each other as equals on this plane of humanity, then the fear, hatred, stereotypes, and discrimination are washed away.

*For me, it all starts about humanity and being a humanitarian. We are all part of this great big brotherhood of humanity. Whether we are male or female, whatever our race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, we are all part of humanity, and we are all brothers and sisters at some level. We all need to find ways to strive to give love and get along with humans; that is a big part of it. It is important to understand that being transgender, our expectations are that we would like to be accepted and loved, to live our lives in cultured society. This is the same with most groups that are ostracized by societies.*

–Emily

It’s not surprising to me that everyone I spoke with expressed similar thoughts and feelings.

*I want people to see me as a human being first and then as a woman, African American, lesbian. I can put any of it first. I am African American. I am a lesbian. I am a woman. I can do any of them in any order. Asking me a question about my sexuality sort of put me in a box that I don’t want to be placed in. I want to know who you are, and I want you to know who I am as a person and what I bring to the party and what I bring to the work that I do; and then, out of that, we develop a relationship.*

–Commissioner Garner

Another core desire is that people be allowed to be who they are, which I believe is something we all want for ourselves. Meg Zulch says, “We’re

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not asking you to completely understand the ins and outs of our identity or know every piece of lingo regarding gender-nonconforming identities. Just validate our existence by acknowledging our right to be here and to be seen as we are.”<sup>418</sup> That shouldn’t be too much to ask for. Nor should respect. Krysten Sinema, US Representative (D-Arizona) and out bisexual, says, “We’re simply people like everyone else, who want and deserve respect.” I suppose we all feel we deserve respect, yet there are plenty of folks who feel they don’t have to extend respect to other people. Since we desire respect, why not extend respect to others? Let us take advice from Tommia Dean, a college student, who says, “Eventually if you respect each other, you will understand each other.”<sup>419</sup>

Another common desire is to be treated like everyone else.

*I don't want anybody to treat me different or special because I'm gay or whatever; I just want to be treated like anybody else.*

—Dr. Lowell

There are hopes for self, family, and the future.

*It matters to me and my family how we get treated and perceived in the world. I am really invested in pushing people to rethink their long-held ideas. It is really important that people have some facts. I really like the idea that you are using your privilege and your understanding as a straight person in the world to help dispel some of the myths. I don't think we are all that different, and some of those things that people are holding on to, if they spent the day in my shoes, it wouldn't feel any different. That's the truth.*

—Anne

Even though you may think you deserve to be treated like everyone else, there is likely some person or some group that would look at you and say you don’t. At any moment in human history, there has always been a group or groups of people being denied the full benefits of membership in society. There is always a segment of the population committed to maintaining dominance over those groups. Fortunately, there is always a segment who believes everyone should be afforded equality. And there

is yet another group of people who aren't sure what to think or believe. Over time, the undecided and uncommitted move in one direction or another. It seems that in each modern era, more people move to the side of fairness and equality. That does not happen without agitation in the forms of communication, grassroots activism, advocacy, financial support, and legislation.

Let us seek to understand each other better rather than hide behind our differences. Let us recognize our sameness. Let us acknowledge that we each have different ways of expressing our humanity. Let us embrace the truth that no one is better than anyone else and no person is less valuable than another. Let us allow each human being equal access to education, healthcare, housing, employment, protection, freedom, and love.

Let us go there.





## A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

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TARA Y. COYT has written and developed books for two NBA All Stars, a former Death Row Records photographer, and several entrepreneurs. Her articles and editorials have covered politics, culture, entertainment, and science.

Prior to becoming a writer, Tara was an award-winning marketing strategist and entrepreneur who developed campaigns for Disney, General Mills, HBO, McDonalds, NBCUniversal, as well as small businesses, and non-profits. She is a Walter Kaitz Foundation Fellow and recipient of the Atlanta Business League Super Tuesday award.

Tara has delivered keynotes and hosted programs on black history, marketing, and book development. She was the host of Newsmakers Live, a political talk show in Atlanta, GA and a community discussion leader for the Public Square in Chicago, IL. Tara has also been featured in videos for My Black is Beautiful, the United Way, and ATL PBA, among others.

Tara's non-profit involvement includes board appointments with the Atlanta-Rio Sister Cities Foundation, Atlanta Technical College Foundation, and Atlanta Writers Club. She is a graduate of the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta Volunteer Improvement Program, and has been an active member of the Atlanta Business League, Black Journalists Association, Black MBA Association, and National Association of Minorities in Communications. She has also supported numerous organizations, including the ACLU, American Cancer Society, Georgia Equality, GLAAD, Human Rights Campaign, National Museum of African American History and Culture, and Planned Parenthood.

The Ohio native was born in Cleveland and earned a BS in Natural Sciences from Xavier University (Ohio) and an MBA in Marketing from The Ohio State University. Tara lives in Atlanta, GA.