

KIMERON'S STORY

My goal with this letter is to share as much of myself and my experiences with you, in as sincere and honest a way as possible. I know that the issue of homosexuality and religion can be a delicate one and I will not attempt to persuade or teach in my writings today. I have learned through the years that in order to receive respect, I must give it, and in order to be loved, I must love.

My experience with faith and the church started the moment I was born into a fundamentalist Christian family in a small, rural town in North Carolina at the end of the Baby Boom years. My parents, devout members of the Forest City First Wesleyan Church, came from large families who tended to get married and stay within a one hundred mile radius of each other. That meant that I had plenty of cousins to play with and that I was related to half my church. My father was the only one of nine siblings to attend college (on a football scholarship) and his mother finished the 3rd grade before she had to go to work. She taught herself to read by reading the Bible from cover to cover, many times in her 99 years.

My mother, the second oldest of five, was raised by an abusive, alcoholic father and a loving but passive mother. She turned to the Lord to help her cope with the chaos and dysfunction of her early life and she clung to her religion with a fervor that I only later recognized as survival.

I grew up attending church every Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening. I went to Sunday school, Vacation Bible school, and our twice annual Revival weeks. Because we did not have money for cub scouts, and a vague distrust in things secular anyway, I was enrolled in our church's equivalent, the Christian Youth Crusaders, or CYC. I was devoted to my church and to the CYC, earning all Christian-related merit badges and twice being named "Christian Youth Crusader of the Year".

My father's side of the family was quite musical, and I followed suit, playing piano and singing first for my church and later, as a professional church musician throughout my high school years for two Southern Baptist churches and one United Methodist.

As was the tradition in my church, I became "born again" at age 12, visiting the altar at the front of the church and promising to follow the teachings of Jesus, a half man, half deity, that I had learned to trust and love. I loved the stories from my childhood that talked about the gentle soul who healed sickness, turned water to wine and protected the innocent. These stories stay with me today and guide me in my life as an adult when I am faced with challenges and risk. The golden rule has been a potent guide for me and helps me tame the baser instincts inside us all to take advantage of situations and people who are vulnerable. The example of Jesus that I follow responds to greed with generosity, anger with peace and most of all, outcasts with love.

I grew up during a time in rural America before Columbine and the Internet. There was an innocence and simplicity in many areas of my life then that I remember with fondness.

Like playing outside until after dark when the lightening bugs were fair game for my lantern jar, riding my bike to the Quick Mart for a cherry Icee, and eating a slice of my grandmother's clove and allspice apple pie right out of the oven. I excelled in school and was the child my mother felt she most resembled.

Unfortunately, my journey from 12 to who I am today was not always a gentle one.

We didn't curse, we didn't smoke or drink and we NEVER talked about sex. In fact, we all understood that there were silent prohibitions against talking about sex or anything that remotely resembled things considered "improper." There were many other rules in our household, some of which were imposed by my parents and some of which were set by our church. Sometimes, it wasn't always clear that there was a difference between what my mother wanted, and what God himself wanted so I tried my best to obey them all. When I wasn't successful, I paid the price. Today, my parents would be considered by many to have been abusive. Then, however, it was the norm and the community standard, condoned by our minister, who modeled the same with his children and grandchildren.

I tell you about this because as you might imagine, I learned some powerful lessons back then that stuck with me for years. There was a vague sense that by following the rules, both manmade and God's, I would be worthy of the love of God and a beautiful paradise after death for eternity. I learned that God could be loving, but could also be vengeful. If you did, or even thought about, things that were displeasing to God, you would be punished in the fires of hell. I learned that my parents loved me, but that they too would not spare the rod if I broke the rules. Being good became the focus of my life. Being excellent kept me that much further from the flames of despair. Putting other people down also seemed a way to feel superior and closer to God, even if only in my own head. Other religions were wrong...no ifs ands or buts.

The only problem was that while I could control my behavior by staying busy and doing good deeds, I couldn't always control my feelings and my thoughts. As a normal, growing boy, feelings began to emerge that caused me a great deal of concern and confusion. I felt a special "intensity" for other boys, but not especially for girls. I wouldn't call it sexual, especially before puberty, but I knew that whatever these feelings were, I shouldn't talk about or act on them. Back then, I had never heard of homosexuality in any forum... no books, no TV or movies, and certainly no direct conversation about gay people or that any feelings other than for the opposite sex could be acceptable. Little boys grew up to marry little girls, and that was that.

As I began to mature, my feelings only intensified and I began to struggle to control and hide them. I searched everywhere for some way to understand why I had these feelings, but did not feel safe enough to actually talk to someone. I thought I was the only one who had ever had these feelings and that I must be sick, crazy or abnormal. I could not believe that Jesus could love someone like me, and I felt intense shame and guilt all the while feeling powerless to change.

One afternoon, at age 13, while searching the Encyclopedia Britannica, I accidentally came across the word “homosexuality” which had a relatively brief, straightforward definition “a person who is sexually attracted to someone of the same sex.” I was stunned for a second until it hit me... *I wasn't the only one*. I also had a name for what I felt.

I looked for anything I could read about my condition. Most of the religious material I found made it clear that the church, at least the Wesleyans, generally felt that homosexuals were deviant and sinners. Objective information was not available at the time since the Internet was years away and our local libraries contained nothing considered controversial or lascivious.

I was terrified. I had no one to talk to and feared the day that my parents would discover my secret. I feared being kicked out of my home and burning in hell. I spent many nights praying to God to take this burden away from me. I begged to be “normal”. I focused on my schoolwork and my church life. I read my Bible, scanning from cover to cover for a solution to my secret sin. But God either did not seem to hear me or he chose to ignore my pleas. While I continued to control my outward behavior, the feelings in me not only did not go away, they became even stronger as I became a young man. I tried going on dates with women, but I felt nothing more than a platonic friendship. I can only describe it by comparing what I felt to one's preference for a particular flavor of ice cream. While you may not find vanilla objectionable, you have a passion for chocolate! I could not will myself to be attracted to girls!

Inside my soul, there was a battle raging between what the church had taught me and what were my honest feelings. At times, I cried to God to stop this struggle, to help me find peace. I wanted to go to heaven and I wanted to be a good man. I could not see how I could live a life of honesty and integrity while keeping this part of me a secret. I did not understand that there were other options at the time, that I could be a good person and live my life honestly and openly, choosing to love and be loved as I had learned from the example of Jesus. I wondered how my feelings could be sinful when I did not choose them. I thought sin was when you consciously chose to disobey God.

At 16, I met someone who would change the course of my life forever. I met a young man who later admitted to me about his own sexuality. I was startled and impressed. He seemed like a nice person, someone who was gentle, worldly and kind. I quickly fell in love for the first time. Within months, my world would fall apart when my parents began to suspect that our friendship was more than platonic.

My parents confronted me directly and passionately about their suspicions. Somehow, despite my paralyzing fear, I decided at that moment that I could no longer deny who I was and what I felt and I admitted that I did indeed have attraction to the same sex. Telling the truth was something Jesus would have wanted me to do, I felt.

Their response was what I expected; in fact it was exactly how I had imagined it would be. They were crushed and angry. They were sad and hysterical. They were ashamed

and miserable. They believed that I had been seduced and brainwashed. They expressed their beliefs that Satan had a role in my thoughts, my feelings and my behavior. I cried, and they cried, for weeks.

During the discussions, they decided to keep me under lock and key. I had no phone privileges, no permission to drive, and was not allowed to socialize except at church. My mother frequently left Bible passages on my bed and on my dinner plate. Once, while I was in my room, she turned up the volume of the TV when Anita Bryant was leading a tirade against homosexuals so that I'd be sure to hear it. I became increasingly depressed. I felt deeply hurt. I had never done anything to make them treat me this way before, with straight A's in school and never touching drugs or alcohol. I couldn't understand their reaction and their disgust with me. I felt abandoned by God. Where was he? Did he feel disgust for me too as they suggested? Maybe they were right, maybe I was evil. But I told the truth and didn't back down.

Eventually, they gave me three choices. One, to go see the preacher. Two, to see a psychiatrist recommended by the family doctor. Or three, to get out of the house.

None of the choices seemed to be good ones. The minister would only continue berating me with threats of hell and eternal damnation. Going out on my own at 16 was terrifying, and I knew that going to college was my only ticket out of my rural hometown, but that it would be hard to support myself on my own, complete high school and go on to college. So I chose the shrink. All that I could find to read on mental health treatment for gays was that sometimes, in order to "cure" homosexuals, they would hook them up to machines that delivered shocks whenever they had feelings of attraction to other males. That seemed better than the other options.

Although I knew in my heart that I did not choose these feelings, I struggled with everything that I had been taught by my parents, my community and my church that said that these feelings were wrong, were abnormal and were to be changed. I did not know it at the time, but three years before my revelation, the largest psychiatric organization in the country had decided to remove homosexuality from the official list of mental illnesses. For years, researchers who had been studying homosexuals, had been finding that simply having an attraction to someone of the same sex did not qualify, in and of itself, as a mental disorder. In fact, evidence had been accumulating, much to the surprise of the researchers themselves, that there were many gay and lesbian people who lived decent lives, working as soldiers, doctors and pipefitters, making contributions to society. Not only were they in every other way, "normal," but many of the widely held stereotypes did not hold up. But I did not know this then.

My visit to the psychiatrist was brief. My stomach ached and I sweated every moment of the car ride to the office. When I arrived, he took me into a room, questioned me about myself and my life for an hour, asked me to complete some tests and sent us all home to return in two weeks. I expected the worst. When we returned, he brought us all into his office, my mom and dad and me and told us that I was indeed a homosexual, followed immediately with "but he shows no other signs of problems...making good

grades...socializing...working after school.” He went on to suggest that if my parents were struggling with this issue perhaps they would benefit from some counseling to help them deal with it.

My heart melted. Not only did I not get blamed, condemned and shocked, but the exact opposite happened...someone offered me hope.

It was at that moment that I heard God’s reply to my years of crying out to him. I did not feel so alone. It was one of those moments that you never forget, when God speaks directly to your heart, even in a crowded room.

My parents decided not to return for counseling. We made a truce that I could live under their roof if I agreed to not talk to, or see, anyone else who was gay. I threw myself into my school and work. No one outside the family knew the difference...except me.

Once I left for college, my life changed dramatically. No longer afraid to speak the truth, I began to explore my identity and others beliefs. Still stinging from the harshness of the church I grew up in, I was fearful of organized religion but had not yet found a way to practice my own spirituality. I knew that there had to be a way to be who I was, but still live a life consistent with my faith and follow the loving teachings of Christ. Although told many times by sincere believers that being a healthy gay person and a Christian are incompatible, I have learned to trust my personal experiences with how God has blessed me over and over and over again.

Just like when I was 17 and I thought all hope was lost, God has come through for me every time.

Another low point in my life was when I had just completed my first teaching position at a large state university. I had taken the job understanding that it was a one year position only, but that I would have the opportunity to apply for a tenure-track position at the end of that year. I worked very hard that year, teaching three new courses, working in the counseling center on campus and serving on department committees. At the end of the year, I was offered the tenure-track position but at significantly less money than had been promised. I felt hurt and manipulated by the administrator, who figured that I had no other options and couldn’t negotiate now that I was on board. I didn’t know what to do... stay and keep a job that I felt had deceived me, or turn it down with no other real jobs on the horizon. I had lunch with my friend John, who happened to be the Episcopal chaplain on campus and shared with him my dilemma. John, a very wise man, suggested that sometimes you have to trust God enough to make the right choice even without a safety net. I decided to trust my faith at that moment and I turned down the job. Within weeks, my 6 year relationship ended when my partner told me that he had been unfaithful. We lived in his home, so he asked me to leave. I was devastated. I now had no job, I was alone, and I was homeless.

Did I make a mistake to trust God? How could this have happened?

I called my good friend from college, Martha, who said without hesitation, “there’s an empty room in my home with your name on it...you can stay as long as you like.” A window opened. I had already applied for a teaching job at a medical school pain center in the very town where she lived. Within two months, I was hired for this position over 60 other applicants, had a place to live again, and was this time making double the salary offered by the university.

I have since continued my career in pain management, which has brought me many blessings in itself. I have never since been homeless and I have met the person whom I am sure God had in store for me. I have never been happier or felt more blessed.

I know that God has done all of this for me. I am who I am. I do not understand why God made me gay. I do not understand why God allows people to judge me because I am gay. I don’t understand why there was a hurricane in New Orleans, but his lessons for me have been powerful and I trust my faith and my relationship with God above all else. Even the darkest times have brought me growth, insight and a deep faith that there is a reason for everything. I have found that by being true to who I am, I am able to feel more compassion for others, to understand what tolerance and love really mean, and to use my energy for good works. Perhaps God knew all along that he wanted me to share this struggle with you someday or he wanted me to learn the value of unconditional love and faith. Whatever the reason, I’ve learned that God is there for me so I don’t have to fear the future. Every day is another opportunity to learn and to love.

Would I like for my commitment to my partner be recognized through marriage? Of course!! I’d love to receive the respect that people who are married automatically receive. And who wouldn’t want the tax breaks and special legal rights that are afforded to any opposite sex couple who chooses to marry?

But the lack of societal recognition does not change my love or my commitment to Brad, and to God, about taking on the responsibilities of a relationship. There is a reason that God has not seen fit to open the hearts of enough people to make marriage legal for me. I choose to forgive those who believe that I do not have the same rights as others at this point in time. I choose to forgive my family who did not understand. I choose to try to feel compassion for those who treat me as a “sinner” or less than human, no matter what the reason. I have faith that things happen in God’s time. Perhaps I will not live long enough to marry the person whom I love, but I choose to focus on the blessings in my life rather than dwell on the omissions. I am not perfect at it, but I choose to continue to try to send love to others even when they condemn me. The lessons of Christ’s life have served me well over the years.

Warmly,

Kimeron Hardin