

WINNER OF THE SECOND PLACE EDITORS' PRIZE

Bisexual Blues in the Bible Belt

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Dean's Denial

"Homosexuality is a sin." A quote I first heard in 6th-grade from my Baptist Sunday School teachers, Dean and his wife, Charlotte. The "abomination" of homosexuality was a recurring theme for months where it was casually mentioned here and there. If my memory serves me correctly, this was the first time I was introduced to religious-based homophobia. A series of "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," and "all gay people go to hell," among other sayings, bled into my formative years. I remember seeing the disappointment on my parents' faces when same-sex marriage was legalized across the entire United States, and I blindly followed their reactions and opinions despite the homosexual desires I was experiencing. I suppressed those feelings because I knew that if one thing was true, it was that God couldn't make me gay—not me. Because I was a "good Christian".

An Alabamian's Anger

I wrestled with God for a long time because despite how "good" of a Christian I was, God continued to test me. And I was angry. I was angry at God for doing this to me. I was angry at the world for stigmatizing homosexuality. I was angry that I would be shunned for dating who I love. Knowing that the pastor I looked up to for years wouldn't officiate my wedding was deeply disappointing. I knew if I succumbed to these feelings, I would lose relationships and be uncomfortable in my environment, but those people and my surroundings were all I knew. And I couldn't give up all I knew, or all I would be left with was my anger and damnation. Although I didn't fit in, I still wanted to be part of a community, but their actions made it easy to want to leave and give up everything.

In my 9th-grade history class, a classmate of mine, Jack, stated something along the lines of "I wouldn't care if all gay people just died," and his friend, Patrick, said "Let's put them in camps," and then, Jack suggested slavery. Some people laughed, others were shocked, and my closeted peers and I silently broke. Our teacher acknowledged that the statements were wrong, but he did not report the situation. The boys faced no disciplinary repercussions despite literally spewing hate speech. I feared that if I spoke up, they would figure me out either as queer and/or a "demoncrat," a derogatory term coined by right-wing evangelical Christians to imply that democrats are demonic. Both labels came with their own consequences of ostracism. On this day, I didn't speak up—I was furious, but I was more terrified than anything.

Baptist Bargaining

I was a “good” Christian: I went to Sunday school and church every Sunday morning and night. I got baptized just one year after *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Yet, God did not rid me of my

“sinful desires.” I was still damned to Hell despite my loyalty. I often bargained with God because I knew I must have upset Him. Why else would He treat me this way? I promised Him I would never skip church. I promised I would read my Bible and do a Bible study daily. I promised I would conquer my crippling fear of public speaking to be an evangelist, like all Christians were “called” to do, but few ever did (at least to God’s standards). There were many nights where I screamed, sobbed, and pleaded for hours, asking God, “Why did you make me this way?” I endured too many of these mentally and physically draining nights before I realized that God wasn’t holding up His side of the bargain; I stopped going to church.

Damning Depression

Knowing I was damned to Hell was soul-crushing. I had to choose (as if there was ever a choice) between personal satisfaction with my life on Earth or my afterlife. I suffered bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts that peaked during my sophomore year of high school. A few months prior, I had just gotten out of my first “real” heterosexual relationship and finally began focusing my attention on figuring out my sexuality. I had already encountered homosexual desires many years before, but I kept them suppressed until I was mentally ready and able to fully unpack them. Given my mental state during and after this journey, in hindsight, it seems I wasn’t ready quite yet.

Alluding Acceptance

As I’ve grown up, I have dropped subtle hints regarding my sexuality. That way, if I ever decide to tell my parents that I am queer, such clues will “lessen the blow”. I typically use gender-neutral terms like “they”, “spouse”, or “partner,” when discussing my potential, future romantic relationships. My parents know about my personal distaste for marriage given that most of the ones in our family have ended in divorce or are unhappy. However, they do not know that my distaste also stems from preferring to marry a woman but being too afraid to do so in today’s society.

Seeing queer representation in media has gifted me some confidence in my sexuality. It’s nice knowing I’m not alone. Netflix’s *Heartstopper* aired a day after my birthday, and what a beautiful belated birthday gift it was. *Heartstopper* is a fictional drama surrounding teenage protagonists Charlie and Nick who start off as friends and fall in love as the series progresses. The show’s depiction of Nick’s realization of his sexuality truly helped me realize it’s okay to tell people you trust, especially if you know that they will support you unconditionally. The series is ultimately what gave me the courage to come out for the first time to my best friend this past summer. I knew she would be supportive, but it was honestly very difficult to say the words “I’m bisexual.” Despite how uncomfortable I was, I felt a deep sense of relief afterwards—just like Nick.

It is unequivocally unfair that I, along with so many others, had to endure and continue to endure this cycle of grief over feelings we cannot control. As time has progressed, my internal

struggle with my sexuality has improved, partially because my environment became more accepting (even back in Alabama), but mostly because I learned how to love myself and these feelings God blessed me with. At times, these feelings have felt like a curse, but I know that is not the truth. I have since joined a church that practices progressive Christianity, where I, as a queer person, am not only welcomed but affirmed in this community. I understand how to discern what is truly God's love versus what is humanity's misconstrued use of the Bible to target the LGBTQIA+ community. I wrestled for years between abandoning my religion or queer identity, but I know now that God intended for me to have and love both.

Queer people should not have to grieve about their sexuality due to society's coarseness, but, instead, we should be welcomed with open arms. I wish I could tell my grieving 12-year-old self that it gets better because it did... it just took a little time and a lot of self-acceptance.