

Coming Out Stories

By Debra J. Mumford

While growing up as a Missionary Baptist preacher's kid in Eastern North Carolina, I was conditioned to believe that being gay was a sin for which people are sentenced –by a good God - to burn in the eternal fires of hell. I was taught not only that sexual acts between same gender-loving people were sinful, but even having feelings of sexual attraction to people of the same gender was a sin against God. In addition to being taught this very oppressive biblical and theological perspective, I was also taught that as an African American being gay was absolutely shameful. Being black in the world and having to contend with whiteness in all of its manifestations is hard enough. Adding homosexuality into the mix not only brings shame upon LGBTQ+ people, but also upon their families both inside and outside of African American communities. This combination of forces can cause some LGBTQ+ African Americans to internalize feelings of complete and total unworthiness. White people don't like them because they are black. Black people don't like them because they are gay. Even God does not love them because they are gay (according to some oppressive theologies). Shame for some LGBTQ+ African Americans is very complex and very real.

Shame is a feeling of internal despair or disgrace brought about by one's own actions or someone else's. In African American communities in general, and African American religious communities in particular, acting in ways that bring shame upon oneself and one's community is to be avoided at all cost. It is with avoiding shame in mind that I tried for many years to date men. I tried to deny the reality that I did not emotionally connect with men. I tried to deny that it was with women that I could breathe – truly exhale and be myself.

Therefore, it was not until I was well into my thirties, after I attended seminary, after I began working full-time at a different seminary, and after I met the woman who would become my life partner that I first came out to anyone. Learning about liberation theology in seminary helped me to begin thinking about liberating myself. Working with people at the second seminary who actually celebrated the lives and loves of LGBTQ+people helped me to make my thoughts about liberating myself a reality.

The first time I came out, I did so silently – in writing – to my parents. I thought a lot about how to come out to them without having to endure the looks of profound disappointment, words of utter condemnation, and feelings of abject shame. To put it simply, I was afraid to face them and have the conversation. So, I decided to come out via letter. I went home for a visit and left a coming out letter on the kitchen table upon leaving. Even though I believed God loved me unconditionally, I could not bring myself to have a conversation with my parents about homosexuality. My mother found the letter, read it and shared it with my father. Her prediction for my life as an out, gay person was that I would not be blessed.

One of my most delightful coming out experiences was with my coworkers at Pacific School of Religion (PSR). PSR is one of the most open and affirming seminaries in the country. Just for fun, I came out to my co-workers, not with one-on-one conversations, but with a wedding invitation. My partner and I invited some of our favorite people to a wedding at the PSR chapel.

We knew that they would be a bit surprised when they received the invitation. We also knew that they would show up for the wedding ready to celebrate our commitment to love each other for life. It was quite a party.

In one of my most consequential coming out experiences, I came out verbally and professionally. In 2006, I interviewed for the position of Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS) in Louisville, Kentucky. At the time, the Presbyterian Church USA was in turmoil over whether or not to ordain LGBT clergy. I went through the very rigorous two-and-a-half-day interview process. On the last day, in a one-on-one conversation with the dean, I came out. I told him I was gay and in a long-term committed relationship (inference being “if you hire me, she’s coming with me”). I am now in my fourteenth academic year at LPTS. In July, I will assume the role of Dean of the Seminary.

I thank God that my mother’s prediction of an unblessed life has not come true. Coming out was one of the best things I have ever done. For me, coming out was truth-in-action. Coming out was my declaration that I wanted to live an authentic life by not hiding who I am or whom I love. Coming out was also my declaration that as an African American woman I reject all forms of oppression including the oppression of shame. By coming out, even with a letter, I was saying I am proud (or at least on my way to being proud) of who I am. I pray that one day, all people, and especially all African Americans, have the support and affirmation they need to come out of the closet.

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