Me To You: Letters From A Gay Man Written From A Slouched Position

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By
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ABSTRACT

Me To You: Letters From A Gay Man Written From A Slouched Position

By

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Master of Arts in Communication Studies

Our knowledge of reality, of what we believe is real, is shaped by our interactions with others. Through these interactions, we create meanings in response to how we view the world and ourselves. Using Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s theory of Social Construction of Reality, I explore how my interactions with others have shaped how I view myself and the world in which I live. Using a narrative approach and specifically through letters addressed to those who have created my social reality, I show how negative communication messages have shaped my physical body; I slouch. More than a personal narrative, this account attempts to serve as a catalyst for social change. It speaks not just to those who have affected me, but to those who can see themselves in the family members and friends I address in my story. It asks readers to see the reality they have helped to create through a gay person’s eyes and hopefully, causes a change in them. I do not assume this is a reflection of all gay people’s experiences, but I do show how my story is similar to many others here in the United States, and globally as well. I also suggest companion research, work that examines the opposite of what I write about here; namely, how a straight person’s reality is affected when someone they love identifies as being gay.
Chapter 1: Introduction

I slouch. I slouch like an old man. I can feel myself slouching as I drive, walk, and sit at my desk. I see older people bent over as they walk. Some of them have a cane as they barely raise their eyes to see where they are going. I imagine that I will slouch like them someday. I wonder how they got that way. It scares me and I slouch even more. I have secretly thought of going to a doctor so he or she could check to see if all my slouching has caused a curved spine. I have told myself I would consent to wearing a back brace if that would help me stand up straight. I can feel myself slouching and it causes pain in my neck. When I get a massage, therapists tell me the tightness is in my neck and shoulders. They are telling me something I already know. I slouch.

I have tried to figure out my reason for slouching. It is not hereditary. I have lots of siblings and none of them slouch. They walk tall and proud. My parents are in their 70s and still have great posture. It is only me with this defect. I have a photo of myself when I was five years old standing in front of our home and I was smiling and standing straight and tall; I was not born looking down. What happened to that kid?

Mary Beth Cancienne and Celeste Snowber note, “The body is not simply flesh and bones; instead, it is a living enactment of cultural and social beliefs” (240). Perhaps slouching was my body’s instinctive protective mechanism. Protecting me from what? I had a major secret when I was growing up. I was discovering I was gay. Not only was I discovering I was gay, but I was learning being gay was not okay; it was a sin to some, unnatural to others, and disgusting to many. “My body makes language. It makes language like hair. And when I write, my body tingles. My body speaks. I feel pain in
certain places” (Gingrich-Philbrook 3). My body, not only my mind, holds these memories.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explain the process by which human knowledge about the social world is created, transmitted, preserved, and comes to be taken for granted as we negotiate the world. We come to define reality in our everyday lives and use this knowledge to guide our behavior. This knowledge is taken for granted as truth. It is experienced as an objective reality we must contend with throughout our lives. We cannot avoid it. It is a reality interpreted by us as we form subjective meanings of the world. Berger and Luckmann explain, “Through socialization, human beings internalize the objectified social world. Through this process, the individual acquires a general sense of the world as well as role-specific stocks of knowledge which shape how he behaves in the world. It is not only a reality that is institutionally defined but it is a reality that comes to be apprehended in a particular way within each individual’s consciousness” (61).

Our constructions of reality have consequences; they shape our identity and how we react to others. And, social constructs create meanings. Each human action has a meaning attached to it. We interpret what others say and do and translate this into a personal meaning for us. Andrew Weigert asserts, “Interpretation is a process of perceiving the other and his or her interaction within symbolic frameworks so that we can make some sense” (76).

The meanings we make from our reality are created through language. Language marks the co-ordinates of our lives in society and fills life with meanings (Berger and
Meanings are shaped through interaction with others whether through face-to-face interaction or through others we may never meet but can only know through another medium, such as their reputation or via a television screen. Either way, we do not live alone but “experience with the existence of other people” (Yu and Kwan 260).

Through this interaction with others, we shape an identity; we start to internalize our place in the social world as an objective reality (Berger and Luckmann). We don’t think of this constructed world as an option or choice. We “internalize it as the world, the only existent and conceivable world” (Berger and Luckmann 154). And we react to this world; we act within it. And, I suggest here, our bodies react along with our conscience and unconscious minds. I slouch.

Berger and Luckmann’s concept of the social construction of reality has been used as a framework for understanding across academic disciplines, from change management in organizations (Nistelrooij and Sminia) to investigations into the basic constructs elicited by the word “death” (Brabant). I use it here to show how my construction of reality, the meanings associated with being gay, have “changed my life in significant psychological, relational, and material ways” (Adams 27). I suggest being called “fag” did something to me. I posit that all the negativity I heard about being gay was manifested as a physical and psychic consequence for me. I slouch.

The slouching is a constant, physical reminder of the shame and guilt I feel around being gay. I carry my identity with me in my shoulders and neck. I understand what Ragan Fox meant when he wrote, “I consider how my thin gay body is performatively rendered meaningful in a homophobic society” (4). I feel it every day.
These days, I am very aware of the slouching and try and correct it but it may be too late. It is true for me that, “the body is, no doubt, informed and inscribed by many political, social, and cultural discourses, which have legitimized the body in its relationship to knowledge” (Cancienne and Snowber 238). I slouch because of all the stories I heard and read when growing up. I slouch with the weight of how being gay was a disgrace, a sin, and a path to death.

**Narrative**

I choose to use narrative to share my experience. My narrative exemplifies social construction in action. My writing is a reflection of my reality that has been influenced by others. Narrative allows for, “the inclusion of actors’ reasons for their acts, as well as the cause of the happening” (Sarbin 9). My story is “jointly authored by the culture and social interactions of the individual” (Giovannoli 25). It is my truth as I remember it. Arthur Bochner writes, “The question is not whether narratives convey the way things actually were but rather what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put” (154). By recalling these truths and putting them on paper, I try to understand how these experiences have made me who I am today. Julia Colyar notes, “Writing is a symbolic system which articulates what we know, but it is also a tool whereby we come to these understandings” (421). Through writing, my stories take shape and form the world to construct meanings. They mold me; they make me. James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium indicate that the fact shared cultural narratives exist is important as they “provide a broad outline for the possibilities of the self” (13).
Through narratives, people make sense of events, their life trajectories, and their relationships. At the individual level, people utilize narratives to connect different, perhaps contradictory, life experiences across time and “render themselves intelligible” (Gergen 186). Scholars interested in identity have, therefore, focused on the stories people tell because it is in analyzing narratives we can understand how people construct their identities. Gary Fine and Corey Fields assert, “Narratives are often the means through which individuals engage in the self-reflexive process of identity construction” (139).

As my recollections of my past weave in and out through history, so does my writing. My method asks to embrace another rhetorical style, what H. Lloyd Goodall calls “mystery,” “to encourage us to see and to define situations by their unique human and spiritual poetic, the interpenetrations of self, other, and context, by our complexity and interdependence rather than by some simpler linear or causal logic” (125). I jump back and forth between then and now; as Julianna Kirschner notes, it’s “a sense of consistent living and reflection” (18). Taken together, all the pieces fit. My life story unfolds.

**Audience**

In many parts of this country, people take for granted the freedom to live openly gay. They see gay people being more visible in their everyday lives on TV shows, and as elected officials. And we have come a long way from when I was a kid. However, intolerance continues to happen today. Unfortunately, I do not have to watch the news or read the internet to find more true life examples of kids learning to slouch, like me. I can see their future. I can see them walking down the street as 39 year olds, looking like me. I
feel empathy for these kids who have started to slouch. Their stories are my stories and we slouch together:

- September, 2010: Tehachapi, California – 13-year-old Seth Walsh died nine days after hanging himself from a tree after continuously being taunted about being gay. Several classmates who taunted Seth cried and said they wished they had tried to stop the bullying. The police chief said no charges would be brought against anyone.

- November, 2011: Oxnard, California – Larry King, 15, is killed by being shot in the back of the head and then again while lying on the ground in his classroom by classmate, Brandon McInerney. Brandon’s defense is Larry was gay and was flirting with him.

- December, 2011: Cheatham County, Tennessee – Jacob Rogers, 17, killed himself after being bullied for four years by classmates. Friends say they heard other students calling him a faggot and a queer.

- January, 2012: Gordonsville, Tennessee – Phillip Parker, 14, hung himself in his foster parents’ bathroom after one year of constant bullying for being gay. A note found in the trash can read, “Please help me, mom.”

- February, 2012: Atlanta, Georgia – A video showed three men punching and kicking Brandon White, 20, after he stepped out of the JVC Grocery and Deli. The men, yelled: "No faggots in Jack City," as they beat him. The surveillance video captured one man lunging at White with a tire iron in his hands.

- October, 2012: Chicago, Illinois – Terrance “Jawan” Wright, 18, was robbed and killed by 5 teenagers. Jawan was transferred to Banner Academy the
previous year to escape bullying over being gay. His grandmother says the boys were picking on Jawan on his way home and calling him names so Jawan got into a fight with them. One of the boys pulled out a gun and killed Jawan.

- January, 2013: Portland, Oregon – 15-year-old Jadin Bell was taken off life support after attempting suicide by climbing on a playground structure and hanging himself; he had been the victim of intense bullying both in person and on the internet because he was gay.

This abbreviated list of headlines, drawn from over the past three years, shows there is a still a need for my story to be told. I found I need to be the voice for those that no longer have one. I “work to tell not only my stories but also the stories of others unable and/or afraid to speak” (Adams 147). I write for those whose relationships have changed because they disclosed or were thought of as gay. Like Tony Adams, “I write for those ostracized because of such change; persons banned by peers and kicked out of homes” (22). I am with you. I understand. I know you.

I underscore the need for political agency for “the voices of those who are not heard” (Garoian 129; Peters and Lankshear). I found I can be the voice for those who come after me so they don’t need to endure the pain I and others before me have had to face. Berger and Luckmann note, “I also relate to predecessors, successors, to those others who have preceded and will follow me in the encompassing history of my society” (48).
It is also to those people who have ever made someone who is struggling with their sexuality feel “less than.” It is to those parents and siblings who have a gay son or family member “wanting–desiring–acknowledgement, wanting recognition of my intimate and meaningful same-sex affairs” (Adams 128). It is to those teachers, youth ministers, coaches, politicians, and church leaders who don’t comprehend how they can affect the way a gay person views their world. It is written for those people who don’t yet understand words carry power.

You will become the first gatekeeper of my secrets and all the emotions that come with these experiences. My memories are embodied inquiry—“sensuous, emotional, intimate, where imagination is as important as rigor, meanings as important as facts, and the heart as important as the mind” (Bochner and Ellis 506). In discussing the effect of performative dance, Cancienne and Snowber note, “we want our audiences to sweat, blush, jubilate, and lament while watching a performance” (239). I want you to feel these emotions through my writing; my story.

I want you to react to my story. I want to draw you in, make you think, make you act. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis indicate, “The product of research, whether an article, a graph, a poem, a story, a play, a dance, or a painting, was not something to be received but something to be used; not a conclusion but a turn in a conversation; not a closed statement but an open question; not a way of declaring ‘this is how it is’ but a means of inviting others to consider what it (or they) could become” (507). Therefore, if you are a parent, friend, sibling, or any other that hurts a gay person by words or actions, I want you to understand the permanent scars you are forming. Not only do I want you to understand, I want you to stop the hurt.
If you are someone who stands on the sidelines as others in your presence uses hurtful slurs towards others, I challenge you to no longer be silent. I want you to read my letters, understand why it is difficult for gay people to stand up for themselves, and be that voice that stops the pain.

In addition to writing for those who are struggling with their sexuality and those that are the cause of the hurt, I also write for myself. Narrative provides a means of looking inward, a means of connecting me with myself. Sartre suggests self-connection is the fundamental purpose of writing. He notes, “Everyone wants to write because everyone has a need to be meaningful—to signify what they experience. Otherwise it all slips away . . . every single person feels, perhaps only unconsciously, the need to be a witness of his time, of his life—before the eyes of all, to be a witness to himself” (30-32). I finally put on paper memories and feelings that were silent for 39 years. I can’t take them back. As David Epston writes, “The words in a letter don’t fade and disappear the way conversation does’” (31). I can now try and make sense of how my past molded me. I can attempt to understand how my physical body took shape; I slouch.

**Method**

I write in both a storytelling format and through an epistolary account, addressing those who affected me most. Writing letters is a method that allows me to focus my message, as throughout the process of writing each letter, I have a specific person in mind, such as my mom, my dad, or my youth minister. Psychologically, it places me in their presence, as if I am speaking directly to them, which allows me to write from a more personal perspective. The tone of each letter reflects the distinct relationship I have
with a sibling as opposed to my parents. As Leskelä-Kärki notes, “In letters, we narrate, and thus constitute our identity from varying positions, depending on the person to whom we write” (329).

The letters allow me to make sense of my own life. Isabel Seara notes, “Born out of the silence of writing, the letter becomes an excellent exercise in introspection” (364). Brigitte Diaz adds, “Letters are written not only as a means of establishing communication but as a way to shape identity, as a way of capturing the self” (qtd. in Seara 364). More than a diary, I write to those who have most impacted my life, recognizing, “letters are dialogical, opening up channels of communication and reciprocity not only between the correspondent parts, but also between the writer of the letter and any reader” (Stanley 202).

I use writing as a process of inquiry and forum for analysis. Bochner and Ellis note that narrative “can be used to examine ourselves, investigate and express the worlds of others, transgress stifling conventions and boundaries, resist oppressions, grieve and heal, produce intersubjective knowledge, reveal the hidden meanings of memory work, and come to terms with multiple and contradictory identities” (510). The stories and reflections emanating from my heart, mind, and shoulders and typed onto this paper are the reflections of my life.

My writing “fuses the personal, political, and intellectual, reflecting the qualitative effort toward more engaging, more useful texts that change minds and hearts as well as the norms of academic writing” (Foley 383). Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln support this concept when they note that texts “offer a ‘montage’ of images for
engagement that create and enact moral meaning, moving from the personal to the political, the local to the historical and the cultural” (5). Even though these letters are from me to people I know, such as my mom, this method allows others to see themselves as either the writer or recipient of the letters as they reflect on their own lives, once again placing my narrative into a larger context.

I include stories of family members and people I have not met, including political figures. I address them directly as their opinions, words, and actions set the tone for the entire country. They have power; with a stroke of the pen, they can sign into law a policy of inclusion or exclusion. My letters show a history of socially constructed exclusion.

The chapters are organized thematically, meaning that each chapter addresses a specific audience, such as family members as opposed to religious leaders. The consequence of slouching ties all the letters within the chapters together. I use the letters to show I entered a world already constructed by those existing within it. The letters reveal cultural attitudes, how my identity is influenced and shaped and how I respond to a society that Berger and Luckmann say is an “ordered reality” – a reality that existed before we each came on the scene and supported by Eric Eisenberg’s idea of “surround” when he notes, “At birth, each of us emerges from the womb into a social world already in motion, complete with preexisting languages, relationships, social networks, and culturally-prescribed patterns of behavior (245).

This writing encompasses some stories that happened a long time ago and some as recent as this year while trying to place them into the context of the larger world in which the events occur. I “retrospectively write about personal experiences that stem
from, or are made possible by, being a part of a culture and/or embracing a particular cultural or personal identity” (Adams 159). I turn the “ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where self-experiences occur” (Denzin 217).

To provide background and lay the foundation for the rest of my story, I begin my narrative with telling you basic facts about me. You will learn how I came to know I was “different” and how my slouching first began. You will then read letters I have written to those who have impacted my life most. The letters span my whole life, underscoring my struggles of being gay “is a lifelong process of recurrent self-creation and discovery, not a singular goal-oriented process of self-classification” (Garnets and Kimmel 262). I then close with conclusions, reflections, criteria for evaluating narrative work, limitations to the study, and further possible research. Let my story begin.
Chapter 2: Beginnings of my Slouch

My slouching is nothing new. Instead, it is culmination of my experiences, fears, and memories. It is important, therefore, to understand where I come from so my story, my perspective, can be rooted in its historical and cultural context. This context illustrates how I was learning the world as someone who was gay. I hid; I slouched.

I don’t know when I realized I was gay. I knew I was different. This recognition of difference “altered every aspect of my life story and made new stories” (Adams 26). I can recall and visualize my first day of kindergarten. I remember walking into the class and the first activity we did. We sat in rows on the floor and I was in the 3rd row, last one to the left. My teacher had pictures taped to the wall in front of us. She pulled down the projector screen to cover the wall and asked what pictures were behind the screen. There were pictures of an apple, a ruler, a ball, and a pencil. I remember taking my dad’s big t-shirt to school to wear as a smock so I wouldn’t mess up my clothes when doing art projects with paint. And, of course, I remember making my clay hand print like many kids do.

Only six kids could do the handprint at one time. While our main teacher was teaching the class, our aide would help 6 kids do their handprints while sitting at a small table on the side of the classroom. When it was my turn, the aide told me to go to the counter and pick out the color I wanted for my handprint; I chose pink. When I brought the clay to the table, she chuckled and said, “That’s the color most girls are picking. Why don’t you go and find a different color.” I can still see myself (as if I am watching from above), looking down at the pink clay I held in my hand, frowning, and then walking
back to the counter and exchanging the pink clay for the plain, white clay. I knew I was different.

On another occasion, when I was about 6, my dad took my sister, Barbara, and me shopping. Barbara is a year older than me. During this time, Dukes of Hazard was a very popular show. The two main characters were Bo and Luke and I watched this show all the time. While shopping, my dad told us we could get what we wanted and place it in the cart. I saw a Dukes of Hazard display with various t-shirts and hats for sale. I told my dad I wanted one of the t-shirts. He told me to go and get what I wanted. I picked out a white t-shirt with yellow sleeves that said “I “heart” Bo.” Looking back, I am sure I didn’t equate picking out this t-shirt with being gay because I would not have known what that word meant. It felt natural to me that I wanted that shirt. I threw it into the cart. When it came time to pay, my dad was unloading the cart. He picked up the shirt, read what it said, and assumed it was Barbara’s. He asked if I had picked a shirt for myself and I told him that was the one. He said, “No, this is a girl’s shirt. Your sister can have it.” Again, I was different; not gay, different.

There were other situations that made me feel I was different than other boys. I remember watching Silver Spoons with my siblings and my sister thinking Ricky Schroeder was cute; so did I. I didn’t say anything because I noticed my brothers didn’t react the same way. I was different. This pattern continued over the years, as did my attraction to other boys. Because I have known myself to be this way, it seems there was nothing that could have been said or done to prevent me from being gay. It is as much a part of me as me being Mexican, having brown eyes, and a big nose. And that’s why it’s hard to deal with hurtful words and actions by others. Through their words, actions, and
non-actions, I was hurt for something I did not choose nor can I change. I am different. And I slouch.

Adams notes, “Coming out never ends as new audiences make for new times to disclose” (107). When I walk into an unfamiliar room, I physically feel myself slouch as I hide from the new people, unaware if they will accept me or reject me. I carry my gayness in my physical appearance, ready to be judged. All it takes is a “trigger” and I regress back to the lost kid I was. It’s the smallest things that trigger a memory to come to the front of my mind. Whether I want it to or not, it is there. It is uncontrollable and that past memory that was hidden resurrects itself in its own time and place. Many times, no matter how much time has passed, it takes me back; all the emotions are once again fresh. Susan Brison notes, “Traumatic memories remain in the body, in each of the senses, in the heart that races and skin that crawls whenever something resurrects the only slightly buried terror” (44). This is how it is with me. There are triggers that take me back to that young, insecure little boy who was afraid to make eye contact with anyone because I was ashamed of who I was. It will always be a part of me. I will always slouch.

This slouching has been cause for embarrassment on more than one occasion. It happened when visiting a friend up in the mountains. I drove the windy roads and as I approached the turn for Tim’s cabin, I was excited to see him. I noticed he was on the balcony overlooking the front yard and he watched as I parked the car. I started walking towards the house and he chuckled, “There you go, walking up the driveway as your head leads the way.” My excitement to see him turned to embarrassment and my natural inclination to slouch was overpowered by my internal voice telling me to push my shoulders back. But the damage was already done.
There was then the time I walked into the pole at school because I was slouching and raised my head up at the last moment; it was too late. As I walked across the street this particular morning, I slouched, not wanting to make eye contact with any of the students. I felt I gave off a “gay vibe” and I could hide. I tried to be invisible. I walked across the street and could hear the laughter and chatter of the group as they greeted each other before classes began. They were not laughing at me but enjoying each other’s company before the school bell rang. With my head bent over, I could see the street and upcoming sidewalk clearly. That was all I could see. I stepped on the sidewalk, lifted my head, and “bang”…right into the bus stop head first. The pole vibrated and the claps and laughter of all the witnesses vibrated in my ears. I slouched. I walked past the applauding group and into the hallway where my locker was located, wishing I truly was invisible; I slouched.

It is moments like these that are reminders of how I perceive the world and how I believe others perceive me. I walk around in embarrassment and fear. I don’t know what others will think of me. Each new experience is a “new time to worry about others, a new time to balance safety and protection with openness and honesty” (Adams 108). To prevent any further pain, I slouch. It is the only life I know.
Our families do not live in a bubble; we are a product of society. And because societal views (such as negativity towards homosexuality) pervade family functioning, conflicts can exist as contradictory sexual identities create a context in which family communication and relationships may be negatively influenced by the outside world (Harwood, Soliz, and Lin). How could my brother not call me a “fag” when that is what all his friends at school called anyone who acted a bit feminine? I do not attempt to justify his actions, only to try to understand. And, understanding goes beyond sibling relationships. It can be especially difficult for parents because societal views of homosexuality influence expectations of parenting. Many parents feel like failures when they discover their child’s sexual identity and may question if something they did (or did not do) influenced this identity (Ben-Ari; Saltzburg). Parents may be unsure of how to “parent” a gay child (LaSala). Although the child is the same person, a new dimension is added to the relationship after a parent finds out a child is gay (Mosher). Unfortunately, in both sibling and parent relationships, it often takes the form of rejection.

This intolerance has left many gay people feeling socially isolated in their own families, which is one of the most important sources of social interaction and support (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen; Robbins, Szapocznik, Tejeda, Samuels, Ironson, and Antoni). Familial rejection either through actions, words, or silence leads to increases in negative identity and feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression (Willoughby, Doty, and Malk). This rejection hurts. It stings. It scars. It may be why the most difficult aspect of this journey has been reflecting on how my own family members have used words and actions to hurt me. Today, when someone brings home a new friend, they ask about what
it must have been like to grow up in a big family. And we tell them of the fun times in the
backyard, joke about sharing clothes, and sleeping on the floor. It’s as if we forget all the
“bad” things. However, I remember them clearly and I wonder if my siblings do too but
don’t want to re-live those times. I especially remember those instances where my
siblings did and said things to me that made me slouch.

The following letters show that my gayness is in direct conflict with the reality of
what my parents, siblings, friends, and others came to know to be true and went against
acceptable patterns of behavior. This interaction with others guided my behavior as
“these schemes provide the child with institutionalized programs for everyday life”
(Berger and Luckmann 135). These letters reflect that the words, actions and inactions of
others taught me who to be; my physical body was shaped; I slouch.

Dear Ryan:

You are my big brother. You are supposed to take care of me, not hurt me on
purpose. When dad left us and it was up to mom to take care of all of us kids still living at
home, you stepped in to help raise us. You were already an adult, even if only 19 years
old. You could have left when you graduated from high school, like the others were
required to do, but you stayed. You had a good job at the bank and I looked up to you; we
all did. You dressed up for work every day in a shirt and tie. It was very different than
dad leaving for work in boots, dirty jeans, and Pendleton shirt. I was scared at night
because of the neighborhood we lived in, especially when mom was working the night
shift. I saw people getting arrested in our neighborhood for fighting, stealing a bike, or
breaking into a car. I would hear sirens and immediately think the cops must be chasing
someone and they would want to break into our house to hide. It was scary. You were out most nights with your friends or girlfriend. I tried to fall asleep but every little noise frightened me. The only noise that allowed me to sleep was the sound of your car pulling into the driveway. If I was sleeping on the couch, I would see your headlights shine thought the front window. This told me you were home and I was safe. I knew you would not let anyone hurt me; little did I know the one who would hurt me was the one I thought was my protector.

We used to play a lot of sports. It is hard for me to think of one day when sports were not part of our life. When we were watching TV, we would run outside and play basketball during commercials, then run back into the house to continue with the show. It was our normal routine and it was fun. When it got too dark or was too cold to play outside, you suggested we play football in the house. Of course, we played a modified version of the game. We would divide up in teams and play on our knees, using the cushions of the couch for blocking. I hated playing that game because I hated being hit. You insisted I play saying, “We are all playing. It’s not even teams if you don’t play.” I played but regretted that decision each time you picked up the cushion (using it as a blocker) and pounded it into my head and body. You were my protector, my big brother, and I figured this was all part of the game.

Recently, I was talking with mom and I could tell she had something she wanted to tell me. She asked if you had called me and I responded you hadn’t. She told me you visited her that day. Somehow, the topic of me came up and you told her how you forced me to play football, though you knew I didn’t want to. You explained you would hit me extra hard with the cushions, thinking that would toughen me up. You purposefully hurt
me. You told mom how you wish you never did. But you did; I remember. I slouch.

Every time we all get together and share stories of how much fun our brothers and sisters had playing sports while growing up, a new dimension is added for me. It no longer is a fun memory but a hurtful one. It is no longer an activity to forge relationships, but divides. You still haven’t apologized. Are you really sorry? Or are you sorry your plan didn’t work?

Your Little Brother,

Joseph

Dear Ruben:

After Jose and I hosted an event at our new house, you sent an email (including the rest of the family) thanking us for such a great day. You said Jose’s family “was awesome.” You greeted him and me with a hug that day, the same way you greeted the other brothers and sisters and their significant others. You chose me to be in your wedding party; I was the only family member you chose. People would think you and I are great friends. But our relationship is far from perfect. Do you remember? I write, pause, and close my eyes; I can see and feel the real relationship we had. I still remember it; I wonder if you do too or if you choose to forget. I wonder if you are extra nice to me, trying to make up for what you did to me.

You got into a lot of fights growing up. The smallest things would set you off. We could be walking home from school and if a kid was walking towards us, you felt it was their responsibility to move out of your way. If they didn’t, the fight was on. If someone at school talked bad about your favorite sports team, it was over. I didn’t think you fought
for any good reason. At least I didn’t think it was a good reason. I am three years younger than you and there are two brothers younger than me. Our younger brothers learned from you and followed in your footsteps. They got in fights for virtually the same reasons they saw you fight; it wasn’t a coincidence. I didn’t go down that road. I didn’t see a need for fighting; I didn’t go looking for it nor did I do anything to warrant someone wanting to fight me. I didn’t find a need to fight you back.

Mom was hardly ever home. I don’t blame her; she had to work after dad left us. Our other brothers and sisters graduated from high school and left home and there was a point in time where you became the oldest. And, boy, did you love the power. There was no one to stop you from doing what you wanted to do, including hurting me.

One day, our brother Sean came home from school. He told us he had been in a fight. He was not complaining or saying he was hurt; he was stating the facts of what he did that day. He was telling us so you would be proud of him. You wanted to know if he had won the fight. I don’t remember the details, but I do remember him saying he had started it. You said if you had been there, you would have helped him fight. I responded since he had instigated the fight, I would not have done anything. You did not like this response. Instead of trying to attempt to understand my point of view, you immediately jumped to, “Why, cause fags don’t like to fight? Cause you don’t want to get your ass kicked?” I slouched. What really got my attention was when you said, “I will show you what it feels like to get your ass kicked!” I ran. Having chased each other (and our other siblings) around the house while playing as kids, I knew the routine. I started to run through the house, throwing the kitchen table chairs down behind me to try and slow you down. My next decision (the wrong one) was to try and run down the hall to the
bedroom, close the door and lock it. I didn’t make it. I was running down the hallway and could feel you right behind me. I ran into my room and knew I didn’t have time to try and close the door. I fell on the floor in a fetal position, up against the base of the bed and covered my face. Your punches came fast and hard. You punched me in the stomach and back. I closed my eyes, hoping you would eventually tire yourself out. I didn’t try and fight you off but instead waited for you to stop. While hitting me, you said, “faggot, faggot, faggot” over and over. Then Brian saved me.

Brian was your best friend. He had been your friend for a long time and knew all of us. He liked to play sports and because he was an only child, our house provided him with plenty of opportunities to have fun. He was the first friend you had who owned a car. Though he would come over and visit, most of the time it was to pick you up so you could go cruising around town. The two of you went to different high schools but he still came by a lot since he had to drive by our house to get home anyways. He was a big football player which on this day was his greatest asset. Through your hurtful words and through my tears, I heard Brian coming down the hallway. “Hey, what’s going on?” he shouted. He walked into the bedroom and pulled you off. You looked at me and gave me one last, departing “Faggot!” Brian was smart enough to suggest you guys “get out of here” and took you to his house. When you came back later, there was no mention of the fight. It was as if everything was back to “normal.” It was as if two brothers who had been in a fight over not sharing a toy was all forgotten. But I have the scar; I slouch.

This was not the only incident. We loved watching wrestling. I wrestled with my younger brothers, practicing the moves we learned by watching the wrestlers on TV. It was all in fun. We didn’t want to hurt each other. On this particular night, I was wrestling
with our brother, Pete. Pete was the youngest but was growing up to be the biggest out of all of us, so it was a pretty even wrestling match. Again, it was playful with us choosing which wrestler we wanted to be and trying to perfect their signature move.

After beating him with a simulated figure four leg lock, you said it was time for me to try and beat you. I could tell from the look on your face this was not going to be fun. I said I was done playing but you insisted. Thinking the alternative might be worse, I tried to emphasize this was a game by asking you what wrestler you wanted to be. You answered, “No wrestler, it’s you against me.” I had no idea why you wanted to hurt me. You came at me and put me in a headlock. I was able to get out of it by twisting my head, the same way I saw the wrestlers do it on TV. I thought if I was able to go along with this “wrestling match,” we would tire ourselves out and it would be over. You kept coming at me, trying to get me to the ground. I positioned my foot against the bottom of the couch to give me leverage knowing if I went down, I was not getting back up. I finally said, “Stop, stop, I don’t want to play anymore.” You ignored me. You put me in a headlock again, this time really squeezing hard. Your hands were near my neck and I was scared I was going to pass out. Remembering wrestlers in headlocks elbow their opponents in the ribs, I figured it was time to see if it worked. It did. My elbow landed directly on your ribs and you let go. You then pushed me hard and I fell against the coffee table, my nose taking a direct hit. It was not broken but bleeding a lot. All you said was “I won.” I cried myself to sleep on the couch. It was not that I was physically hurt, but more so that I had a brother who was out to hurt me in any way he could.

There were similar incidents that occurred over the course of our teenage years. After I went away to college, things seemed to change. We were both adults and when I
came home to visit for the holidays, you pretended as if nothing negative had ever
happened. Maybe you thought all brothers fight but I knew it was something more. What
you did permanently affected me; I slouch. I started to ask myself why I was the target
for you. There were other brothers around but I was the target.

After I graduated from high school, I didn’t make it back home often. I went from
college to a career that took me to four different cities, all within a 13-year span. During
this time, you and our other siblings grew up too with everyone starting jobs and families.
Everyone was happy when you got engaged. I liked Brenda and she seemed to be a good
partner for you. The wedding was fun and brought both families together for a big party.
When Brenda got pregnant, everyone was excited. It had been a couple years since we
had a newborn in the family and that was a long time for us. Baby showers are for the
mother-to-be and her friends but for us, it was a big affair. There seemed to be the
unspoken goal of trying to see who could find the most creative or unique gift. I decided
to make a gift basket full of things you would need, such as small toys, and diapers
although I did make sure there was a New York Yankees baby blanket. Everyone thought
the blanket was very cool and I figured though it was a simple gift, it may have hit the
mark. I guess I did a pretty good job because for Michael’s official baby pictures, you
have him lying on that blanket.

You and Brenda were opening the gifts with all your friends and family gathered
in a semi-circle around you, and people were talking about stories of growing up, having
babies, and raising kids. Because we are all sports fans, some of the gifts (beyond my
blanket) were sports themed, such as bibs, clothes and baby sized basketballs and
footballs. You were very excited about having a baby boy and the opportunity to watch
him play sports. You then surprised us all by saying you wanted to put him in gymnastics when he grew up. Surprised, we asked why you would do that. Some said boys really didn’t take gymnastics. You responded angrily, “All the great athletes took gymnastics to help them with flexibility and coordination. He is going to do it too. And if he grows up to be a fag, I will kick his ass.” You did not say this in a joking way, but everyone laughed; I slouched.

The party continued. I immediately regressed back to when we were kids and my initial thought was to say something, even as simple as “be nice,” but I was afraid you would regress back and come after me. I didn’t want to be called “faggot” again directly to my face, even though essentially that is what you did. I didn’t stand up for myself and neither did anyone else. Instead, in that moment, I hoped and prayed your son is not gay. He doesn’t deserve to be treated the way; he does not need to be the recipient of your hateful words and hurtful fists. I am forever afraid to be around you. I walk on egg shells. I never know if you accept me or tolerate me and if you only tolerate me, one small thing may set you off. I am not physically scared of you anymore but I know how emotionally hurt I would be if you did do something to hurt me. I stay away from you; I slouch.

Your Little Brother,

Joseph

Dear Mom:

Our relationship has been full of good and bad, laughter and tears. I don’t know which outweighs the other. It’s difficult because I know how much you had to sacrifice to raise us kids; no one can ever question that. You spent nearly every minute of your life
doing whatever necessary to put food on our table. For this, I love you and respect you. However, this is compromised by how you made me feel as kid growing up gay. I am conflicted between owing you the upmost respect for everything you sacrificed for us and at the same time, thinking how my life could have been different had you loved me for who I was.

Jose’s family definitely considers me one of their own. I easily call his grandparents “grandma” and “grandpa” and everyone reminds me I am family. There is no question at family events, I will be there. If Jose is out of town, I still go. His family has no problem letting everyone know who I am.

Last Christmas was the first time I went to Jose’s extended family Christmas celebration. This is an annual event hosted by Jose’s aunt and includes lots of extended family and close friends people normally do not see on a regular basis. For many of them, this is the one time each year they see each other. There is a lot of great food, holiday music, and a visit from Santa Claus! For me, because it was my first time going, there were many people I was meeting for the very first time.

Jose’s mom, Chris, makes sure and introduces me to everyone. Wherever we are, she goes out of her way to make sure proper introductions are made so I feel like I am part of the group. This night was no exception. Many friends and distant relatives would come by our table to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. Some of the people had not seen Jose and his brothers for years and would say “Wow, the boys have gotten so big!” and other obvious but appropriate clichés. They would curiously look at me, and Chris would say, “And this is my son, Joseph.” They would respond with a puzzled look as they
thought they had remembered Chris only had four sons, not five. And she would smile and say, “He’s Jose’s partner and that means he is my other son.” She made it sound perfectly alright, not only that Jose was gay but that she considered me family, which made the person feel more comfortable. I met a lot of people that night and everyone was very nice and accepting of me and when we were leaving, all hoped to see me again at the next Christmas party.

Mom, I wish you acted in the same way towards Jose. You accept him for who he is but have not fully embraced him as part of the family. Part of it falls on him because he is not an overly outward and outgoing person and usually waits for others to embrace him, rather than be the initiator. I have not asked you what stops you from fully accepting him in your life but I ignore it because I don’t want there to be any problems; I want to keep the peace.

A few months ago, you asked me to help you at one of your volunteer events. Jose came along with me. You ran into people you have met at other events and friends from the past who have not seen me in a long time, similar to what happened at Jose’s family Christmas party. Similar to Jose’s mom’s reaction, you said, “This is my son, Joseph, and my other son, Jose.” Because everyone knows you have many kids, no one questioned your statement and assumed we were both your biological kids. I walked you to your car and said it was nice you introduced Jose as your son. You replied, “It’s easier that way so no one asks any questions.” I slouched. I didn’t know what to say and instead told you to have a safe drive home. You closed the door and said, “You too. Thanks for your help today. I love you.” And you drove away. It is these contradictory messages (saying “I
love you” only in word but failing in actions) I have received from you all my life that continue to haunt me and confuse me. They are the things that make me slouch.

Growing up, you had a friend named Mary whose daughter was Liz. Liz had a friend named Rudy who was obviously gay; he was very feminine. He was the very first gay person I knew. He and Liz were great friends and they were always together. He was very nice to us and like Liz, would spend time teaching us to swim and making us lunch. After one visit, you picked my brother and me up from Liz’s house. On the drive home, I innocently mentioned how Rudy was nice and funny, though he kind of acted like a girl. You sternly responded, “He’s called gay and I don’t want you ever to be alone with him. People like him do bad things to little boys.” In that instance, I was once again learning I was bad. I started to wonder if I was going to grow up and do “bad things to little boys.” Is this a part of who I was and a glimpse into my future? I didn’t want this. Here I was; I slouched.

On one hand I appreciate you for everything you did for me and my siblings; no one else could have had the strength to do everything you did for us. On the other hand, parents help shape their kids into the people they grow up to be and you literally helped shape the posture I have. I slouch. Maybe you said all of those things when I was growing up not knowing I was gay. Maybe if you had known, you would have been more sensitive and aware. You are my mom; moms know. I wish you had known. Do you love me? Do you love all of me? I want to know.

Your Son,

Joseph
Dear Dad:

It’s hard to know where to begin. The beginning is a good spot. No one ever doubted I was your favorite. When I was little, while watching TV, the spot next to you on your favorite chair was reserved for me; everyone knew it. You would be sitting there and if other kids were in the room, no one sat next to you in that chair. They knew when I came into the room, I had my seat. You didn’t hit me with the belt like you did my brothers and sisters. Once in a while, you did get upset with me. I do remember getting my mouth washed out with soup when I accidently said a bad word and you scrubbing the back of my ears with Comet and a sponge when you found I didn’t clean my ears well enough. For the most part, your physical punishments were reserved for others. I knew you liked me best.

Unfortunately, our bond ended when I was 7. That is when you left us and our relationship was not to be the same again. For starters, you didn’t come around much and when you did, it was to drop off a child support check or some groceries. You didn’t take me with you for the weekend or the summer. Instead, your visits lasted two hours and then you were gone. You missed out on my basketball games and my graduations. I virtually have no stories of us doing anything together since I was 7 years old.

In the years since, I learned a lot. None of it has come through conversations or interactions with you. Rather, I learned from other brothers and sisters and from my own research. I discovered your past drinking problems; I know of your infidelities. You were not a good man, but you are my father.
About 15 years ago, as I was ready to tell everyone I was gay, I wanted you to know. Though we no longer had a close relationship, you would still call me once in a while, first to see how I was doing in college and then how my job search was going post-graduation. The conversations didn’t last long but during those 15 minutes, I knew you at least were semi-interested in my well-being. For me, it was important there be no secrets about who I was; I was tired of hiding. And I knew it was time to tell you I was gay.

Mom warned me not to tell you. She didn’t say anything other than, “Don’t tell your dad.” I didn’t follow up her comment with a question because I thought you would be okay with it. I figured though we didn’t see or talk to each other often, I was still the one who had been your favorite. When growing up, I was not the kid who got into trouble like other siblings did, but you still continued to maintain a relationship with them. Why wouldn’t you do the same for me? I called you and told you there was something I needed to tell you. You told me not to worry, that at this point in your life, you “had heard it all.” You were to quickly learn there was one thing you had not heard.

I told you I was gay. I didn’t hint at it and didn’t try and tell a long story. How harmful could 3 little words be? Then there was silence. Dead silence. The scariest part of telling someone I was gay was being unable to predict what their reaction would be. The fear of rejection was real and not hearing anything was agonizing.

I thought you had hung up the phone on me. I didn’t know what to do. Part of me was thinking you were taking a minute to absorb what I said while the other part of me wondered if you were going to explode. I softly asked, “Are you still there?” You told me
you didn’t believe it, would never believe it and I was giving you a heart attack. I said, “I
was not calling to get your approval or acceptance but wanted you to know because I
wanted to be honest with you.” You told me you would not accept it until the day you
die. “Then I will see you at your funeral,” was my reply. Click; I hung up the phone. I
had not planned to say this; it just came out. I was mad you reacted this way because I did
not expect that to be your reaction. Though I knew it could go either way, I remembered
back to when I was a kid, when I was your favorite. I didn’t think there was any way you
would not still see me as that kid who shared your favorite chair with you. But you did.
And it hurt. I slouched.

A couple days later, I received a call from my uncle. He and my aunt are my
favorites. And though he is my mom’s brother, you and he have a great relationship, even
after the divorce. They have attended our family functions and interacted with us kids. It
was not unusual that I received the call. He told me you had called him and told him I
was gay. I didn’t deny it. He then requested I once again lie to myself. He told me my
admission of being gay had really hurt you and I should not hurt my father. I thought to
myself “don’t you understand how much hurt I have been through? What about my
pain?” He said I could call you back and say I was confused. He told me to do it for him.
I replied, “Uncle, you know I respect you and love you but I cannot do that.” He then said
you see me as a reflection of yourself and that has been damaged. My aunt (who was
listening from the other phone), said emphatically, “If he sees you as a reflection of
himself, then he should be damn proud!” Thanks Aunt Sara. Our relationship has not
been repaired since that day and by the way, I don’t want to be a reflection of you. I don’t
hurt others and cause pain that can last a lifetime. I am not selfish or physically abusive; I am not my father’s son.

You have caused a lot of pain to others. Yet, for the most part, you have been left unscathed. You still maintain relationships with my siblings, despite what you did. They still accept you as their dad. And I am sure you are thankful for that. And, here I am, not being accepted by you, when I did nothing wrong. You are still being accepted by others, yet I am being punished for doing nothing wrong. I didn’t choose this; it chose me. I slouch.

From,

Joseph
Chapter 4: Religion and Politics Do Mix

Both religion and politics have been major organizing tools of cultural practice, meaning-making, and development throughout human history (Etengoff and Daiute; Gorman-Murray). They both are important in my life. I learned the Bible said to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). Yet, religious beliefs co-occur with prejudice rather than tolerance. William James notes, “Religion in its extreme could turn fanatic, causing its adherents to hate others rather than love their neighbors” (312). Therefore, the role of religion is paradoxical. “It makes and unmakes prejudice” (Allport 413).

Similarly, politics has been used as “a means of persistent exclusion, discrimination, vilification and other effects of social power” (Gorman-Murray 112). Though there have been recent “victories” for gay Americans, such as the ruling the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which ruled defining marriage only as between a man and a woman (excluding gays) was unconstitutional, people fail to understand three things: first, how engrained the government has been historically in its discrimination against gays; that persecution supported by the government still exists; and, most relevant to this thesis, the impact the government has on young people who watch their decisions unfold as the backdrop of them coming to terms with their own sexuality.

Discrimination against gay people endorsed by elected leaders is not new. The federal government, for example, prohibited the employment of gays in the civil service until 1975. Local police departments would report all morals arrests of “sex perverts” to the FBI, then the FBI could give the information to the Civil Service Commission. The commission could then pass the information on to relevant agencies to remove current
employees, and the FBI could maintain the lists so job applicants could be screened against them (Lewis).

In more modern times, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, or ILGA, lists 78 countries with criminal laws against sexual activity by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people. In Uganda, the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was passed in December 2013 with life in prison as a consequence of “gay behavior.” In Jamaica, listed by the Human Rights Watch as the most dangerous country in the world for gays, the local police allow the community to carry out what they call “jungle justice,” where citizens can literally beat and kill people suspected of being gay in their neighborhood.

Closer to home, Arizona lawmakers passed a bill that would have allowed businesses that asserted their religious beliefs the right to deny service to gay and lesbian customers. And though the governor vetoed the bill, the lawmakers of Georgia have a similar bill for their state. While adults are profiled in newspapers and media regarding protests and rallies against these bills, what is lost are the many young people who are sitting at home, watching TV, listening to how lawmakers are telling them they can be discriminated against; that they can be told they can’t eat in a restaurant. With easy access to the internet, they are reading about international discrimination (including the examples I provided) that they can be beaten and killed for being gay; they slouch.

The following letters are addressed to those religious and political leaders who spoke to me though political ads, or signing laws supporting the idea being gay was immoral and should be kept silent. These letters “illustrate not only the marginal and devalued status of same sex attraction but also how speaking about the attraction can be
They highlight the confusion, hurt, and longing for a fusion of a religious, societal and sexual identity. Through it all, I slouch.

Dear Angela:

I was attending elementary school when you arrived. I had noticed the classroom with bean bag chairs but never saw anyone in it. In sixth grade, I started to notice you in there during the day sitting alone at the one desk. I noticed the sign on the door: Youth Ministry. The end of 8th grade approached and I started to mentally prepare for my journey across the street to the high school. Being at this particular elementary school had been a comfort zone for me. I had known nearly all of my classmates since 1st grade. We were all friends, we grew up together, and I felt safe around them. This was my safe haven since I was already self-conscious and afraid I might be showing feminine mannerisms. I hated my voice; I thought it sounded “gay” or “girly.” These classmates knew me as me; that’s the way I was.

I figured high school would be different. My classmates would go there but we would be joined by kids from other schools in the area. How would I fit in? Would they notice I was different? Could no one tell anything and it was a story in my head? It did not matter if it was a story because it felt real to me. I knew it was very likely I would have some of my current classmates in my future classes but it meant a lot more new faces. Towards the end of my 8th grade year, you came to speak to our class. You talked about youth group, that elusive club that occupied that room with the couches and bean bag chairs. You told us youth group was open to high school students who wanted to learn more about the Catholic teachings of community and social justice through
volunteer work, retreats, and prayer. Youth group meetings would be every Monday night at 7 and you invited us to join as soon as our 9th grade year started. A few of my very good friends signed on to this idea immediately and I thought this would work out perfectly. It would be a continuation of my school experience with people who knew me; a haven away from what I was afraid was awaiting me in high school. I was wrong.

Angela, you helped me come to know and love Jesus, while at the same time helping to form the permanent arch in my back I walk with today. You taught me how Jesus knew me before I was born while at the same time insinuating he made me wrong. You taught me Jesus forgave all, while at the same time telling me I would go to hell. Your favorite line was, “Love the sinner, but hate the sin.” You said this when the topic of homosexuality came up; this was your stance and we believed you. I believed you. You were my youth minister, the one I looked to for spiritual direction and truth and I believed what you told me.

I believed when you said homosexuality was cause for immediate condemnation, being gay was a choice and gay people could change through prayer. I prayed. I prayed every day for God to change me. I prayed so hard tears would stream down my face as I lay in bed praying to God to take this sin away from me. And when this gayness was not taken away from me, it made me feel God was not listening to me; it was too late and he abandoned me. The God you taught me about was no longer there and I believed you were right; it was a condemnation, it was a sin, and I was destined to hell. I slouched.

From,

Joseph
Dear God:

I love you. And I know you have always loved me. I type this letter and can feel myself smile as I really feel your love for me. I know it to be true. I do not doubt it. I know I do sin against you but that does not mean you stop loving me; rather, you are willing to welcome me back to your heart. Angela, my youth minister, taught me being gay was a mortal sin; she told me you condemned it. But, she also taught how loving you are. Through weekly mass and yearly retreats, I heard of your great love; how you knew me before I was born. I was confused as to where I stood in your eyes. If you knew me before I was born, and if I believe I was born gay, then did you not make me this way? And if you did make me this way, and I was taught I was made in your image, how could you not love me? As a teenager, this was very hard for me to cope with. I had no one to turn to so I turned to you.

Maybe Angela was right, after all she was the one responsible for helping guide the youth of the church. She once told me, “If you think your life is good, pray and it will be better.” I took her advice. I prayed each night for you to make me straight. I prayed for you to take away my confusion. It was the only thing I prayed for. You did not listen.

When the confusion did not stop and when I did not suddenly wake up “straight” one morning, I changed tactics with you. Instead of asking you to take away my gayness, I asked you to lead me in the path you set for me. Maybe I was wrong, maybe Angela was wrong, and in your eyes, I was who I was supposed to be. I prayed you would give me direction and if I was meant to be gay, then that is how it was meant to be. After a
while, when my attraction to other boys didn’t cease, it was my way of believing you were saying I was meant to be gay.

For the first couple of years after high school, I didn’t have much of a relationship with you. I learned very early that the Catholic Church was not very welcoming to gays and felt no need to be there on Sunday. I missed church; I missed you. I loved the singing, the fellowship, and I tried to take one lesson away from each mass. I wanted to be back with you.

Christmas was coming up and Advent was beginning. I thought this would be an ideal time to start going back to church. Celebrating being back in church coinciding with the birth of Jesus would be a perfect situation for me. I found a church and learned they were having a penance service. Because I had not been to confession for a few years, I thought it would be good to go. When I got there, I found it was a face-to-face service. During confessions, there is a private booth with a screen separating the parishioner from the priest and though there is the option of pulling back the curtain, I never did. Since this was the beginning of Advent, this church was having a special service and had a few priests standing around the church. There was a line formed for each priest and individuals went up to the priest and said confession directly to them. I freaked out: I was nervous simply telling a priest I missed mass on Sunday to his face!

I almost walked out. Something told me to stay; I think it was your voice. I got in the line for the priest that was hearing confessions in the very front of the church. I waited in line and made sure the priest was speaking softly enough that no one else in line could hear what he was telling the person; so far, so good. I started practicing what I
was going to tell him: “Please forgive me for missing mass on Sunday, for getting drunk at parties, for cussing.” I was ready to go. Then something unexpected happened. As I approached the priest, I started shaking uncontrollably. I slouched. I did not feel any one else around; it was as if it were me and the priest alone in that church. I felt tears coming down my cheeks. I stood in front of the priest and he took my hands in his and asked what was wrong. I said though my tears and trembles, “I think I may be gay.” He smiled, held my hands and said, “That’s okay. Jesus loves you.” In that moment, I felt you. I felt your hands holding mine. It was the most powerful moment for me and in that instant, I knew you loved me as a gay man.

Since that amazing experience, I tried to make it to mass each Sunday. I still find myself to be very much at peace each time I leave the service. This is very different than how many of my friends feel. They literally hate the church, though many of them grew up Catholic. They can’t understand how I can continue to support an institution that doesn’t support them as gay people. I don’t share the encounter I had with you (through the priest) during penance service because I do feel it will fall on deaf ears. I tell them, “I will pray for you” and they laugh as if I am making a joke but the next Sunday, I really do keep them in my prayers.

I recently moved to a new city with my partner, Jose. One of the first things I did was try and find a new church. Jose was baptized Catholic but his family didn’t go to church and he really has no interest in going. However, to be supportive, he said he would go along with me to whatever church I felt was best. I searched the internet for the closest Catholic Church and there happened to be one a couple miles away. I saw on the website that part of the mission statement of the church was: “Firm in the hope of the
Gospel of Jesus Christ and inspired by the example of our patron, we proclaim the kingdom of God to embrace everyone in love without discrimination of any kind.”

Maybe I was reading too much into this statement but it sure sounded Jose and I would be welcome. After attending for a couple weeks, I felt the people were very nice and welcoming. I figured Jose and I should register as parishioners.

I called the church office and was sent a questionnaire. Part of the questionnaire would be used to personalize the envelopes used to give contributions to the church on Sundays. Their form had a place for “husband” and another for “wife.” I crossed out “wife” and placed Jose’s name on that line. I mailed it off to the church, curious what the result would be. I was surprised when the envelopes came in the mail with both Jose’s name and my name on the envelope. I felt this may be a good sign. Then things changed.

One Sunday, the pastor spoke about how Catholics need to stand up for their faith and not give into political battles. He specifically used the example of staying true to God’s teachings of marriage being the union of one man, one woman, especially given the current political environment of same sex marriage being legalized. I slouched in my pew. Moments later, I placed my envelope and money into the basket as it got passed around.

I am not naïve and understand the church’s stance on gay marriage. I know they see marriage as being one woman, one man and it’s for life. I know they do not recognize divorce. However, in my experience, the idea of gay marriage is not explicitly called out during mass. It’s a fact everyone knows, even if they disagree with the position. And I am okay with that. It was very uncomfortable when the pastor called it out. The pastor is new
to this parish and it is up to the pastor to set the tone for the rest of the church community. I was starting to wonder if this was the place for me.

On a second occasion, the pastor used his homily to once again promote “the strength of the traditional family.” This time, he used the proposed overturning of a Boy Scouts of America ban on allowing gay youth to be members. He talked about the need to keep the morals of the community strong and that started with the youth of the church. He made it clear it was the role of the church to not cave into societal pressures. He told the congregation that should the ban on gay youth be lifted, he was unsure what would happen to the troop the church sponsored. Shortly after this, I walked up the center aisle and received Holy Communion from him.

And finally, a few weeks ago, the pastor once again used his homily as his bully pulpit. He is from the Philippines and his brother and sister had come to the states to visit him. He talked about the importance of family and how much it meant to him to have his siblings with him. He asked us to stand and pray for all of our families and especially for the “growing and nurturing of traditional families; one man, one woman.” I slouched.

Do I ignore what is being said or do I question if this was the right church for me? The church plays an important role in my life so I didn’t want to make a decision in haste. Instead, I called the church and asked to make an appointment with the pastor.

We met in his office which was similar to any you would see in an office building. There was the desk, computer, office supplies, and two chairs for guests. Though I had not had a prolonged conversation with the pastor, he recognized me. After exchanging pleasantries, I told the pastor I am a gay, Catholic man. He didn’t flinch or
react in any way. I felt there should be no beating around the bush so I asked him if there was a place for me at this church. He said he didn’t quite understand what I was asking. I reminded him of the past sermons in which he specifically targeted gay marriage, the boy scouts, and “traditional families.” He said it was his job to promote the teachings of the church and he was doing what he committed to do.

I explained to him I understood the church’s stance and I had been to many other churches over the years where the pastor didn’t point it out; rather, it usually was not mentioned. I pulled out the envelope that had both Jose’s name and my name and showed him the church had no problem accepting money each week from two gay men. He showed no reaction.

I asked him what was meant by the mission statement of this parish being against discrimination of any kind. He looked at me, puzzled. I had prepared for this meeting and had a copy of the weekly bulletin with the mission statement on the opening page. I told him how I understood he was fairly new to the parish but this mission statement had been around for a long time and asked what that meant to him. I slowly read aloud: “We proclaim the kingdom of God to embrace everyone in love without discrimination of any kind.” I emphasized the “discrimination of any kind” part.

Without addressing the mission statement directly, he instead told me once again, it is his responsibility to speak the truth of the church. Having already figured I had gone far enough and at this point could ask anything, I asked directly, “But do you personally, as pastor, see this church as a place for me?” He looked at me and said, “You have been in church, you have heard my homilies, and therefore, I believe you understand where
this parish stands on homosexuality.” I slouched. Then I consciously sat up straight; I
didn’t want my natural reaction to be seen by him. I wanted to portray myself as strong. I
fought my shoulders from caving in. Again, being prepared, I had brought my remaining
church offering envelopes in a manila folder. I placed the envelope on his desk, told him I
would not need them anymore, and walked away.

Once again, Lord Jesus, I have left the church. I cannot go back to a place that
takes my money each week (with the name of two men on the envelope), and then
actively preaches my relationship is not illegitimate and unnatural. I feel lost again. You
know how much I love you and at the same time, I question if it is you speaking through
this priest. Was Angela, my youth minister, right? Am I going to hell? I slouch as I wait
for an answer.

Waiting for you,

Joseph
Dear President Clinton,

I was the kid who enjoyed reading newspapers and watching the news. I enjoyed hearing and learning about politics and it was where I would be introduced to you. The presidential election got underway and you were seen as a contender. Here you were, younger than the other candidates; someone who appealed to me and my generation. You spoke of hope, of optimism, of a bright future. You were a speaker with charisma and confidence. Having read books on John F. Kennedy and seeing some old videos of him speaking, I imagined you appealed to me the same way Kennedy appealed to my mom’s generation. “He reminds me of Kennedy,” I told my mom. She smiled and nodded in agreement. I graduated from high school in June 1992. I would not be turning 18 until July but that still put me four months ahead of the general election. By this time, you were the Democratic candidate taking on incumbent George H. W. Bush.

In September of that year, I entered college. It was exhilarating to be in college during a presidential election as students would hold rallies, pass out flyers, and have mock debates. I felt this is what college was all about; people coming together to discuss ideas in a free, open, and safe environment. Most students were on your side and I was proud to be part of your “Rock the Vote” campaign – a movement to get college aged youth engaged in the political process. You promised you would end the discrimination that banned gays from serving openly in the military. This would be a complete reversal of the current policy of the time, which according to a 1992 report by the Government Accounting Office, saw nearly 17,000 men and women discharged under the directive during the 1980’s. I stood up a little straighter, wore your “Rock the Vote” pin on my backpack, confident you would be MY president.
On November 3, 1992, you were elected the 42nd President of the United States. I knew you would be the one to end prejudice and injustice, a naïve belief, I now know, but I believed in you. In your inaugural address, you said:

“When our Founders boldly declared America's independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change; not change for change's sake but change to preserve America's ideals: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Though we marched to the music of our time, our mission is timeless. Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be American” (Clinton 31).

I knew part of that change was an end of discrimination of gays so we could all share in that elusive life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I watched closely as you quickly started implementing your policies and started to openly speak about following through on your campaign promise to me to end discrimination in the military. It affirmed to me you were my president, that I was right in supporting you.

Then politics happened. Your utopia was at odds with top military leaders and with a number of elected officials who had oversight responsibilities for the armed forces. You sought a compromise in which gay servicemen and servicewomen could remain in the military if they did not openly declare their sexual orientation; this became known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

News of the compromise hit the airwaves and I slouched. What you were telling me and all gays was to stay in the closet, to not tell anyone. I was hearing being gay was still a taboo subject and it was wrong; not only should gay people not talk about it, but
people should not ask. Do you realize your policy extended far beyond the military? Do you realize you were setting a social policy and not merely a military one? I think you do. It once again affirmed to me, an individual who was still having a hard time and questioning his sexuality, that being gay was wrong. You told me not to come out. You did not suggest to me not to come out, you told me “don’t tell.” I slouched further.

There was no mistaking your words. I felt betrayed. I did not understand how the man I believed in let me down. You were trying to spin the policy that it was a win for gays everywhere. It was not a win but a defeat for all of us who were questioning our own place in society at that time. You excluded us…you excluded me. I did not tell anyone…I followed your instructions and didn’t tell. I continued to slouch.

Sincerely,

Joseph
Chapter 5: Love and Loss

David Frost writes that, “Narrative and life story approaches have been theoretically and empirically useful in understanding the lives of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) individuals; highlighting how cultural and historical concerns shape LGB identity development” (2). All the negativity a gay person hears when growing up affects personal relationships. Gay couples do not feel the same societal and familial support as heterosexual couples (Herek). Jonathan Mohr and Ruth Fassinger found, within same sex couples, identity confusion and stigma sensitivity negatively impacts relationship quality. Often, gay relationships fail not because of the conflicts between the two people, but because of the internal struggle that goes on within individuals. I carried the disapproval of my sexuality with me into my relationships.

Despite my slouching, Alan loved me to the core. He was the one who tried to teach me not to slouch. But, I lived the experience of Adams when he writes, “You will tell this beautiful, caring man that you don’t want to see him anymore, because he’s too openly gay and likes to please you too much and doesn’t worry about what others think about men dating and loving men” (76). I was not ready to be loved.

Dear Alan:

You taught me to be gay. You taught me how to love and be affectionate with another man. I will not forget the date: June 27, 1997. Over 15 years later, I pause in my typing to rest my hand on my chin, stare at the computer, and think of us back then; young, free, fun, in love.
In January 1997, I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. No one knew I was gay…at least I had not told anyone I was gay. I knew San Francisco is where I would start my gay life. It was portrayed through the media and stories that all gay people lived in San Francisco. In 1997, there was no Facebook, no MySpace, and no easy connection point for gay people to meet. It was mostly done the old fashioned way; people went out to clubs or bars to meet people face to face.

One exception was Yahoo had chat rooms you could join, one of which was for gays. Through a chat room, I met Mark, a 22-year-old college student who was looking for someone to hang out with: perfect! I met up with him a couple of times. The first time we decided to make a bold attempt to get into every bar on Castro Street to experience them and see which ones we liked best. Castro Street is the main drag in San Francisco - every bar, restaurant, and store is full of gay people. It truly is a gay mecca. I felt out of place as it seemed everyone was much more comfortable being gay than I. They nonchalantly held hands while walking down the street. I saw men kissing each other in public for the first time in my life. I saw they were happy. I wanted that, too.

I noticed the “uniform” worn by the majority of gay men. It was pretty simple; jeans and tight t-shirts. The goal was to show off what you had, even if you did not have much. A shopping spree was in order.

Mark and I found our way to the Café at the corner of Market and Castro Streets. Despite its name, the Café is not a coffee or pastry shop. It is a 2-story dance club that (at the time) was very popular with 20-somethings. And though I am not a very big dancer, because I am not a very good one, it was great to be around people my age.
June approached and I learned the annual Gay Pride Festival was coming up. Gay
Pride is seen as an excuse for a huge street party and parade but in reality, its significance
stems from commemorating the Stonewall riots, which were a series of violent
demonstrations by members of the gay community against a police raid that took place at
the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Historically, the riots are considered as the main
event leading the fight for gay and lesbian rights in the United States. I had heard of gay
pride before and saw stories on the news but experiencing it in San Francisco was
something I could not pass up.

Mark and I made plans to meet at the Café for Friday night. I went out to buy my
outfit, my uniform. I bought a new pair of jeans that hugged my body just right and then
found a cool, blue, short-sleeved sweater with a solid gold stripe across the front. After
trying on my typical size, I asked for one size smaller. With it fitting a little tight, I was
set. I got to the Café at 9:30 and went to the pre-arranged meeting spot but Mark was not
there….9:45, 10:00, 10:15 and no Mark. This was the time before cell phones so there
was no way to reach him. I had been stood up and didn’t hear from him again.

There I was, alone at the Café, on Pride weekend surrounded by everyone else
who is celebrating with their friends. It was the first time I was alone at a gay bar. I
thought of leaving, but I forced myself to stay. I thought about how embarrassed I would
be going home and telling my sister I had been stood up. I figured I should stay a couple
of hours so my sister would think I had gone out and had a good time. I ordered a Corona
and found a little corner on the second floor to hide in. Then I saw you. You were the
cutest guy I had ever seen in your jeans that fit just right and tight t-shirt, laughing with
your friend, Cory, as you walked to the bar. You walked confidently, shoulders back,
proud to be gay; a stark contrast to me slouching in the corner. Despite my hiding, you looked at me and smiled, showing your dimples. I slouched and quickly turned away. When I turned back, you were gone.

Half hour later, as I am standing in the same corner with the same Corona, you walked back up to the bar again. Something was drawing me to you, telling me I had to meet you. My inexperience and lack of self-confidence kept me from moving. You once again walked away. I told myself the next time you came up to the bar, I was going to meet you; you would be the first guy I ever approached. Time slowly passed and you did not come back to the bar. I stood in that corner and made it a mission to find you; not knowing what would happen if I did not see you again.

I walked down the stairs to the dance area and there you were dancing…with another guy. I don’t know what came over me but I walked up to you, grabbed your arm and said, “You were supposed ask me to dance.” Turning your back on your dance partner, you responded, “I don’t even know your name.” “It’s Joseph,” I responded and our story began.

We stepped outside to the open patio and talked, the entire time me observing how amazingly cute you were; I kept thinking, “Wow, he’s talking to me!” I drove you home that night and you asked for my number as you got out of the car. The next morning, the phone rang and woke me up. I said hello and you responded, “Good morning, sunshine.” You asked me to go back into the City to continue gay pride weekend with you. I did and we never looked back; we were inseparable.
You were confident in yourself and your gayness. Beyond being attracted to you physically, I was attracted to the charisma you exuded. You dressed kind of “crazy,” going to work while wearing a bright, yellow, tight t-shirt that one could see a mile away. You wore it with pride with no worries about what other people would think or say. I loved that about you because I had not a fraction of your self-esteem. You were proud to be seen with me, and would hold my hand wherever we went; I felt lucky to be with you.

I loved you because you knew I slouched. You were the first person not only to point out I slouched but who understood why I did it; and you still loved me. You would tell me as we were walking down the street, “Joseph, stand up straight. You look great, you are smart, you are very cute, and I want you to be proud of who you are.” I would smile and stand up straight and tall as we continued our walk. After this, wherever we went, all you would have to do is smile at me and pull your shoulders back, giving me a nonverbal reminder that I should stand proud. You did this in a way that didn’t say, “Stop slouching” but instead in a way that said “I love you and want others to see you, too.” Wow, recalling these moments makes me pause and I can see you right in front of me. You have left an indelible impression on my life.

My slouching was caused by years and years of people pushing me down. That took a great toll on my shoulders. I am happy during moments of time we were together, you allowed me to see the world differently. My lack of self-worth, no matter how much you tried to help me, was too much for me to overcome. It is what led to me walking away.
You really wanted to be a deejay and started spending more time at the clubs so you could meet more people in hopes of becoming part of their music rotation. I would go with you, noticing a lot of your new friends were like you…confident, charismatic, and proud to be themselves. I thought to myself, “Why is he with me? I am not good enough. There is no doubt he will leave me for one of these guys.” This little voice inside my head got louder and louder, though you gave me no reason to doubt your commitment. I was convinced you would leave me for someone “better”; someone who stood up straight and didn’t have that permanent slouch. Instead of waiting for you to break up with me, I broke up with you. I made up some reason about “our lives going in two different directions.” You told me you wanted me to stay and for once, “you felt you were with someone who was your equal.” I heard you but didn’t believe you. I was not ready to believe you and I left. That was over 15 years ago.

No one has ever cared about my slouch the way you did. You were the one to call me out on it and to tell me it didn’t have to define me. That meant a lot to me; it showed unconditional love. Every once in a while, I have thought of you and tried to find you through various internet searches but with no success…until last year. By a fluke, I was on Facebook and looking at new pictures a friend of mine had posted to his profile. I was looking at the pictures and there you were! You happened to be in one of his pictures and I was able to link to your Facebook page; I found you. I immediately wrote you the following message and posted it to your account:

Dear Alan: Wow, there you are!! I can't tell you how crazy this is to find you and be writing you a message. It was so random the way I ran across your profile...I am never really on Facebook but was with a friend of mine and we were playing
around on here and it showed him and I had a mutual friend so being curious, we checked it out and it was your boyfriend and I noticed your picture! I literally stared at the screen for like 5 minutes, not believing it was you. Time passes fast and I have wondered over the years how you were doing, hoping you were happy and safe wherever you were and here you are, living in the same city as me. I have only seen a couple pictures of you on your bf's profile but you are smiling so hopefully that means you are happy and that, of course, makes me happy. I have been with my bf for a little over 2 years and my life is crazy, crazy busy. I am writing this message instead of working on a project for school which I really need to do. But it was important to me to send this message to someone who was a big part of my life and with whom I have many happy memories. I hope you feel like writing me back and at least saying hello. Well, my friend, I should really start my work day even though it's Sunday. It was good to see you, even if just in a pic.

I didn’t receive a message back from you. My construct that I am not good enough overshadows all other possibilities of why you didn’t respond. I didn’t want to disrupt your life and I wasn’t asking anything from you. I told you I had a boyfriend and acknowledged I knew you were in a relationship; I would not mess that up for either one of us. All I wanted to know was you were okay and to say thank you for all you did for me. I got nothing. I still slouch.

Thinking of you,

Joseph
Chapter 6: Scars are Forever

The letters I have shared with you illustrate that, my slouching is not something I grew out of; I don’t know if it will ever not be a part of who I am. It’s real for me. I live with it every day and with it, come the memories of all the people and experiences that have contributed to my stooped world. Everything that has happened shapes my outlook on life and defines me.

Recent news stories have made me mindful of the struggles others are facing. Being on the receiving end of slurs and insults has made me try and not be the one who is judging others. And, in everyday life, I have tried to find a voice. Sometimes, it is an internal voice in which I later regret not saying something aloud; but other times, I have gathered the strength to hopefully make a small difference in this world. This chapter outlines and shows I am not simply a reflection of all I experienced while growing up but these experiences are carried with me and affect my daily interactions. In some cases, it causes me to be strong and act. In other cases, I slouch.

Recently, my car needed repairs. Fortunately, the shop was not too busy and they were able to check out the car right away. They listened to the details of my story and took the car out for a test drive. The mechanic exited the vehicle and came towards me, knowingly nodding his head. It was an easy fix; I needed new tires.

I was told it would take an hour for them to complete the tire installation, balance and road test so I decided to walk across the street to Wendy’s for a snack. I sat there eating my spicy chicken nuggets and watched as two boys (I would guess about 8 and 10 years old) ate with their father. It seemed like they were sharing fries and playing with a
toy that seemed to come from a kid’s meal. Their dad was not paying much attention as they chatted and played among themselves. Their dad seemed to be non-interested, glancing periodically at his cell phone. I didn’t think his disengagement was strange but rather was indicative of letting his boys enjoy themselves. I then noticed they had backpacks on the back of their chairs and assumed they were walking home from school and stopped in for an afternoon break.

I then noticed a little girl walking in with her dad. She was probably 10 years old, round faced, and overweight. Her dad was also overweight. She approached the counter and the customer in front of her turned and accidentally bumped into her. He said, “Excuse me,” but then her dad giggled and told the man, “Don’t worry about it. She’s pretty solid.” She slouched. I slouched.

The girl went to sit at a table, two away from me but immediately next to the dad with the two boys. She sat in the chair facing me so I had a direct view of her. As she took her seat, the dad at the other table looked at her un-approvingly, and I “knew” he was looking at her weight. She noticed too; she slouched. She looked up at me and I smiled at her, trying to tell her I knew what she was feeling and it was going to be okay. Her dad came and placed a hamburger, french fries and a frosty in front of her. He then said he would go get her ketchup. She started to eat her frosty and the man at the other table stared at her. She looked up sheepishly, feeling the glare. She then slouched a little more, rested her right hand on her chin while turning away from him so he would not watch her eat.
I slouched. I got angry. I felt 10 years old again but with the courage to fight back. I thought of my plan. I was going to walk up to the man and tell him it was very rude to stare and he needed to pay attention to his own kids and leave her alone. I played this out in my head; I figured if he tried to say something, I would turn to the little girl’s dad and tell her how rude this other man was being towards his daughter. It would be two against one. Then I thought of the little girl. I remembered the comment her dad made to the gentleman who accidently bumped into her and figured her own dad would not defend her. This would make her feel worse.

I did nothing. I felt bad because I wish I had someone to stand up for me when I was ten and here I was, not coming to her rescue. I found it ironic how seeing another child put in that position reminded me of how I felt when I was treated as “less than.” I slouched when she slouched. I felt it. She got up to leave the table and the man continued to stare. She looked down as she walked away to avoid his glare. I was staring at her but for a different reason. I wanted her to make eye contact with me, thinking that through that connection, I could tell her I understood. As she approached my table, I think she felt my stare and immediately (but mistakenly) put me in the same category of the other man. She passed me; she slouched and hurried out the door. As I write this, I think of her, hoping she is okay. And, I am sorry I did not come to her rescue.

In other situations, I have failed to come to my own rescue. I was the kid who stayed quiet because I was afraid people would think I sounded gay; I hated my voice. These feelings have not disappeared. Along with Adams, “I fear negative responses to my identity and my work, particularly from people who find same-sex attraction inappropriate or immoral” (115). I get nervous about how an audience will react to a gay
person. I do think (true or not) people can tell I am gay by the way I speak, gesture, and my mannerisms. And I fear they will judge me which will reflect negatively on my company.

I was recently asked to facilitate a meeting with a current customer in Kentucky. I was a bit hesitant, having never been to Kentucky and knowing some people there may not be as tolerant of gay people compared to California. Plus, I was not going to a major city but instead, to a city 2 hours from Lexington, Kentucky. The company really needed me to go so I went. It turned out to literally be the worst trip ever.

I was presenting in front of 20 people. Two of the leaders of the group were men who sat in the front row and introduced me to the group. I started talking and could hear them laugh. I heard one of them say to the other, “It’s true…fruits do come from California.” I pretended I didn’t hear and continued with my work. I wasn’t mad but the remark hurt. I guess the men found my pronunciation of some words “funny” so they would say, “Can you repeat that?” as if they did not hear but only to hear me say it again for their pleasure. One of them murmured, “The only thing he is missing is a lisp.” I figured they thought I “sounded gay.” I didn’t know what to do. I slouched. I knew I needed to keep this relationship for my company so I couldn’t walk out or get angry with them and I did not want to bring more attention to the situation so I took the abuse. I had not experienced this type of outward prejudice before. I didn’t know it really existed. Here it was and I was the target.

When lunch time came, it was announced we would be going to a pizza parlor. Again, that was a horrific hour. The abuse continued and though I could see others at the
table noticing what was happening, they didn’t say anything. These men were the bosses of the rest of the group so maybe they felt they could not do anything. Maybe they thought it was joking but it was not funny to me. I felt humiliated, ashamed, and belittled; and I slouched more than I ever had in my life.

After I flew back home, my very understanding boss called me. He asked how the meeting in Kentucky went. I told him I passed along all the information I went to relay, so from that perspective, it was fine. I didn’t go into detail but said, “Bob, I want you to know I will do whatever I need to do for the company to be successful but I will not go back. There are no exceptions; if we go back, you will need to send someone else.” He asked if I wanted to talk about it. I told him it was enough for him to know I wasn’t going back. That was 5 years ago and I have not been asked to go back. I’m glad about that.

There have been other times where I have been able to speak up when people make derogatory or hurtful comments. Recently, it happened while on a cruise.

Jose and I looked around and found a great family cruise from San Pedro, California, one hour from my home. This sounded perfect; not only could we drive to the port but would be able to sail to my favorite place; Mexico. At first, we thought it might be weird going on a family-themed cruise without any kids with us, but after reading reviews online, I was confident there would be other couples traveling alone and we would have a great time.

The cruise met all my expectations. Besides the pool games, ping pong tournaments, and bean bag toss, I was a regular participant at Bingo! Bingo was one of the events that included people of all ages and each session was equally split between
kids and adults. Though minors could not claim the prize money, they could play along on their parents’ cards. Besides cash, there were door prizes. When paying for your bingo cards, your room keycard was swiped, which automatically placed your name into the door prize raffles. The raffle prizes were simple items, like hats, cookbooks, and key chains but, nevertheless, everyone got excited if their name was called. For these small prizes, the kids were allowed to go on stage to accept the prize on behalf of their parents.

The prizes were handed out in one of two ways. The first way was the bingo caller would hold up the prize for everyone to see and then would call out the winning name. Alternatively, the winner would go up to the stage and need to grab out of a big box of prizes so even the caller was surprised as to what would be pulled from the treasure chest. I could feel the anticipation in the room as each person hoped to hear their name called.

During one raffle prize session, it was announced the next prize was a children’s cookbook, with recipes of desserts found on the ship. A woman’s name was called as the winner and when the woman stood up, the caller (her name was Kelly) announced over the microphone if she had a child since it was a cookbook for children. She nodded she did and then her son happily ran up to get the prize. When Kelly saw it was a boy, she laughed and announced over the microphone, “Oh, you don’t want a cookbook. Let’s see if there is something more appropriate for a boy.” She gave him a keychain instead. Everyone clapped. I slouched.

I looked around the room and thought about how many other kids in that room slouched with me. How many boys, at that moment, felt something must be wrong with
them? I could feel their questions, their confusion, and their sadness. Maybe they liked to cook and be in the kitchen with their parents. Here was someone not saying it was only inappropriate but accompanying that notion with laughter.

Then it got worse. This time, a man had his name called and he had his son, about 7 years old, run on stage to pick a prize from the box of prizes. He put his hand in the treasure chest and pulled out a pink hat and was happy as can be. He put it on his head while on stage to show everyone in the audience his new prize. Kelly (again, over the sound system), laughed and said, “Your dad would not appreciate that pink hat so how about this one,” and placed a blue hat on his head. I instantly saw myself as a little boy with my dad giving the “I “heart” Bo” t-shirt to my sister. The boy was as happy with the new hat and ran off stage. I slouched and again, wondered how many others slouched with me.

I thought about this and began to get upset. Most people would have not thought twice about what had happened because in our world, cookbooks are for girls and blue hats for boys. But, I know there was most likely one kid in that room that felt like I did at his age (or her age). And here are these boys that like the color pink (as I did when trying to make my handprint in kindergarten) and this woman is saying, “That’s bad and your dad won’t like it either.” Further, it was reinforcing to everyone in the room these stereotypes. It was telling all the kids in that room it’s okay to laugh at boys who like a certain color or hobby. It really affected me. Again, the majority of the audience did not think twice about what was happening but I knew there were some kids who were slouching.
At the conclusion of the bingo session, I thought of going up to Kelly and telling her about the possible affect her words and actions could have on kids. I decided against it because I really was upset and did not want to cause a scene so I left. For the rest of the day, I could not stop thinking about it. I walked around the ship and observed the kids passing me; I knew for sure there was some who would slouch. And, in retrospect, I knew how great it would have been if someone came to my rescue. I thought of the regret I had for not coming to the aid of the little girl in Wendy’s. This time, I decided to do something.

I went to the customer relations desk and asked to speak to the cruise director. I said it was concerning something that had occurred during the bingo session. They asked me to wait for a few minutes and they would page the cruise director for me. The cruise director showed up along with the activity director. I told them what happened and staff members either had to stop categorizing boys and girls or choose gender-neutral prizes so it would not be an issue. They seemed to understand what I was saying but not why I was saying it and I wanted them to know this was serious. I told them my story. I told them I was gay and I heard these stereotypes when growing up and it confused me and hurt me. I told them it made me feel I was “not okay.” I told them undoubtedly there were kids on the ship who are struggling as I was and what happened in bingo could affect them for a long time, like it did me.

Once I started telling my story, it flowed. I wasn’t embarrassed; it was important for them to know why the incident was very significant and needed to be addressed. I specifically named Kelly because she was the one that did it; and, though I felt like a tattletale, I didn’t care. I could tell they were hearing what I was saying. They sincerely
apologized and told me their company tried to be on the forefront of inclusion for all people and the last thing they would want is to unknowingly hurt kids. They assured me they would not only talk to Kelly but later that day during a scheduled staff meeting, it would be addressed. Later, I received a voicemail in my stateroom from the cruise director. He told me he had talked to Kelly directly and made it very clear of needing to be very careful about gender stereotypes, especially when it comes to kids. I was proud of myself.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Discussion

These proud moments have been few and far between. My slouching is at the forefront of my reality and affects everything I do or not do. From the moment I was born, though not realizing I was gay, I entered a world already constructed by those existing within it. People already living in this reality had been taught what the norm was and how others were supposed to behave within it; a social order was defined that shaped my identity. I was given a specific place in the world (Berger and Luckmann). It started with simple things, such as blue is for boys and pink is for girls; boys are tough, girls are dainty; boys like girls and girls like boys. My world was the opposite and I paid for it. My kindergarten handprint, a symbol a parent keeps forever, was changed from pink to grey, erasing who I really was. I was physically hurt by my brother during football for not being as tough as the other boys.

It was words that hurt and impacted me most. As Berger and Luckmann write, “Language constitutes both the most important content and the most important instrument of socialization” (133). I was called “fag” and beat up for liking boys. I was told I was going to hell because of it. This interaction with others told me to hide and be silent. This interaction told me I was not worthy to stand proud; instead, I slouch.

I understand how I was affected by the words and actions of others. After all, “writing is first and foremost an act of self-witnessing and self-knowledge” (Colyer 429). But, I don’t feel empowered to own my identity as my reality is still lived within a larger
societal construct that stands in opposite relation to mine. I am still “shameful for not seeming proud and comfortable with an identity I claim” (Adams 119).

My brothers and I (along with our dad) recently went on vacation. This was the first trip we ever took where it was just the guys. My memory of this weekend will not be of all the great things we did. Instead, I will remember if I had $1.00 for every time one of my brothers used the words “faggot,” “fag,” or “pussy,” I would have been able to pay for my hotel room. They used them to describe someone in a derogatory way, to describe someone as “less than,” with me sitting right next to them. They used it while exchanging stories about life and if someone’s name came up they didn’t like, they would say, “He is such a fag.” Or, on the couple of occasions where one brother would annoy the other, I no doubt would hear, “stop being such a faggot.” This would happen with me being inches away from the person saying it; I did nothing. Not all my brothers used this language but they were there when it happened and, again, did nothing. Everyone let it happen; they continued to let it happen to me. I let it continue to happen to myself. I sat there and heard these words come out of my brother’s mouths over and over. I thought this is the time to say something. This is the time to not get angry but to say it was not right for them to use that type of language. I sat there. I sat there and continued to let it happen. I live in their constructed world. I react; I slouch.

Reflection

This introspection has forced me to re-live hidden memories. It required me to consider other aspects of my life as contributing factors that made me slouch. The fact my dad left us, especially me, when I was 7 years old. I was his favorite and I lost that. At
my 8th grade graduation, while others had both their parents escort them to the stage, I had only my mom. I didn’t know how to respond when other kids asked, “Where is your dad?” I slouched.

I was forced to also recall I grew up very poor. I was teased in elementary school because of the clothes I shared with my brothers and then during senior year, because I wore my uniform because I didn’t have any other clothes appropriate for school, despite the fact as a graduating senior, I was allowed to be in “free dress.” I was forced to stand at the back of line during picture day because they placed you in order of the “package” you would purchase and I never bought any. Again, I didn’t know how to respond when other kids asked, “Why aren’t you buying pictures?” I slouched.

More than just looking inward, I have also learned to see others differently. I thought I was tolerant and non-prejudicial, but I noticed I still occasionally mock others, even in jest. Recently, there was a girl who was overweight sitting in the booth next to me at a restaurant. I was about to make a rude comment about her to my friend. But, I stopped. I thought about this project, how I was made to feel when someone talked about me, and kept the comment to myself. More than just not saying anything, however, I told myself to think differently about her. Instead of noticing just her physical features, I took the time to notice how attentive she was to her sister and how she helped her when she accidently spilled her juice. She was a good sister and helpful to her family.

This narrative, however, is not just about me. I had also asked you (the reader) invest yourself into my story. Drawing upon the words of Mark Gray, I ask, “Has it drawn you in, made you feel involved? Does it engage you? Does it give you a visceral
sense of experience? Do you relate to it emotionally and bodily, as well as intellectually? Does it unsettle you, challenge assumptions? Has it encouraged a view of people as creative actors in their lives? These are my questions. How will you perform your response?” (265-266). Jacques Derrida describes writing as “leaving a permanent trace, discourse as material practice, and the text as a fabric of signs” (14). Did it leave a permanent trace for you as it did me? My hope is it did. If you are struggling with being gay or just different, I encourage you to find people who love and support you because (not despite of) whatever it is that makes you “unique.” If you saw yourself reflected as a recipient of one of my letters, I ask you to understand the power of your words, and others are not just hearing them, but physically feeling them.

*Evaluating Narrative Methodology*

Evaluation criteria for narrative research are different than criteria used for other forms of research. However, evaluation criteria need to be available for any type of method to provide a framework in which an assessment can be made in regards to a piece of work meeting its intended goal. As Donald Polkinghorne notes, “If narrative are to be effective for research aimed at understanding aspects of the realm of meaning, the basic definitions of the concepts concerning the generation of knowledge must be reclaimed” (160).

Amia Lieblich provides a framework of analysis for narrative research, including concepts of width, coherence, insightfulness, and parsimony. Width describes the comprehensiveness of evidence. This refers to the amount of evidence provided to allow the reader to make an informed judgment on the evidence and its interpretation. I have
provided multiple examples to illustrate that negative reactions and words used by others have caused me to slouch. I have associated this negativity across time, showing that others actions and my reactions are not isolated incidents but are carried throughout my life; this adds credence to my assertion that this is “real” phenomenon.

Coherence is the way different parts of the interpretation create a complete and meaningful picture. Even though this narrative has only provided snapshots of my life, I carried the theme of “slouching” throughout each story and each letter. I continuously referenced back to my reality of everyday life, the language used by others in reaction to my being gay, and my physical reaction. I use Geertz’s concept of “thick description” to, “go beyond superficial description to see the richness of thought and purpose that might lie behind the action to provide an intelligible picture for the reader” (Jorgensen 70).

Insightfulness is the sense of innovation or originality in the presentation of the story and its analysis. It asks the questions, “Does this research move the reader to greater insight into his or her own life? Does it lead to a more profound understanding of the human condition?” This is significant as the narrative is not supposed to be just about me; narratives should bring to light social conditions or phenomena. I attempted to meet this criterion by stating in the introduction that I was asking the reader to see themselves in my story. I asked them to see themselves as agents of change and directly stated that this thesis was written for those who ever made another person feel “less than” by their words and actions. I wrote to others struggling with their sexuality, writing that “I am there with you.” This narrative allowed me to tell my own story, from a first person perspective, to bring to light the social phenomenon of the negative affect societal attitudes and beliefs can have on the physical body of any gay person.
Parsimony is the ability to provide an analysis based on a small number of concepts, and elegance or aesthetic appeal. This refers to the literary merits of written presentation of the story. To reach this goal, I wrote my narrative in a very ordered manner. This approach, which begins with the introduction and takes the reader through my experiences as a young child, provides the backdrop and foundation that leads to incidents that happened later in life. The reader is then able to experience my journey alongside me, up to the present day. Further, my choice of implementing an epistolary approach using letters (not just memories in story format), adds to the overall aesthetics as breaking the letters up into chapters forms a physical and mental shift with the reader, taking them with me into a different sphere of my reality.

Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

There are limitations that I acknowledge regarding my method and conclusions articulated in this thesis. I address these and propose how future research can respond to these limitations.

I have heard from others regarding my theses topic that it is no longer relevant; that my story is unique to place and time and youth today are born into a constructed world that is more open, tolerant, and supportive of gay people. Some reference the reversal of the military “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy or the reversal of the Defense of Marriage Act. Others may point out there are over 3,000 Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in high schools across the country which offers supportive environments for students (Mayberry). This is similar to the critique Adams notes when others indicate that “the closet” no longer exists for gay people because we are now in an accepting world. Adams
responds to this notion bluntly when he asserts, “To say the closet no longer exists is ignorant and impractical” (169).

I echo the sentiments of Adams. I have shared recent stories of students committing suicide because they were mocked for being gay; of youth being killed because of their sexuality; of states, like Georgia, considering legislation effectively allowing businesses to not serve gay people; and for entire countries, such as Uganda, which recently criminalized homosexual activity. Until these stories no longer exist, and marginalized people no longer need to slouch, my experience is relevant and real.

The concept of truth can also be a limitation as memories are challenged by time and interpretation. I first address the notion that perhaps I misinterpreted the words and action of others. I admit I may have, but this does not make my reaction less legitimate. As Berger and Luckmann write, “This does not mean that I understand the other adequately. I may indeed misunderstand him but his subjectivity is nevertheless objectively available to me and becomes meaningful to me, whether or not there is congruence between his and my subjective process” (149). The name calling, for example, even if one argues is something all brothers do to each other, was different for me because I was struggling with my sexuality. To me, I was not hearing “fag” as just another playful put-down but as a real insult. As William Thomas supports, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (69). I felt the consequences in my mind and body because the words and actions were very real to me.

What may be of chief importance, then, is not so much the actual happening portrayed in the story itself, but rather what the memory symbolizes in the context of my
narrative (McAdams). Using a narrative method does allow for less emphasis on empirical facts, and more emphasis on understanding the meaning of social constructs towards gay people.

A further limitation is the lack of agency found within my narrative; that the actions and words of others were done to me and I had no choice in my reaction or to change the situation. I acknowledge this lack of agency similar to Goodall when he notes, “Family narrative is a shared system and I, too, have to accept responsibility for my part of our family story and for my complicity in our mini-culture of family secrets” (510). I could have defended myself but cultural norms dictate the “correct” way to respond and being in the minority makes it very difficult to challenge the social constructs that are reiterated each day; this is a significant concept in the “everyday life” described by Berger and Luckmann. They note, “The common language available to me for the objectification of my experiences is grounded in everyday life and keeps pointing back to it” (39). The language used by others, the words that hurt, is internalized and constantly reinforced, making it difficult to respond.

Finally, this thesis was limited to my voice; my writing letters to those who affected me. But what about those I have affected? It is relevant to view being gay as “relational phenomena – phenomena that affect not only the gay person but also her or his close, personal others” (Adams 130). What about my parents who grew up in a generation that didn’t even recognize gay people existed and now have to explain to others they have a gay son? How have they been judged by others? What has my gayness done to them?
How has being gay affected my siblings? Are they afraid to even acknowledge I am gay, for fear their own friends would tease them? As adults, are they fearful of telling a new boyfriend/girlfriend they have a gay brother for fear of rejection? Their perception has been shaped by a reality of what a gay person is and how to feel about them regardless if it is “right” or “wrong.” As Kirzner explains, “Knowledge has social effects which may have little to do with whether that knowledge is ‘true’ or ‘false’ in any absolute sense” (137). But this knowledge and their reaction to it have consequences and we can attempt to come to a joint understanding of this.

Further, what about those people who have always been supportive of gay people? What was different about their reality that shaped their identity and made them think and act differently? Berger and Luckmann note, “Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (174). Therefore, what is their relationship to society that provided their worldview? Further research may include hearing the voices of others. This can be examined in multiple ways.

First, using a first-person account approach, similar to the method employed in this project, the scope could be expanded to include returned letters in which others respond back to the sender. My purpose to make “experiences of same-sex attraction more humane, tolerable, and meaningful for others,” forces me to attempt to understand the worldview of others (Adams 36). I may not like or agree with their reasons and explanations but it may help me understand them and them understand me. As Adams notes, “Persons-in-relationships are not isolated phenomena, and, although I may not like hearing another’s response, I must make an attempt to work with and respect it” (139).
It could also include interviews of those struggling with their sexuality and letters they want to send to those who affected them, along with my personal letters. Using this auto-ethnographic approach maintains the first-person account but also allows the voice of others to be heard, while at the same time bringing to light cultural and social norms, practices, and beliefs.

Secondly, Cognitive Dissonance Theory can be used as the foundation to explore this topic further. Cognitive dissonance is experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time (Anderson). This contradiction can be between a parent’s unconditional love for their child and the negative connotations they hear from friends, colleagues, and the media in regards to homosexuality. Parents may suffer cognitive dissonance when trying to understand the conflict between all the negative images surrounding homosexuality and the loving relationship they have with their child (Boxer, Cook, and Herdt). How do they reconcile the two conflicting messages?

The same question can be explored by widening the scope to include siblings. In my thesis, I addressed a couple of my letters to my brothers. But they may have also struggled to support and love their brother (me) against the societal backdrop of boys needing to be tough, strong, and unemotional. Exploring this situation, using cognitive dissonance as a foundation, would help uncover and bring understanding to this contradiction.

Using this thesis as a foundation, the Spiral of Silence Theory can also be used to explore not only why those struggling with their sexuality find it difficult to “come out”
but also why family members find it difficult to share with others that a family member is gay. Spiral of Silence indicates that people are reluctant to express minority opinions based upon fear of isolation or rejection so instead, they don’t say anything at all (Noelle-Neumann). This could help explain why gay individuals are afraid to communicate their sexual identity against a backdrop of a society that is unaccepting. It could further explore the motivations that family members have to keep another family member’s sexual orientation as a family secret, as my mom has done with me. This concept is also very real to me as my nephew recently disclosed to me that he is gay and his parents told him not to tell anyone. This could be an example of the spiral of silence theory in action.

Finally, this thesis can be used as an agent of change. Often, when we meet people, we categorize them into different types or typifications (Berger and Luckmann). This causes us to often judge one other unfairly. It causes people to view “all gay people” as a group, instead of seeing people as individuals. It leads to prejudice based upon false impressions. These impressions last for a long time, influencing social interaction and judgment. Berger and Luckmann note that, “Unless thus challenged, the typifications will hold until further notice and will determine my actions in the situation” (31). But this means there is hope for change.

As we move away from a world of silence and bring forth the stories of gay people; as laws are enacted that protect and bring equal protection to all sexual minorities; and as we teach our youth to respect all people, we can work to reconstruct a society in which all people feel safe and are treated with dignity. Together, we can be the agents that reconstruct the reality of everyday life.
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