

Thorny - North East Ohio

The first person I had to come out to was myself. At 13, I'd just lost my mom, my dad wasn't available, I lived with my grandmother, and I kept looking at boys like my female friends did. I'd slip up now and then when they'd talk about boys, adding my two cents about how somebody looked or acted, and it probably should've clued me in a little that they talked that way right in front of me since that said they felt I was one of them. I thought that my life was screwed up enough without adding gay on top of it all and I had friends, didn't get picked on for much more than being a shrimp, so I shut up and tried to ignore it. That so didn't work :)

When I was 15, thinking about maybe kinda being gay had gone from like a speck in my eye to a boulder on my back. I'd get jittery whenever I thought about it too much. Convinced myself what I did at night or in the shower was just crazy stuff that didn't count because it was just fantasies in my head and no one knew. Totally didn't count. But my girl friends were starting to date and I wanted to have somebody too. I remember getting packed into a car full of friends and their "dates" to go to the mall and popping wood from being pressed all up and down one of the guys. I spent most of my time hanging back and trying not to stare at lips and hands and hairy legs... Don't even get me started on the polar bear that was my history teacher! Grrr!

So I'm 15 and my head's about to explode from all these thoughts and wants that I'm afraid to admit are real and have a name and a reason and that some people think are perfectly normal. Which people, though? My friends? My grandmother? The father I haven't talked to for a couple years? Teachers and other students and complete strangers? Then my Grams sits me down after school one day and is all smiles while she tells me my cousin just came out to her parents and isn't that wonderful? Boom! Tears and snot and can't catch my breath because it's finally out of me and OMG but Grams is still smiling and telling me she loves me and everything's going to be just fine. She'd been looking for a way to talk to me, to bring it up, searching my room even for a magazine or something that could spark the conversation and finally get me to say out loud to her and to me that I'm gay.

I'm gay!

I'm 19 now and WOW but did things get better from there! I didn't go around waving rainbows or telling anyone who stood still long enough. I didn't even really tell anyone other than my friends until after high school graduation, but that was just my choice, my comfort zone I guess. The first time I really came out after graduation was to tell a co-worker that I'd happily meet her gay friend

but wasn't interested in meeting her girl friend. Then the man who would later exchange rings with me and live with me walked into that restaurant and -- OK it took me a couple months to get up the nerve -- I came out to him by leaving my email address and a heart on his receipt. I got my bear, thank you very much ;)

Coming out never actually ends since it's something I might consider every time I make a new friend, get a new co-worker, or anyone I'll spend a lot of time with. I come out every time I hold my husband's hand, too. He got back from a business trip recently and I came out to the entire airport baggage claim area when I jumped him! :D It's a consideration sometimes every day and a few times haven't gone so well, but I've never regretted coming out. I am glad I had someone who loves me unconditionally to catch me when the closet door flew open because I think that's the most important part of it. (Thank you, Grams!)

Happy Coming Out Day!

"If you're going to call me a name, please make sure you can spell it correctly."

Brian - Arizona, USA

When people ask me when I knew I was gay, I can honestly say that I "knew" when I was 6 years old. At the latest. Let me clarify. I guess I should say that I knew I was "different" but didn't know why, or what the word was for it, until much later. Then, one day I had it etched into my locker in the 7th grade for all to see. "FAGGIT!" Nice, n'est-ce pas? I was horrified. By the spelling. Sure, the word angered me, but if you're going to insult me, at least spell it right people. So, I did what anyone would do. I attached a post-it note to my locker, next to the etching, correctly spelling the word. In red. That's my style.

But how did I "know" at such an early age? Exhibit A: I was the only one who had the complete Blondie collection (on vinyl, thank you) when I entered the 2nd grade. Ok, and "Missing Persons". Exhibit B: a little later, while other kids were pining for the girls on "Facts of Life" or the women on "Falcon Crest/Knott's Landing/Dallas" I was carefully planning my proposal to the men on "The Dukes of Hazard/Hunter/CHiPs". See? Different. But I didn't see anything wrong with it at the time. I was always told "one day, you'll meet someone, fall in love, and get married." Pretty simple, right? It wasn't until a local neighbor kid told me "you can't marry another BOY" that I knew I was indeed a different kind of different. What a wretched little kid. I bet he ripped heads off of dolls too. Anyway...if that didn't convince you, I give you the final coup de grâce: even later, when asked to write a school paper about one of our

"heroes" at the time, I decided to write mine on Randy Shilts. Brilliant, right? I thought so. I even used Venn diagrams. Needless to say, it wasn't well received. Well written, yes. Well received, not so much. Pity.

But, if you were to ask me when I came out, I'd have to say I started the process in high school (because it really is a process that goes on your entire life). It wasn't something I set out to do, mind you, I was just being "me." And in a school as big as mine, you'd have thought I would have flown under the radar (my class alone was nearly 700 people). Unfortunately, I found out real quickly that the old adage "just be yourself" had an asterisk and a bunch of fine print below that I never read. You know, like the long list of side-effects that accompany some drugs, including but not limited to: headaches, nausea, vomiting, panic attacks, harassment, loss of vision, loss of friends, and black eyes. Apparently, hanging pictures of boys in your locker was a faux-pas if you also happened to be a boy. And don't ask why, but my clothes were also a point of contention with my classmates. I thought I dressed fabulously, but what did I know...I also thought *The Smiths* were amazing. P.S.- that was also gauche at my school. Where was the rule book, and why didn't I get a copy with my class schedule like everyone else??

From that moment on, I was the target of classmates, teachers, and guidance counselors alike. I was banned from virtually everything: gym class, the locker room, school dances, Thursdays, most hallways, even more tables in the cafeteria...and English class. Don't ask, I still don't get that one. Maybe my teacher was afraid I'd go into some epileptic fit of gay rapture while reading Oscar Wilde? One will never know.

I was beat up weekly. My car was keyed. I had anonymous threatening notes passed to me during class. Most of the friends I had entering high school left my side once they found out I was toxic to their popularity. So basically, much like my widely panned, Venn-diagrammed school report, I wasn't well received. The harassment eventually led me to a bout of depression and anxiety. I hid from most people and social interactions, and sadly enough, hid from myself. I denied myself anything that brought me happiness, because everyone had told me it was wrong. So, I spent the last two years of high school basically muted, in both color and voice. That was the hardest part. I silenced myself out of fear. The clothes that I loved...gone. The wit, sarcasm, and humour that was "me"...gone. All because of other people. If it wasn't for two friends, in particular, and a saviour of a teacher, I wouldn't have made it. They saw my dark cloud, and helped reassure me that I was a wonderful person, and I should be proud of who I was. They promised things would get better. And believe me, they did. Much better.

I "escaped" to college. A large, LIBERAL college, complete with gay bar. I told my roommate and friends in the dormitory, without any issues. And these were guys from small towns. It taught me an important lesson: never sell someone short. You never know who will be the most accepting. I told my

family next. And while it wasn't exactly accepted right away, they worked through it. We are now closer than ever. I found all kinds of support. Co-workers. Acquaintances. You name it. And, most importantly, I was free to be "myself" again. Dark cloud? It was clearing.

Years later, I met and fell in love with the most wonderful man. This year marks our 10th anniversary. And now, in some states, we can get married. (Side note to that wretched boy who told me I couldn't marry another boy: Suck on that!) He works in the corporate jungle, and people accept him. I am a doctor, and patients accept me. I'm sure there are those out there that won't (or don't) accept us, but I don't worry about those. I don't need their approval. That is their issue. Honestly. Let THEM own that.

With that, I basically want to tell anyone who is still reading this (if you aren't asleep) that you are not alone. Things get better. And there are plenty of us out here that understand. We accept you. We adore you. You are one of us, and you are special. Never let anyone take away a part of you that makes you different. Don't change the way you dress, talk, or walk because they tell you it's "wrong." Don't pass up a career, or dream, because you are afraid of other people's acceptance (I almost didn't become a doctor for that reason). You are perfect the way you are. You can be whoever you want to be. We have your back. You have the right to remain fabulous.

Reno MacLeod - Cape Cod, MA

When Wave first asked me to write my coming out story, I almost didn't accept. Not because I didn't want anyone to know about my story, but because I didn't think I really *had* one. Then I realized that maybe my kind of story *is* important for that exact reason. I grew up in a solid, two-parent home. We weren't rich, but I never went cold or hungry. My life had always been rather uneventful, except for one thing.

By the time I was eight, I knew I was different. I was artistic, not athletic. I liked rock bands fronted by pretty boys wearing makeup. I had embarrassing thoughts about my best friend, eventually leading to me pulling back from him so he'd never know. When I finally figured out what was 'wrong' with me, I buried myself in schoolwork and tried to ignore it.

Allow me to backtrack for a moment. I have an uncle who I'll name Albert here. Albert is ten years older than I am, and he's the sweetest man you'd ever want to meet. Growing up, when I visited my grandmother, I went out with

Albert instead of hanging around the house while my mom gabbed with her mom about whatever mothers and daughters talk about.

I didn't know it then, but my Uncle Albert is also gay. Thinking back, his outward signs of homosexuality were as blatant as mine were/are. At nineteen, Madonna was the only woman on Uncle Albert's bedroom wall. The only girl he ever dated (for 6 years), he became engaged to but at the final hour, he called off the wedding. And he had a serious fashion sense, OMG! The signs were there for him, and for me.

Albert came out when he was twenty-five. I was fifteen at the time, and I remember thinking about how scared he must have been. His father had passed away not long before and looking back, I think it might have been why Albert waited to tell everyone. Grandma took it well, but she takes everything well. She's a tough old bird and she had three daughters who had already given her six grandchildren. To quote her, she didn't *need* any more grandkids. :-)

Albert and his partner have now been together for nine years.

Back to my own experience. Because Albert came out years before I did, and because I saw he hadn't been kicked out of the house or even chastised for it, my courage level was probably greater than most, but not by that much. It still took me until I had left for college and tried to do the dating thing before I got up the nerve to sit my parents and brother down to break the news.

Mom, Dad, Bro—I'm gay.

The reaction?

My mother smiled and said, "We wondered when you were going to get around to telling us."

My father said, "You're our child. We love you. Even your grandparents figured it out. Make sure you tell them too, or they'll be hurt."

They will be hurt? I sat stunned for a few minutes. My brother, seven years younger than I was, had already gone back to playing with his Nintendo. Why had I waited twenty long years?

Now granted, this is not going to be the reaction all parents have, although I think with the issue of being gay out in the open on television, in the movies and on the streets, it will become more commonplace.

I have one more story to add, because mine became very comfortable afterward. My parents support me to this day, and I've finally found my life partner in Jaye Valentine. Because of this, I feel I owe help to those who've had a less easy road to tread than I have.

My friend—I'll call him John here—had a dad who wasn't as understanding as mine was. He suffered daily at the hands of his father and his two older brothers. His mother seemed not to care about anything other than her bottle of vodka. John wanted desperately to leave his home, but he didn't have a job and he had little education. I suppose I might have been sticking my neck out, but I adored this kid. I told him he had to work at getting his G.E.D. (General Education Diploma, a high school equivalent) and get a job, and if he wanted to, he could have my spare apartment bedroom. He accepted. John lived with me for three years, and he earned his G.E.D. He then went to college and graduated with honors. After that, he met a man who would become his steady boyfriend, whom he married legally in the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts this past summer.

That's how we're going to beat this. We who have had it better than most need to stand up and take an active role in paying it forward.

--Reno

Jaye Valentine – Cape Cod, MA

I had a very strict upbringing in an unusual household. My mother's family was Roma (from Czechoslovakia or Romania, I'm not sure) and my father was from Ireland. As a child, I lived in a large, multigenerational household with my parents and eight members of my mother's extended family. Between the Roma taboos and the staunch religious beliefs on both sides, homosexuality wasn't a topic for discussion in our house, much less as part of a family member's confession.

My uncle (my father's brother) is gay, and he didn't come out until he'd already been married to a woman for almost twenty years and had three kids. He came out on a holiday during a family gathering, and his news didn't go over well. After much drama, the family ostracized my uncle, which turned out to be a dark harbinger for my own coming-out experience.

I kept my sexuality secret until shortly after my seventeenth birthday, at which time my family showed me the door. Drama, as I fully expected, ensued. I can't go into graphic detail regarding that period of my life because it's simply too painful for me to remember. To summarize: I had no contact with my family, no place to live, and I was too young to get a job without my parents' written permission. I spent the next year living on the streets, doing some things I'm not very proud of in order to survive. I'm sure there were city agencies I could have turned to for assistance, but I was too ashamed and afraid to talk to

anyone about my situation. Sometimes you do stupid things when you're scared and alone.

In many ways, the general climate for gay people has significantly improved in recent years, but in some ways it's still a tough road to travel. While some families openly embrace their homosexual children, many gay teens still have an experience similar to mine when they come out. My advice to you should you find yourself in that predicament is to run, not walk, to a neighbor's house, the guidance counselor at your school or a favorite teacher, to a gay outreach center, local Red Cross office, or a health clinic. Hindsight is always 20/20. I know it's hard, but take a lesson from my mistake and seek help, either in person or online.

There's a saying that you should keep in mind if you feel like you've reached the breaking point, whether it's due to a bad coming-out experience or from bullying perpetrated by your peers.

Living well is the best revenge.

Don't let the bullies and haters get to you. Take advantage of the many resources now available to GLBT teens and seek help if you hit a rough patch. Pick up the phone, and don't give up—you're not alone.

It gets better.

--Jaye Valentine

Resources:

The Trevor Project (crisis intervention and suicide prevention for GLBT youth) - <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

State and Local Help Lines at TeenCentral.net - <http://www.teencentral.net/Help/teenhelp.php>

It Gets Better Project - <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>

Stop Bullying - http://stopbullying.gov/topics/get_help/index.html

Josh Aterovis – Baltimore, MD

When I was around nine years old, I clearly remember my best (male) friend and me making a time capsule to hide in the hollow trunk of a tree in the forest behind my house. The time capsule was just an old mason jar, but we took our self-imposed task to commemorate our fascinating lives for future generations very seriously. We each meticulously wrote down a list of favorites: TV shows, movies, songs, foods, colors — every fascinating detail of our young lives. And then he suggested writing down our secret crush. Without hesitation, I wrote his name. Later, he told me he'd written the name of our mutual friend Kristy. It was one of the first times I remember clearly thinking that I was different.

It wasn't long after that, while riding the bus to school, a bully started calling another boy 'faggot.' I'd never heard the word before, but the boy was visibly upset to the point of tears. I turned to the high school boy who sat next to me and acted as my protector and asked him what the word meant. He thought a moment, then said, "It's a boy who only likes other boys." My first thought was, "Then that's what I am." I didn't say it out loud though. It was clear from the tone of voice and the way the boy was crying, being a faggot was not a good thing.

A year or two later, my friend was ready to go dig up the time capsule and read our responses, you know, now that we were so much older and wiser. He was ready to laugh at our childishness. I panicked. Between my school bus lessons and church teachings, I'd learned by that point that being gay was a very, very bad thing. I couldn't let my friend find out.

I somehow managed to convince him to leave the capsule a while longer, and the first chance I got, I went out to retrieve the jar. The tree had grown in the intervening time, though, and the jar would no longer fit through the hole in the trunk. I ran back to the house, got a hammer, and returned to the tree to smash the jar and destroy the papers. Crisis averted.

Or so I thought.

My teen years were rough, to say the least. My family was extremely religious conservative. My father was a Southern Baptist minister. I was the youngest boy in a large family, and I'd always been the good son. Everyone expected me to follow in my father's footsteps. I felt an enormous amount of pressure to be perfect. I remember praying every night for God to make me straight, crying myself to sleep because I couldn't control my thoughts and feelings, and believing I was letting down God and my family. I felt broken.

When I was in my mid-teens, I ran across the Valdemar series by Mercedes Lackey. When I read her *Last Herald-Mage* trilogy, my whole world turned upside down. It was the first time I'd ever read about a boy falling in love with another boy. It was presented as something completely natural and normal and

healthy. This was an entirely new concept for me. I looked for more books like that but couldn't find any.

It wasn't until my late-teens to early-twenties when I discovered online stories about gay people. I felt guilty but I couldn't stop reading them. The idea that gay people could fall in love and lead normal lives fed a part of my soul that was starving. By then I was a staff member at my dad's church and couldn't resolve the two lives. I became horribly depressed, believing I'd never be truly happy, never be able to really be myself.

The turning point for me, ironically, happened at a church camp. It was at the peak of my emotional struggle. I was on the verge of a complete and total nervous breakdown. That week, on three different occasions, complete strangers walked up to me and referenced Jeremiah 29:11. It reads: *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

It was exactly what I needed to hear. That was the week I made peace with being gay. The problem was, while I'd found peace with who I was, I still didn't know how to reconcile that with my dogmatic religion. I decided to try living two lives, at least for a while. I met my first boyfriend and we started dating secretly. The stress was immense. While part of me was the happiest I'd ever been, I was constantly in fear of someone finding out. And eventually, someone did.

My boyfriend lived about three hours away, which was the main reason I was able to keep our relationship under wraps for as long as I did. We'd often meet halfway for date nights. One of those nights, my car broke down. Not wanting to cancel the date, I called my parents' house to see if I could borrow my little sister's car for the night. It was an odd request, and as such, it elicited a barrage of questions from my father: Why do you need it? Where are you going? Who are you meeting? Where did you meet this person? I tried to give vague answers: I was meeting a friend. I met him online.

Then came the kicker. What seemed to me to be out of nowhere, my dad suddenly asked, "Are you gay?"

I was so shocked by the question I simply said, "Yes." As soon as the word left my mouth, panic hit, but it was too late to take it back. I slammed the phone down and tried to figure out what to do, where to go. I knew my life as I'd known it was pretty much over. Within fifteen minutes, my dad and brother (who was also becoming a minister) were at my house. Within a few days, there was a family exorcism. My older sister even drove five hours to attend the festivities. They tried to make me go to ex-gay counseling but I refused. As a result, I was stripped of all my positions at the church.

The next couple of years were strained. After the initial fire and brimstone, things simmered down to a slow burn. When I moved in with my now-ex

husband, however, it ignited a whole new conflagration. I was told in no uncertain terms that my family didn't and wouldn't support me and wouldn't "condone" such behavior. I'd come to terms with myself much more fully by that point, and my response was simple and direct: "I'm not asking you to condone anything, but if you want to be a part of my life, you'll accept it." I laid down the terms. If they wanted to see me, they invited both me and my boyfriend. If he wasn't welcome, then neither was I. I was through pretending and I refused to hide.

I didn't hear anything from my family for a few weeks, and then one day I got a call. It was my mother inviting us to a family cookout. I won't pretend everything was a picnic from that point forward. It took years for most of my family to really come around, and some of them still haven't fully. I'll never be as close to them as I once was for a variety of reasons, the biggest one being that while they begrudgingly accept that I am gay, they still vote for antigay bigots and support laws that deny me the same basic rights they take for granted. How can I feel close to someone who doesn't believe I'm equal?

The good news is I've created my own chosen family of friends who support me unconditionally. I no longer need nor desire the conditional approval or support of my biological family. I maintain my relationships with them because, for better or worse, they are my family and I love them despite their shortcomings.

I've come a long way since I was that little boy hiding a jar full of secrets in the hollow of a tree...and I wouldn't trade a single second of it for anything. Everything I went through made me who I am today. When I started writing, the reason I decided to make Killian, my main character, gay was because of the impact those books made on my life when I was a young teenager. I look back and see what a huge turning point that was for me. Those books started me on my path to acceptance. I wanted to provide that for other people. I wanted to tell stories that reflected me, and hopefully, others out there as well. If I helped one kid feel less alone, less broken, then it was all worth it.

It's almost become a cliché at this point, but trust me, it does get better.

Buda – Lawrence, Kansas

I'm delving so far into the past I feel like doing this Sophia Petrillo style, so buckle up, buttercup.

Picture it. Western Kansas, 1987. I turned 15 that September. It was undoubtedly the nadir of my teenage years, which had started off with the

death of my grandfather two days after my thirteenth birthday. It was shortly after my 15th that I finally faced the fact that I was gay.

Remember, in 1987 Ronald Reagan was still president. Rock Hudson and Liberace had been dead of AIDS only two years and a few short months, respectively. The gay men and lesbians who were ever so rarely on television were giant messes who showed up on *Donahue* (think *Oprah*, but with a white-haired WASP man as host). The AIDS epidemic had everyone in mourning, in fear or enraged. *Will & Grace* was twelve long years away. Then picture me in a town of 1100 unenlightened souls where actual cowboys lived side-by-side with actual farmers and Butch was a fairly common and completely un-ironic name.

I was absolutely petrified of my future. I tried and failed spectacularly at finding females attractive. When I would try to watch the popular cheerleaders walk down the hall on Friday game days, I would be distracted every single time by what (to this day) I swear was the single most beautiful male ass ever created. (CS, wherever you are, I thank you.)

My father is one of those unapologetically butch men. He's a trucker by trade, a two-tour Vietnam veteran by choice, and a damn good man. But he's capital-c Conservative. In those days, I was sure of two things: 1) I was gay, and 2) no one—NO ONE—could ever know, because if my father ever found out, he would kill me. My plan was to finish high school and move away to a place where no one would ever find me. I would disappear into the ether and never contact my family again, even on my deathbed. Only then would I be able to be me. I didn't understand the concept of the closet, nor had I ever heard of a gay ghetto. I just hoped that if I could get far enough away, to a town large enough, perhaps I would find one other person like me. Every day until that mythical graduation day would be a struggle to hide myself in plain sight.

Fifteen was also the age at which I attempted suicide for the second time. It was a much more serious attempt than my first. (The first is a tragi-comedy. I was eight. I misread my final report card from second grade and was convinced I was going to have to spend another year with wicked Miss F. I'm unclear about the details 30 years later, but I know I planned to climb down some hole in our back yard. Perhaps I thought it was a gateway to Wonderland? One foot went in. One turtle climbed out. One little boy screamed bloody murder. Turns out, I passed second grade after all.)

Needless to say, I failed suicide. But that was the only option I could see at the time. I really wish I could go meet up with that fifteen-year-old me somewhere. I'd share with him this story:

Picture it. Central Kansas, 1992. Just a year and a half before, I'd started my first real job in a town four hours away from where I grew up. The very first night, I met my first openly gay man. Even though his openness scared the holy hell out of me, I made it a priority to become his friend. I came out to him

one cold November night. Eight months later, I'm in a motel room talking with my visiting mother and I finally have the courage to tell her. "Mom," I say, "I'm gay."

She's shocked into motherly silence. Then her first question—(Wait. Swallow whatever you're drinking and put down the glass. Seriously. Okay. Ready?)—Her first question is, "But if you like to buttfuck, why can't you do it with a woman?"

I didn't have any idea the woman knew the two words could be combined, much less use them in a sentence!

But now... it will be 20 years this November since I told the first *other* person that I'm gay. And you know what? That part of my life really did get better. It wasn't all at once and it wasn't without effort, but it happened—and it keeps happening *every* time I have to do it again. And each time I do it, I care less and less what that other person thinks. I am me. And, for the most part, I like the guy I've turned out to be. I haven't hidden myself—in plain sight or not—since that day with Mom. Are there things I would change about my life and the journey I've taken to get to where I am right now? Of course. But that's just part of life, I think. The one thing I would never change is coming out and living honestly.

Ethan Stone - Ely, NV

I see Coming Out as a series of steps, not just a proclamation of one's sexual orientation. The first step being actually admitting the truth to yourself. For me that was the hardest step, at least so far.

My coming out story is eerily similar to Rick R. Reed's: I was married for almost ten years and had a young son when I went through a messy divorce. I'm sure the specific details differ a great deal.

I remember having an attraction to men from a very young age, I just didn't know what it meant. John Loprieno, who played Cord Roberts on *One Life to Live*, was one man I fantasized about, but back then my fantasies weren't sexual, they were more on the romantic side. I wanted so bad for Cord to dump the girl and sweep me up in his arms.

Sex wasn't something my parents talked to me about, and I lived in a small town, so even at the age of thirteen, I was woefully uninformed about sexualities, both hetero and homo. I knew I was attracted to men—not boys

my own age—but men and in my mind that didn't mean anything. I liked girls my own age, or at least thought I did. Looking back I realized the few relationships I had with girls even through high school were more ones of friendships than romantic ones. They remarkably resembled that which I have now with my fag hags (and fruit flies).

The truth of my orientation became more apparent to me in high school PE class and the dreaded showers. I remember very specifically trying to make sure I could spot a certain guy in my class, but I still couldn't fully admit the truth to myself. By then I felt that being straight was good and being gay was bad. So of course I couldn't tell anyone that while I was making out with my girlfriend I was really thinking about a guy.

I didn't act on my desires until I was 19. Some seriously hot pix in a Men's Fitness magazine led me to buying an issue of *Playgirl* where I also found a plethora of nudie mags dedicated to gay men. I'd never had the slightest idea such things existed. This was the very beginning of the Internet age and way before I had access to the World Wide Web. In addition to the pictures and stories in the fag mags, there were also advertisements for phone lines. Not just phone sex lines for gay guys, but phone message boards where gay men left their info in the hopes of the right guy listening.

I talked to several men over the phone and I came to meet the young man who would become my first. I lost my virginity in a pink Econo-Lodge. (If I ever write an autobiography, that could be the title.) But neither that first experience nor the following few with men were earth-shattering, more nerve-shattering.

At that time, I was still under the now-laughable notion that I could deny my desires, and that's what I tried to do. I dated women. I met and married one, becoming an instant father to her daughter, and then we had our son.

What few steps I had made out of the closet, at least internally, were completely destroyed. I tried to find solace anywhere, including a rather dogmatic Christian denomination. I tried to pray the gay out of me, I prayed to God to remove my sin. But He didn't. Of course, He didn't. It wasn't a sin for Him to remove, it just took me a long time to accept that fact.

I tried to be as honest as I could with my wife about my sexuality, but, of course, the marriage didn't survive my revelation. Eventually, I could no longer deny that I was gay. I felt horrible, and still do, about how my admitting that hurt my wife. Hurting her was the last thing I ever wanted to do. But I could no longer live as I had been. Not that getting divorced meant I was stepping entirely out of the closet. Far from it. But at least I could admit it to myself, if no one else. Like I said, that has been the hardest part of the coming out process for me.

I am selectively out in my life right now. I've told my family I'm gay and I'm glad I was able to share that with my mother before she passed away a couple years ago. Several friends know about me as well.

Unfortunately, being totally out would cause large problems at my current job.

So, for now, I have to settle for being selectively out, though I hope that sometime, in the not-so-distant future, I will be able to totally step out of the closet. And that could be when I face the next toughest step of the process.

I'm happier being selectively out than I ever was when I was fully in the closet. I would never take back the decisions I've made. If I hadn't taken those steps I would never have written a book, let alone four. It *will* get better for me and for anyone out there.

Damon Suede - New York, N.Y.

I had to come out three times to my mom.

Now that might not seem strange to many people, but the important fact is that I had to come out three times to my LESBIAN mom over a period of six or seven years.

My mother did her own coming out when I was four years old. The circumstances had been pretty tragic and the fallout devastating to her, but being the firebrand she was, she threw herself into the ERA movement and the Gay Lib movement with zeal. My household growing up was a strange masala of activists and idealists, male and female. I marched in my first Pride Parade when I was, I dunno...5 years old? Maybe 6? All of my mom's best friends were gay men, so I was sort of raised by this loving, artsy tribe of ambisexual women and men in the 1970s who imagined a future without fear, an America that didn't care who you loved. They were changing the world.

Now I remember the first time I knew I was "different." I was playing football with a crazy mix of kids at the park and I tackled a handsome older boy. Instinctively he rolled to make sure he didn't break any of my bones as we went down. As we hit, and his body took most of the impact, bracing me, I remember thinking, "That feels right." From then until I was 12 or 13, I remember wrestling with these feelings. Weird when you think of my upbringing, but you see, my mom had this whole life she'd imagined for me.

And then the Plague came. My mom's buddies started getting sick with this thing the doctors called GRID, Gay-Related Immuno-Deficiency. These were the men who had raised me and I watched them wither and fall. By this time I had

hit puberty and as one of the only healthy males in my mom's circle of friends, I wound up carrying a LOT of coffins when I was 11 and 12 years old. I sat in a *lot* of hospices and sickrooms watching a dumb disease crush all the hope and idealism and passion out of my mom's world. Governments around the world went right-wing and the era of sexual liberation devolved into jackbooted commercialism. Greed was good, facts were bad, and mass media became a *de facto* religion.

I knew I was gay, but with AIDS reinventing us in the popular consciousness, being gay meant something terrifying to the entire world. So many of our friends died. So many funerals with Judy Garland soundtracks. I lived in one of the most repressive, hostile environments in America, buffered by a weird bubble of liberalism that was shrinking with every coffin I carried. How could I survive being gay when every Republican in the country painted us as pedophilic plague dispensers who deserved assault and imprisonment?

The clincher was a Gordon Merrick novel. *Yes, really!* A gay romance kicked me out of the closet. :P I've talked about this at length on my website, but in brief. I read *The Lord Won't Mind*, became obsessed with Merrick's florid, demented books and then went in search of ALL of them for months. These weren't like the "literary" gay fiction that my mom and her friends had around the house... these were flat-out romances, and crazy erotic besides. Anyways, after much searching, I found his books all together in a lurid, muscular wall of oil-painted perfection. And at THAT moment, right then, my joy and anticipation were so overwhelming that it simply scorched the uncertainty out of my adolescent self. I knew I was gay and that genie was not going back in its bottle.

The first time I told my mom I was gay, I was probably 13 or 14. I knew she would be unhappy. Her BIGGEST fear was that HIV (as it came to be called) would take more people she loved. Back then, the myth and superstition about it were medieval. Her reaction was worse than I could have imagined: I thought she was going to *kill* me; she went ballistic, screaming and lashing out like a trapped animal. I knew she didn't mean the stuff she was saying, but at that age, it sucked.

I tried again when I was 15. By this time, I was dating guys and staying away from home as much as possible. My best friend was gay and we went to the bars all the time. Hell, a lot of guys in the gay community KNEW me already because many of them had watched me grow up. I also knew that my mother got reports from her friends about my carousing; she liked to pretend that I visited gay bars because the music was better and the 1980s had enshrined androgyny at that point. But one terrible weekend, I forced the issue with her and would not let her pretend I was straight. I had a boyfriend, I needed her to acknowledge who I was, and for fuck's sake, SHE had come out and knew what she was supposed to say to me.

Nothing doing. She told me she had watched too many friends die, she didn't want that for me. I reassured her that HIV didn't happen spontaneously, that "safer" sex had begun to be investigated and defined. Worse, maybe I was gay because she was a lesbian! Did my gayness prove some deficiency in her parenting skills? Didn't I want to be "normal" and not "suffer" as she had? Then she hit me with the weirdest one: she had no interest in guys and couldn't imagine why the hell I would: couldn't I understand that women were a better option? Had some boy "corrupted" me and confused my orientation? This toxic bullshit poured out in a torrent: I had a death wish. I was being weak. I had an unrealistic sense of tolerance and equality because of my upbringing. I didn't understand what I was risking because gay men attracted such particular loathing and abuse from the patriarchy. I was doomed. I was a joke. I was a tragedy waiting to happen.

As much as I loved her, that fight and those words became a wall between us for many years. Her myopia and rage depressed me in ways I can't describe. Knowing what she knew, living the life she'd lived, she still felt justified in "protecting" me from being honest, from being my authentic self, simply because the 1980s were all about covering shit up and swimming in denial. Thank all the gods, I had paid enough attention to all of her idealistic, long-dead friends post-Stonewall. Even at 15, I knew what mattered and what didn't. I got the hell out of dodge.

Fast forward: I went to college up in Yankee country and I introduced myself to my new classmates as an out gay man right up front. No lies, no bullshit. I dated guys and dedicated myself to gay activism. Within a semester I was the president of the LGBT group on campus. AS A FRESHMAN. Still-still-still my mom pretended I was "going through a phase" or "acting out." I stayed away from home as much as I could and I knew that she kept pretending to everyone that I was straight.

In my junior year, I wound up being hospitalized because of a bad injury. My mom flew up because the risks seemed real and my odds weren't the greatest; she arrived late at night. I was to go under the knife in the morning and my nearest and dearest were panicky. Lying there in a bed, with my ass hanging out and three days of stubble on my face, I felt about as terrified and candid as it's possible to get. My boyfriend had just kissed me goodbye and left us alone to talk. She glared like he had sold me heroin, like he was responsible, like he wanted me dead. Bad foot to start on: I had no time for her bullshit or denial of anything. I was gearing myself up to die under the knife in a few hours.

With my scary thoracic surgery looming ahead of us and the minutes whisking past, I tried one more time. "Mom. Mom? I am gay."

She looked at me like I'd hit her. So I started to get angry and my heart monitor freaked out and then she raised a hand to calm me down.

I remember her voice was hoarse and she sent a worried nurse away. She nodded and shrugged and said, “Yeah. I know. I do. I just didn’t want you to make a mistake when you were too young to know better. I came out so late.” She relaxed then, as if a weight had fallen and laughed once. “You’re so fucking stubborn. I only want you to be happy and whole.”

In some way, that moment she allowed me to grow up. Her son was a gay man and not a confused boy. She was so afraid I’d die that she finally agreed to let me live. The angst of her own coming-out had blinded her to the reality of a young gay person who embodied all that idealistic shit she and her friends had preached in the 1970s. She had only wanted to protect me; I had only protected myself. There was nothing to fight about.

In years to come I would look back at our hospital conversation over and over. Being allowed to come out healed my relationship with my amazing family. It validated many of the impossible choices I had made and taught me to trust my strength and integrity. It released years of anxiety about my identity and my future. From that moment, I became a man walking towards a world of possibility instead of fleeing a life of denial and compromise. That moment of clarity opened a door into a life I wouldn’t trade with *anyone*, for anything.

In the end, we wound up talking and joking all night until the nurses threw her out. For some reason the surgery had become unscary to us both. The truth felt bigger than the fear. As she stood, my mom said she’d see me when I woke up in the ICU and bent to kiss my head. “I’m so proud of you honey. You’re better at all this than I am. Your generation is gonna change the world.”

And we did.
