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Coming Out Stories Framed As Faith Narratives, or Stories of Spiritual Growth

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Abstract:

The tension between religion and sexuality is particularly pronounced for gay and lesbian people who are often “caught in the middle” between a constitutional sexual orientation and a religious body that rejects it. This paper demonstrates how gay men can be helped in trying to integrate these deeply human and intrinsic parts of themselves, using a developmental approach first articulated by Robert Kegan. It argues that such development is often reflected later in theological language: in this case, in these men’s coming out narratives, which are often framed as stories of spiritual growth.

KEY WORDS: gay, coming out, religion, spiritual, faith, faith development, developmental, lifespan development

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The recent and unprecedented confirmation of an openly gay Episcopal bishop, Gene Robinson, as well as the accompanying protests and fears of schism point to the tensions frequently associated with trying to integrate religion and sexuality. Much press surrounding this event has pointed to the “grief beyond words” (Sawyer Allen, 2003) many heterosexual members, including bishops, feel, as well as to concurrent fears churches might split over this very issue. Less press and less attention has been given, however, to how gay people themselves try to reconcile or to find a place for both (1) religiosity, and (2) their own sexual orientation. This paper will demonstrate how many gay men go about trying to integrate these deeply human and innate parts of themselves, using a developmental perspective first articulated by Robert Kegan (1982). It will argue that such integration is possible, that clinicians can assist in this process, and that this effort often results in psychological and spiritual growth. The product of this work is often a reappropriation of religious symbols, which can be seen even in how ones own coming out story often becomes a sort of “parable”, guiding metaphor, or “lesson learned”.

The United Church of Christ’s original publication, Human Sexuality: A Preliminary Study, begins with a reference to Carl Jung: “when sexual questions were brought to him, they invariably turned out to be religious questions: religious questions that were brought to him always turned out to be sexual. The religious and sexual dimensions of our lives are deeply intertwined, whether we are conscious of it or not” (Human Sexuality, 1977). Carl Jung, cited in this quote, shows an awareness that religion and sexuality are closely linked. However, as attested to in the 277 page report by the United Church of Christ, and in Gene Robinson’s recent appointment as a bishop demonstrate, religion and sexuality are not always comfortably linked.

The tension between religion and sexuality is particularly pronounced for gay and lesbian people who are often “caught in the middle” between a constitutional sexual orientation and a church body that rejects it. James Brock, a gay adolescent, describes this tension well. He writes, “religion and religious beliefs can be as strong as the sexual urges facing an adolescent...it is hard

enough to deal with the taunting, the jeers, and being ostracized by your peers. But when your religion, the one and only security you have come to know turns you away, the hollow emptiness cannot be filled in any way”(Heron, 1983). This hopelessness that James expresses is one that is common for many gay people who attempt to reconcile their faith with their sexuality. In the process of coming out, many gay people realize that they no longer stand in the same relation to their religion. Yet it is not the end of the story for James, nor is it for many gay people who attempt to integrate these two parts of their lives.

My hypothesis is that this tension between sexuality and religion experienced by gay people has the potential to produce growth, or what Robert Kegan calls a “consciousness leap” (1982). This tension often leads gay people to realize that they “don’t fit”, or that they no longer stand in relation to religious institutions in the way they once did. For example, a man who grew up believing in categories of “saved” and “unsaved” groups of people may be led in his coming out to the recognition that he himself falls into what was once for him a condemned group. His categories no longer “fit.” It is then necessary for him to rearrange his world view, to organize it in a more complex way that can take in this new information.

This growth eventually results in a new comfort and reintegration, as well as a reappropriation of faith (the “stuff” of spirituality). Though this growth is neither immediate nor automatic, people can grow spiritually and psychologically from trying to reconcile their sexuality and religion. These “lessons learned” in the process of reintegration are often framed (that is, shown or described) by putting what they have learned into faith narratives or stories of spiritual growth. The growth is shown in the stories themselves, with their psychological and theological themes.

In this article, then, I will look at a sample of published coming out stories in which people have framed their experiences in an explicitly theological way. I will look at the ways in which they have made sense of their coming out by attaching a “moral to the story”, or by interpreting their coming out as something that taught them about their spirituality and their

relationship to religion. I have two assumptions. First, I believe that humans are makers of meaning. We construct the events of our lives in such a way as to give them coherence. Robert Kegan writes that humans are active in this process and that it is central to being human (1982). He hypothesizes that taking in new information necessitates the reorganization of one's worldview, or the re-telling of one's story in such a way as to reintegrate this new information. My second assumption follows from the first: coming out is one such experience which requires an active reconstruction of meaning. In it, an individual's social location is often displaced, relationships are reevaluated, and a potential for growth is present.

My two goals in this article come from these assumptions. I will explore (a) how men's stories show a critical reappropriation of their relationships to religion through the theological theme shown or "lesson learned", and (b) how this reappropriation shows psychological growth, or the taking in of new information and the subsequent reorganization of the old. The paper will be organized thematically, according to recurring theological themes I found in my research. Each theme will be introduced by brief excerpts which reveal the essence or "moral of the story", the realization, or the "lesson learned". Each theme will be followed by a more in-depth analysis of the (a) theological theme(s), and (b) the psychological growth, or consciousness leap evidenced. I should say, too, that I am looking at "success stories": at people who have worked with this sense of dissonance and have arrived at a new, presumably more sophisticated or mature "synthesis" or sense of their more adult faith. I make no claim that all people undertake such work. As Robert Kegan (1982) noted, people arrive comfortably at different levels of psychological development throughout their lives. I am simply arguing that the experience of being gay offers one (albeit central and pivotal) opportunity for psychological and spiritual growth.

It is first necessary to define a few terms. I understand spirituality to be "the drive in humankind that gives rise to religion in the first place" (Fortunato, 1987). It is that sense of wonder in being alive; it is our meaning-making and question-asking nature. In this sense, then,

it is universal. I see religion as a response to spirituality. Religion consists of those symbols and stories that people use to answer the questions we ask, and to give ourselves meaning. In this article, most (but not all) of the themes I will examine that are reappropriated (i.e. understood in a new way) by gay people in coming out are Christian. I do not intend these to be exclusive or exhaustive. They rather come out of the system I know best and with which I align myself. Christianity is the story I have put myself within. I do not intend these themes to be universal, but only to be “starters”.

Related to this, my particular focus is that of gay men reexamining their relationship to religion. I believe the experience of lesbian women to be similar, but warranting its own treatment. The fit between sexual orientation and religion as a relationship requiring a reworking of one’s own world view is also not exclusive: gays’ and lesbians’ relationships to government, family, and other institutions are relevant. I have written this for the gay community and for practitioners who work with gay people. Its clinical and ministerial applicability is in its introducing themes for therapy, worship, and personal introspection. It is ideally to help gay people frame their own coming out narrative and to find grace in that story.

This article is not only for gay people. Friedrich Schleiermacher said that no individual could be “universally schooled in religion” (Schleiermacher, trans. By Oman, 1952) and called any event potentially revelatory or miraculous. He wrote that none of us can grasp God alone. We therefore need many people’s voices and experiences to have a fuller picture of religious experience. It is my hope that this paper will add the voices of these people who have grown richer in their understanding of their faith, by virtue of being gay, to the broader faith community. It is also a chance for people to look at these particular experiences and to see what resonates in their own lives. Readers may look at their own life experiences with an eye toward their own social locations which have formed them and informed their faith (regardless of sexual orientation). It may offer a chance for readers to look for parables in their own lives.

Lastly, by coming out, I mean that process of gradual self-acceptance and eventual celebration of one's own sexual identity. It is usually admitted first to oneself, and shared later with others to varying degrees, if at all. It is experienced differently for each individual, with race, class, and gender as important variables. In order to give some focus and limits to the paper I have chosen to look only at men's coming out stories with race and class as categories of analysis. Lastly, in order to understand the interpretive framework I am using to conceptualize psychological growth, it is necessary to understand Robert Kegan's stage-consciousness developmental theory, and particularly his idea of the "consciousness leap" mentioned above.

Kegan and the Consciousness Leap (Stage 3 – 4):

Robert Kegan is a developmental psychologist who dissents from Freud and others who claim that early childhood is the most influential and formative period in forming one's personality. Kegan sees development instead as a life-long process. He expands on the work of Piaget and Kohlberg to explore moral (and even faith) development in the adult years. He is influenced by both narrative and constructivist theory. Narrative theory stresses the importance of story in people's lives. It claims, like constructivist theory, that humans actively construct meaning. It adds that humans construct meaning often in the form of a story, a story which they actively write and edit throughout their lives as they acquire new information.

Kegan's developmental perspective is thus a relevant choice for looking at faith narratives. The whole of his developmental theory, however, is too broad for the scope of this article. I will instead focus on the most common transition in early to mid-adulthood (the time when many people come out); I will look at the move from stage 3 (interpersonal) to stage 4 (institutional).

Kegan calls stage 3 the interpersonal stage (1982). This is the stage following the imperial stage (stage 2) where authority is entirely external; all authority is understood from an egocentric position. For example, a young person fears being late only in terms of how it will affect him or her (i.e. by being punished). At stage 3 (the interpersonal), authority begins to be

“brought in” or internalized. This Kegan says is healthy, provided that the values which are internalized are ego-syntonic. The danger is when someone takes in ego-dystonic information, or negative pictures of his identity and sense of self. In identifying with the broader culture which is often against gay people and thus against him, he may in this internalization literally turn against himself. The gay community calls this internalized homophobia. A gay adolescent may even face the denial of his existence as a gay teen. The word “gay” has only come into recent usage in reference to sexual identity, and many people do not believe in the possibility of an adolescent being gay-identified.

Stage 3 is called interpersonal because authority is understood in an interpersonal way. That is, others’ values are so much internalized that there is practically an identification. Strict categories of good and bad exist, as defined by the group. One becomes defined by relationships and can only assert oneself against the group’s opinions by risking rupture of the social fabric. At this stage, anger and disagreement are difficult, because threatening one’s relationship to the group is in a sense to threaten one’s very existence. One cannot stand outside of the group and continue to be. Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest, writes of being a late adolescent at this stage. After a sexual encounter, “we drew apart. We dressed in silence, not looking at each other. All I could think of were those voices, the voices that had wrenched us apart as surely as those adult hands might have done...what we had done was wrong –to them – and if they ever found out?” (Singer, 1993).

This is the stage at which many gay people find themselves prior to coming out. At this stage of late adolescence and early adulthood (though each stage is not necessarily age-specific), the awareness of being at odds with a peer group’s or society’s values is extremely threatening. This is the stage where many gay people realize a dissonance between their own values and those of the group’s, family’s, and society’s. A gay man may, for instance, consider himself to be observant of his religion and yet know his religion teaches the “sinfulness” of his orientation. He may feel that his orientation “feels right” internally, but believe intellectually that it is morally

wrong. This crisis is a sort of critical point, where the internal dissonance can lead either to emotional growth, or if unsuccessfully resolved, to despair. To be able to resolve this conflict, he will need the tools of stage 4. He will therefore struggle and rework his world view until he is able to make the “leap” to stage 4.

Stage 4 is the institutional stage. At this stage, one internalizes greater authority. Here one is able to disagree with peers and society without ceasing to be. It is no longer the group or society that determines truth, but an internal system that is derived from a critical internal examination of these outer voices, along with their investments in one’s own identity. At this stage, outer emotional conflict is brought within.

I propose that coming out at stage 3 brings such threatening dissonance that it often prompts the move to stage 4. Dissonance is realized in that very early, the gay man discovers a difference between a public and private self. He has learned at a young age that he is at odds with “the way things are”. He has heard that gay teens do not exist and that to be gay is a bad thing. Yet this information does not meet with his own reality that he is (or was) a gay teen and that he was well liked. He must therefore reorganize this information to weigh and to integrate the disparateness between what he has heard and what he has experienced. He thus becomes the judge who determines his own worth. In order to reach self-acceptance, he is forced to relativize the “truth”, influence, and power of the institutions around him which seek to influence him (i.e. the church, family, school, etc.) if their messages are negative or incongruent with his own. To survive, or to be ego-syntonic, he will have to define himself as good and healthy over and against a number of other voices which will tell him otherwise. With each stage of Kegan’s, one sees himself or herself as “more fully...you” (1982, p. 100).

Kegan speaks of this stage 3 to 4 move with the example of a gay man he counseled. He writes in The Evolving Self of a young man who fears being gay. The young man’s fear is not so much about being gay, as it is about the way in which being gay would threaten to disappoint the people from whom he gleans his very identity and its coherence. Yet Kegan adds that even here,

in the midst of this threat, “this can be just the kind of experience that, with the proper support, can facilitate development” (1982, p. 192). Other people’s perspectives can be relativized and people can be seen for who they are: people with a limited picture of the “truth”. This development of an increasingly internal locus of authority and a sense of really being oneself is a theme that will be recurring: theologically and psychologically.

Before examining these themes, however, I wish to make explicit what Kegan hints at above in reference to “proper support”. I want to stage clearly that this work, and the growth which is its reward, is never done alone. The presence of a supportive or unsupportive community plays a major role in the ease with which one redefines himself or herself. Communities can help by giving the individual within the group explicit permission to experiment with self-formation, and by encouraging the person to develop an identity apart from the group. I wish also to acknowledge that the terms “institutional” and “interpersonal” are not neutral terms. By using these terms I do not wish to judge either; each builds on and requires the former. Each is a normal part of development. Yet to be true to Kegan’s use of the terms, I must state that he sees each subsequent stage as able to take in and to integrate more information than the previous one.

Theological theme # 1: Resurrection

The development of an internal locus of authority, and the power of self-definition are often framed under the theme of resurrection. Resurrection in this sense is brought into the present. It is not seen only as something Jesus did as a sort of isolated feat long ago. It is not only propitiatory; it is identified with.

Resurrection in this sense is understood as an experience of authentic personhood or new life. Nineteen-year old Aaron Fricke expresses this sentiment when he writes of his coming out: “it was o.k. for me to be gay, to be different. And being different didn’t mean a life of loneliness and solitude. I learned that my friends and I could be different together. I was not merely out of the closet; I was out of the coffin” (Fricke, in Heron, 1983). Here he refers also to his ability to

disagree with peers while still maintaining a sense of self. He returns to his friends in a new way, as a new person (pointing back to Kegan and stage 4). Coming out is much more threatening to a person in the interpersonal stage. Philip Gambone says of himself as a teen: “I was filtering all my feelings through the screen of what others might think” (Preston, 1992). At this stage one’s peer group plays a strong role in defining each individual member.

Fricke’s choice of an allusion to death (i.e. the coffin) is intentional. It is the best way he is able to describe the experience of being a new person. He has died to an old sense of self, to his loneliness and fears of discovery. He says of this period: “I was very paranoid at the time. Living in a shell for years does that to a person” (Heron, 1983, p. 40). Another woman says of this period, “How can you shut down a piece of who you are and not have other areas shut down as well?” (Carlson, et al., 1991). After their coming out, though, both are able to begin to be more of their authentic selves than before.

At this point one might argue that what has occurred is not the experience of “authentic selfhood”, but instead the individual has simply been resocialized into a different reference group (in this case the gay community). What is happening here, however, is more than resocialization. If a gay man simply moves from one reference group to another to be defined by it, he is still at stage 3. The authority by which he defines himself is still outside of himself. At stage 4, however, a person takes in the authority with which to define his or her identity. At stage 4, the gay man takes a more active role in defining himself. He is more self-determinative of his own values and identity, and he operates with a more internal locus of control. He does not go to a new group which defines him, but re-defines himself, using the resources of a new community which can embrace his new identity.

David Deschamps, a Massachusetts college student, writes of this move toward self-authorship. He speaks first of a past in which group allegiances defined him. “the ten years of self-loathing and sleeping with women to prove to myself I was a real man – gone. The period I tried to hide my being gay by becoming a born-again Christian and physically stopped myself

from looking at men – gone” (Singer, 1993, p. 81). He writes of a transformation and of returning to his old reference group with a new, more actively constructed identity. He returns to his college and writes, “it was a beautiful spring day – but it was more than that. It was me. Instead of being all wrapped up in feeling ashamed of myself, I could see clearly the people and things around me. For the first time in my life I was truly happy and confident” (p. 83). David is defining more than a move toward a new community; he is revealing a stronger sense of self and an identity he has been more active than before in constructing. He has made a move toward stage 4, a move marked by a strong break with his past. His outward return to his college is contrasted with his inner transformation; the visit serves as a metaphor with which he revisits who he was, contrasted with who he has become.

Often this break involves anger at those who are perceived as having kept the individual isolated and inauthentic: wavering between a public and private self. In the play, Coming Out, Coming Home, members of Spirit of the Lakes Ecumenical Community Church in Minneapolis record their journeys of coming out in explicitly theological language. One character says “no one has the right to ask you to go through life feeling dead inside” (Carlson, et al., 1991, p. 68). Resurrection here is defined as vitality and spontaneity. Rick’s parents write him, saying “your being gay is a secret we have kept for too long” (p. 68). Resurrection here is Markan (i.e. characteristic of the book of Mark and the messianic secret): it is the secret identity not of Jesus, but of the person that is let out. Almost with the sense of being given new life, the man is allowed to experience being himself.

People bring themselves into an identification with characters of the biblical story in other ways, too. One character in the play says, “one of the names for God is ‘I am who I am’, and now I feel like I can say it” (p. 65). God is thus described by way of authentic selfhood; God is experienced by being oneself. The relationship is a sort of methexis: a relationship of interdependence. Experiencing God here is deeply tied to meeting God as truly oneself, as a child of God more than a child of the dominant culture.

Another interpretation of the resurrection is of bringing good out of bad. In discussing Easter, one character says, "I firmly believe I have been challenged by God to make some good out of this." He does this by sending his coming out story with his Easter cards and asks the audience in one line of the play, "will you be sending any Easter cards this year?" (p. 69). The good news becomes a challenge, the indicative an imperative. This new found freedom is announced as its own gospel.

Psychological Theme # 1: Resurrection as gaining an internal locus of control

Each of the above experiences and understandings of resurrection are preceded by what Erik Erikson calls an "ego chill"(Kegan, 1982, p. 169). It is an awareness of "...the disjuncture between who I am and the self I have created", (p. 169) and the subsequent relativizing of others' authority over one's own identity. In each case, the person makes a break with the past and its call for silence, and takes an active role in defining the self. The move from stage 3 (interpersonal) to stage 4 (institutional) can be seen in each, and understood as an internalizing of conflict over one's identity followed by the act of letting oneself act as the judge of what constitutes "self".

Another angle of Kegan's that is helpful in understanding the psychological principles behind the theological move is found in his discussion of subject/object relations. By this distinction, Kegan discerns between those things (i.e. attitudes, beliefs, opinions) people are subject to (and thus cannot evaluate or separate from), and those things which are objects (which people therefore have distance from and power to "look over" or evaluate). When someone has a strong or high internal locus of control, she or he is able to hold many things as objects.

Subject/object relations and a stage-growth model are especially seen in Stephen Powell's story of why he came to Harvard Divinity School. He came as a gay man with the recognition of the authority texts and tradition have had over him. He had in effect been subject to both of them. he came to make them objects, to understand and to relativize their authority

over him (Powell, personal communication). He came to actively reappropriate his relationship to organized religion and to gain more of an internal locus of control.

This taking in of authority and examining theological presuppositions or popular beliefs can be seen in the above and other examples. The internalization of one's locus of control is seen in Kegan's account of the young man's coming out story where his question of sexual identity prompts the larger question of "who determines my worth?" It is also seen in the following instances.

Dr. Gary Comstock shows this internalizing of authority in his keynote address which exegetes the story of Queen Vashti in the Book of Esther. Addressing the United Church of Christ's Lesbian/Gay Coalition, he holds up the story of Queen Vashti who chose to stay with her women friends instead of being summoned as a spectacle before the emperor's banquet. He holds this up for gay men and lesbians seeking ordination, comparing seeking ordination to a search for external (in this case the church's) validation (Hasbany, 1989). He calls instead for gay candidates for ordination to find a community and to stop searching for external validation. He responds with anger to the church and says in effect "don't wait for them to acknowledge your ministry. We're already doing ministry."

This relativizing of others' authority over one's identity can also be seen in psychologist/theologian John Fortunato's discussion of gay people having to let go of what he calls the "myth" (1982). Fortunato describes the myth as those things people use, external to themselves, to flee from anxiety. The myth, according to his understanding, is the idea that marriage, a house, career, ordination, or anything outside of oneself can bring happiness. The reality that

this myth of church sanctioned ordinations and marriages is not available to gay people in the same way as for heterosexuals can facilitate a conscious leap. He writes:

Most of the mythical systems and structures, conventions and customs which heterosexual people use to allay their angst and to keep their sense of human powerlessness at bay are off-limits to homosexuals. What happens to people who

are excluded from the myth? There they stand, face to face with the angst of the human condition, wanting desperately to escape by the same hatches: but the hatches are off limits, and they must give up the myth forever. (p. 39).

Fortunato calls this realization the beginning of spiritual growth. He invites people to embrace this exile, “seeing it as an opportunity both for profound spiritual deepening and for being empowered to do some very holy work”(p. 32). He qualifies this statement, though, by stressing that the myth is not the birthright of all heterosexuals and that the gay community in no way monopolizes the “exile” from material privilege.

The gay community does not stand as a monolithic body, viewing society’s values from afar. Here race and class become important variables in just how much one sees or participates in the myth. In the play, *Angels in America*, a gay Jewish character, Louis, concedes his own racism as something to which he has been blind. He tells his friend Belize, an African American drag queen, “I just think when you are discussing lines of oppression it gets very complicated and...” (Kushner, 1995). Before he finishes his diatribe, Belize interjects, “oh is that a fact? You know, we black drag queens have a rather intimate knowledge of the complexity of lines of...” (p. 94)

The two go on to discuss the idea of epistemological privilege, or what one sees from where he or she stands in relation to a culture and its values. Neither Fortunato nor Kushner (the author of *Angels*) is saying that being gay is a guarantee of insight; one’s vision is never complete. Being gay merely provides an opportunity to “see more” than before, not a guarantee. Also, it should be noted that this experience of “once, but not now fitting” is not experienced in the same way by African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities as it is by European Americans (Johnson, personal communication, 1994). For African American gay men, often the realization of dissonance comes much earlier, prior to any experience of ever “fitting in”. I believe that Kegan’s consciousness theory and Fortunato’s idea of epistemological privilege are both equally applicable to African American gay men. The experience of being a racial minority is another stance from which a person stands at a distance, viewing dominant culture.

What Fortunato is saying is that exclusion from social comforts and “easy answers” can propel people to seek their own answers, to rely on something else, and specifically to ask, “what is ultimate?” “What can I base my identity upon, if not the assurance of social belonging or material advantage?” “If I am not what I own, or the summation of the people who like me, then who am I?” Seeking the answers to these questions is part of what propels people to stage 4.

Theological Theme # 2: Grace as unconditioned value

If the above questions are answered with the conclusion that we have unconditioned value aside from what we do, our role, and who we know, this discovery is of what theological language might call “grace”. A bubbly, laughing fifteen-year-old New York gay adolescent hints at already having this awareness when he says “just like a community...in a religious community they want to pray together a lot...well this gay community might want ah...they like want to *be* together” (Livingston, 1990). By this I understand him to say that he is a part of a community not because of a role (i.e. a corporate prayer, church affiliation), but because of his very constitution. He is valued before anything he does; he is valued simply because he is. I need to acknowledge here that in this instance it is my theological interpretation; it may or may not be the boy’s. His choice of comparing his community to a religious community, however, leads me to believe that is a comparison he is deliberate in making. I believe his statement to be theological.

Coming to the awareness that I have value apart from and prior to any role I have or thing I do can be an experience of great liberation. This I saw primarily at a Dignity service I visited in Minneapolis after a ruling came down that the Catholic center at the University of Minnesota could not host its meetings for gay and lesbian Catholics. This was upheld by a local court and by Bishop Roach in the Minnesota Diocese. A nun at the service sang an old Gospel from Black Nativity: “Tell them you’re a child of God...if anybody asks you, tell them you’re a child of God.” She danced around the room pointing at different people as she sang. Invariably the person pointed to would begin to cry. Why would this bring such a strong reaction? It is because each person in that room, struggling to stay faithful to both their sexuality and their tradition, had

been told repeatedly, and with the court ruling powerfully so, that this is not true. This reminded me strongly of Nat Turner who wandered into Southern plantations telling African Americans, “you are not slaves; you are children of God” (Callahan, class lecture, fall, 1992).

The event of coming out often becomes a paradigmatic experience of grace. In one man’s coming out story, his parents respond “you know, this is going to take a while, but the first thing we want to tell you is that this doesn’t change our love for you” (Anonymous, personal communication, 1993). It is a story of unexpected acceptance and of love without condition.

The coming out story can also become a sort of parable. One man tells of his father saying, “if God made you gay, then God has a plan for you as a gay man. My mother was crying, and I said, ‘don’t be sad, mom.’ And she said, ‘I’m not sad. These are the tears a mother sheds at a wedding. I’m glad you’ve grown up and know who you are.’ What I learned from coming out to my parents is that things are not always what they seem to be” (Carlson, 1991, p. 64). Like a parable, this story has an unexpected ending. The world one expects is not the world one finds. Everything is turned upside down, and the unvalued is valued.

Psychological Theme # 2: Grace as unconditioned positive regard

In Kegan’s language, grace can be understood as congruence between the public and private self. It is the experience of no longer having the bifurcated sense of self, divided between the public and private, between one’s own and other’s opinions, between who one is versus who one wishes to be. It is the experience of self-acceptance, of what dynamically oriented clinicians might call ego-syntonia, or of what Carl Rogers calls “unconditional positive regard”. This fits also with Freud’s concept of psychological health involving the lowering of defenses, and of viewing the self as objectively as possible – the good and the bad.

But how does self-acceptance or “grace” show a consciousness leap from stage 3 to 4? As was said earlier, at each stage, one sees oneself more accurately and more fully as “oneself”. At stage 4, one is more able to experience “grace.” A person at this stage is more self-authored, whereas in stage 3, “the truth of the self is finally derived from the authority of others” (Kegan,

1982, p. 188). At the institutional stage, a person is less subject to defining himself or herself by others' standards. In order to experience self-acceptance at stage 3, the society must change the negative messages to which it subjects a gay person. At stage 4, it is the person who changes, transcending and re-evaluating the negative messages.

This reevaluation leads not only to a reappraisal of oneself and one's own value, but leads to a critique of social values and their own subjectivity. The gay individual stands with some epistemological privilege, able to see the constructed nature of social norms. I believe those who have successfully integrated their homosexuality into their lives learn critical thinking in the very process of coming out and the resultant reorganizing of their realities. Assumptions are examined and relativized. This can be seen in the following quotations which are taken from the 1977 film *Word is Out*, which interviewed 26 gays and lesbians:

“We're all born naked. Whatever we wear is drag. We dress as we want to be seen.”

“I didn't realize that their macho behavior is as conditioned as my faggot behavior”.

“I was further on the outside than they were, so I had a better picture of what was going on. I could just see things from a different point of view.” (Selver, 1977).

Each shows the ability to critically examine and relativize a cultural norm or the ability to look at it from another perspective. These people have gone through grief and dissonance, and have critically examined the competing values which were theirs before. By doing this, they have been transformed.

Theological theme # 3: The Kingdom of God.

This emerging critique of social organization and stratification often leads to a vision of a new, more just society. This view is more prophetic than it is apocalyptic. It is a vision that is “in-time” and “this worldly”. Spirit of the Lakes, a predominantly gay and lesbian congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota demonstrates this. This church is what is called in the United Church of Christ a “Just Peace Church.” This means that it sees a central part of its mission as involving social action nationally and internationally. It has a sister city (Ciudad Romero) in Latin

America, and its sermons and study groups are often political in tone. For instance, one Easter the stories of Christ and of Oscar Romero were woven together as visions of a savior. The time of “shalom” is a key theological concept in this church, envisioned as a state of economic, material, and spiritual peace.

The church also professes a strong affinity with other minority groups. In the play, *Coming Out, Coming Home*, two characters say, “what I want is a sense of community, not just any community but one where women and men share a commitment to social justice...we as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people know and understand the pain of others who have also been put down. It is critical we don’t get frozen inward but move outward to others” (Carlson, 1991, p. 65-66).

The kingdom of God thus becomes framed as a collapse of old categories and a reconstruction of new ones. Parables are understood very much in the tradition of Sallie McFague, where Jesus reverses the social norms about who is valued, where the last become first, and where the prostitutes are saved before the “righteous”. This understanding is shown in this man’s words: “what I learned from coming out to my parents is that things are not always what they seem to be” (Carlson, 1991, p. 64).

Gay men and lesbians self-consciously see themselves as having a prophetic role in this reconstruction of categories. Chris Glaser uses Acts 17:6 as a periscope, calling gay people “those who have turned the world upside down...” (1985, p. 131). Though here he is speaking specifically of the church, he writes of gays and lesbians having a particularly prophetic role in calling the broader church back to the essentials of the faith, back to the center of the tradition. Jesus and the prophets are understood very much in this vein. They are our predecessors who criticized their own religion’s hypocrisy from within the tradition. These stories remind gay people that we are not the first to be laughed at or mocked while trying to claim our place in the tradition or in calling the church to account.

Psychological theme # 3: The Kingdom of God as a collapse of old categories and the re-creation of a new concept of family

This collapse of old theological constructs and the reappropriation of one's faith concepts is a theological reflection of what the gay man has already done psychologically. The change in theology reflects an underlying psychological change. The language implicit in this theology shows a view enabled by the consciousness leap. The kinds of understandings shown above would be hard for a person in stage 3 to grasp. If one is not in stage 4, how can he or she meaningfully speak of collapsing categories, defying "conventional wisdom", "living in exile", or of "seeing the world less in black and whites" and "experiencing the greys"? Understanding this theological language on emotional and not merely an intellectual level presupposes certain psychological categories that are a part of stage 4.

Being gay thus becomes a social location which gives a certain epistemological privilege, or one which teaches about social construction. This is seen in the above quotation from Coming Out, Coming Home. The quotation above about the importance of not getting stuck in the particular experience of being gay, but in "mov(ing) out" from it to other people's particularities shows the expanding categories and the expanding identification with other people. It shows a universalizing tendency in which people are identified with, not on the basis of national or class-based lines, but by the common experience of struggling to define themselves against others' definitions. The language of moving toward versus away from people is also strongly reminiscent of Karen Horney's language about psychological health being evidenced in people's social nature, in their moves toward people (Freidberg, 1987, p. 44).

Conclusion

In each of the above themes, I have tried to demonstrate an underlying psychological principle and particularly, evidence of psychological growth, which is reflected in the theological language used. Coming out is, I believe, a concrete situation which is often preceded by

turbulence, social dislocation, and an awareness of dissonance. It is one which requires an active reconstruction of both the self and the self-in-relation to others.

Stage-consciousness theory stresses that it takes concrete situations to bring about such growth. Two developmental theorists, Lewis and Jacobs (1993), write that “conceptual capacity develops slowly in response to real world experiences which call into question the adequacy of one’s current best way of making sense of the world and one’s relationship to that world” (p. 32). I have presented coming out as one such experience in which conceptual capacity is challenged, and when addressed, as something that brings growth, leading to a more complex understanding of the world, having taken in and incorporated new information.

Perhaps the largest theological theme that has undergirded each of the above themes is “the importance of story”. It is, after all, the coming out story that becomes the paradigmatic faith narrative. It is the story which judges and informs all other stories in one’s new relationship to a religious tradition and to religious language. The very putting together of this story, the act of imbuing it with meaning is a very human, psychological, and religious act. It is one which reclaims the idea of “testimony” (Cox, lecture, December, 1993), and teaches the person of faith the centrality of story in religion – as something that interprets life events in such a way as to give them coherence and ultimacy.

I have written about coming out as one such situation that prompts a re-evaluation of one’s world view and which can ideally lead to psychological and spiritual growth. I acknowledge that there are many others. I hope that in reading this paper, clinicians will be able to better assist clients in looking at their own experiences and to ask: (a) what experiences have informed my own faith narrative, and (b) how have I grown from them? What new lessons have I learned? How are my new understandings reflected in my own theology? These questions can be prompted by therapists, chaplains, social workers, and spiritual directors, all in the spirit of facilitating spiritual growth or a more mature, psychologically sophisticated sense of faith.

I am arguing that a gay person's coming out story often becomes a sort of parable. It is a story that is revisited and revised throughout one's life, much like the Sioux vision quest, where a boyhood vision becomes a guiding symbol for all of his life. (Ludwig, 1989). This act of giving story to our lives is one that constructivist theory and religion agree is central to being human. Narrative theorists and therapists have also articulated this sense (Epson & White, 1990). The themes I have suggested are only preliminary. They are, however, the result of people looking closely at what they have learned from integrating both their sexual and religious identities. I hope that they offer a starting point from which each reader can look within to find those stories for both themselves and their clients which have informed their faith development and which have become what Jean Dalby Clift (1992) calls "core images of the self".

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