Opening safe space

Sarah MacDonald

Memory: December 2003

School is out for the Christmas holidays. I am home from my first semester of seminary, baffled and worn from a welter of emotion. My pastor, who has mentored me since I joined the Mennonite church four years earlier, invites me to lunch. As we move through the buffet and settle at our table, I tell her everything I love about seminary life. But she already knows this is not the whole story. Eventually she gently turns the conversation: "You said the semester had challenges, too?"

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I nod, my eyes on the tablecloth between us. "Yes. Well." Aware of my fluttering nerves, I consider my words. How do I explain what I've been learning about myself? How will my pastor react? I take a deep breath and opt for directness. "I guess the most tumultuous part of my semester is that I fell in love—with a woman."

A quick glance at my pastor's face. She doesn't look shocked, just interested, open, carefully listening. So I tell her a little more. "It was a surprise and it wasn't. For as long as I can remember I've been attracted to women. Mostly I've run away from the question of my sexual orientation. But falling in love this autumn was so intense. So undeniable. I can't dodge this reality anymore." I pause, then admit, "It's hard for me to talk about falling in love. I'm kind of embarrassed by it."

"But why?" my pastor exclaims with genuine surprise. "There's nothing wrong with falling in love!"

Our conversation continues, but my pastor's response lingers in my mind. A few years and many coming-out conversations later, this remark is still my favorite: "There's nothing wrong with falling in love."

My pastor's words not only opened safe space for me to share my experiences; they were also one of the earliest affirmations helping me make the long gradual turn from fearing my sexuality to embracing it.

Invited to write this essay on pastoral issues related to homosexuality, I deliberated about what to say. Part of me wanted to lay out a neat theological paradigm or present wise pastoral suggestions—to write something that felt relevant, fruitful, not overly self-revealing. But before I am a theologian, I am a storyteller and a memoirist. The only place I know to begin is the ground where I'm standing. All I have to share are these reflections from my own still-unfolding journey. So I offer this handful of memories, snapshots from the path I—one contemplative activist lesbian Mennonite follower of Jesus—have been traveling from a fearful, divided self toward greater sexual wholeness and integrity.

My experiences are not unique. Even many heterosexual people, somewhere along the way in their development, wrestle with similar feelings of anxiety, ambivalence, confusion, or downright fear in the face of their sexuality. Nonetheless, those of us who are queer,[1] who find ourselves unable to live the script of heterosexual expectations, face distinct challenges in understanding and reconciling ourselves to our sexuality. Especially if we grow up in the church. Especially if we want to stay a part of it.

Memory: Childhood, probably eight years old
A pastor from a sister church visits our reserved New England congregation. He describes his ministry in distant San Francisco, accompanying his talk with slides I can barely see, because I've forgotten to wear my glasses to church this evening. A few slides show a gay pride parade with drag queens in skimpy, colorful costumes, like odd and exotic exhibits. A murmur of shocked distaste ripples through the congregation. But all I can see on the screen overhead is a blur of color and form. I only feel curious, disappointed I left my glasses at home.

So it was for me growing up: on this issue, I was always out of step with those around me. On the rare occasions it got talked about, homosexuality was presented as lurid and strange and, in resonant King James English, "an abomination unto the Lord." To everyone else, as far as I could tell, the disgust came naturally and the

picture was clear. But to me the image was blurred, unrecognizable. Try as I might, I couldn't bring it into focus. Thinking differently from what I'd been taught, I felt as if a piece were missing inside me, and because I didn't feel revulsion, I feared something was wrong with me.

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Meanwhile, my own sexuality left me wary and uneasy. While classmates skidded from one giddy crush to another, I remained aloof and largely uninterested in boys. By the time I graduated from high school, most of my favorite friends were women ten or twenty years older than I. Occasionally I wondered about my sexual orientation. It's not that I believed I was gay, exactly. Still, I didn't seem straight, either. My orientation just felt blank, like a space on a form someone had forgotten to fill in. I hoped I was simply slow to wake up to erotic attraction. But when sexual desire did begin to stir in my body, it frightened me.

Memory: Young adulthood, early or mid-twenties
Alone in my room late at night, I lie on my bed, my body curled into fetal position. My mind dwells on a friend who attracts me so deeply I am scared. When I think of her, I feel a magnetic tug in my gut. Imagining how this attraction would disgust her if she knew of it—how it would disgust any of my Christian friends, as far as I can tell—I hate myself for feeling this way. If only this sexual attraction were some physical part of me, I think, I would cut it out of my body with a knife. I visualize the blade slicing into my abdomen, and I start to cry—not because I am picturing violence done to my own body but because I don't know how to get rid of the part of me that I fear.[2]

I grew up in a Bible-teaching church, attended Christian schools, and became a leader in our graduate student campus ministry at the University of Iowa. All my life I've wanted to be a worthy disciple of Jesus. I didn't need to open the gospel of Matthew to recall the text that warns: "If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. . . . If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out."

During the first three decades of my life, every spiritual community I belonged to treated homosexuality as a deadly stumbling. For years I assumed I had to choose between being queer and being righteous—or at least, between being queer and remaining in the communities that were my spiritual home. I was sure I couldn't live without a spiritual home. So I told myself my sexual orientation didn't matter. If I happened to be lesbian, well, I'd have to slam the door on that part of myself.

Memory: A few years later, at almost thirty

Now a campus pastor working with an ecumenical ministry, I'm at our annual gathering in Chicago with my colleagues from around the country. Over dinner one of them—I'll call him Jonathan—tells a few of us what has been happening this year in the campus fellowship he pastors. Last fall the fellowship invited as a guest speaker a lesbian woman recently converted to evangelical Christianity. Over the next weeks, Jonathan learned, various women from the fellowship contacted the speaker to share questions and fears about their own sexual orientation. Jonathan has tried since then to follow up with pastoral sensitivity, but he's startled by the live nerve this talk apparently touched, amazed that the evangelical fellowship would have so many members questioning their sexuality. He turns to us around the table to ask what we think. Have we encountered anything like this on the campuses where we work?

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I listen to my dinner companions expressing amazement like Jonathan's, and I feel a different bewilderment. Am I really the only one at the table unsurprised to hear of these young women's concerns? I think immediately of students I know with similar stories. I think of myself. How would my colleagues react, I wonder, if I admitted that I too have wrestled with the puzzle of my sexuality?

I don't say a word. The conversation rolls on around me as I clench my mouth shut, half longing to be invisible, half aching over how such invisibility hurts. After the meal Jonathan asks me again if I have any advice for him, and I consider trying to talk with him, or sending him an e-mail message later. But I never do. Too much seems at stake—my

relationships, my reputation, my position, perhaps even my call to ministry—for me to risk opening up.

In retrospect, I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had shared my truth with Jonathan or another colleague, or with my ministry supervisor. Likely their responses would have surprised me. Certainly, in the five years since I started coming out as lesbian, I've been surprised many times as friends and mentors have welcomed or affirmed me, whatever their own orientations and theological perspectives. Such acceptance, mirroring the tender grace of God, has been crucial in helping me learn to love myself. All of myself.

Memory: Summer 2004

Halfway through an intensive course for seminarians, as I'm chatting with my closest friend in the program, she suddenly begins to warn me against the "pro-homosexual agenda" in our classes. My friend is an older woman who calls me daughter. In her motherly way, she is worried for me.

Now I am worried about what she suspects. Only last fall I started coming out to myself as lesbian, then gradually to a few trusted friends. Still learning how to wear this identity, I'm extra sensitive to any mention of homosexuality, "Why are you saying this to me?" I ask my friend several times, my voice strained and urgent.

Alarmed at my distressed response, my friend says she doesn't know why she's brought up this topic. "You're not angry at me, are you?" she begs. "Please don't be angry."

I shake my head. "No, not angry," I answer, "just sad." For a long moment I'm quiet, wondering whether I should come out to her. The thought scares me. I've never yet come out to someone this opposed to homosexuality. But I don't know how else to stay in our conversation with integrity. Fumbling for words, I say, "What you said saddens me because this year I began coming out as lesbian. It's hard to tell you this—I don't know what you'll think of me now."

The gentleness of her response surprises me. We talk a little more, and then she prays over me for God to reveal my true identity. When she finishes, we're both crying. I don't try to second-guess what she hopes for through her prayer. I simply drink in her words. For so long I have wanted God to show me who I am. My friend's prayer—what-

ever her intent in praying this way—confirms for me that God is doing exactly that.

Coming out conversations—like sexuality itself—are a meeting ground of vulnerability and risk, openness, and grace. Each time I share my story and someone responds by stepping toward me rather than away, I rediscover that I am indeed a beloved child of God. A long-shut door inside my heart eases open. Then I am more able to open my heart to the beauty and the brokenness in the world around me.

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Having journeyed this far, I now see how the fear of my sexuality that I felt for so many years was really a fear of intimacy and vulnerability, a fear of being fully present to other people and allowing myself to be truly known. It is no wonder, then, that embracing my sexuality has deepened the quality of my relationships—not only those with erotic overtones, but all my relationships. I'm learning to live in this world with greater awareness, larger tenderness, stronger honesty and courage.

Shortly after I came out as lesbian, I started working with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), a ministry of nonviolent activism and accompaniment. There's a practical reason for this: my denomination is unlikely to ever hire or ordain me, an out lesbian. To follow my call to ministry, I needed to join an organization that would value all of who I am.

But I believe the link between these two life choices is more profound. Coming out as lesbian required me to face reality and take risks. I had to stop protecting myself at the cost of personal integrity. I had to learn to love more boldly, to hold gently the fragile pieces of my own spirit as I care for endangered people everywhere. These same traits also motivate my work with CPT and carry me to conflict zones to get in the way of violence.

For all of us, embracing our sexuality—like resisting injustice—entails risk. We may get hurt. We will likely break our hearts, and maybe lose our lives to gain our souls. But in the end, how else do we live with integrity? How else do we live at all?

Notes

[1] Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have reclaimed the once pejorative term *queer* for various reasons. Acronyms inclusive of all sexual minorities are cumbersome and sometimes mystifying. The term *gay* often refers specifically to men who love men and so lacks the inclusiveness of *queer*. Consequently, *queer* is the preferred self-identifier for some of us. But others in the LGBT community choose not to use this word because of negative connotations they hear in it. It is wise to be careful when talking with or about sexual minorities and to ask individuals how we prefer to self-identify.

[2] Internalized homophobia—disapproval of or severe discomfort with one's own homosexual orientation, often caused by absorbing the surrounding social or religious tenets that privilege heterosexuality—is a real danger. Teens with same-sex attraction or unsure of their sexual orientation are at least twice as likely to commit suicide as their heterosexual peers. The memory I recount here is a common experience, though my story is much less grave than some. I only lay on my bed and thought about self-inflicted violence. Far too many LGBT-identified persons do go get the knife or choose another way of doing themselves harm.

About the author

Sarah MacDonald is a member of First Mennonite Church of Iowa City and a 2007 graduate of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. She works full-time with Christian Peacemaker Teams, serving in Palestine and Colombia.