

*I realised that by transitioning I had come back from exile; from my body, from the Bible, from God.'*

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For many Christians, I am too outspoken about my queer and transgender identity. For many queer and transgender people, I am too Christian. I have spent much of my life feeling like I don't fully fit anywhere.

I grew up in a rural fundamentalist evangelical church in Pennsylvania that did not ordain women and thought homosexuality was one of the worst sins. Even so, that church played a huge part in who I am today, and there are things about how it worships that I find lacking in liberal churches. It was there I felt my call to ministry. I was home-schooled, and church was my social life. I was there so often, they gave me my own keys! I wanted to be involved in everything, to speak up and be a leader. And they let me lead.

I went to a college affiliated with my church. Smoking, drinking, sex and dancing were prohibited. In my first year, I met a pair of women and for the first time felt I'd met someone like me. Two weeks later they were expelled for being lesbians and I got the message: I needed to shut up.

I began to doubt my faith; things weren't making the same sense they once did. I was trying to be someone I wasn't, but didn't understand who I was meant to be. I still felt called to ministry, but was criticised for my 'subjective view of scripture'. I was floundering and saw a therapist, but quit as soon as she brought up my gender presentation. I wrestled with God and wanted to ditch Christianity, thinking it was easier than trying to reconcile what I knew to be true about myself with what the Church held to be true. I desperately prayed God would fix me, make me normal, make me right. This back and forth with God would last for years.

Meeting some theatre kids at college saved my life – they let me be myself and didn't make fun of how I dressed. I wrote and directed two plays that drew on my issues with being an outsider. To see these played on my college stage was a huge deal for me. It was a way of taking my own mask off a little bit.

Everything changed when I interned at a United Methodist church in 2001. They profoundly affirmed my call to ministry, even though I was still perceived as female, and I began to see I could do the ministry I was called to do. I admitted to myself that I was gay (I still had no language for my gender discomfort), but was convinced I would have to be celibate my whole life.

After graduation, still celibate and not out, I became a youth pastor at an American Baptist church. The minister I worked with was amazing; he was the perfect role model and guide for me. That summer, one of our youth group kids came out. His family and our church accepted him, and I was amazed. I took him to gay youth groups and pride events. These kids were longing for someone religious to come alongside them and not hate them. I met gay Christians for the first

time, ministers who were accepting, and even gay ministers! It was so new to me. I abandoned my ideas of hell and embraced a God of love who maybe, just maybe wouldn't abandon me because I was gay. I also realised that sometimes you have to take an unpopular stand in church – a family left our church because I wouldn't teach their kids that homosexuality was wrong.

Three years later I met a woman and fell in love. It was a whirlwind and I became deeply depressed as I tried to be a closeted minister, a closeted child, and a partner. I ended up in hospital because of my anxiety and something had to give. My mom asked me if I was gay, and I came out to her. It was rough for a while, but she was pretty remarkable about it all. She welcomed my partner and included her in family functions.

I resigned from my church when they hired a new, homophobic minister. It was too dangerous for me to stay. Right before my final Sunday, I was outed by one of the youth, who had discovered my MySpace page. I was asked not to preach on my last day because it would set a 'bad example'. It was completely disheartening. My partner was with me and the grandparents of the young man who'd come out in my first summer there took me aside. They said my partner would sit with them, and that if anyone messed with her they would have to go through them. These were people who had been in the church for years and I realised then that I could be a gay minister.

A shift began to happen inside me. I took a year off, married my wife in Canada, and read every book about theology I could get my hands on. I started moving away from the emotional religious experience of my youth and steeped myself in education. I applied to seminary in New York and was accepted. I finally received the intellectual tools to understand my faith and was embraced as an out, queer person. I worked at a camp for queer Christian youth and it was amazing to tell them they were loved just as they were. And I was finally given space to deal with my gender discomfort.

I came out as trans the following year. The seminary was supportive, but didn't always know what to do with me. I had to deal with professors making transphobic statements, and classmates who, even after I had medically transitioned, still couldn't get my pronouns right. I had to be a walking explanation for what it meant to be trans. And because my faith had shifted from the emotional to the intellectual, I had nothing to fall back on. I had to find a way to engage my heart again without dismissing my head in the process.

Around that time we studied the story of Thomas in John's Gospel, and something changed within me. I realised that by transitioning I had come back from exile; from my body, from the Bible, from God. It was transformative for me. I graduated from seminary and my wife and I divorced. Following my transition we decided to part ways.

My faith keeps me queer and my queerness keeps me faithful. Both of these identities, at their best, are concerned with people on the margins and justice for all. Jesus cared about justice, overturning oppression and helping people be free. Followers of Jesus need to be about the same things. I'm learning to embrace my status as someone on the margins and I give thanks for the way this gift allows me to see things that other people are unable or unwilling to see.