

# Stories and Stigma



## Acknowledgements

Recognizing that we are on unceded Coast Salish territories, homes of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

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Cavan Bog Fence

Montreal Shadow

Remains of a Fence

Carnal Stigmata, Knight of Sweats

On Vancouver Island

Undoing Stigma

# Stories and Stigma

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# Our Stories about Stigma

**T**here are many kinds of fences that define our territory. Weathered wood and ancient stone, beautiful but uncomfortable to perch on. Other fences that block us: barbed wire and spikes. Invisible fences that we construct and maintain ourselves. Metaphors for the role of stigma in gay men's lives.

Pervasive stigma that might say we do not exist, unless we are oh-so-obvious. Then there can be an icy continuum to negotiate: stereotypes, prejudices, engrained discrimination and persecution. We also have internalized stigma, barriers of shame on which all other stigma can be built.

Stigma that prevents gay men from fully participating in society. The enduring stigma that surrounds HIV and keeps people from accessing testing and care. Stigma within our gay communities: in a meandering Internet troll we can read an HIV negative gay man distinguish himself as "one of those who are less deviant."

Resilience is a word often used to counter stigma: meaning to spring back after bending, stretching, or being compressed. Why do we have to keep doing this? How about the word stamina instead? Run, jump, perhaps knock down fences along the way.

It's complex, but our stories can be the crucibles where we can find the strength and determination to challenge stigma. Here is a small collection of lived experiences, a beginning. We need to see more stories about gay men's journeys. What are we not hearing or seeing?

—*Craig Barron, Editor*



# Closet Case?

I consider myself to be very “out” about my HIV status. I’ve talked about it on TV, I have (see next page) a **blog** and a **tumblr** that note my status in their sub-titles; I **tweet** with a profile explicit about my status; I have participated in **poster** and **video** campaigns trying to reduce HIV-associated stigma and discrimination. After all that, I found myself in a peculiar situation the other day, discussing what I do for work with someone I had just met, and referring to people living with HIV in the third person. Wait, what?!

A bit of context here. I am visiting my sister in Australia, in the country, and the person I was talking to was a friend of my sister and her husband who is a bit older than I am, and retired. He had come over for dinner, and I think the first time I said I worked for an AIDS organization (yes, I use the “A” word because it usually brings more familiarity from the uninitiated), I think he thought I said “age”. Accents are apparently a killer here, like my thick Canadian accent.

Well, when we got that sorted out and it was clear that I was working in HIV/AIDS, we turned to a bit of a discussion about today’s realities for people living with HIV. I pointed out that “they” are likely to live just as long as “their” friends who don’t have HIV, and maybe longer, given a more frequent medical follow-up. “They.” I was immediately disappointed with myself for not being out about my

status for our guest, but the experience underlines for me the crazy ongoing nature of the coming out process in yet another aspect of my life (although the gay thing seems to be a bit easier, as people don’t assume that I am some kind of straight lumberjack for whatever reason).

Maybe it was the fact that I had prepared the first course of our dinner (there’s an old stereotype) or the fact that this was a light social event with pleasant chit-chat and not so much deeply serious conversation, but whatever it was, I “othered” my people. What we won’t do to pass in life.

I feel like I need to fix this, but I don’t know that I will ever see this guy again. Maybe I will have to ask my sister to share this post with him when it comes out. Of course, I will likely at home by then and will have taken the coward’s way out. I guess I will have to work on a better strategy to ensure that I am equipped for disclosure in more situations. Live and learn.

*First published in [positivelite.com](http://positivelite.com)*

—Ken Monteith

It doesn't happen to me often, in the circles of friends and acquaintances around me, to meet people who are afraid of me. But there is nothing more disturbing for a person than being the object of fear for another.

Sometimes I disclose my status in unexpected circumstances and I notice the person in front of me pulling back a bit. It's like having HIV transforms me into an agent of infection with the sole goal of transmitting the virus that lives in me. On the contrary: like every person living with HIV that I know, I have always done everything I could to avoid transmitting HIV.

Imagine, then, the evening I met a man I liked—and who liked me, I presume—and we found ourselves at my place, in bed, giving and receiving pleasure. All finished and satisfied, he took *that* moment to ask me a question: did I know my HIV status? Yes, I answered,

and honestly. His crisis began. All of a sudden, I was forced to become a social worker, walking him back through everything we did that evening and analyzing how nothing we did had a risk of transmission.

No, I don't think I have a "right" to sleep with anyone. I do, however, have a right to be seen as a person and not a virus, as a responsible man and not a doer of harm. I take seriously my obligation to stop the transmission of HIV, but his bad timing in assuming his own responsibility for prevention does not make me a bad person. He needed to be able to see past the virus to appreciate my ethics and my human values.

Knowing me is not scary. What is scary is not knowing me.

*First published in [jesuisseropo.org](http://jesuisseropo.org).*

—Ken Monteith



**blog**

[talktothehump.blogspot.ca](http://talktothehump.blogspot.ca)

**tumblr**

[tumblethehump.tumblr.com](http://tumblethehump.tumblr.com)

**twitter**

[twitter.com/ken\\_monteith](https://twitter.com/ken_monteith)

**poster**

[jesuisseropo.org/campagne-des-acquis-et-des-defis](http://jesuisseropo.org/campagne-des-acquis-et-des-defis)

**video**

[youtube.com/v/HwnBvZ-taug](https://youtube.com/v/HwnBvZ-taug)

# The Diplomats

Casa Rodriguez, Celina Ohio, April 2000

**M**y dad saw it coming—I could tell from the look on his face when he walked up to the restaurant, stoic like that of a diplomat sent on an obligatory courtesy call to a head of state. I had handed him a few ominous clues in advance, asking him to leave my stepmother, brother, and sister at home, and intentionally selecting a restaurant sure to be quiet for a weekday lunch. It was a small town, and Dad knew just about everyone—he was prominent as a youth pastor at his church. I was in college in California at the time, so I was obliged to regard Mexican food in western Ohio as inferior to the Californian-Mexican cuisine to which I had become accustomed. But somehow Casa Rodriguez felt like common, if not neutral, ground. Where a Midwestern church leader and Californian queer could safely convene.

Pope John Paul II had just completed his *Millennial Pilgrimage* to the Middle East, where he visited the Western Wall and expressed his “sadness” for the role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust. Israeli officials referred to his statement as a gesture rather than an apology. I wanted to raise this topic with my father, having two years prior presented him with my list of reasons for no longer participating in the Catholic Church, but there were more pressing things to discuss.

“Dad, I’m gay,” I said flatly, just a few minutes after we sat down. I didn’t mean to bring it up so quickly. It was the product of nerves, not confidence. He was silent for a long time. I noticed the waitress was avoiding our table, presumably aware of the pain in his face. He started crying. This wasn’t the first time I had seen my father cry. I might have preferred that he were angry, but that wasn’t in his character—I’ve never even heard my father raise his voice to another person. I studied his now morose face and tried to read his thoughts. I awkwardly asserted to him that I was happy, in case this would somehow allay his sadness. He just looked down.

Eventually I suggested that we leave the restaurant, both of us still speechless. Dad complied, and I saw immediate relief in his face. Our waitress was now anxious, bustling over to try to save our uneaten enchiladas from the silent debacle. I motioned to her to leave them, and we walked out to the parking lot for an awkward goodbye hug, during which my dad continued to cry.

## Berkeley Thai House, Berkeley California, May 2002

Two weeks before my college graduation I emailed Dad to tell him I had a boyfriend, whom I wanted him to meet. He and my stepmother had already agreed to attend my grad ceremony, though they refused to stay anywhere near debaucherous Berkeley, opting instead for a B&B in the posh countryside north of San Francisco. Dad didn't answer my email so I sent another one a week later, letting him know I made a post-ceremony dinner reservation for four at my favorite Thai restaurant.

Taking photos after the ceremony, I felt increasingly uneasy about my dinner plans. My father fidgeted nervously as he was invited in and out of photos with different configurations of parents and stepparents, overly-affectionate queer friends, and my boyfriend, Trevor. In one photo Trevor picked me up in his arms, carefully draping my black robe and dipping me. I saw my dad and stepmom turn away.

Dad and I hadn't spoken about my sexuality since the Mexican standoff two years prior. I did visit once, and while the topic was constant in my mind, I gave Dad a pass. In part I was afraid of a harsher reaction the second time around. I was also still struggling with my own internalized shame about my sexuality.

I wasn't sure exactly why my father had been so incapable of talking about my revelation, but I made up a dozen explanations. Friends suggested it was his rigid adherence to Catholic dogma or his fear about the sensitivities of my younger siblings, though I suspected there was more to it. My parents divorced when I was four, and I spent much of the subsequent years walking on eggshells, trying to protect against another blow. Now I wondered if my dad thought the divorce, and his relative absence from my life after, was to blame for my sexuality.

Over dinner, Dad was suddenly chatty, even gregarious. He chattered about his work and his love of golf and eagerly shared detailed updates about my early-teenage brother and sister—left at home for fear of contamination from exposure to gays, or Berkeley radicalism, or Thai food, or maybe all three. Meanwhile, my stepmother refused to eat, instead staring at the wall as if trying to knock over the photographed Buddhist temples with her angry eyes. Admittedly I had picked Thai food because I knew she would hate it. Passive aggressive warfare was a long and deep part of our family heritage.

After dinner my dad and boyfriend hugged, Trevor towering nearly a full foot over my father. Dad asked Trevor to take care of me, and I saw tears welling in his eyes, held back by my stepmother's persistent scowl. As Trev and I walked away silently, I wondered if something had shifted in my dad—a false hope. His return to Ohio marked the start of a twelve-year cold war, during which he forbade Trevor from visiting and preemptively outed me to my brother and sister after I asked for time alone with them. Silence

grew between us, phone calls stopped, hostility hardened. Dad became a deacon and a leader in the Knights of Columbus, which raised millions of dollars to fight gay marriage in voter initiatives across the States between 2002 and 2015. In October of 2008, Trevor and I married, despite the Knights' efforts. The RSVP card from my dad was returned with the decline-to-attend checkbox accompanied by a sentence fragment: "sorry, too busy with back-to-school activities."



## Il Giardino, Vancouver Canada, September 2015

A week before Pope Francis visited the United States, my dad and stepmother came to Vancouver. The latter visit was a surprise to everyone, including Trevor and me. In August my father called me and asked if they could come. A gesture. When I asked Trevor where we should take them for dinner, he suggested the newly re-opened Il Giardino, and I immediately knew what he meant. It was an olive branch. We desperately needed the visit to go well, which meant no spicy foods or dishes with foreign-sounding names—Italian was okay, being papal cuisine and all.

I read that Pope Francis and President Obama had each deliberately planned to steer clear of charged topics of discord, like gay marriage, and instead would focus on climate change—an issue where their views more closely aligned. I took their cue, mentally preparing a list of diplomatically safe topics: cooking, microbreweries, my sister's new career in nursing, my brother's first house, as well as verboten topics: gay marriage and climate change.

The visit was smooth, even warm. My stepmom praised the food and décor at dinner—"I want a garden patio that looks like this!" My dad asked Trevor questions about his work and family. We all devoured plates of overpriced pasta and smiled at one another, trying to re-

cover from bad memories of meals gone wrong, and uneaten.

The next day my dad and stepmom heartily thanked Trevor and me—this time politely smiling through their hugs—and then departed. I spent the day inventing stories to interpret the unexpected détente, then sorted them, favoring those that plausibly related to the previous explanations for the start of the war. Perhaps as my dad approached retirement the cumulative weight of the strain between us was too heavy to bear. Perhaps my sister had negotiated a peace treaty, without inviting me to the summit. Perhaps Pope Francis's more relaxed approach to gay rights had a trickle-down effect to deacons.

The next week I saw a picture of the pope, on parade in Washington D.C. He had a neutral expression, but I imagined him deep in thought about something personal, a regret maybe. His appearance reminded me of my father. I started thinking of the thousands of diplomats on mission around the world, some of them tenuous or even endangered but enduring, for now, and I smiled.

—*T S Warm*

# Carnal Stigmata, Knight of Sweats

In the centre a blue, harrowed figure held in the throes of ecstatic pain. His cock cupped in the hand of the man on his right whose ass crack and balls drip with the blood of the stigmata. On his left a flaming faggot with bruised scapula, perhaps castrated wings, devouring him. This paint-stroked threesome is called, *Carnal Stigmata, Knight of Sweats*. Chthonic, these three swarming knights of orgiastic frenzy, propped up within one another's arms, alone, they are hideous, together they are a force of nature. His palms anoint the others with his blood, his spiritual suffering covering their hearts with pain as the most anti-romantic kind of love. They embody the anti-force of the good gay citizen; they are the denizens of the night; saturated colours defiant against an inevitable darkness, stroking one another back to life.

The painter, Lore Schmidts and his partner of twenty-five years, Kenn Mofatt, have been frontline viral komrades and soul-filling playmates through the recent half of this multi-generational, globalizing epidemic. Born of outrage/ousness, our friendship is a love that defies words, one unlikely to be repeated in the remainder of our days; an ache I pray many of you also know in the white blood cells of your bones. People helping people make sense of the horror by creating moments of joy together.

We met in 1995 during a Canada Council funded theatre festival in Victo-

ria, B.C. entitled, *As deep as Your throat*. Lore thought he was answering an Xtra West ad to star in a porno. Instead, twelve neophyte activists turned the city pink for six weeks making front-page news with our guerrilla art performances. We protested recent gay bashings by dressing up in glam rock drag and parading into the streets. We drew pink triangles, dumped fake blood and held kiss-ins on the steps of the cop station and the Empress Hotel. We explored the violence of stigma by rooting out internalized homophobia and its impact on both our viral identities and collective creativity. We broke the hex of self-stigmatization using the alchemy of art. We were adored and reviled.

One night during rehearsal my \$500 bubble gum pink Datsun, battle decorated in queer symbols, got gay bashed on a busy Friday night street by an uneducated skateboarder. A passing lesbian couple placed a red rose under the wiper of the smashed windshield with a note saying, "Keep going boys!" We sculpted hatred into hilarity, transforming the smashed glass into an opulent crystal crown we wore in the next performance cabaret, *Coming Out/Inside*. We turned a pissy situation into a golden media shower of social activism.

Collective risk taking helps us bust through self-isolating fears. We turned patterns of self-flagellation into community inspired passions. Our reward was



to skill ourselves with boundary pushing, stigma-freeing creative acts. We fluffed up our social immunity. We discovered that by purging ourselves of self-hatred we were inoculating ourselves from the social virus of manufactured heteronormative shame. Sharing our wounds inspired us to become cultural healers through activist art. We liberated ourselves by composting pain into nourishment for growth, ever vigilant that fags make it up as we go.

We dubbed ourselves the Georges and the Still Standing Sluts. Our grassroots performance extravaganzas included a midnight marriage ceremony in the cruising area of Beacon Hill Park.

Twenty cars flooded the performance field with their high beams while one hundred queers and high kicking drag queens gripped tight to a 30-meter rainbow flag and bounced a beach ball of the globe. We blasted Mr. Roger's hit single, "Welcome to My Neighbourhood," loud enough for the police to be called from Oak Bay. We escaped to the local bar, our car horns blaring with defiant joy, as the four cop cars arrived. We had just married Kenn and Lore, reading from a translation of a 15th century Greek Orthodox same sex ritual. Who needs a bridal registry when the party is a shared gift of performance?

A few years later the four of us abandoned the urbanization of AIDS Inc. for an idyllic life of the Gulf Islands on Canada's west coast. We chose to explore our renewed albeit complicated HIV, medication supported, freedom. We romped in the woods, grew our own food, raised and buried our four legged family members. We continued our inner/outer work by throwing weekend events, what I like to call parties with purpose. We actively investigated community-meaning making processes by mapping out our fluid-bound identities. We rented the 100 year-old community hall and stirred our gay men's cauldron. We courageously walked between the poz/neg, cis/trans, youth/elder divides until we valued our differences as an expression of our vital to-these-times connections. We edged

ourselves toward what we now recognize as the ferocious need to decolonize our consciousness. We strive to be more effective allies to queers of other abilities, queers of colour and 2 Spirit folks because we continue the hard work of debunking our internalized 'otherness' by unpacking our white privilege within our own representative body politic.

Kenn, as co-hostess, brought his gleeful pyrotechnic genius to each performance/art party. Lore called these gallery shows *Chocol-art* and invited the wider Saltspring community to be part of an explosion of erotic light and sound. I have devilishly fond memories of the well-loved, highly esteemed sexologist Dr. Captain Snowden, the then AIDS Vancouver Island men's health coordinator, introducing the crowd to a tray of sex toys. The straight boys always went for the cock ring while their girl friends wished they'd go for the dildo. We offered demonstrations. Another dear friend, Metta, and I performed a high drama HIV disclosure scene between a 'straight acting' neg guy and a crossing dressing poz person. We used non-violent communication skills to outmanoeuvre the stigma of rejection. We brought the house down with a long reconciliatory kiss. It's easier to know what to do in awkward scenes when you've seen someone work through the fuckups first. We became known for embracing the erotic edge with the Eros of community care.

We recognized we were culturally transmitting what our gay elders continue to reveal to us: work together to heal, laugh through the tears and instruct your anger to make the party, and therefore the clan, smarter.

For years small crews of us, in tandem with larger organizations of caring people, have helped Poz folks outlive the terror of germs and the nightmare our fluids once represented to us. As white, cisgendered gay men we paradoxically represent some of the most traumatized and privileged of our generations. Many of us are, because of supports offered and received, now spirited peer navigators of social evolution.

Our foursome benefited at times from a social welfare system that allowed us to not only survive, but to discover how to thrive. Our work reflects our often abstruse, gratitude. This province invested in our lives by providing enough resources to help some of us find each other. Our efforts must be to always reach out in all ways possible to those who suffer alone. It's only together that we can reimage and ultimately transform the stigmatizing narrative of HIV/AIDS into what it really is, one of humanity's greatest stories, our very own sacred, our one day dream of, "Once upon a time..."

I write today to open up a space in our conversations about stigma to embrace what I see as its equal and opposite, stamina. Without doing so, like

walking ghosts, we hover in the shadowy realms of victim and perpetrator, vectors of despair and disease. Our interwoven networks prove that we are in fact rhizome like members living and dying in dynamic patterns of interrelationship. To keep this subtle wisdom alive, Radical Faery poet and avant-garde filmmaker, James Broughton said it best and so had it written on his tombstone: “Adventure, not predicament.”

Our stories, when witnessed, lubricate change. That’s what makes them matter. Stories heal the willing. Stories upset the resistant. Stories are especially dangerous to those who refuse or are denied change. When we/I share the mess of learning how to unpack stigma, our stories provide potential paths to consider. Freedom from shame; accountable; cleaning up together can be the adventure of a lifetime.

Stories curate the art and demonstrate the skill of lived experience. Audiences and tellers, with mutual respect, embody the empathic and critical cultural contexts necessary to envision and therefore, enact change. Well-crafted story spaces can show us how innovation is possible. Vulnerability, steeped in the awareness of the social determinants of wellbeing, is necessary for change to occur within liminal sites of shared sanctuary and cultural stewardship. Transforming stigma requires us to strategically tell the tales of the heart’s hurts and yearnings. Doing so

offers sorely needed role relief to the witnessed teller caught in the ecstatic riptide of pain and pleasure. The educated audience has the potential to help transform the “Ow’s to Wows!”

For those who choose or are forced to exist in sites of marginalization, we must collectively reimagine what living on the edge means, to value the skills needed to survive while working together for the benefit all. The pain of stigma tells us what needs attention. Stigma reveals who, where and how people are struggling. Privileging stamina highlights skills won and honours what has survived. Claiming stamina demonstrates gratitude for help received. Our stories, these lanterns of love, once held for us, now hold a profound space for those still finding their way through the darkness of oppression.

After living for a quarter of a century with HIV and sixteen years of non-HIV related health challenges with such grace, humour and dignified faggotry, our small posse doesn’t know how many more days Kenn has left on this planet or how Lore will survive his impending loss. We will be there in any way possible to help him find his way back into the largeness of life. Where we show up for suffering we find beauty in the art of one another’s arms. What is remembered lives.

Friends forever.

—*Robert Birch*

# Boy of Paramaribo

If our humanity would have a brain with a serving memory (which I think it does, just conveniently forgets), it would remember that humans have always distinguished 'queer' people most fiercely. In the times of slavery you might have wished to be born a heterosexual African male instead of a homosexual Caucasian male.

Coming 'back' to modern times with slavery abolished (Has it really? We can talk another time about that.), I still felt like I'd been born in the worst situation ever along with the least preferable body. Until I was eleven I didn't even really know why I felt that way. I guess caterpillars never think their bodies are made to soar one day. As I think back to my earlier teenage years, I am actually trying to forget it at the same time. At the moment I'm very proud and strong, of course. But a strong memory is a coin where one side makes you smile and the other edge leaves you staring out at the endless horizon in front of us, where we stare when we are lost.

When somebody says 'school', I feel bittersweet, bittersweet, bittersweet. Looking at myself today and seeing that the bullies can be literally sixteen and pregnant, I sometimes don't know what to feel.

Nevertheless there is serenity in my heart. The same peace that I possessed as a child locked in my bedroom secretly playing with a doll. But without the occasional fear of being caught. I know better now, and an awful lot more than most of the

adults who were there around my childhood. Teachers can be the worst. The worst thing a teacher can do is NOT teach. Not teach humility, empathy, respect in those early years when a person's mind is most impressionable. If they can't teach, they at least shouldn't be encouraging bullies, something I saw happening not long ago.

They obviously didn't know better. (But a murderer doesn't as well eh?)

Maybe I knew that and therefore I just bided my time. Growing a seed of hope, which I watered with patience and faith in justice.

Everyone who has a 'problem' with accepting something that's not understandable (be it race, sexuality, religion or a simple belief) should first of all try to respect somebody's choice (note: in homosexuality there is no choice). Second thing to do is to notice how the other party is thinking about you. Are they respecting you or thinking of harming you?

The third thing is to make a choice. Are we going follow the same path which led to misery and suffering for so many people (as history is showing us)?

—*Vikash Raghoebier*

**B**ack in New Zealand my family lived above our takeaway restaurant, “The Oriental Takeaway.” My memories revolve around thinking my family were the coolest people in the world, and on regular doses of Spider-man, Star Trek, Batman, I Dream of Genie and Three’s Company, I loved toys, TV, costumes and drawing.

I’m a really visual kind of guy—which sometimes gets me into trouble with cute guys! I learned to draw based on comic-book heroes and especially the costumed band KISS. My family wasn’t very well off so I drew pictures to fill the absence of expensive toys. I remember always looking to characters on TV as role models, moreso than the people around me.

Going to school for the first time I realized that I was different than everyone and didn’t belong. The white kids seemed to all agree that my eyes were funny and weird, and dismiss everything else about me.

We moved to Vancouver when I was six years old. Growing up I benefitted from the popularity of my older sisters. Knowing kids in higher grades ensured that I didn’t get beat up or picked on, but I still wasn’t one of the cool kids. I was overweight and very sensitive. While the cool kids had their toys and shoes, hockey card collections, grades or physical gifts, I had the special ability to be loud and make an ass out of myself.

While there were certainly more Asians in Vancouver, my distinct New Zealand accent ensured that I was still an outsider. But this time people enjoyed my difference. They’d ask me to read and perform to hear my voice. I was asked to recite lines from all the British characters they’d seen including C3PO, Mr. Belvedere and any 80’s cartoon super villain. All British, all effeminate.

I kept up the habit even after my accent had faded away. I quickly learned the difference between the laughter of people who are mocking you and the appreciative laughter of those you entertain. And I learned to love the sound of people laughing with me. My pain and humiliation was comic gold. I did voices. I fell (a lot); I openly flirted with cute boys and got rejected. I drew comics, talked back to teachers, endured detentions and low grades. I even put on one-man sketch shows for my friends during lunch hours. My love of entertaining people was born.

High School was very confusing. I knew that I was considered unattractive, but suddenly became aware of my sex drive and yearned to be considered sexy. All I knew about “gay” was that it was bad and nobody wanted to be gay! I felt very strongly about my guy friends and really admired their physical qualities. Being unable to accept, express or even understand my gay feelings suffocated me. I spent my middle teen years feeling alone and depressed. I would dream

of ending the pain with suicide. I just couldn't see how I could possibly fulfill my dreams being so unattractive and being so afraid to be labelled gay.

Worrying about my safety, my best friend (whom I had a huge crush on) introduced me to his religious family, the Jehovah's Witnesses. I found a group of wonderful misfits united in their worship of God. Their message of a future where everything would be perfect, and where God would wash away all of my imperfections, gave me something to live for and a new way to connect with people. I loved the idea that God, like me, didn't want me to be gay, and that the suffering of suppressing my feelings was a sacrifice to God. The other Witnesses were beautiful people who loved life, loved to laugh. They rejected secular status and wealth and valued honesty.

I was emotionally stronger and meeting so many more people. But even immersed in a life devoted to God, I still couldn't escape my need to love another man. I found myself charming my way to repeat visits with cute boys I'd meet in my door-to-door ministry. I even started fooling around with some. As I grew to understand my feelings and the possibility of actually being close to someone, I began to explore the chat lines to at least hear others like me.

I stood outside of gay nightclubs just to see what gays looked like and to see if I could fit in. I had so many prejudic-

es against gays. It certainly didn't help that I had very few examples of healthy out gay people in my life. I really believe that the easiest way to fight homophobia is by proving to everyone in your life that being gay is healthy, vital, inspiring, diverse, and harmless; being closeted serves only to allow homophobia to exist and grow. Just as with racism, the more examples of gay people that are available, the fewer stereotypes can exist.

I started to take care of my body and I lost 55 lbs. With a newfound confidence, I started to act on my feelings. Still a believer, I confessed my double life and was disfellowshipped (kicked out) from the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. This meant that all of my friends from those six years could no longer speak to me. I was 22 years old.

When I was in High School I never expected to live to see twenty. As a Jehovah's Witness, I fully expected to serve God until Armageddon or I died, whichever came first. I found myself without any friends or goals for the future.

I experimented a lot to find myself. I still had the ability to make friends, but these friendships were based on good times and parties and not many lasted. I plunged into different scenes, pushing my personal boundaries. That's why I think I'll never get tired of being an actor. I love exploring the truth of a person's existence, his situation and his feelings. In doing so I've always enjoyed surprising and chal-

lenging myself—thus the go-go dancing stint. Having grown up seeing myself as fat and ugly, I was shocked to find people enjoying my face and body.

In gay scenes, however, I was once again being dismissed because of my ethnicity. “I’m not into Asians” was a comment I became all too familiar with. It was elementary school all over again. I wanted so badly to just fit-in. While my teenaged crushes were multi-racial, somehow I became exclusively a potato-queen and stopped finding other Asians attractive. I wanted to be seen as North American and sexy. When cute Asian boys would hit on me, it was me who’d say, “I’m not into Asians.” Look-

ing back, I can now see how it was born of my insecurities.

Thankfully this attitude didn’t last. After a few years and a few fabulous boys, I realized that the rules of attraction are wonderfully varied and that if people will dismiss you because of your race, they aren’t worth your time. I blame the racism in the gay community on the same reason I find for homophobia—a lack of positive role models and examples. There certainly aren’t enough sexy images of Asian males available to us in the media. Not yet anyway, but things are changing.

—*Nelson Wong*



# Undoing Stigma: Hitchhiking as a Young, Gay Man

If a conversation should turn to travel, and I mention my penchant for hitchhiking, the reaction is always strong. Most people immediately worry aloud about how unsafe it must be. But even those in whom my irreverent travel stories have struck some chord of terror—once they’ve pushed beyond the horror show unfolding in their minds—are left gazing enviously down an open road of adventure and potential. Even as they insist they could never do it, their minds conjure up a Kerouac inflected image of a footloose and fancy-free vagrant, plying the highways with all the time in the world.

It can feel like that, standing at the side of the road waiting for my next ride, about whom I will know nothing more than I’ve known of all the rides who’ve brought me to where I stand. Yet, for all that appearance of freedom, there’s no freeing myself from what I’ve known or who I am. My personal history affects where I’m going and how I’ll get there far more than how long it will be until that next car stops. I travel carrying most of my life on my back, but there’s no denying the invisible backpack and its tools that is also always with me. The tools that let me spurn the billboard on Highway 16—the Highway of Tears—imploping young women not to hitchhike. The tools that provided me with the means, at age 17, with nowhere to sleep, to turn down a man driving along

side me down Santa Monica Boulevard cooing “Such pretty eyes” and insisting I get in. The tools that have granted me the rides who, in only a matter of sentences, make it clear that they would not have stopped if I were not white.

Confrontations with realities like those leave a stark impression, harsher than the usual haze of heterosexist assumptions I more often face. Across tens of thousands of kilometres and over six hundred rides, many queer people have picked me up, but, as with so much of life, the majority of those who’ve picked me up are straight. From experience, I now know it’s easiest to just say I’m Christian, when someone has stopped for me by the grace of Jesus whispering into their ear. Some men who stop, and declaim against being anything less than straight, would likely proposition me all the same whether they knew I was gay or not. From quite a different set of experiences, I now know the stronger negotiating position is letting them think I’m straight, which is probably their fantasy anyways.

With the greatest share of my rides the negotiation is fully interior: “I may be passing well enough, but what happens if I out myself?” Many of us become deft at handling such interactions and code switching, even if we may not often be so vulnerable as with a solitary ride at the setting sun, traversing some lonesome expanse. My experience has thankfully

never taken me to where many people's fearful minds first turn, but a key skill in hitchhiking is foreseeing such possibilities, hoping as I do that they will never arrive.

Whether my hitchhiking stories have elicited terror or envy, an inevitable curiosity is where I sleep. When the sun does set, and I have to viscerally confront that question, unlike the complete unpredictability of who will stop for me, when looking for a place to sleep there's much more I can do to narrow whose attention I'm grabbing. From Tokyo to New Orleans, the situation changes considerably if there's a gay area, or even just a bar, to go to. My backpack, clad in cardboard scrawled with my most recent destination, is a certain invitation to ask what I'm up to, and often enough, with a mutual exchange of good vibes, I end up with a place to crash for the night. Many young people travelling by thumb have that experience, though from speaking with them, it doesn't seem to happen nearly so often as it seems to for me. What seems to separate us is that the 'perverts' whom my gruffer, straight compatriots of the road are quick to brush off happen to be just the people I'm looking for. Certainly, the young straight couple fresh off the freeway and busking on the corner aren't seeking the same nighttime connection as I am.

Nevertheless, while the excitement of finding that night's bed off the street

or from a bar can be a tantalizing high, what can be done when dropped off in Deer Lake, Newfoundland or Topeka, Kansas? Walking those streets would sooner have the police stop to question me than provide a place to sleep. In years past I would unfurl my tent in whatever cranny I judged adequate. Once I owned a smartphone though, I could put cruising apps to a whole new use. "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers" was my Grindr profile's headline, before a brief description of where I've come from, am headed, and the open invitation that I'm looking for a place to crash. It rarely took long, even in the most remote locales, to get a few messages, many simply dumbfounded and amazed that anyone still hitchhikes. Inevitably I'd be offered an explicit exchange, but a little patience nearly always garnered more earnest replies and, often enough, somewhere for the night.

With no further explanation, nearly everyone who hears these stories assumes that when I meet these men something more is being put out than fresh sheets. Yet, as was initially to my own amazement, I've rarely encountered that expectation and almost never have felt pressured to do so, even as a 17-year old vagrant plucked off of Market Street near the Castro. It feels far more like tapping into the 'secret club' that being gay was once described as, but perhaps taken a step further. It recalls Kurt Vonnegut's

romantic proposal to combat the lonely anonymity of modernity by assigning everyone to a group, so that no matter where you may find yourself, you'll know someone. In a word, community.

Certainly, I've found far more community in being gay than with many of my fellow vagrants, who so often are as prejudiced by heteronormative society as any other group. I gladly proclaim that all of my rides, from the church going to the meth slamming, have picked me up only to help me along my way. But such kindness does not equal belonging. Yet, by depending on the kindness of fellow

queer men that I've met on my journeys, my experience colours a very different gay world than one of cold shoulder cliques and shrivelling gay villages. Instead, in countless cities and towns that I've sought or ended up in, I've had the privilege to discover genuine warmth and hospitality—an acceptance beyond anything conventional gay narratives would lead me to expect. Though we're so often taught to be wary and on guard, it has only been by exposing my vulnerabilities that I've found true connection.

—*Daniel Wexel*



## About US

Community-Based Research Centre for Gay Men's Health is a non-profit charitable organization that advances gay men's health through research, learning and leadership development. Our vision is a better world for all gay men. Please consider donating to support one of our programs.



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