

Growing Up Gay

My earliest memories at school are that I was different, that I didn't fit in. When I was small, I didn't enjoy the games that boys played at school . rugby, bulrush . games that provided opportunity for a degree of violence that I didn't enjoy. I wasn't interested in sports, and tended to socialise with girls rather than boys - I felt more at ease and perhaps safer with girls. I was more interested in reading a book than playing with other boys my age.

At one of the smaller country schools I went to, when I was probably around 7, a group of boys picked me up by my ears and feet and threw me into a hedge. My defence was to use my language skills and run fast, and avoid situations where things like that might happen..

Between the ages of 5 and 14 we lived in 10 houses, and I attended 6 primary schools and 1 secondary school. I don't know if moving as much as we did made it easier or harder . I knew that whatever the problems at a particular school there was a very strong chance we would move on and I would have the opportunity to start afresh, but I was always me, hating rugby, more likely to have friends who were girls not boys . just not fitting in, and not expecting to. I always knew that Mum and Dad loved me and would protect me whether I fitted in or not. But I was off school a lot . and much of this was to avoid things at school like sports day when it was hard to avoid situations where I was uncomfortable or felt unsafe. I was also lucky that I didn't come across any teachers who were determined to make a man of me+

I remember how much safer high school felt than primary school. Finally I had friends, some of them male, who had the same interests as me . who loved reading, who didn't think I was weird, - a class of other kids who never threatened to beat me up.

Thinking back, by this stage I had become very good at self-protective behaviour. The only times I was threatened at high school were when I was in unsupervised areas . by the bike racks. I also stayed out of the boys-only areas as much as possible, staying mainly in the safer area underneath the staff room and, when possible, in the library.

Compared with my partner Mark's school experiences I was very lucky. Mark was beaten up at least weekly in his first three years of high school, and his academic record was very poor because he avoided school as much as possible. He scraped through school cert, and in the 6th form blossomed academically, because the kids who were bullying him dropped out, and he ended up with an A bursary in the 7th form.

I realised how I was different in my early teens . and when I realised that I wasn't attracted to girls and was attracted to boys I knew that was not good, and was very dangerous. Being gay was illegal of course then . the law didn't change until 1986. There were no positive role models for gay boys back in the late 60s and early 70s. I recall rumours about radio announcers being arrested for indecent behaviour that went around the school. The only people in Ashburton that I thought might be gay didn't attract me at all, and I instinctively knew that to let anyone know that I was attracted to other boys, even someone who I thought might be interested, was dangerous. Of course many people thought that I was a poof . and quite a few of them told me so.

So I grew up desperately not wanting to be gay, trying to be straight, and trying to be the person that I was raised to be. I read books on self hypnosis and tried to hypnotise myself into being attracted to girls. I had a girlfriend in the 5th form, but I couldn't fall in love, no matter how hard I tried. I had periods of quite bad depression in the 6th and 7th form, and I used reading as an escape . when I had my head in a book I was transported into that alternative reality, and I could never sleep without this drug removing me from my daily life and switching off my fears and worries. I don't think that I ever got to sleep without reading first until after I came out.

I think that Mum and Dad knew that I was gay when I was a teenager, at least at one level. I remember Mum telling me when I was in my mid teens that I was their son, and they loved me

whatever I did. That was the most protecting thing that any parent can do . I always knew that their love was not conditional on me achieving particular goals, and that if I did come out to them they would still love me. But, possibly because I knew their love was unconditional, I also wanted to be who they wanted me to be, to have a wife and family of my own one day.

Growing up the only time that I remember a man making an actual pass at me was when I was working at a woollen mill in my home town. I would have been 18. He seemed to be a good friend of one of my other workmates who was always making homophobic comments to me, and was the father of a girl who had been in my year at school. I was terrified that I was being set up for a beating and ignored the pass. In retrospect I don't think I was.

Anyway, I went to University, and continued much the same pattern as before. I had a couple of girl friends, but avoided going further than kissing, and the relationships didn't last very long. Apart from two male friends, one from high school and one from the university hostel that I stayed in my first year at university, my closest friends were all women, and I didn't meet, or try to meet any other gay young men. I knew that my eye was drawn to men rather than women, and which sex made my heart beat faster. But I didn't dwell on it, as the implications panicked me. It was sort of like I put it in a trunk and shut the lid on it. Every now and then I would raise the lid and peek in, but then I would slam it shut.

Moving to Wellington after University could have been liberating, but it wasn't . I was too fearful. For the first two years life went on as before . I was oblivious to the fact that I was working with a gay man whose marriage was in the process of breaking up, and who fancied me. In fact, there were several gay or bisexual men working in or around the organisation that I worked for that I didn't have a clue about, many of whom were married.

I met my first ~~real~~ girlfriend through a work colleague - she lived in the flat next door to him. When she moved out of her flat I took over her room, and we started seeing quite a bit of each other. It became clear to me that she was interested in me. I was my usual evasive self, until a friend of hers, who flatted next door with my work colleague, took me to one side and asked me what was going on with her, why I wasn't responding. I realised that I could either come out (with no experience, and not knowing any other gay people as far as I knew, so with no support network) or see how things worked out with her. We went to a party & drank & smoked a bit & ended up in my bed, and everything worked out fine.

I was relieved and confused. I had thought that if you were gay then that was it. I had never considered until then that I might be bisexual because I had never really fancied women . liked and appreciated them, but not fancied them. The fact that I was able to have a ~~proper~~ relationship (i.e. sex) made me think that perhaps I was bisexual. All I knew about sexual orientation I had gleaned from books, and the range of information available wasn't great.

This relationship lasted for 5 years . we moved in together when she joined me in the UK, and lived together for three years after we got back. We split up because I wanted kids & she didn't. I ignored my attraction to men for that time, and continued to ignore it after we split up. This was 1985, the beginning of the peak of the AIDS crisis. I was still aware of my sexual orientation, but keeping it shut in a box, still scared of what it might mean, and now with the added fear that it might kill me.

Then I met my second female partner, a Canadian. She had an affinity with gay men . all of her closest male friends in Canada were gay, and she also had gay friends in Wellington. She helped me (unintentionally) move to a place where I could come out, first to myself, and then to her, and finally, gradually, the world. I was finally meeting gay men through her in Canada and also in Wellington, and I could see how gay men lived lives that were ordinary, and that there were many out there. I found that I was gradually moving towards accepting myself as I was. Then I fell in love.

I met him through a mutual friend who had bought two second hand PCs, one for him and one for his friend, and they had been stripped of all software, including the operating system. Neither of

them knew anything about PCs. So I helped set the PCs up for them, and fell in love for the first time in my life. This was in October 1999.

When I realised what love felt like and that people weren't exaggerating about it I realised that I couldn't keep on pretending that I was straight, and that I had to come out to my partner. This was probably the worst time of my life, particularly Labour Weekend 1999. I was in a panic loop . I had to tell her that I was gay - if I told her my entire life would change . I could lose all my friends and family . everyone would hate me because I had treated her so badly . I couldn't tell her . I had to tell her that I was gay. Round and round for the whole weekend.

I was very lucky with the man I had fallen in love with, who had some experience as a counsellor. He kept asking me probing questions that forced me to sort out how I felt and what I should do, never giving me advice on what I should do. I realised that I wasn't ready to tell my partner right then and decided to put it off. But I did come out to my closest female friend, a woman who had been a friend since we met at the age of 12, who was working as a grief counsellor. I couldn't have had better support at that time than these two friends.

I came out to my partner just after Christmas. I came out to my sister the day after, and then the coming out process was somewhat out of my hands. My partner needed the support of her friends, which were almost entirely my friends because she was a relative newcomer to New Zealand, so my entire network of friends found out very early on. All of this was very stressful . I dropped to 67 kg, and ended up on ACC when I got OOS in my right hand. I was just considering coming out to Mum and Dad when we discovered that Dad had a brain tumour . I decided that he didn't need to have any additional stuff to deal with at that time, and didn't come out to them then. My partner and I continued to share our home for a few months, and then we sold up and went our separate ways . we are still in touch.

I discovered a very supportive community in the Wellington gay community. Along the way I met a few key friends who introduced me to others, and who were enormously supportive during Dad's illness.

After Dad died I put off coming out to Mum, largely because I didn't want her to get obsessed with the possibility that I would die any minute from AIDS . she had an anxiety disorder that was exacerbated by mild dementia. I came out to Mum after my photo appeared in the paper at the AIDS Candlelight Memorial in 2002. My plan had been for my sister and I to go up on Saturday, I would tell Mum, and my sister would stay over so that there was someone supportive that Mum could talk to about it. Mum pre-empted me by asking my sister outright if I was gay the Monday before we went up to visit her at her home . I had given her permission to tell Mum if asked outright. Mum took the news very well . possibly because she had worked it out for herself and had some time to think about it, although didn't always quite seem to understand that my being gay was permanent.

I expected Mum to pass the information on, but she didn't, as far as I know. I came out to my brother about 6 months after coming out to Mum.

I have been very involved in the gay community in Wellington since coming out. I have found the most incredibly supportive and caring group of men . I wish so much that I had found this years ago . all those years of fear were in some ways so wasted . trying unsuccessfully to be someone that I wasn't. It is so much easier to be who I am.

I met my partner Mark at a GAP/Rainbow Pub Night, which changed my life yet again. Mark and I had our civil union in May 2005.

When my mother died in July the same year I found that I had to complete my coming out to my extended family, a task that hadn't seemed important until then. When Mark and I had our civil union we made a commitment before our friends and family that we would love each other and share our lives together for the rest of our lives. This meant that I had to include Mark in the funeral

notice as my partner . to do other would have been dishonourable, an insult to him, everyone who attended our civil union, and to me. Mum knew Mark, and always asked after him. She had intended to attend the civil union, but wasn't well enough to go. The alternative would have been to remove all partners from the notice, which would have been unacceptable to everyone, including me.

I had to get the word out to as many relatives that I could before the funeral. I had a number of very supportive and beautiful emails back, and no really negative reactions at the funeral or afterwards. I wish I had done this before Mum died . Mum's death alone was enough to deal with . but as I saw so little of most of the relatives, it didn't seem necessary.

I am proud of who I am . if I could wave a wand and change to being straight I wouldn't consider it for a moment. My only regret is that it took me so long to get to this place, so many years of fear, of times that I could have shared with people like myself. I went to the Sydney Mardi Gras in 2001, and for the first time in my life I was not in the minority . it was the most incredible experience . not the parade, or the dance party (I was too tired for that), but the beautiful people on the streets. I am who I am, who I was born to be, and I am happier than I have ever been before in my life.