

Rick R. Reed, author (Seattle, Washington, USA)

I didn't come out until I was thirty. At the time I was married to a woman I loved and had been with for almost ten years (including our courtship and seven years of marriage) and had a five-year-old son, whom I adored (and still do!). It was a very hard decision. I lived my life almost completely behind a mask. My friends, family of origin, and my wife and son had no idea who I really was. But the more I tried to force my "gay impulses" down, the stronger they became. Through the help of a good therapist, I realized I had to come to terms with who I really was. Pretending no longer worked for me and I began to wonder if all the people in my life really loved me for me, or if they loved only the image I projected. I knew if I wasn't true to myself, I would die, either by withering up inside and losing my spirit, or at my own hand. Living a lie became an intolerable choice for me.

Coming out was not easy. It entailed going through a very costly and emotionally painful divorce and custody battle. When the conservative company I worked for got wind of my troubles (and the specifics), I lost my job, even though I had been there for four years and until all of this, um, came out, I had been an exemplary employee, with glowing reviews.

Would I go back? Do I have regrets? I think in my darkest hours, I asked myself those questions and then realized they were ridiculous questions. How could I have regrets or go back to living a lie? To do either, I would have to not want to be me. It would be like saying I wish I could change having green eyes or being five feet ten inches tall. Not being gay in the end was not a choice; being straight was not the "right" thing to do, even if, at the time, it caused a lot of pain and heartache to those whom I loved and myself.

Living my life as openly as I do now has been a hard-won battle. I now have the attitude that if people don't accept me for who I am, then I don't need them. As far as the people I loved and whom I feared rejection from, I'm happy to report that all of them, including and especially my ex-wife and son, still love me. And it's a great treasure to know they love me...and not some so-called idealized me.

John (Texas, USA) who is not "out"

I'm single as much by choice as by life circumstances. I live with my 90 year old father who doesn't agree with homosexuals or their political agenda. And I'm a Christian that hasn't figured out how being gay and a Believer should work, so I try not to think about it too much. I live in rural Texas, an hour from San Antonio, an hour from Austin, and couple of hours from Houston. I physically can't bring a boyfriend/lover home to live with me. I know that my dad will eventually die and I'll have the house to myself, but right now things are as they are.

I have some gay friends that I've met on-line and through on-line friends. None of them will ever be more than friends. We get together occasionally for a movie and a meal and just spend time together. But the closest ones are 2 hours away. Don't get to see them as often as I'd like.

I've never done the bar thing. I'm not a drinker and I'm also not into sex just for the sake of sex. I want to date someone, get to know them first and then have sex. But I have done the sex on the first date thing, didn't ever work out for me though, as far as finding someone long term. I have also found and dated

someone that I met on the phone sex line. Long distance dating. I spent a delightful weekend on the River Walk in San Antonio a couple of years ago with someone I met on the phone and at the time it seemed as though we might have a future, as soon as his kids graduated from high school and my dad died and he moved to Texas from Arizona. But not long after San Antonio he quit returning my calls regularly and eventually said 'it' wouldn't work. And right now I'm not looking. In the past I've resigned myself to being alone and making the best of it, then been caught up in the possibilities of loving and living with someone, and then back to making the best of it again.

In real life I want a brain and feelings and romance too. I want to walk hand in hand and look at the stars, talk politics and religion, disagree and make up, not wait at home for my muscle stud to finish at the gym where he spends all his free time.

Will I throw off my self imposed celibacy and live happily ever after? Right now, probably not. Yes, I'm only 45 years old and I fear living alone when I'm old and gray and not having anyone close to take care of and be taken care of. But do I live alone fairly happy, making the best of it, or live with someone just to be not alone? Deep question.

Now if a middle aged gay man ends his relationship and then flounders out in the dating world looking for that replacement, yes, he's probably going to have trouble and disappointments. Gay culture is built on looks and sexual performance, in my view. There are exceptions, probably a lot of exceptions. I don't like being painted with a broad brush by heterosexuals or other gays, and so I shouldn't be doing it here either.

That's me, not all of me, but probably gives you a pretty good idea.

Christian Otto (Germany)

I think my coming out experience is quite untypical. When I look back on my childhood there's no denying that I had a happy one. I always had a close relationship with my parents and my sister. They were always supportive and I could always discuss my problems with them, though I was not always a good boy. :) But nonetheless I took my time to come out even to my family. Not because I was afraid to tell them, but because I needed time to come to terms about my sexuality myself. And I really took my time to do so and was in my early twenties when I finally had my first boyfriend. I then immediately came out to my family. But it was no big surprise for them by then, because they had already suspected that I was gay. I mean I never had a girlfriend in my whole life and I am quite sure too that my secret stash of Playgirl magazines wasn't that much of a secret to my mother. :)

Coming out to my friends was a positive experience, too. They too had already suspected by then and my best friend came out a few years before me, so I could be quite sure that they would have no big problems with me being gay either.

Though I work at my company for over ten years now, I have no close connections to any of my colleagues. That's mainly because I live in a different city and so my work life is naturally separated from my private life. Because I have no close connection to anyone at work, I never found it necessary to come out to my

colleagues. I think it's none of their business. They may suspect that I'm gay, because I'm in my mid-thirties now and not yet married, but I simply don't care and I never had any problems at work as it is.

Now that I'm out do I sometimes wish I could go back into the closet because the world is a cold unfeeling place with a lot of bigots? Nope

Sean Kennedy, author (Perth, Australia)

Coming out is a never-ending process. Books and television may convince you otherwise, but the truth is that that first step out of the closet is just the first of many. Because even though your family and circle of friends may be aware, the wider world does not – unless you're a celebrity who gives an exclusive to a magazine that then gets retold across every media platform in existence. But for normal people, from there on, you will have to make a choice every time you meet someone new whether to break free of the closet or not, and it's important for you to also do it in your own time, when you're ready and comfortable to do so.

There will be situations where you don't feel comfortable or it may not even be safe for you to do so. Sometimes you might just be tired of having to do it again. Because the world's default status is set to a heteronormative one – and most times you will be considered part of that until you say different, or someone asks you otherwise. And sometimes you may make the decision that it's okay for you not to come out to certain people, either for your own safety or sanity.

In essence that means that every time you make a new acquaintance, start a new job, or even meet a new work colleague, you may have to come out all over again. And there's always that flash of worry that comes with it – that this time it may be one of those people. Because you've met them before, and you'll meet them again: those whose acceptance comes with conditions, or even downright dismissal. And it's not like you have to live your life based on their acceptance, but it would make things a hell of a lot easier.

And sometimes you get sucked into that 'easier' option. I had come out to my friends and some of my family by the time I moved to the opposite side of the country for work. It all seemed to be a new start, and one day when the question was posed to me I was unprepared, or taken aback, or tired, or probably everything combined, and I stupidly put myself back in the closet. After that, it all snowballed and the lie continued and I had to keep doing so because it seemed it had been far too long for me to refute it and the window of opportunity was long gone.

So, yeah, 'easier'. All it did was make me even more miserable, because I knew I was lying. It's one thing to be in the closet and never have come out (that comes with its own awful baggage) – it's even worse when you stick yourself back in there. I had great new friends including a great lesbian couple living downstairs from me (who probably knew the truth but were kind enough to never put me on the spot about it) but I still did that to myself.

Obviously I eventually decided to end that. But it serves as an example of how long and complex the coming out process can be. And that's why it can be damaging to hear other people say that it's not such a

big problem these days. Because everybody, and everybody's way of coming out, is different. And you'll be doing it for a bloody long time.

**Ethan Day, author (Missouri, USA) -
Ethan's Coming Out...and Wants the World to Know**

Coming out for me wasn't perhaps the typical angst-fest that it was for many of my peers. Considering the soundtrack to this particular time in my life was Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation, I can safely say there was plenty of gay angst for folks at that time. There were a multitude of reasons for the ease of my introduction to the world as a gay man, a combination of things both external and internal that came together at just the right moment which perhaps made things as simple as they wound up being.

First and foremost, by the time I actually came out I'd already spent years and countless hours of teen-angst trying to convince myself I wasn't the one thing I knew myself to be – something I'd known from a very young age – a big 'ole Mo. Telling myself I didn't really want to sleep with the hot guys on the cover of those magazines, I just wanted to look like them...be them. That was the biggest lie I told myself that I never truly believed – which is saying something considering my imagination is strong and filled with mighty mojo, grasshopper. The reality was Jessie's Girl could go to hell for all I cared, because Rick Springfield had been put on this earth for me to love.

The second component which fell into place happened during my senior year of high school when I met two other gay guys through the part time job I'd had at the time. They were a year or two older than me. Despite the fact I was dating a girl at the time, their gaydar actually worked and they took me under their fairy wings, so to speak. They were quite simply, friends – who never placed any pressure on me yet never hid who they were from me either. They were my bright and shiny beacons, showing me it was okay to be the authentic version of myself. Not only was I not alone, I was quite normal.

Around the time I was entering my own age of gay-quarius, I remembered a conversation I'd had with one of my sisters the year before during the Christmas holiday. She'd been going on about loving me no matter what, that nothing could ever change that. She even mentioned that if I were gay she wouldn't care because she loved me. At the time I wasn't ready to hear such things and subsequently flew off the handle because I WAS NOT gay, mind you...I just wanted to look like the hot guys, remember? A year and a whole lot of perspective later, I realized the conversation really had nothing to do with me. My sister had been feeling me out, trying to decide how I would handle her truth, because she was gay.

The third and final thing was something that was already a part of me. I'd had it all the while and never knew it. This strange steely resolve that gurgled to the surface once I realized I had a support system in place – a group of people I could count on who wouldn't turn and run once my truth came to light. In all fairness, this all conveniently came to fruition as my high school career was coming to a close, so I wasn't exactly the gay second coming running through the halls of Racist High, Missouri screaming, "Kiss my fairy dust, bitches!"

But something had indeed clicked inside me, and I knew I no longer gave a damn who knew I was gay because I no longer cared whether or not I had their approval. It had been the single most liberating conclusion I'd ever come to. It was the very thing that gave me the strength to get up out the pew one

Sunday during yet another hate-sermon and turn to leave. The very thing that gave me the gumption to turn back around after the pastor called me out as I attempted to quietly leave which had me telling him in front of the entire congregation that I thought he was full of it. Believe me when I say there is nothing in this world worth giving up that moment. The price of my freedom was acceptance. And all it took was the knowledge that there were others out there just like me, quite a lot of them as I soon came to discover. They came in all shapes and sizes and in every color of the...well rainbow for lack of a better or less cheesy turn of phrase.

Coming out is a uniquely gay-specific set of circumstances, especially in terms of being a minority, unless you count superheroes. We are alone in our ability to hide the very thing that sets us apart. I've heard people state that fact as if it's some kind of bonus, like we're lucky because many of us can pass. And the best way I can think to describe this *bonus* is for you all to ask yourselves to remember a time when you've done something you knew to be wrong. The way it ate at you, maybe even still eats at you years later even though you did your best to fix that mistake at the time. That feeling, the sinking pit in your chest and stomach is what it feels like for gay people who live in the closet. At least that's what it felt like to me all those years ago when I was the one pretending.

It's true that we alone can build a wall of self-loathing and live our lives as if we are another. For those who choose to hide, I bear you no ill will for I believe it's your life to live as you see fit. It does however make me sad...for the things you miss and for the self-imposed burden you feel you have to carry. And to anyone out there who's struggling, I promise you that despite your background and no matter your upbringing there is nothing wrong with you and you most definitely are not alone. You've got family the world over.

Batboy 126 (Ontario, Canada)

I must admit I don't have any exciting or poignant coming out stories to share. It wasn't overly traumatic in my case, except in the sense that I had to discuss something indirectly related to sex with my parents.

What did occur to me is the way coming out is an ongoing process. The decision to reveal oneself isn't made once, then it's over with.

For someone who isn't 'obvious,' the ability to blend in makes coming out a conscious choice which can present itself many times a day. Every time you reach the point where a new acquaintance would customarily find out personal details about your life, the decision is made again. Innocuous questions like "Are you married?" or "Do you have a girlfriend?" are the line in the sand. That sounds overly dramatic, but answering honestly means bracing yourself, if only a little, for a less than positive reaction. There's always the choice of simply saying "Nope, no girlfriend" and leaving it at that, or of elaborating. The former can make life easier, but can start to feel like hiding.

Even total strangers are part of the process. I'm more uneasy than I should be about PDA's (public displays of affection). Every one of them is another, tiny coming out -- usually to people who couldn't care less what you do on the street or in an airport, but again, you never know for sure.

There's even a process of coming out to ourselves, which is also, except for the most ostentatiously evolved and self-assured of us, a work in progress. Acknowledging the fact of being gay is only one step; there are layers of resistance most of us have to overcome, different for each. It's not always as blatant as the young man I've encountered in fiction who, at one time in his life, feels he's not actually gay, not really, truly gay, because he doesn't do X sex act, participate in Y social pursuit, or enjoy Z form of entertainment. It can be as simple as taking a little too much pride in the fact that strangers never guess you're gay until you tell them. It can be a certain embarrassment with any aspect of yourself which could be called conventionally feminine. I'm still working on that one.

Since this site deals with popular fiction, let me mention some examples of this kind of thing which rang fairly true for me.

1. David Fisher of *Six Feet Under* is a very true to life example of a sometimes conflicted gay man. One episode shows him meeting and impressing a group of colleagues at a convention, enjoying their respect, and doing his best to postpone the time they find out he is gay and, quite possibly, withdraw their admiration. In another, a vacation with his boyfriend is spoiled because David keeps imagining how the straight guests at his hotel might perceive him. David's partner Keith is a wonderful example of a gay man who, while largely self-accepting, has trouble letting himself be perceived as gay.
2. Justin Suarez, the gay teenager in *Ugly Betty*, rationalizing his way around his first same-sex attraction, then hesitating to finally declare himself even to his overwhelmingly accepting family, simply because he doesn't know what it might change.
3. Josh Lanyon's character *Adrien English*, encountering a couple of redneck cops who ask if he's "one of those funny boys," notes what a struggle it can be for even the most 'out' gay man to answer that question honestly and with equanimity. (My SO would have answered, "Funny? I'm fucking hilarious!" But the question would give most of us a moment's pause.)
4. Kevin Walker of *Brothers & Sisters*, who's out privately and at work, and actively defends gay rights, yet is disturbed and angry when his date tries to kiss him in a public place.
5. *Breakfast With Scot* was a great novel about a 'straight acting' male couple who end up caring for a flamboyantly effeminate 10-year-old boy named Scot, and how this affects their self-perception. The movie version focused on one of the men, Eric, a sportscaster and former hockey player. Although Eric is technically out, and openly living with a male partner, he unconsciously takes refuge in his jock reputation. He's embarrassed and uncomfortable about what Scot represents to him. Although comical, Eric's journey through multiple layers of denial is something many of us can identify with.

Ozakie Knotts (Swansea, South Carolina, USA)

I knew I was gay since the age of five. I know for some people that seems like an impossibility but it's true. I was very much aware even at that young age that something was "different" about me. Once I became self-aware of this knowledge of myself, I spent the majority of my childhood and well into my adolescence in complete denial of my homosexuality. Always an avid reader, I read in a health periodical that homosexuality was a phase that one can grow out of. When I reached the end of puberty, I waited for the day when I would wake up and just be heterosexual. I guess I'm still waiting (lol).

I decided to officially "come out" on my twenty-first birthday, at the moment of midnight. The reason is because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in denial of what feels natural to me as breathing. I

wanted to experience kissing someone and feeling butterflies in my belly. I wanted to feel the heady rush of being in love. Kissing and holding hands with the person you love. All of the activities that many heterosexuals really took for granted.

I believe “coming out” is truly a process. First, you have to be comfortable with it because once you proclaim “I am gay”, there is no turning back. For me, at the stroke of midnight on the eve of my birthday, I stood in front of my mirror, stared back at my reflection, and repeated the phrase until it became like a mantra: “I am gay. I am gay. I am gay.” I remember silently crying, not because of sadness, but release. It was relief to truly say who I really was. I felt no more trepidation or fear. Of course, I had heard the horror stories of families turning their backs on members of their family who came out to them. I felt that if my family truly loved me, they would accept me for who I was.

I remember counting to ten and going to my mother’s room. She was lying in bed and I sat down beside her. “Mom, we have to talk. I have something to tell you.” She had a look on her face that reflected calm when she said: “Whatever it is, I will always love you.” I said, “Mom, I am gay.” My mother said what I believe many mothers of gay children have said probably since the beginning of time: “I already know. I was just waiting for you to tell me.” My mother didn’t really have any concerns about me coming out. The only thing she asked me was if I was having safe sex (lol). I told her she didn’t need to worry – that I was having safe sex whenever I did have sex (sorry my sex life is not the riveting plot of m/m stories, but such is life..lol) After I told her, she suggested that I tell my sisters as well. When I sat them down and told them that I was gay, both of their reactions were like: “That’s it? We were expecting something horrible.” LOL.

I can truly say that my experience was an overwhelmingly positive one. I am very blessed because it could have been the other way around.