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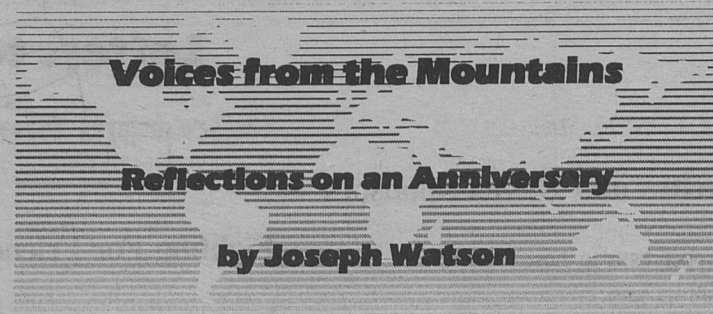
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I was recently startled to realize that the fifth anniversary of my "coming out" had come and gone last October and I didn't notice. This anniversary has gotten me thinking, and I'd like to humbly share some of my thoughts.

As I thought about this five year mark, I realized that the fifteen year journey I've been on since I turned eighteen can be neatly divided into three five-year legs. From eighteen to twenty-two, I had no clue that I was Gay. Sure, I liked to look at fit men's bodies, but I told myself that this was just because I wanted to be like them. I'd grown up in a conservative, Bible-believing church and everything I'd been taught about homosexuality didn't fit me. I was taught that homosexuals were depraved and selfish ruiners of society, and since I was none of those things, it never occurred to me that I could be Gay. I'd been taught that homosexuals would burn in hell, and since I felt that God loved me and I was going to heaven, I wasn't Gay.

I didn't know that what I was taught as a child was wrong. I also didn't know any Gay people. They didn't exist in my circles, so I had no real-life examples to which to compare myself.

Looking back now, I realize that I worked with a few older Gay people when I was in high school. Because they never talked about it openly, and since I wasn't worldly enough to understand their subtleties, I remained clueless for five years.

When I was twenty-two, I was clued in by a college friend who told me that he was Gay and that he thought I was as well. In fact, he hoped I was. I told him I wasn't, and when I said so, I believed it. But as time went by and I thought about it I realized he was right; I was Gay. I wanted to talk to him about it, but it was too late because he'd gone home to Venezuela.

With nowhere else to turn, I got out my Bible, did a lot of praying, and even wrote a letter to Billy Graham for advice. These channels convinced me that I had to deny my true nature. I likened my attraction to men to that of a pedophile's to children, thinking it was my moral duty to live a celibate life in order to remain sinless.

From twenty-two to twenty-seven, I lived in this state of denial, and it wasn't easy. I was extremely lonely, not fitting in anywhere and not able to be truly honest about myself with anyone. I slowly grew distant from my family, and I began to resent God and the church. I felt distant from even my closest friends, and towards the end of that five year period, I sometimes seriously considered killing myself.

Thankfully, I was then enlightened by three key people. The first, a waiter in the restaurant where I worked (thank you, David), was proud to be an openly Gay man. He was also a good-hearted, honest, caring person, and I saw nothing wrong with being like him. Indeed, I saw a great deal right about being like him.

The second was the minister of the church I was attending (thank you, Sidney), who preached the word of God using the good sense God gave him to interpret it. I don't recall that he ever mentioned anything about homosexuality from the pulpit, but his sermons got me thinking about my relationship with my Creator. I realized that God wouldn't create me homosexual and then tell me it was wrong. Further, I realized my desire for intimacy with men is nothing like a pedophile's desire,

because pedophiles prey on their victims. My seeking out and finding a loving relationship with a peer wouldn't create victims, but rather could bring fulfillment to us both.

I read *On Being Gay* by Brian McNaught and learned how the Bible has been misinterpreted, and that the original texts do not condemn homosexuality at all. I realized then that homosexuality is morally neutral — neither good nor bad, just natural. These revelations awakened my spirit and I began to have some hope for the future.

The third person, an openly Gay man who had become a friend, gave me the last incentive I needed by being so cute (thanks, Rob). It was worth the risk to tell him I was very attracted to him. I hoped he would consider dating, so I told him I was realizing I was Gay and that I was interested in him. Although he wasn't interested in me, it all worked out in the end. Because telling him seemed so right, I began to tell everyone.

Without even having kissed a man before, I came out to my friends, co-workers, fellow volunteers, and family. Suddenly it was all sorted out; it all fit, and I knew it was right. Almost everyone I told was accepting, and I'm better off without the few that weren't. My relationships with my friends and family have become more deep and honest, and I'm happier today than I ever imagined was possible.

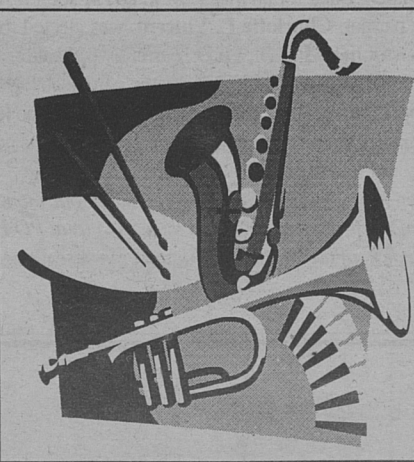
So why do I think this story of three five-year segments is worth telling? Because I feel we can all learn something from each other's experiences. Because those who aren't out yet need to know that it's worth the risk.

Yes, it's sometimes trying, even dangerous, to be out. Daily, being out takes energy that could go into other things, yet it takes less energy than is taken by hiding our true selves. Every day I've spent in the last five years has been happier than any day I spent in the previous twenty-seven. Accepting yourself and letting everyone know it is the most worthwhile and satisfying thing you can possibly do for yourself. You're worth the effort, and it's never too late to start fresh.

I've never heard anyone say that they wished they'd never come out. That's because everyone who has come out knows it's the road to happiness. Also, those of us who are "out" need to remember every day that it's worth the trouble. We know that nothing can make us as happy as self-acceptance does, even when it comes at a price. We must remember that anyone we're talking to could be clueless, or in a state of denial like I was, or worse, could be oppressing someone who is. By letting that person know that it's possible to be homosexual and happy, we encourage their progress towards self-acceptance and the acceptance of others. The most important thing we can do is to be seen and heard as ourselves, not as an edited version of ourselves.

Perhaps I forgot my "anniversary" because it no longer really matters now that I'm past that hurdle. It's interesting for me looking back on these five year stretches, seeing how they create a symmetry that I will now shatter, growing older as an openly Gay man. ▼

Note: Joseph Watson was the lead producer of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force's video, "The Freedom to Marry: A Green Mountain View." Copies are available for \$15 each by writing to VFTMTF, PO Box 1312, Middlebury VT 05753.



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