

**Matt Richards**

## **A Reflection on Lost Histories**

### **I. First Movements**

My sexuality really has influenced almost everything that matters to me because it was the first experience in which no one could tell me what I was supposed to do. There was no vocabulary for my experience, no trusted confidant, no cultural clearings to inhabit. Consequently this is really a story about the search for a vocabulary that gives voice to personal experience. It is about recovering an identity that has always existed, my finding a community that is still sometimes hidden, and in the process learning to love myself. There is a difference between keeping a secret, concealing a fact, perpetuating a deception and actually feeling that one is the kept secret, the concealed fact, the perpetuated deception. I suspect that, at times, we all feel unknowable and irredeemable. However, in my case, this has been a way of life—a persistent never ending anxiety about never being fully known, even by the ones I love the most who think they know me the best. It really is hard to convey in words the damage that does to a person especially when it is coupled with the seemingly universal human need for recognition. This almost obsessive need to be understood, to be loved beyond all conditions, to have your depths acknowledged, is what makes the phenomenon of a kept secret so damaging. Living as deception requires that the entire generous process of funneling forth into the world is stunted. One is only left with the feeling of not being seen, of living in misunderstanding, and I had to ignore that call for recognition for many years. I have found that there is a price to pay for that—after so many years of avoiding recognition it is difficult to finally ask for it.

My earliest memory of explicitly confronting homosexuality is of watching “Philadelphia” with my mother. All I recall now about that first viewing are the purple splotches that dotted Tom Hank’s body as he slowly wasted away with AIDS. He breathes heavily through his oxygen mask and his partner slowly slides down a hospital wall into a fetal clump on the shiny, cold floor. At the time, I believed that all gay men would inevitably contract HIV and that I, like Tom Hanks’ character, would end up in a hospital bed painfully scrounging for breath. As the movie progressed, I recall my little ten year-old heart rattling in my chest as I slowly processed what would inevitably unfold for Tom’s character, and I thought, probably for me.

I recall nervously returning to my room and then with my heart again beating through my chest, approaching my mother in the kitchen. She stood with her floral kitchen apron as she chopped at the cutting board. This is an image of my mother that will always stay with me. I nervously propped myself up against the door seal, “Mom, I have something to ask you about that movie.” She looked up. “Sometimes when I see men undressed, I want to see more.” She stopped cutting and really without a pause replied, “Well honey . . . It’s very normal for boys and girls to feel that way growing up. Sometimes that goes away and sometimes it doesn’t but either way you know Daddy and I love you. And you can always talk to me if you are worrying about that. Please don’t worry though.”

This confession was really only a pseudo-disclosure. It would be seven more years before I would finally and permanently “come out.” In the meantime, I adopted my mother’s wait and see approach. Although I had shared this very private feeling with her, I grasped that it would be totally impractical to be gay and in middle school. I didn’t know anyone gay. All of my male friends were interested in girls, so I figured I

better get interested too. I tried dating but I always wanted to talk, or read books together, or flip through magazines. I had absolutely no sexual interest in women. On the Kinsey scale, I was a 6 (0-6 scale where zero is exclusively heterosexual and 6 exclusively homosexual.) Further, I felt humiliated when two girls I had “dated” confessed to one another the very minimal intimate encounters we had shared. I felt betrayed and exposed and their innocent laughter made me feel impotent and powerless. All the while my fantasies of boys and curiosity about my sexuality were expanding. I felt trapped.

Around the same time, my homosexuality crossed explicit paths with fundamentalist Christianity through the intrusions of the father of one of my younger brother’s friends. Bradley, my brother, had informed me that his friend Brian was no longer allowed over to our house because his father thought I was a homosexual and would molest him. I felt flushed with panic. Not only did my brother now think I could be gay but his friends would smirk and laugh when they came over. I felt humiliated. Brian’s father invited me over to his house for Bible study and to go to youth group. He was clearly trying to reprogram me for Jesus. What a noble cause. I hated him, his church, and his stupid Bible study but at the same time I so badly wanted him to like me that I consented. It makes me sick to my stomach remembering how badly I wanted him to like me and intuiting the only way he ever would was if I believed exactly what he did and became exactly what he wanted me to be. Even then, I would be just one more notch in his belt, another saved soul to inflate his already substantial ego. My hatred of fundamentalists started with Brian’s dad. He had laid bare the shallow narcissistic psychology of fashioning God and others in one’s own image, in accordance with one’s own plans.

Growing up a gay boy in the American south made me especially attentive to the promise and closeness of violence. The rigidity of gender norms, the public position of a wrathful God, and racism are deeply woven into the cultural cloth. I knew the land kept dark secrets. I had seen the slave deeds my distant family had once held. If that was possible, then what violence might come for me? I never felt “southern” if that phrase really means anything. It represented something alien and barbaric to me. This world of the “Old South” always became very apparent when I would spend the summers in my grandmother’s marshy coastal North Carolina hometown. The little boys I played with would get beaten if they weren’t home by 6pm and I remember being scared of the nearly toothless truck drivers that watched Nascar down at the General Store where confederate flags proudly flapped in the breeze. My grandmother’s adult male friends would correct my brother and I if we didn’t shake their hands firmly enough—the implication of a weak handshake was implied but never stated.. This was very different from the progressive university town in central North Carolina where I was being raised.

I rarely felt safe but one place that to this day reminds me of the rare comfort of security was laying at night in my bed in the room that my brother and I shared. Large streetlights loomed about twenty feet from our window and would ever so faintly light our room. So I imagine that as I stared into the darkness and tried to trace those silvery splotches they represented something like that unfolding mystery inside. I would imagine distant worlds and better times. I felt called to a place where there were no suitable answers, no established rites or directions, a place that elicited both terror and excitement. The excitement of a rising sexuality that exults in what is both hidden and forbidden. That revels in the freedom to entertain what the outside world cannot know and will not ask. That bedroom is where I became a dreamer.

I look back on those days and so badly want to whisper into that little boys ear. To just crouch beside his bed for a second and whisper something through the darkness that he might hear in a dream. To remind him

that everything will turn out okay in the end. But, he didn't know enough then and he still stays with me. Occasionally it helps me to imagine that I can still help now—or at least other boys and girls like him. I want to promise him that one-day from a place of wholeness and safety, he will look down on this night and see possibility. He will tell a story that begins in this very room and he will decide how it unfolds. But as one of my favorite gay writers Paul Monette presciently notes, “by the time you realize who the real deviants are—the homophobes-- your childhood is over.”

## II. Intimations Pursued

I first read “Stranger at the Gate: To be Gay and Christian in America” at a bookstore in Oak Park, IL when I was 17. A few short years prior, my family had “moved North” to follow my dad's job. Oak Park represented something like a liberal suburban enclave for me (yes, they do exist!) and one thing I learned was that no matter how “conservative” or anti-intellectual the context, a bookstore was generally the safest place to be. I have always trusted people who love books. Borders was the place where I began searching for the lost language of my identity. I would nervously flip through the pages of a gay magazine for teenagers called XY hoping no one would notice and then eventually mustered the internal fortitude to actually sit in front of the gay studies shelf. Actually, I would sit between gay studies and psychology and when I thought no one was looking would blindly grab books off of the gay studies shelf.

I can still remember how fast my heart would beat. I was filled with a shame and anxiety that wasn't tethered to anything specific. I just wanted to be unnoticed, left alone, and I would look up at those books. Freedom came to represent grabbing them freely without shame, maybe even taking one to a cashier to purchase if I dared. It would take a long time before I could do either of these seemingly innocuous things. I think the most powerful sign of oppression is when a person has so internalized the violent prescriptions of their cultural moment, that they police themselves or deny themselves the freedom to explore possibilities that are their birthright. For me, this is perfectly captured in the image of my little teenage self, so anxious, so self-conscious, and nearly broken that I cannot reach for a book that is three feet away from my hand.

I felt at times both excited with intrigue and uncomfortable with the sexual frankness that often spilled forth from the pages of these books. You see, to be gay and a teenager in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century does not require a knowledge, interest, or experience with gay sex. I had never had sex with anyone, was not particularly interested in it, and wasn't aware—as apparently most of my gay friends have since informed me—that there were all sorts of online venues for meeting other gay teenagers. I was more interested in finding a vocabulary that explained the feeling of unaccounted for difference that had enveloped my self-understanding, as far back as I had memories. I, of course, recalled the tingling rush of sensation that danced across my body the first time I had a crush when I was 7. So, in a strict sense, I knew I was gay. But, I mostly accepted this as a biological fact. What became more difficult was understanding how one chooses to embrace this fact and construct a meaningful identity around it.

One day I blindly grabbed “Stranger at the Gate: To be Gay and Christian in America.” I wasn't a Christian. In fact, I was a militant seventeen year-old atheist and yet I felt drawn in by the blurbs on the back of the book. My anachronistic interest in Christianity really began with this book. It tells the true story of a prominent Christian author, professor, and filmmaker named Mel White who struggles with his sexuality for forty years before finally coming out. It tells of shock therapies, furtive sexual encounters, years of suicide attempts, and finally reaches its apogee at a last failed suicide attempt. This last attempt at

ending the mystery of his identity—which is really the mystery of being at all--includes the indelible image of Mel standing on the edge of a bridge prepared to jump to his death. Yet, the silence is penetrated by the voice of an old fisherman, futilely casting his line in the middle of a nighttime summer rainstorm:

“Late one desperate night, I decided that I would jump off the bridge that connected Fox Island to Gig Harbor. I wrote suicide notes to my wife, to my children, and to Thomas. It was raining and cold. I had walked and cried and written most of the day. As I climbed over the railing of the bridge, I heard a voice say, ‘It’s a mean night for fishing, but come on down and we’ll talk.’ When my eyes finally focused against the darkness and the rain, I saw an old fisherman sitting under a bridge abutment waiting patiently for his first bite. ‘Don’t know why I chose tonight to fish,’ he said, shaking his head and trying to light his pipe. In my heart, I knew why. I don’t understand why some people die and others live. I can’t make sense of evil in the universe and why some suffer endlessly while others live in luxury and ease. But don’t ever try to convince me that our Creator doesn’t care, for that night I knew that God was there sitting on the bridge beside me holding a fishing rod in his hand and an unlit pipe in the other” (Mel White, 174.)

I experienced the story as redemption—as the promise that God always returns to us. I suppose I too felt that I stood on something like the edge of a bridge and I longed for a voice of concern to penetrate the nighttime air. I was struck that we occupy one little forgettable (but miraculous) planet in a cosmos filled with billions of stars and yet I felt with certainty that the divine love saved Mel on that night as I hoped it might save me. That this little star and this little man was not too little for the force behind everything to rescue him took my breath away. I didn’t realize my need for God until I was honest with myself about the depth of the need for recognition and love.

Despite all of my brokenness, my feelings of ugliness, and a staggering self-consciousness, I felt with certainty that God loved me when I read those words. And, in hindsight, I think that might have been the first time I actually believed that. God was the response to the need for complete recognition, acceptance, and love before the Other that I encountered in the figure of Christ giving his/her body and imagination to a broken world. What I saw and continue to see in the crucified Christ, is the openness of a body to those who have maimed it. It is really a posture of openness towards what is other, mysterious, and ultimately unknowable. I was scared of the world and sometimes hiding before bookshelves but I couldn’t help but be amazed by the symbolic significance of remaining open and committed to a world that has battered and sought to erase you from its memory. The cross made me want to be open and courageous.

### **III. Two steps forward, one step back**

In some sense, I hesitate to share this last movement in my spiritual chapter. It interrupts the progressive narrative towards liberation that I would like to tell. For me, it seems in retrospect like a step backward. And yet, in our times, I feel like gay people are often compelled to pretend like things are better than they actually are. We are not honest about how badly our culture has damaged us or the ones we love. I trust you all enough to say honestly, that this culture and church has damaged me. I feel very uncomfortable with the fact that I joined an evangelical church that I knew loathed people like myself just when I was starting to get my life in order. It reminds me of how desperately I still wanted to compromise my own identity so that others might disapprove of me less.

During my senior year of high school after having “come out,” I became involved in Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL—one of America’s original “mega-churches” and a leader in the seeker-sensitive evangelical movement. It is difficult now to understand why I felt compelled to become involved in a church that I knew held theological views that were quite contrary to my emerging sensibilities. High church liturgy and psalms were replaced with contemporary Christian music, a talented theatre troupe, sophisticated use of multi-media technology, and sermons that addressed many of the cultural questions I was thinking about. Strangely, I think I found the corporate feel of the space to be comforting in the way that a trip to a large shopping mall during the quiet of a day off can be relaxing.

I recall sitting in church one day before the service had begun and was thumbing through a church pamphlet. I noticed a program called "A Safe Place" with an extension listed. The next day I called Willow and left a message for the leader of the program. A gentleman called me back and explained the basic premise of the program--that it was a support group for people "struggling" with same sex intimacy. I explained that I was perfectly content with my sexuality but was curious to meet with him and have a more in depth conversation about Willow Creek’s position on the issue. He was initially uncomfortable with the idea of meeting with me because we had already implicitly come to the understanding that we held different views on the matter. He explained that they met in a “private location” (think Dick Cheney) and that the program assured total confidentiality. Many of the men who attended the group were apparently married to women in the church and had children. This group functioned to support them in “battling their sexual desires” as they continued to live out their “heterosexual” identities. I promised discretion and eventually he agreed to meet me for an early dinner the following week.

Upon meeting Mike, I was struck by this soft-spoken man’s timidity. He spoke in a very programmed fashion—as if he were reading from some literature that he didn’t agree with. There was a palpable distance between his words and his commitment to them. The shaking in his voice reminded me of all the forgotten men in Mel White’s book. I thought of the silent man who steps off of the train platform in front of the moving train, or the young choir soloist who cuts off his testicles and spends the rest of his life in a sanitarium. I think of these men always and I suppose I am always looking for them. They are the begging eyes on the street or the boys who left town, or the uncle who is never mentioned. When I think of them, I think of their shaking hands and a halting voice. Not the authoritative voice of God filling the void of Genesis 1 but a human voice still learning the difference between making a demand and asking a question.

It became clear as we spoke that this gentleman was not "cured" of his sexuality but was instead a man primarily attracted to other men who had entered into a relationship with a woman. They had two children and it was clear in talking to him that he was not sexually attracted to her (he conceded this) but attracted to the unconditional love she offered him that he apparently struggled to find in the gay community. He confessed to various marital infidelities—which he brought up to me without my inquiring as I recall—including a two week business trip in Asia filled with various indiscretions that assuredly compromised his wife's own health. His conflictedness, tension, and sadness almost rose above him like an aura of light. He seemed to deeply love his wife and simultaneously seemed so broken--he was grateful that she would love him despite his homosexuality, which he perceived to be an intrinsic flaw. I felt weighted down talking to him. I knew that if this was the way to be a gay man in a relationship with Jesus, then I could not enter into that relationship. I would die alone, broken, and folded in upon myself feeding on whatever husk was left.

The more I explored Willow, the more I realized that “ex-gays,” and heterosexual Christians with gay relatives were everywhere throughout the leadership. The church had a way of pretending like they were discussing homosexuality in a sympathetic way but the conclusions were always stacked in the reactionary anti-gay corner. They would have a “coffee-house discussion” about the topic and then would have an “ex-gay” person do “pro-gay” and “traditional” interpretations of the handful of relevant scriptural references. Whenever, Richard, a particular “ex-gay” leader would do the pro-gay interpretation he would put on this ridiculous French artisan hat—which he thought was quite funny. I agreed it was sort of darkly funny to watch a man who is as stereotypically gay as Liberace performatively enact a cartoon of the life he so wishes he had the courage to pursue. Sublimation indeed.

At the same time, in those moments I understood rage and hatred. I felt it within myself. I wanted to batter this charlatan—to dominate him and make him look stupid in front of everyone. Afterwards, I not so generously confronted him. He couldn’t look me in the eyes and sort of nervously stammered, occasionally uttering some meaningless platitude when I asked him to explain Genesis 19 to me in the light of Matthew 10. One learns later that becoming a man—or better an adult—has nothing to do with a particular sexual identity but instead rising to meet the challenge of your own life and chasing after your own stars. However, there was no need to try to humiliate him. Those are the moments where I still feel my weakness, my inability to open myself to the suffering of another who is only very transparently, an “enemy.” I still feel like rage is good for the soul, as Paul Monette says, “it keeps the blood moving” but it doesn’t fit into my picture of Jesus and the ideal which his life birthed into being. In those moments, I struggle with how to be a Christian. I struggle with understanding what lies between passivity and meanness. How does the principle of justice inform the confrontation with lies? Is it enough to hate someone less than they hate you?

I have no comforting conclusions on this question. I continue to learn that I have more anger towards the church than I ever realized. There are people who I still probably hate. And yet every Sunday morning I find myself sitting in the pews of St. Paul’s United Church of Christ. Communion has taken on a special meaning for me. I watch the bread break as if in slow motion, it’s two halves coming apart and then back together again. Rewind, fast forward, over and over in my mind. At first, I couldn’t understand why this image continued to return to my thoughts. I feel the pain of a body broken over and over again. Sometimes I linger on that pain. Yet, I am always moved to tears that it remains open to us. I take great faith in the fact that what is broken becomes whole again in a different way. And little by little, every Sunday, I find the voices of the past in my head finally getting so quiet that one day I think they will leave forever. I hope I won’t even notice when they do.