

Homophobia: An Autoethnographic Story

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This article is an autoethnographic account of one person's struggle with homophobia. It chronicles the experiences and internal battle of the author as she struggles to understand and be accepting of homosexuality. The author identifies and discusses messages received, in early childhood and adulthood, as it relates to homosexuality and gender. These messages encompass religious ideology, as well as family and community beliefs toward gay/lesbian individuals. Key words: Homophobe, Homophobia, Homosexuality, Gender, and Gay/Lesbian

I have deemed the following personal account an autoethnography. My hope is to present the reader with a detailed description of my experiences as they relate to homosexuality. I use the autoethnographic style of writing posited by Ellis and Bochner (2000). My intent is to provide the reader with an autobiographical story "that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). I intend to incorporate both the societal and cultural aspects of my overall experience of homophobia as I delve into my own cognitive processes and emotions. I hope that by reading my story others will be able to explore their own biases and prejudices, and how those define your character in today's society.

"Hi, My Name is Sham and I am a [Recovering] Homophobe..." I grew up in a tiny rural town in central Mississippi. My neighborhood was primarily composed of extended family, all of whom were descendants of either my paternal grandfather or his half sister. Families in this area were all working class and several, including my immediate family, were barely making ends meet. We attended a nearby Missionary Baptist church. Looking back I would classify my youth as a "liberal upbringing." However, many of the messages I received about homosexuality were in contrast to that idea.

Being a Black person from the deep south, it's understood you grow up following either one of two paths. Either you are the "church-going, try to live right" type of person, or you are the person everyone around you looks at and deems a "good-for-nothing thug" type, the kind of person that is never really going to amount to much and is probably living on borrowed time. That is it. There is very little, if any, room in the Black community for someone who does not choose one of the aforementioned paths in life; at least it was that way in my little community. Homosexuality was simply not a part of our worldview. And on the few occasions it did come up, it was made clear fairly quickly that it was not a desirable or acceptable trait.

My first memories related to understanding homosexuality center around jokes. My family members and friends often made fun of men who did not exhibit stereotypical masculine characteristics and behaviors. I can recall my cousin (who lived with us) dating a guy, who was very feminine or "sweet", as we called him. His mannerisms were

ideally what you would expect from a woman. There were many jokes at his expense, in the absence of my cousin of course. From being exposed to the ridicule of others, I learned (1) that homosexuality or “homosexual behaviors” are not socially acceptable, and from the content of the jokes, (2) that homosexuality is wrong in general. Other than the limited exposure of this type, I never gave much thought to homosexuality as a way of life. Then, in the early 80’s, you did not see the freedom of exposing alternative lifestyles as you do today with mass media and other forms of entertainment.

It was not until 1993, my third year of college, that homosexuality became more of an issue in my life. I attended a university in southern Mississippi, only an hour and a half from where I grew up. Although this was a much larger town, it would still be considered rural for all intents and purposes. During the early years of my college education, I attended a predominantly Black Missionary Baptist church near the university. Seeing a white face in the congregation or pulpit was not a strange occurrence here and unlike the church I grew up in, this church doctrine spoke out regularly against homosexuality. I was taught that homosexuality, just like a crack addiction or a demon possession, was nothing more than a spirit that a person had been overcome by and that person could choose to give in to this spirit or to fight it.

This idea did not sound strange to me at all because we (church members) often referred to many things as “that’s just a spirit” and making a statement like that related to homosexuality was scripturally sound (meaning it could be found or backed up in the bible). The primary message I received from church was not to reject individuals who were gay or lesbian, but instead, in knowing one, try to help them by being a Christian witness and by helping them understand that this was not something they had to accept and give in to. Although, personally I was still very unclear about many of the nuances of homosexuality, I found comfort and peace in believing what I was being taught in church and trying to live my life accordingly. After all, the views of the church seem to coincide with the popular view of society. I remember television shows being taken off the air because of homosexual storylines, people protesting community parades in which homosexual organizations marched, and individuals being harassed and beaten because of their sexual preferences. With all this going on, it was very easy for me to not question what at the time seemed to be the dominant view.

While an undergraduate, on the few occasions I recall that I was in the company of individuals, who were openly homosexual, and I remember feeling very uncomfortable. I was mostly exposed to feminine-acting men, who were members of the campus gay and lesbian organizations, whom I would see in the student center or cafeteria or class. I remember staring a lot, as if I expected them to somehow transform from the person, who stood before me to some sort of strange creature. Although, as a Christian I knew I had a responsibility to witness (talk about the ways of Christ) to them, I would keep my distance as if they possessed some sort of contagious disease that would leap from them to me if I got too close.

And then there was the day of the church play... A girl (I will refer to as Sally), who lived down the hall from me, in my dormitory, was the main character in the play. She was an extremely intelligent person and clearly very beautiful. Sally’s role in the play was that of a girl, who was actively having sex with her boyfriend and at the same time having sexual feeling towards her best friend (a girl). This play was one of many performances that the Young Adult Ministry (the college students) would put on at the

church during youth week. It was designed to demonstrate how you could respond in a situation in which you had a friend confiding in you with similar issues of fornication and impure thoughts. I attended the play that night anxiously awaiting the performances of my friends and associates, not really knowing what the content was before I arrived.

Everything was going great when Sally began crying uncontrollably. She had just completed the segment of the play in which she admitted to having sexual feelings for her friend. Initially, we all thought it was part of the play because the other actors kept going, and I remember commenting to the person sitting next to me, "Boy, she is really into it." Soon the other performers and we realized the script of the play had ceased and Sally was crying for real. Then she proceeded to begin to testify to the entire congregation that the script in this play was representative of her own life. Sally went into detail about how she had been fornicating with her boyfriend and at the same time was having feeling for her roommate.

I remember sitting there in total shock, thinking "she lives down the hall from me," "I see her every night at the library," "but her boyfriend is so gorgeous," "but she's so pretty," and so on and so forth. The random thoughts were just flooding my mind. I could not believe what I was hearing. Then, when my shock subsided, I began to feel very sorry for Sally, even to the point that I cried with her. As I expected, the church embraced her and offered its helping hand. After the ordeal was over, there was an altar call for prayer, in which Sally was one of the people, who volunteered to pray with others, although still crying herself from what had just happened. I remember not really feeling like I needed prayer for anything specific, but at the same time feeling that I needed to go to the front. I watched as many went down for prayer, all walking toward other volunteers and not Sally. So I made up my mind and went down the aisle, headed straight in Sally's direction. I'll never forget the look on her face when I reached out my hands to pray with her. It was almost like she said "thank you," even though she never spoke other than to pray with me and give me a long hard hug before I walked back to my seat. I would not have described myself as a homophobe then, but other than my experience with Sally, I steered clear of anyone I could associate with same-sex relations. Steering clear always seemed like the right thing to do, and besides I always carried the fear of association.

And then there was a turning point in my life... After I received my bachelor's degree in 1995, I got a job at a local community mental health agency. I had stopped attending the church I had attended practically throughout my entire undergraduate experience, but I still upheld the ideals gained during that time in my life. It was at this mental health agency that I first met Jen. Jen, who was a 30-something children's clinician, was also a lesbian. Jen had just moved to Mississippi from Alaska with her girlfriend. Upon arrival in this new city Jen's girlfriend immediately left the relationship with no warning to Jen. When I first heard Jen's story she was severely depressed, taking medication, and hardly sleeping. Not to mention she was now all alone in a new place with only her job as a social outlet. I think it would be fair to liken Jen to what I have always called the "underdog," someone who does not seem to have a chance in the world of a good outcome. I have always been drawn to the underdogs of the world and it was no different with Jen.

I was fascinated with her story and eager to befriend her for my own selfish reasons. For the first time in my life I started to question the things I had been taught

about homosexuality, and I saw Jen as a way to learn all I ever wanted to about this forbidden lifestyle. I began to see more freedom of expression within my own community as well. It seemed everywhere. I turned someone was standing up professing their pride in their homosexual way of life. I viewed Jen as someone, who could answer all my questions and enlighten me to this unusual way of life that had been the subject of so much controversy in my past. Besides all that, I liked her. She was a really nice lady, going through a very difficult time and if I could help in any way, I wanted to. But my curiosity and my kindness both backfired on me.

I made every effort to grow closer to Jen as a friend. It broke my heart to see her cry at work or to have to help her sneak into the faculty lounge in the middle of the day to take a nap because she had hardly slept the night before. All the while, I was taking advantage of the opportunity to learn all I could about this thing called homosexuality. Jen openly shared intimate details of her life with me. Maybe her need to get some things off her chest was just as strong as my desire to learn about her way of life. So, Jen and I became fast friends, and at the same time I learned enough about homosexuality to form the independent opinion that “hey, it’s not that big of a deal.”

Then, much to my dismay, I accidentally discovered that other employees in our office believed me to be a lesbian simply because of my friendship and interest in Jen. I was devastated at this discovery. My fears had come to life. I could not believe that people would mistake my kindness, to a person obviously in need, as some sort of sexual come on. And although, I never confirmed it, I believe these rumors were nurtured by Jen herself. I was hurt. I was outraged. I was angry. And I directed all these emotions not in the direction of Jen or my fellow co-workers, but towards homosexuality itself. What was once honest curiosity became hatred. I had been marked just as the slaves that were branded before they were sold on the auctioning block. I was no longer “Sham,” now I was “Sham, the possible lesbian.” And more importantly to me, everything I had been taught about homosexuality being wrong and unacceptable was validated by this experience. Simply having this unjust label made me feel like some sort of freak, as if I did not have enough labels already being the poor Black southern woman.

The next few years of my life I was very overt in the area of homosexuality. I openly spoke out against it every opportunity that I got. Any relative or friend that I had, who I remotely suspected of being a little odd, I made it a point to mention “undesirable behaviors.” For instance, if I felt like my little brother cried too much, I would make it a point to say to him “boys don’t cry over every little thing.” My bitterness at being misunderstood dictated my every word, thought, and action, as it related to gender. I was homophobic and not ashamed of it.

After years of bitterness and prejudice, I entered what I call the recovery period... Two years after Jen came and left my life. In 1997, I began my Master’s degree program back at that same Mississippi university. The world around me seemed to have softened a little and as it did, so had I. It wasn’t strange to turn on the television then and see two men kissing or two women professing their love for one another. Although I still carried around my prejudices, I did not feel the need to shout them from the mountaintops anymore. I thought homosexuality, although wrong, was fine as long as it didn’t touch my life in any way. I simply did not want to hear, know, or see it, and life was good.

My cohort in my Master’s program was relatively young with a few exceptions; Cindy and I were two of those exceptions. We really did not click with the younger

group and ended up spending a lot of time together that first year, eating lunch in the classroom between classes when the others would go out to eat, things of that nature. We got to know each other pretty well, and I thought Cindy was a great girl. It was not until after that first year in the program that I found out Cindy was a lesbian. She had always discussed and mentioned her roommate in conversation with me, but her roommate was really her life-mate.

When I discovered this, I felt so silly about how I had behaved the previous years in relation to homosexuality. I thought, "I've associated myself with this person for a whole year now and she is just an average everyday person." "But if I had known about her sexuality before the year had passed, I would have missed out on getting to know her at all." My behavior around her almost became apologetic in a sense. I could not remember whether I had exhibited my homophobic nature around her or not, so I figured it was better to be safe (and be apologetic) than sorry. I guess you can say that meeting Cindy was the beginning of my "recovery."

Where I am today... Well, I consider myself a "recovering homophobe." I still struggle to understand homosexuality in the grand scheme of things. Even writing this essay makes me a little nervous at the notion that someone may read it and mistake me for a closet homosexual. My religious teachings still resonate in my mind when I'm asked, "How I feel about the topic." I know several gay and lesbian people now, although none of which I would refer to as friend. However, I seriously suspect that some of my friends may be gay and have tried to tell me indirectly on several occasions, but my close-mindedness turned them away. I still ask questions whenever I can, but I am not as quick to disassociate myself when misunderstandings occur, such as I did with Jen. In fact the main characters on one of my favorite television shows are two gay men. That would have been unheard of back in the early 90's when I first began college. I guess I'm not the only one "recovering," maybe the world is recovering as well. Even my own little rural Mississippi community (that I grew up in) seems to have opened its mind a little, but not much.

I am now studying to receive my doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy. My job this semester is the teaching assistant for a class on human sexuality and a couple of weeks ago representatives from the campus Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Alliance (LGBTGA) came to class to do a guest lecture. I remember sitting there listening to these stories of harassment, abuse, ridicule, and discrimination, feeling so bad that I was once one of the people that they were describing. They were all just kids. Their ideas about life, their dreams, and their goals for themselves were essentially no different than my own had been at their age. I left that class wishing I had walked down the aisle to one of them and reached out my arms and gave them a long hard hug, much like the one Sally had given me so many years prior. Only the intent behind mine would not have been "thank you," it would have been "I'm sorry."

What can I say, I'm still growing and who knows maybe I'll be a "recovering homophobe" for the rest of my years. I may never be able to understand homosexuality or fit it into my nice little box of all the things that make sense to me in the world, but at least I know where I fit in its box. And for now, that'll have to do. I hope that as you read my story, you were able to raise your own consciousness and awareness of how prejudice can influence thought and behavior. I am sure that the inner conflicts I have described herein are familiar to others in relation to homosexuality. It is clear that my

ideas were not only shaped, but also nurtured by my environment and the many phases of my life. Everything about me (Black, female, southern, Baptist, poor, etc.) shapes the lens through which I view the world. I believe the same is true for you. I hope that through reading this autoethnography you walk away with an understanding of the importance of questioning and exploring your own biases. And my challenge to myself, and the one I present to you, is to recognize the importance of and try to look at things from the other person's viewpoint, as you attempt to examine your own.

References

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