Coming Out as Sacrament

By Rev. Mona West, Ph.D.

A sacrament is an act that mediates the grace and mystery of God. Coming out is a sacrament for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) people of faith because it sets us on a lifelong path of manifesting God's grace in our lives. Coming out is crucial to our spiritual development because it starts us on a journey of integrating our GLBT identity into our whole life. Or to say it another way: ***embracing our GLBT identity is an invitation to go deeper in our spiritual journey.***

Coming to terms with being part of the GLBT community—acknowledging who we truly are and have been created to be—is one of those "break-in" moments in our spiritual life. Break-in moments are those moments of invitation that happen throughout our life in which we catch glimpses of something more, something bigger in which we participate. In those moments we catch glimpses of our own divine nature: the true authentic self that is the image of God in us. This true self gets layered over with the 'stuff' of life. Our true self in God's image gets covered up with a false self, made up of our fear, our defense mechanisms, and our survival techniques. For GLBT people, part of that false self is an identity we try to live into based on our conditioning in a heterosexist culture. We grow up with strong messages that are counter to our true self. We accumulate layers of the false self trying to fit into a heterosexist ideal. When we come out, we let go of this false image and we begin the process of making room for our true self to emerge—the true self that God intended. ***We are engaged in the work of transformation.***

A Central Theme

Chris Glaser, author of Coming Out as Sacrament, claims that coming out is the central theme in the lives of GLBT people. He indicates that the expression has had its own history in gay and lesbian culture. Before World War II, 'coming out' was an initiatory event in which a person was introduced to gay society. It wasn't until the 1960s that coming out began to be associated with hiding one's sexual orientation, most commonly referred to as 'being in the closet.'[1] For Glaser, coming out is a 'unique sacrament—a rite of vulnerability that reveals the sacred' in the lives of Queer people of faith.[2] Glaser also claims that coming out is a central theme in scripture:

> *Coming out is a theme in scripture in a way that homosexuality is not The latter has as few as five debatable references. But coming out is a recurring if not central theme of the Bible, easily recognizable to those familiar with the experience and process of coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or as family, friend, or advocate of someone who is. This links our own experience with that of our spiritual ancestors as well as opens us up to the universality of the*

life-giving and life-changing coming-out process for every human being. Just as coming out to God opens up the chosen or called in the Bible to God's own coming out, so our vulnerability creates a welcome sanctuary for God's self-disclosure.[3]

Glaser goes on to apply coming out as a hermeneutic for re-viewing scripture—a revisiting of familiar stories read through the lens of coming out. He identifies coming-out themes in such stories as the Garden of Eden (coming out of innocence and shame), the book of Exodus (coming out of oppression), the book of Esther (coming out of privilege), and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.1-42 (coming out as ourselves).[4]

A Profound Spiritual Process

Lesbian feminist theologian and Episcopal priest Carter Heyward emphasizes that coming out is a process containing dynamic tension that is fruitful ground for both solidarity with others and the manifestation of the divine in the lives of GLBT people. She identifies a 'profound theological tension' between revelation and concealment that is at work not only in GLBT lives as we negotiate the closet, but in the nature of divine revelation itself:

Because we cannot bear so much reality, G-d's presence is often concealed from us: We do not realize what is good until we are ready to help generate the conditions for it. Yet the knowledge of G-d can be called forth. It is available to us whenever we are ready. What we do not see now also is important to our knowing and caring for ourselves, one another, and our relationships. Revelation—of divinity and of the fullness of humanity—is a matter of timing, of seasoning our capacities to risk seeing and showing forth our goodness when we are ready to live into what we see.

She continues:

And in the hidden places of our lives, preparations can be made even now toward enabling us to respond to those kairotic moments in which the time will be right for us to open ourselves more fully to one another and to the larger world. Like bread, we are being prepared to rise.[5]

Heyward encourages those of us who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender to recognize that our coming out has a profound impact on ourselves and others. She calls us to be accountable and honest about the ways owning our sexuality brings us into 'right relation' with the world.

Therapist Kathleen Ritter and Catholic priest Craig O'Neill draw from their years of working with gay and lesbian clients to offer yet another model of coming out as a spiritual process. In their book, Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening for Lesbians and Gay Men, they apply

an eight-stage loss model to coming-out stories. Ritter and O'Neill claim that coming out involves letting go or losing a falsely constructed heterosexual life image.[6] Their model of loss includes the stages of initial awareness, holding on, letting go, awareness of loss, gaining perspective, integrating loss, reformulating loss, and transforming loss.[7] They claim that moving through this loss process provides profound psychological and spiritual healing. Ultimately it is a process that leads from death to life:

> *For centuries, gay men and lesbians have lived with death, both psychic and physical. In earlier cultures, they were accorded the role of "midwives" or companions for those who were dying to a new birth…. Today, people of same-gender orientation are still very much the outsiders of the culture, and their alienation once again puts them in a unique position to choose for themselves a qualitatively different life image. In other words, having little to lose in terms of status, respectability, or prestige, they can begin to see themselves as having been released from society's strictures. Losses can become gains, and deaths can become resurrections.*[8]

Coming out is a process that involves not only acknowledgment of one's sexual orientation, but also an integration of one's sexuality into life.

Coming Out, Coming In

There is another layer of coming out implied but not named in these various multi-stage models: coming out spiritually. As Ritter and O'Neill mention, Queer people have a rich heritage as spiritual people. For many, part of the coming-out process includes claiming that heritage. Christian de la Huerta describes the spiritual history of GLBT people as shamans, priests, healers, gobetweens, two-spirited people, and keepers of beauty.[9] De la Huerta claims that coming out also involves coming in—GLBT people discovering their true spiritual selves.

Coming out spiritually is not only reclaiming GLBT spiritual history for ourselves, but for many it is risking being identified as a spiritual person within the gay and lesbian community. There is an irony here: GLBT people of faith risk ridicule and rejection by the heterosexual community and our traditional religious communities when we claim our sexual orientation, and we risk ridicule and rejection by our own community when we claim our spiritual identities. De la Huerta quotes a lesbian minister who experienced this irony:

> *It is still not 'fashionable' to be a queer person of faith…. [I] feared being considered a traitor by the very community I loved the most. For many of us, it's still our secret that we believe in something. It's still our secret that we practice and that we go to church. We're apologetic about it. We're just as afraid to come out as spiritual*

people among queer folk as we are to come out as queer among straight folk.[10]

A Biblical Coming Out Story

One of the most powerful coming out stories in all of scripture is the story of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, found in the second book of the Bible: Exodus. This story demonstrates how a diverse group of people called Hebrews came out of their bondage and slavery by saying yes to God's offer of liberation. Their saying yes to God and risking an unknown future set them on a path of transformation. When they came out of Egypt they were literally transformed into the people of God. (Exodus 19:3-6) This new identity did not happen overnight for the Hebrews, nor did it happen the minute they crossed the Red Sea. This new identity was the product of gradual transformation as the Hebrews learned through the ups and downs of the wilderness what it meant to live fully into this new way of being.

When the Hebrews came out of Egypt, they shed an old identity and began embracing a new identity in relation to the God who had delivered them and called them out. There were times they became afraid in the wilderness— the unknown territory of their new identity. Often they were so afraid that they wanted to go back to their familiar old closets of slavery. (Ex 16:1-3)

Eventually they make it to the land God had promised them and they are charged by God to continue to tell their coming out story. (Exodus 12:24-27) The Hebrews (now called Israelites) kept the story of the Exodus (coming out) alive through its telling and retelling so that future generations could participate in its power and reality. This story has important spiritual lessons for GLBT people of faith who embrace their coming out as sacrament. God calls us out; to live authentic lives as GLBT people and when we say yes to God we are set on a life-long path of transformation. We leave the old identity of the closet behind, and when we are afraid of the sometimes unknown territory of our new identity, we are invited just like the Hebrews, to trust God's leading on this journey.

Coming out is a sacrament and the most powerful aspect of sacrament is the ability for many to participate in that power. So, as GLBT people of faith, let us continue to tell our coming out stories so that present and future generations can participate in their power and reality.

References

1 Chris Glaser, *Coming Out as a Sacrament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), p. 9.
2 Ibid..
3 Ibid., p. 49.
4 Ibid., pp. 50-75
5 Ibid., p. 30.
6 Kathleen Ritter and Craig O'Neill, *Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening forLesbians and Gay Men* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).
7 Ibid., pp. 59-61.
8 Ibid, p. 215.
9 Christian de la Huerta, *Coming Out Spiritually: The Next Step* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1999).
10 Ibid., p. 126.