

M E R E D I T H G E R A R D

Finding a Heavenly Identity

Hath he commanded any that they should not partake of his salvation? Behold I say unto you, Nay; but he hath given it free for all men; and he hath commanded his people that they should persuade all men to repentance. Behold, hath the Lord commanded any that they should not partake of his goodness? Behold I say unto you, Nay; but all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden. (2 Ne. 26.27–28)

I knew almost the second that Chris opened the door that he was gay. It wasn't too hard to put together—not that I was judging him. I just knew.

“Sisters! Hello, how are you doing this evening?” He greeted us with a jovial smile on a round, expressive face that showed a kind of kindness we didn't often get to see at the door of a stranger.

Chris quickly introduced himself, and we made light conversation over the Halloween decorations that were scattered

across his porch. We had each other laughing almost immediately. I had run into a few gay men and women on the mission, but none of them were so immediately welcoming of two missionaries as Chris was. After a bit of conversation, my companion got to the point.

“So, I’m guessing you know a little bit about missionaries then?” her eyes glittering in the light above his door. It was usually a redundant question, given that the greater portion of St. George, Utah, was very familiar with the nametags on our chests. Chris grinned at the question.

“Oh yeah, honey! I actually took the lessons a year or two back. I love all of your doctrine—I really do. I was actually pretty close to getting baptized for a while . . .” He paused and shrugged his shoulders, revealing what we had already guessed. “It’s just . . . I’m gay, and that’s a pretty big part of me. I wasn’t really ready to give that up.”

What are the chances of this? I thought. It was only day one with my new companion—our first door together no less—and here we were. I always did yearn for these kinds of moments, hoping for an opportunity to say what I felt like I had a duty to say. Maybe this was it? I tried to form the words together.

“I definitely understand. I actually have a couple friends who are members of the church who are gay. It’s been hard for them.” He nodded empathetically. “I have some who have chosen to stay in the church and others who haven’t. In any case, the message we are out here to share with people is that God is our Father and that He cares about each of us. I just want you to know that He loves you a lot.”

Chris’s eyes softened and welled up immediately as I spoke. A brightness—a radiance—visibly filled him. He turned his head away, embarrassed.

“Wow, you’re going to make me cry.” He fanned his eyes. “No one has ever really said that to me before. Thank you so much.”

A similar radiant warmth sprung in the center of my chest, and I smiled. “Of course.”

Chris laughed as the spiritually-charged moment slowly faded. “You know, do you sisters want to come over for soup sometime? What’s your number? I make a mean tortilla soup!”

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It wasn’t until the drive home, an hour or two later, that we were able to reflect. My brand-new companion, a blonde fitness queen from Missouri, spoke as she drove.

“You know, I used to be so judgmental; but after high school, I feel like my eyes have opened a lot.” Her eyebrows furrowed in deep thought. “Like, do you ever think about what that would be like to be gay and try to be a member of the church? That would be so stinking hard!”

“Yeah, I know. That would be,” I agreed softly. “A lot of people really struggle with reconciling it, but there’s a lot of people who do find a balance.”

“Yeah that’s intense.” My companion shook her head. “But good for them. I mean . . . I can’t understand it obviously, but I don’t know if I could—if I was like that.”

I continued walking the line of sounding empathetic but not *too* obviously empathetic on the ride home. I could’ve said more, but I didn’t. There was one part of me that found it refreshing to be able to be somewhere where no one knew my past, my struggles.

But for another part of me, that was the hardest part. That was the part that wanted desperately to be able to talk to someone about what I was thinking about. But I couldn’t. To my new companion—and pretty much every other missionary in the mission—I seemed like any other upright, stalwart, and obedient servant of the Lord (which I certainly was). I would always be that. But this situation provided me with another

unrelenting reminder of an identity that was always hovering at the forefront of my mind.

Gay.

Not gay exactly—I was bisexual, to be specific. Even though it had already been two years since I first realized who I was, it was still something I thought about all of the time. Even with the few people who knew how it has affected my life, I tried to show then I was in control of everything and was perfectly happy with who I was. But in reality, my identity was like writing strewn across my skin that only I could see. It always reminded me of who I was and what I was hiding: my anxiety, my fear, my sexuality. I saw it at strange times, like every time I looked in the mirror or across my hands as I said my prayers at night.

Though being a bisexual member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints inherently came with some challenges, through the ups and down of it all I had never wavered in my desire to remain a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. It was at times like when I knelt to pray that I remembered a time when things were simpler.

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The only sound filling the cool evening air was the crackling of the fire and the soft words of each girl as she bore her testimony. I was sunk into a camping chair with blankets and sweatshirts layered over me. All of the girls in my ward were circled up around the fire under banners displaying Christlike attributes that I was just beginning to learn:

Faith, Divine Nature, Individual Worth . . .

It was getting close to my turn, and one of the girls beside me was sharing her testimony of Christ and of trials. Her words were simple, sincere. They seemed to float, isolated, through the air.

I was sure that not all of the warmth I felt could be coming from the fire. After hugs, tears, and several post-testimony donuts, my friends and I stretched out under the biggest stars that I'd ever seen. They twinkled above us, almost seeming to communicate with each other—with me. The earth felt like it was cradling me beneath it all.

We'd been going over different scriptures all week that focused on our divine nature and being a "light" to the world. The different crafts, skits, and songs were often cheesy; but sixth-grade me was overwhelmed by the positivity I felt. I had never belonged quite like this before. One of the scriptures we had memorized came to my mind as I gazed up. "Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God" (D&C 18:10). I felt the strong confirmation of the spirit in my mind, and I knew who I was.

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An unfortunate part of growing up seems to be that you lose a bit of that clarity in your perspective. Life wasn't easy or carefree during those formative years. Somehow, I still had plenty of insecurities despite everything that I knew about my worth in God's eyes. But I still felt like I knew (at least theoretically) who I was at my core. I was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a follower of Jesus Christ, and a daughter of God—which is why I told myself that nothing had to change after I came out to myself and my friends.

I told someone for the first time at the start of my sophomore year at BYU. The discovery had been a long time coming. After pushing the visible signs of my attractions out of my mind in high school, I had been forced to begin recognizing them during my freshman year when one of my close friends discovered her changing sexuality. Her name was Emma.

Emma had discovered she was bisexual. It wasn't long before she was questioning her self-worth, her identity, and her

role in the church. I supported her as best as I could. Her questions also led my own thoughts to spiral down my own rabbit hole. Piece by piece, I added up all my years of buried feelings with the surprising empathy I felt for Emma. After months of questioning and denial, I was led to an inevitable conclusion, but it wasn't until the beginning of sophomore year that I admitted it to her and my close friends. The moment I spoke the words for the first time was surreal. It was like it was instantaneously adding a legitimacy to everything I had been experiencing. I was attracted to girls just about as much as I was attracted to guys; I was bisexual and a Latter-day Saint.

At first, this newfound identity was very freeing. It was a whole new part of me to be discovered, but I was confident that nothing would change. I knew who I was. I knew that God loved me. So what if I had some temptations sometimes? I knew from the scriptures that Christ had taken upon Him "pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind" (Alma 7.11). That meant He must have understood how confused I felt. He even must have understood the moments of guilt I faced now that I had opened my eyes to noticing how I felt about girls.

All I had to do was not act on it, just like any other temptation. It didn't take me long to realize that not every lesson is so simple.

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Within a month or two of this discovery, I started dating my first boyfriend. At first, everything was sunshine, long walks in the park, and strange little butterflies that fluttered around in my chest when he held my hand. He was cute, funny, and charming, but I still spent the majority of my time with my best friend. We had known each other the year before and had bonded over our shared love of movies and books. She had been a particularly strong support to me after I came out.

I don't really know how it started. I still don't really know how the deepest, richest friendship I had ever experienced suddenly felt corrupted by an unwelcome daydream; but it did. The butterflies started happening more and more, but they were around her. *I liked her.*

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It didn't take long for everything to start falling apart. At first, I told myself it was fine to think about her every once in a while—harmless even. Soon, every song became about her instead of him. In some form of twisted logic, I spent more and more time with my boyfriend to try to counteract what was happening. I convinced myself that what I was thinking wasn't real. I really did like my boyfriend; but after he brought up marriage, I was forced to realize that the road I had been building with him ended in a brick wall. I was rushing straight toward it.

Though my friends didn't know the destructive end that I was facing, they saw the signs. They tried to help, but I only shied further away. My anxious dependency on my best friend's presence grew daily alongside my need for reassurance that my anxiety hadn't pushed her away yet.

Our relationship grew more strained when she started dating, and I started going on runs to drive out my racing thoughts. I would run and run, often late at night, and plead for some escape from the road I had taken. My prayers at night grew increasingly desperate.

Weren't my weaknesses supposed to become strengths? How long did I have to wait until this would be taken away from me? I thought I was humbling myself as much as I could. I couldn't imagine having a heart more broken than this, more contrite than this, more desperate than this. Maybe I didn't deserve to be saved anymore. Was there anything left of me

but a liar? Some stupid girl who caught feelings for her best friend?

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The day my best friend found out how I felt was the day I finally crashed into the brick wall that I had been building. After all of the horrible, manipulative things I had done in our friendship . . . the way she looked at me said enough. The disgust in her eyes flashed before me again, several hours later, as I sat in my friend's car with my hands balled up against my face. I rocked and pulsed with the emotion coursing through me.

"Just hold on." One of my other friends, Laura, held me tight to her. She pointed out the things that were still good in the world like cute dogs and chocolate chip cookies. And me. Shame poured through me. I couldn't believe what Laura said as she tried to remind me of who I was beneath the darkness. When my body convulsed into hysterics, she just held me until my breathing slowed. In the darkest moment of my life, she convinced me to stay another day. A few weeks later, as I sat in the temple, I read these verses, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10.29–31).

My fingers grasped at the edges of the pages, trembling. It was a simple reminder that I desperately needed: that I was important to God. No matter what I had gone through, or how much of it was my fault, I was still that girl who had sat with wonder under the stars. It was then that I started to really recognize how Christ had been there the whole time. He had given me friends who loved and supported me, and He was giving me the strength that I needed now to push forward. With

the help of friends like Laura, and an amazing counselor, my life began to turn around.

It was several months later, sitting back on the green sofa in my counselor's office, that I got my next answer. I had been striving for months to build myself back together. I got a new place and some new friends, and I started a new life. The repeated encouragement of my counselor, and a lot of time spent on my knees, had gotten me to say nice things about myself a bit more often. I had healed a lot, but not completely.

My counselor was an older, kind woman with big friendly eyes that always made me feel safe. This particular day, she leaned towards me as I crinkled a tissue absentmindedly in my hands. "I think I could do it, but I'm just so worried." I was murmuring. "I still don't know if I've got it in me. I worry that I'm not good enough."

She listened intently.

"Here's what I want you to do," she finally said, meeting my eyes. "Do you see that you're limiting yourself to just one thing or another? Whenever you want to say the word *but* in a sentence, replace it with *and*."

I sat silently pondering. She went on.

"People aren't just one emotion, one decision, or one identity; not every situation is perfectly gray and white. That's okay. They can both exist in the same place, even if they seem to conflict. You can have a desire to go on a mission *and* be scared to do so." She smiled a bit. "It's only your mind that makes you think that one has to limit the space for the other."

I let this really sink in. It was something I thought that I had understood before, but the way she phrased it made me re-think. What would it mean to really allow myself to be two things? I could be both determined and anxious; confident in Christ and terrified of my own frailties; a beloved child of God as well as someone who was currently struggling—with attraction to girls and otherwise. It was okay to be both. I could find

peace and strength in whatever position I was in through Christ.

After I had grown and matured a lot, this idea is what helped me get over my fear and trust the inspiration I had received to serve a mission. Despite my concern over what this new adventure would be like, I had a burning desire to share the love and healing that I had felt. My mission provided just that.

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The Sunday after meeting Chris, my companion and I sat in hard chairs in the institute building and prepared to watch the general officer who had come to speak at the YSA devotional at Dixie College, where we served. As always, it had been a long Sunday. My body was exhausted, and my mind was particularly plagued by insecurities. I doodled and listened as the speaker announced her topic, “Divine Identity.”

My gaze was forced up from my doodles as she began to delve into the theme. Everything she said was similar to what my Young Women leaders had taught me so many years ago, but with new insight breathed into it. Though she didn’t mention me personally, her words began to strike me like they were meant just for me. A slide appeared on the projector above us, with a line printed in big letters, announcing one of the core premises of her talk, “The Labels We Give Ourselves.”

She went on to talk about our many labels—student, friend, athlete, nerd—and how these sometimes begin to overshadow who we are as children of God. The more she went into it, the more it felt like she could see the labels I had written all over myself. Not just bisexual, but others too—anxious, dependent, fearful.

“What do we do? What do we do when there are so many different ways to define who we are?” She was saying.

Another slide pulled up. It read, “Let go of any labels that limit your perspective of what your Heavenly Father can do for you.”

I took a moment for me to process this. It made so much sense, but it also stung a little. Letting go of labels . . . did that mean giving up my label of being bisexual? In my mind I ran down the list of everything that the term had meant to me. Even after I had truly accepted that I could be bisexual and a Latter-day Saint, being bisexual still took up a huge portion of my identity in my mind. It was the source of much of the pain I had felt over the last two years, but it also gave me a sense of belonging. Did she mean letting go of that?

The longer she spoke on how our self-imposed labels often limit us from seeing how Heavenly Father can act in our life, the more I knew the answer. Yes, at least to an extent. The knowledge that I was bisexual was important. It was a fact of my existence now; it was a part of my history, but it was just that—a label. My experiences were more than that, and so was I. For years now I had been struggling to find the balance between my two selves. At times I had thought that I couldn't really be happy, or be fully who God wanted me to be, if this was something I struggled with. Even now, it was something I was always aware of—a trial that defined my life.

My mind fluttered back to Primary songs and the reassurance I felt as I recited the Personal Progress theme, “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him” (“Making Progress”).

I had always known in theory who I was; and now I knew what I needed to let go of—not of being bisexual itself, but of the label that I relied so heavily upon. I needed to recognize that I could be a follower of Jesus Christ and have these feelings; and I needed to know that they didn't have to define who I was.

My perspective today is still based on those simple principles. I'm still learning every day. It isn't easy. I always have to remind myself—like anyone else does—that this life is short. I have to remember that because of the Plan of Salvation we

know there's much more to our existence than the things we experience right now. Individuals are so much more than what they've been through or the challenges they face. The important part is who those experiences shape us into, and I've learned that God cares a lot more about that than anything else.

Though there are a million different experiences and perspectives that differ from mine, I've found happiness in knowing that I will always have struggles, and I will always have the Savior to rely on. I know now more than ever that Christ's arms truly are open to any person—regardless of age, gender, race, or sexuality—who will take His hand and exercise faith in Him. And this only becomes more miraculous to me each day.

Works Cited

“Making Progress.” *New Era*, Jan. 2002. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2002/01/contents?lang=eng>.