

LIVING OUT LOUD

A Black gay ordained Baptist minister's account of sexual orientation discrimination by the U.S. Navy and a black church congregation

FOREWORD

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

-Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

GENESIS 1:27, 2:25, 3:8-11a (New Revised Standard Version-NRSV-The Bible)

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (1:27).

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (2:25).

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked?’ (3:8-11a).”

This story was the most influential in helping me recognize, accept, and negotiate with various matters in my life particularly my sexual orientation. The fall of humankind was, as I was taught, a story of original sin, the invention of shame, and how the serpent, the Devil, tempted the woman, Eve, to eat the fruit, give it to Adam, and they became to know good and evil. They then became ashamed of who they were because before this incident, as the story goes, they existed in the garden totally exposed, naked, and felt no shame.

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This story also came to have new meaning for me in light of my failed attempt to live without acknowledging my sexual orientation.

“Damn,” I thought, “How can I be gay (the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual attraction for someone of the same gender) and have a relationship with God, be a faithful member of a congregation, and be an ordained minister?”

For me, like Adam and Eve, I was made uniquely and authentically by the Divine Creator, to be and live a healthy life just the way God made me. Like Adam and Eve, I allowed the logos, or words and opinions of other people to become gods and superlative to the Logos or Word of God, allowing **certain circumstances and people to convince me I was naked**. I believed I could not be my true authentic self. And again, like Adam and Eve, I hid myself among the trees of unhealthy pretentious relationships and friendships, self-righteousness and alcoholism because I was so AFRAID to be who God created me to be: totally exposed, naked, true, open and feeling no shame, never realizing that “playing the game” and manipulation was not required of me.

God said, “Tommie, do you think you can hide from me in the trees? I made the trees and can see through them. Do you think I do not know who you are? Before you were born I created you as well.”

Thus began the process of me accepting my sexual orientation-the Divinely orchestrated natural emotional, mental, physical, sexual and spiritual connection I have with persons of the same gender.

The following story articulates my plight of **not** accepting society forcing me to live my life silently, secretively, deceptively and manipulatively because I am gay and black. The prayer that has been the most liberating and effective for me: “God, *please*

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deliver me from the opinion of other people, Amen,” has also broadened my relationship with God for now I no longer live by the word or opinions of others, but by the will of God for me. So when I behave in certain ways, I frequently go back to this fundamental request for God’s openness and ask myself, “Am I acting out of fear, shame, and/or denial because of others? Am I afraid to be naked and totally exposed? Am I fooling God or trying to fool humankind?”

Through systematic oppression and discrimination, similar to Blacks being denied access to institutions of higher learning in the 1960’s simply because of their race, I was strongly encouraged to have my identity be what others thought it should be rather than whom God had authentically and Divinely created: me.

So in response to God’s “food for thought, “ Who told you, Tommie, that you were naked, that something is wrong your sexuality or race? Was it I? Who told you that something was wrong with you? Who told you that you are not to be authentic? I surely did not!”

Honesty, open-mindedness, willingness and integrity were to become my bedrock to improve my spiritual consciousness with the Divine.

I learned to accept my true self: strengths, weaknesses, screw-ups and limitations, learning to live as a black, gay man whose double identity has experienced racial discrimination and sexual orientation discrimination. This is my story of learning to live and love myself openly, authentically, and uniquely. Not just surviving, knowing that my true authentic self was and is my Divinely inspired sole power, but Living Out Loud.

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“Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person’s ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me.”

“Neither the Bible nor the prophets ~ neither Freud no research ~ neither the revelations of God nor man ~ can take precedence over my own direct experience.”

“My experience is not authoritative because it is infallible. It is the basis of authority because it can always be checked in new primary ways. In this way its frequent error or fallibility is always open to correction.”

~~ Carl Rogers, On Becoming a Person, (pages 23, 24)

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INTRODUCTION

“Close the door son, and step out so I can talk with this boy here.”

His son, James F. Williams, II, quietly complies as a mood of trepidation and anxiety suddenly permeates my entire body. Senior Pastor James Fitzgerald Williams Sr. throws the letter I wrote contesting being omitted from the ordination ceremony without explanation, (of which he and the rest of the powers-to-be at the church had invited me to then publicly omitted my name from the list of ordinands), on his cluttered desk.

“Tommie, you don’t give a damn about anybody but yourself! Homosexuals have never had a place in the Black Church and will never have a place in the Black Church. The only reason your black ass is here is because I allowed you to be!” Rev. Williams exclaimed, his shrill voice booming with indignation.

“I do have a place in the church, Rev. Williams, I am the Black Church and out of the millions of members in the Black church, I know I am not the only gay person who is called to the ordained ministry. The Church certainly can sustain a challenge to a discriminatory practice. I have given a great deal to the HIV/AIDS ministry here and I feel I did not deserve the church’s cowardly disrespect!” I struggle to calmly retort.

“Yes, but you are the only open one! Now I told you we, the ordination council, did not ordain you because you were gay and so damn open about it. Now if you would just marry a woman-a lesbian if you have to-you can have you cake and eat it too!” Rev. Williams asserted, “You are trying to change the church and you cannot change the church. You gotta tow the line my brother and I am trying to help you!”

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“That is crazy! We both know that homosexuals have been a part of the church and will always be a part of the church. Look at Charles, our musician. Everyone knows he is gay with his purse and make-up and he is being ordained into the Gospel ministry!” I contested.

“No, we do not know it because he has not spoken it. Your problem is that you are too outspoken and talk too much. Now I allowed you to have your gay service here, but now that is over. My loyalty is only to the man, Senior Bishop, and him only! If you persist in this effort, I will close down the entire HIV/AIDS ministry and send all the fucking money back. Don’t cross me boy!”

“Our policy is the same as the military’s, ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’” Rev. Williams countered and continued sternly pointing his finger at my face, “Just as Senior Bishop told you when you flew up there to Jacksonville to talk to him last summer when you sued the United States Government and started all this bullshit; he and the Church are on the fence with this issue. We think this is your choice and if the Navy did not want you as an officer, we don’t want you either!”

“And I told him Senior Bishop that is crap. He is almost 80 years old and doesn’t know if sexual orientation is a choice or natural, being or genetically determined. It wasn’t enough for me being African-American and a male in America? What do you all think, I rolled over one day and said you know what I really want to be discriminated against and at odds with society, my family, and my church so I’ll just like men and be gay?” I shouted sarcastically and continued, “Besides the other part of the policy is don’t harass and don’t pursue. You all are penalizing me for standing up the U. S. Government and winning my lawsuit against them, which exposed my sexual orientation!” I barked,

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“How can you penalize me for something I cannot change. I won that case and so now I am all of a sudden not worthy to be a minister in your church?”

“Yes, we are afraid and concerned you will sue the church...” Williams responded.

I interrupted, “I cannot sue you for not ordaining me even though you all could have told me before having me come to the ordination service and then omitting my name in public at the damn service! To ordain or not ordain is totally up to the church. But you all should be made to tell me why you all think I am not and was not qualified after completing the 18-month prerequisites.”

“Hell, I scored just as well or better than everyone in my class. You all made me go up there three hours away fully knowing that you were going to publicly embarrass me.” I exclaimed.

“I am not going to keep talking about this. This is not about you anymore. It is about ME and moving up in the Church. Everyone will be looking at me and not you (He was currently campaigning for becoming a Bishop.). You gonna have to go now. Since you crossed me, the Ministry of Reconciliation is over-gone damn it! I did a lot for you and you owe me. You are biting the hand that feeds you. You either resign or I will toss your ass out of here!”

“Well, do what you have to do, but I ain’t going no damn where. I have not done anything wrong. You are my Pastor and I feel you should have allowed me to minister honestly and truthfully. If you had a problem with my sexual orientation, you should have had the gall to tell me two years ago when you hired me to write grants and invited me into the ordination process. I do not appreciate being tolerated. Rather I felt you

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embraced me wholeheartedly. How do I owe you for doing what you are supposed to do as a pastor-not judge but love? You all mistreated me and continue to vilify and castigate me by telling me the only way I can preach is by towing the line of lies and deceit and if I don't, I am the depraved person?" I angrily countered, "You let Charles through the process and you hired him from an MCC [Metropolitan Community Church] knowing he is openly gay as well. So why treat me so..." I retorted.

He interrupted with authoritative shrillness in his voice, while simultaneously pointing vociferously at me with his right index finger again, "He is not gay. We don't know that because he has not said it. That is your problem, you talk too much and I am going to do what I need to do. You are gone and don't have a goddamn job!" he confidently exclaimed.

I felt as if I had been kicked in the gut and before I knew it tears were parading down my face. It felt surreal, like being hit by a Mack truck. Angry, flabbergasted, and traumatized, "what did I do wrong?" I thought. I felt bamboozled and hoodwinked.

After 14 months and a very successful, up and coming HIV/AIDS prevention education ministry, Rev. Williams and the church terminated my employment a month later by "reorganization," because I would not live silently.

What I found most ironic was that the African Methodist Episcopal Church began due to White churchgoers refusal to fully acknowledge Blacks and their complete inclusion and participation into the worship experience. In 1787, they subsequently were fed up with the discrimination and intolerance and paraded out of the church to form a new church, the oldest Black denomination in America. As the AME Church's' website describes their beginning:

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“the fact that members of the St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia Pa., in 1787 segregated its colored members from its white communicants. The Blacks were sent to the gallery of the Church, to use the venerable Richard Allen's own words. One Sunday as the Africans, as they were called, knelt to pray outside of their segregated area they were actually pulled from their knees and told to go to a place, which had been designated for them. This added insult to injury and upon completing their prayer, they went out and formed the Free African Society, and from this Society came two groups: The Episcopalians and the Methodists. The leader of the Methodist group was Richard Allen. Richard Allen desired to implement his conception of freedom of worship and desired to be rid of the humiliation of segregation, especially in church.”

How tragic that his vision has not yet been reached for all of God's children.

Just as when certain Americans protested over desegregation of the military and the full inclusion of Blacks which they argued would “undermine good order and discipline”, how ironic it was that certain military heroes, such as the Tuskegee Alabama Airmen, contributed outstandingly to the mission and victory in the war as indicated by their receiving high military awards and honors.

The patriarchal code of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue” endorses systematic castigation, vilification, and discrimination against “non-heterosexuals” that is both insidious and virulent and influences those who possess atypical sexual orientations to live deceitfully. This system seems to condone an establishment that dictates the status quo as: (1) cannot serve in the military unless you hide and lie about your sexual orientation, and (2) cannot preach the Gospel (the TRUTH) unless you marry or imbibe heterosexist ideals to hide who you love, which invalidates ones humanity. These hypocritical “norms” are the epitome of injustice, unrighteousness, discrimination, profanity, and border on the criminal.

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Being encouraged to live an unauthentic existence in order to be accepted into society and into the white patriarchal culture, and to be told to “tow the line” and fit in, I was often encouraged to use opposite gender partners as trophies to move up the social scale of power and privilege-to simply “make it” by pursuing the American Dream.

Fear of abandonment, ridicule, and discrimination, especially for people of color (POC-Hispanic/Latino (a), African American, African-Caribbean, Native American, African, Asian/Pacific Islander) who are already marginalized and stigmatized by society fuels beliefs that I could not live out loud my true sexual orientation. This choice to be unauthentic further impedes and adversely affects the lives of people of color as indicated by the increase in health disparities and significantly lower health outcomes (substance abuse, STDs, HIV/AIDS, mental health issues, higher teen pregnancy rates, domestic violence, etc.) because we are not allowed to live as we truly are.

Living Out Loud is my story of challenging two notoriously homophobic and heterosexist institutions that attempted to confer their magnanimous and germane tradition of disparate treatment of homosexuals on my life by living a lie. For me, I had to decide either for the sake of family, friends, and personal security (career, finances, education, etc.) just to be quiet (i.e. don't tell) and go along with what everyone else has done or break with these traditional societal establishments and live my life, out loud and authentic!

Not only did standing up for myself against the United States Government cost me a very promising Naval career and financial security; but my valiant action also prompted me to be at odds with and engage in conflict with the only other social support system I possessed and could readily identify with-the Black Church. At the core of the

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matter was my sole obstinate conviction that being my authentic self was my only true power. Thus, to be victorious against the virulent and insidious homophobia exhibited in these institutions and general society, I was compelled to **live out loud!**