

# An 'Open-textured' Case Study in Philosophical Counselling

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In philosophical counselling, as in all other helping professions, it is important for practitioners to exchange case studies as material to be studied for insights into both methodological approaches and content interpretation. But a criticism often levelled against case studies presented in the social sciences literature is that the material selected to be presented as a case study by a therapist or counsellor/author is typically biased and notoriously incomplete. In his essay 'Traditional Case Studies and Prescriptions for Improving Them' (In *Psychodynamic Treatment Research*. Nancy E. Miller *et al.* (eds). New York: Basic, 1993. 38-40). Donald P. Spence writes,

The typical case report tells a single story with heavy reliance on anecdote and narrative persuasion, and with a preference for what may be called singular explanation. The anecdotal nature of the typical case report reveals only the highlights of the clinical encounter, with few details; as a result, anyone who wants to assess whether a particular interpretation might have been formed differently or to decide whether a particular formulation could have been improved will have to look elsewhere. ... The evidence is never so complete that we, as readers, can draw our own conclusions. ... The closed texture of the case report effectively cuts off disagreement. ... This state of affairs comes about because of the tendency for the case report to highlight the clinical happenings that seem to mesh with received theory and to underplay, or exclude entirely happenings that cannot be explained, that go against theoretical understanding, or that result in bad therapeutic outcomes.

Unlike a face-to-face counselling session in which notes are hand-written by the counsellor either during the meeting or afterwards from memory, in the case study presented below absolutely every word exchanged between counsellor and client has been documented. The following series of dialogical e-mail messages are an attempt to offer a more 'open-textured' case study in philosophical counselling, one which has not been censored or edited. They constitute the most significant e-mail communications exchanged between myself and one client over the course of about five months.

I offer the following case study for two reasons: first, in order to reveal more than just a few carefully selected highlights of a counselling experience to anyone interested

in studying this case; and second, to illustrate what I consider to be a successful instance of e-mail counselling. The only deletions were a few very brief messages exchanged early on in which we discussed my fee, and in which I asked for time out while I was ill. The evidence is, for all intents and purposes, complete; the text is open, and you, the reader, are free to interpret it for yourself, and to draw your own conclusions. Of course, I have changed the client's name and those few details necessary to maintain confidentiality. The passages presented in *italics* are ones that have been forwarded from a preceding message.

Here then is the case, presented as close to *verbatim* as is humanly possible without the use of voice or video recording equipment, and in confidence.

## K's first message:

Hello,

I found out your email address on your web site. I hope you don't mind my asking you a couple of questions. I am interested in finding someone to go to for philosophical counselling in my area, but I don't know if there is anyone. Is there a resource I could go to? Or, do you know of anyone in this area?

I have been to several traditional counsellors over the last several years, and none of them have been able to address my fundamental philosophical concerns. My dilemma can be summed up in one question, 'How do I live a life of integrity when I am constantly forced to lie to people about who I really am?' (I am gay and very closeted; I live in a conservative rural area.)

Thank you.

K.

## My reply:

Hi K,

I don't know of any philosophical counsellors in your area. It's a very new field and there aren't very many of us around yet.

I appreciate the difficulties you're experiencing, and I agree with you that the issues you're grappling with are well suited to philosophical counselling. Since there aren't any counsellors where you live, and we're too far apart to meet on a regular basis, I'd like to suggest discussion by e-mail. Although e-mail is obviously not as immediate as face-to-face dialogue, I think it's an ideal approach given the circumstances we find ourselves in.

One negative aspect of e-mail counselling is the level of privacy you are allowed regarding your messages. In other words, please consider carefully whether anyone else will read your e-mail, and whether this matters to you or not.

The positives of e-mail counselling are (1) it gives us time to read, re-read, and think about each others' messages; (2) we'll both have a permanent record of everything 'said,' something you don't get from face-to-face counselling, and (3) neither one of us has to worry about meeting at an appointed time since we can write whenever we please.

If you're interested in going this route let me know and we can come to some sort of agreement and arrangement regarding my fee.

Best regards,  
Peter

K's next message:

Peter,

I would like to consider doing the counselling by e-mail. What would your fees be? Thank you for your response.  
K.

We discussed a fee K. could afford and then I wrote:

Hi K.,

I think a good place to start would be for you to tell me more about yourself and the situation you find yourself in. Keep in mind that as you type you'll be able to see in front of you - right there in black and white - what it is you think and feel. This may give you insights that you may not have had before into what it is you believe.

But don't just read your typing and then delete it before you send it to me. I need to follow your thinking, even when you've typed something and then changed your mind. In other words, don't censor yourself by trying to second-guess what you think might be useful and interesting to me. Let your thoughts flow freely and let them end up in your messages.

I'm looking forward to receiving your first message

Regards,  
Peter

K's first counselling message to me:

Okay, here goes. I grew up an only child with two loving parents. My parents have their quirks, as do any. My mother is very cold and unemotional. Whenever I did something to displease her as a child, she would give me the silent treatment. . . . which is very much worse than an argument, I think. But I always had everything I needed. They were very supportive of me academically, etc.

I was a tomboy growing up. (No surprise, huh?) Mom tried to force me to wear pretty dresses and shoes, and I balked and wanted to wear jeans. I am a very sensitive person, and somehow that must have shown. The neighbourhood kids used to tease me ruthlessly. I was not your typical tough tomboy. I guess they knew they could take advantage of my naiveté. They often tricked me by telling me one thing, watching me fall for it, and laughing all over themselves. I learned not to trust people very well.

That was reinforced by my parents. They were and are to this day very reclusive people. They don't make friends easily, and what friends they have had have 'betrayed' them in some way and they don't see them any more. I find, unfortunately, that I am very much like that now as well. I knew as a child that I was different - not in the sense of being gay - just different. I liked to read. I was into archaeology. Though I was into different interests, I always tried like crazy to fit in. When I was in junior high, I had my first crushes on girls. I even wrote about them in my journals. I still have those journals. I can go back and look at what I wrote then. But I had no role models. What gay teachers there were, (of course, the gym coach) was one of those people that everyone whispered about behind her back. Who would want to be like that?

Throughout high school, I dated boys. When I was eighteen, I met a nice guy with whom I could enjoy doing a lot of things. Our relationship got serious. We got engaged. I remember distinctly a voice in my head questioning this. It said, what about your attraction to women? Oh, that will go away, another part of me thought.

So, we got married. We were married for quite a few years. He and I were great companions. We enjoyed camping, concerts, reading. . . . but as time went on, we had virtually no sex life. Eventually we began to have some tentative discussions about this. After about a year

of struggle, I realised and finally admitted to myself that I was indeed gay.

It was a wrenching experience for us to separate and eventually divorce. But we knew it was the right thing to do. (We didn't have children.) He went on to remarry. I went on to. . . well, I've been stripped of the right to marry. . . (much bitterness about that is what I'm feeling as I type that). . . but I have a wonderful partner with whom I've been for 3 years now.

At first, it felt liberating to admit who I am and to celebrate it . . . and then reality hit, and I realised that the world does not celebrate who I am with me. Society hates who I am. That is devastating to me. I've always had trouble fitting in anyway, and now. . . I don't fit in at all. I used to be able to talk about my personal life. 'My husband and I went camping last weekend . . . blah, blah, blah. . .'

Now, I censor myself. Can I say I did something with my partner to this person? Are they gay-friendly? Will they disapprove of me? Fortunately, my parents accepted my coming out to them. They like my partner very much. But they are of the opinion that it's something we don't need to talk about.

I was used to having certain freedoms that I now don't have. I used to hold hands with my husband or put my arm around him in public. I can't do that now. And it makes me angry. It makes me angry to have to hide this part of myself. I have always considered myself a good person. I am kind, sincere, thoughtful. I have a right to live on this planet too. But because I am gay I feel like I am a second class citizen. My integrity is compromised daily because I lie about myself daily. I had to learn how to lie. I have never been good at lying. People could always tell by the expression on my face if I tried to lie about something.

Here are a couple of quotations that sum it up nicely for me:

'Character cannot be summoned at the moment of crisis if it has been squandered by many years of compromise and rationalisation. The only testing ground for the heroic is the mundane. The only preparation for that one profound decision which can change a life is those hundreds of self-defining seemingly insignificant decisions made in private. Habit is the daily battleground of character.'

Senator Dan Coats.

'Character is always lost when a high ideal is sacrificed on the altar of conformity and popularity.'

Anonymous

I feel that by keeping myself closeted and lying about myself, I daily erode away my character and my self respect. But I am afraid to be open. . .

K.

My reply:

Hi K.

You wrote:

*That was reinforced by my parents. They were and are to this day very reclusive people. They don't make friends easily, and what friends they have had have 'betrayed' them in some way and they don't see them any more. I find, unfortunately, that I am very much like that now as well.*

There's not much I can do for your parents, unless of course they decide to get counselling from me. So our focus will be on you. Although your parents reinforced certain behaviour in you, it doesn't mean you're destined to either remain the way you are or that you are doomed to become like your parents. I understand that you must realise this to a certain extent already or you wouldn't have approached me for counselling.

I'd like to ask you a bunch of questions to make sure I've understood correctly what you wrote in your message. . .

*I knew as a child that I was different - not in the sense of being gay - just different. I liked to read. I was in to archaeology. Though I was in to different interests, I always tried like crazy to fit in. When I was in junior high, I had my first crushes on girls. I even wrote about them in my journals. I still have those journals. I can go back and look at what I wrote then. But I had no role models. What gay teachers there were, (of course, the gym coach) was one of those people that everyone whispered about behind her back. Who would want to be like that?*

Why do you think your gym coach was gay?

What was it about your gym coach you wouldn't want to be like?

*Throughout high school, I dated boys. When I was eighteen, I met a nice guy with whom I could enjoy doing a lot of things. Our relationship got serious. We got engaged. I remember distinctly a voice in my head questioning this. It said, what about your attraction to women? - Oh, that will go away, another part of me thought.*

*So, we got married. We were married for a number of years. He and I were great companions. We enjoyed camping, concerts, reading. . . but as time went on, we had virtually no sex life. Eventually we began to have some tentative discussions about this. After about a year of struggle, I realised and finally admitted to myself that I was indeed gay.*

*It was a wrenching experience for us to separate and eventually divorce. But we knew it was the right thing to do.*

Why did you consider your separation and divorce 'the right thing to do?'

*(We didn't have children.) He went on to remarry. I went on to . . . well, I've been stripped of the right to marry. . . . (much bitterness about that is what I'm feeling as I type that). . . . but I have a wonderful partner with whom I've been for 3 years now.*

When you say you've been 'stripped of the right to marry' I assume you mean the right to a legal marriage and ceremony. Is this what you mean? After all, it seems to me you're living in a common law marriage arrangement which is the marriage of choice for many thousands of heterosexual couples. But I assume you're saying you'd like to be able to have a legal marriage if your state allowed it? Why is this important to you?

*At first, it felt liberating to admit who I am and to celebrate it. . . . and then reality hit, and I realised that the world does not celebrate who I am with me. Society hates who I am.*

I'm not sure all of society hates who you are. I certainly don't. So who do you mean when you say society hates who you are?

*That is devastating to me. I've always had trouble fitting in anyway, and now. . . . I don't fit in at all. I used to be able to talk about my personal life. 'My husband and I went camping last weekend. . . . blah, blah, blah. . . .' Now, I censor myself. Can I say I did something with my partner to this person? Are they gay-friendly? Will they disapprove of me?*

It seems like you're suggesting here that if someone is not 'gay-friendly' and they disapprove of you that this is somehow your problem, something you ought to be concerned about, something you ought to censor in yourself. Why?

When you ask, 'Will they disapprove of me?' do you mean will they disapprove of you as a total person or just your gayness? Do people disapprove of all of you just because of your gayness?

Do you have friends who know you're gay?

Do you have friends who DON'T know you're gay?

*Fortunately, my parents accepted my coming out to them. They like my partner very much. But they are of the opinion that it's something we don't need to talk about.*

When you say your parents accept your coming out but feel it's not something you need to talk about, do you

mean THEY don't need to talk about it or YOU don't need to talk about it?

Or are you inferring that they don't WANT to talk about it?

*I was used to having certain freedoms that I now don't have. I used to hold hands with my husband or put my arm around him in public. I can't do that now. And it makes me angry. It makes me angry to have to hide this part of myself. I have always considered myself a good person. I am kind, sincere, thoughtful. I have a right to live on this planet too. But because I am gay I feel like I am a second class citizen. My integrity is compromised daily because I lie about myself daily. I had to learn how to lie. I have never been good at lying. People could always tell by the expression on my face if I tried to lie about something.*

I don't understand why you say you have to lie about yourself. How do you know your community is that opposed to the idea of a gay couple?

*Here are a couple of quotations that sum it up nicely for me: 'Character cannot be summoned at the moment of crisis if it has been squandered by many years of compromise and rationalisation. The only testing ground for the heroic is the mundane. The only preparation for that one profound decision which can change a life is those hundreds of self-defining seemingly insignificant decisions made in private. Habit is the daily battleground of character.' Senator Dan Coats.*

Do you think concealing your gayness from strangers is the same as lying from habit?

*'Character is always lost when a high ideal is sacrificed on the altar of conformity and popularity.' Anonymous*

I assume you would argue that the 'high ideal' in your case would be telling the truth about your sexual orientation to everyone. The 17<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Kant also claimed that in order to be a morally upright person one should always live by the categorical imperative (a principle that cannot be compromised) 'never tell a lie.' But he forgot to consider the cost of telling the absolute truth on every occasion. I'm sure you can think of situations when not telling the absolute truth is by far the more kind or sensible thing to do. In other words, I'm sure you can imagine situations in which the price of truth is too high and an avoidance of truth is deemed more morally acceptable. What would be the price you would have to pay if you were to always tell the truth about your sexuality?

*I feel that by keeping myself closeted and lying about myself, I daily erode away my character and my self respect.*

I can imagine that your situation must be hard on you. But, although I agree that your self-respect is probably suffering, I'm not sure your character is being eroded away. Again, do you think your avoidance of mentioning your sexuality is the same as being a habitual liar?

*But I am afraid to be open. . . .*

What do you think will happen?

Take care,

Peter

K's second message to me:

Before getting into answering your questions, a little business first. . . .

Could you email me your address again so that I can send this money order off to you? Thanks for your questions. They have given me good food for thought.

You wrote:

*Why do you think your gym coach was gay?*

*What was it about your gym coach you wouldn't want to be like?*

I grew up in a small town, and everybody around town seemed to know that she and her lover lived in their own house together. What I don't want to be like is the way these lesbian women seem to have to keep to themselves. They didn't socialise within the community. They may have had lesbian and gay friends outside of the community. They, of course, did not discuss their personal lives. This particular coach never mentioned her significant other, in contrast to the way other teachers might mention their husbands or wives. For five years my then-husband and I worked in a rural, conservative US town. We knew of two lesbians who taught in the public school system. They were extremely reclusive. People laughed and talked about them behind their backs. It's just that I look at my life right now and I think that I personify that same thing. I didn't want to grow up to be a reclusive (outcast) lesbian that people laugh about behind my back. I surmised that one reason these women were so private is that they were probably afraid and aware of the criticism they received, so they tried to stay out of the public's eye as much as possible.

*Why did you consider your separation and divorce 'the right thing to do?'*

I firmly believe that being gay is genetic. My parents were not any different than anyone else's. I did not 'become' gay. I just always was. One of my cousins is gay as well. Once I had admitted to myself that I was gay, I could no

longer in any way pretend to be straight. To remain married would have been wrong because it would have denied my husband a chance at a normal straight relationship with a woman who likes sex with a man. And it would have denied me the chance to express my sexuality naturally. If we had had children, the situation might have been different. We got along okay, so we might have stayed together for the sake of the children, until they were grown. But, we weren't in that situation. My husband had very low self-esteem sexually and physically while he was with me. He wondered what was wrong with him. After I admitted to being gay, we both realised that there was nothing wrong with him or me, for that matter. His desire for sex was normal; mine was normal. But we weren't compatible sexually. We had hoped at first that maybe we could remain married, in spite of our incompatibility. But sex is a big part of a marriage. We loved each other very much, but we also both wanted a loving and fulfilling sex life. So, we amicably divorced.

*But I assume you're saying you'd like to be able to have a legal marriage if your state allowed it? Why is this important to you?*

I feel now that I live in a shadow world - not fully a part of society. When I was to marry my husband, I was able figuratively to 'shout it from the rooftops.' Now, it is like a dirty little secret. Yes, I would want a legal marriage. I am a traditional person. I value commitment. I value ceremony. My partner and I have considered having a commitment ceremony, but we are afraid to. Her sister and brother-in-law live in the same small town. He is a respected member of the community and would be embarrassed by our doing such a thing. His family would probably not attend. We have no other relatives nearby. It's just not worth the hassle, I guess. If we were a straight couple, we could count on everyone's support and willingness to celebrate our bond. But, it just isn't like that for some gay couples.

*I'm not sure all of society hates who you are. I certainly don't. So who do you mean when you say society hates who you are?*

The religious conservatives really get under my skin. I am very sensitive to criticism in the first place, and I tend to take their condemnation of gays very personally. I wish I wouldn't. When I go out, I guess I take my bitterness out on straight people (inside my head). I resent them for the freedoms they take for granted. I project my fear of homophobia onto practically every straight person I see. Yes, most of them probably are not homophobic, but I assume that they all are, and I assume a defensive posture, in other words, not revealing anything about my personal life, for fear that they are one of those homophobes that

are 'out to get me.' I don't want you to think that I'm extremely paranoid. But hyper-sensitive, yes.

*It seems like you're suggesting here that if someone is not 'gay-friendly' and they disapprove of you that this is somehow your problem, something you ought to be concerned about, something you ought to censor in yourself. Why?*

*When you ask, 'Will they disapprove of me?' do you mean will they disapprove of you as a total person or just your gayness?*

*Do people disapprove of all of you just because of your gayness?*

*Do you have friends who know you're gay?*

*Do you have friends who DON'T know you're gay?*

I have heard people say that often once you are older, you stop caring as much about what other people think of you. I wish I could get to that point right now! I am afraid of not being liked, in general. I always watch what I say to ensure I haven't stepped on anyone's toes. Well, being gay compounds this. I want to be liked. I fear that people who like me now would reject me if I told them I am gay. I have a major area in my life in which I am closeted. I am in a military reserves unit. I love the organisation. We are a civilian arm of the armed forces. We do wear military style uniforms, however. Because of the quasi military nature of this organisation, I have not come out to any of my friends in the unit. As you know, our military enforces a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy towards gays. Although we are civilians, I have assumed that I simply cannot tell anyone that I am gay. It gets difficult sometimes. We have social events in which we are supposed to invite our spouses. . . . I always come alone. The irony is, sometimes when it is a potluck, my partner prepares the dish that I bring. . . . even though she can't come. I hate being in such a situation. I am proud of my partner. I love her. I would love for her to be involved, but what can I do?

*When you say your parents accept your coming out but feel it's not something you need to talk about, do you mean THEY don't need to talk about it or YOU don't need to talk about it? Or are you inferring that they don't WANT to talk about it?*

Both. I think they feel frustrated with the situation for gays too, but they are helpless to do anything to change it, so why waste time talking about it? They are very closeted as well. They don't discuss my partner with anyone. I would imagine that when they talk about me to friends and colleagues, they omit details that involve my partner. . . . which effectively negates her existence. And that angers me. But I know that they too are afraid of the homophobes.

*I don't understand why you say you have to lie about yourself. How do you know your community is that opposed to the idea of a gay couple?*

I have taken what my partner's brother-in-law said to us when we were getting ready to move up here to heart. We used to live in a southern state. We moved north because her brother-in-law had a house we could rent, and we were tired of the southern heat. When he talked to us on the phone, he warned us not to come up here waving our gay pride flags. (He said that in a joking tone, but we knew he was not joking.) After we had lived here for about six months, we also had a little falling out with her sister's family because my partner had talked to one of their teenage daughters about gay issues (the marriage issue, etc.). Her brother-in-law told us we were not to talk about it. So, I've taken his attitude to be reflective of this whole town. My partner's sister and her husband have lived here for over 20 years.

*Do you think concealing your gayness from strangers is the same as lying from habit? Do you think your avoidance of mentioning your sexuality is the same as being a habitual liar?*

I see what you mean. No, I don't think it is the same as being a habitual liar. But it still makes me uncomfortable to lie (or omit telling) in situations where straight people are so free. I am always running a compare/contrast program in my head. 'This is something I used to be able to freely say ... now I cannot.' My partner doesn't have this problem as much as I do because she's never been in a straight relationship and has never experienced those freedoms. She has never talked about her partners in public. She has never held hands in public, etc. She is more used to this hidden way of doing things than I am. But I am stubborn. I don't think I can ever get used to it.

*What would be the price you would have to pay if you were to always tell the truth about your sexuality?*

I would have to accept rejection from some people. I also think I would be rewarded with wonderful acceptance from some people as well. But in the case of the military reserves, I feel really stuck because I don't want to be kicked out. I don't think they would blatantly kick me out, but maybe they might use other more subtle ways of ostracising me to the point where I just stop going. I am afraid to find out.

You have seen the words 'fear' and 'afraid' a lot in this email. I don't like being afraid. I want to be strong and courageous as I know I am deep down inside. How do I bring that part of me out?

Thanks.

K.

At this point I informed K. that I would need a little time to recover from what seemed to be a cold coming on that was negatively affecting my ability to think clearly.

My eventual reply:

Hi K.,

Well, the little head cold I told you about in the short message I sent you a while ago developed into a raging case of the flu that has lasted for the past two weeks. Happily I'm now back to being as normal as I ever get. Thanks for your patience. Here are a few observations and questions.

You wrote:

*... We knew of two lesbians who taught in the public school system. They were extremely reclusive. People laughed and talked about them behind their backs. It's just that I look at my life right now and I think that I personify that same thing. I didn't want to grow up to be a reclusive (outcast) lesbian that people laugh about behind my back. I surmised that one reason these women were so private is that they were probably afraid and aware of the criticism they received, so they tried to stay out of the public's eye as much as possible.*

What you describe here is very similar to what is encountered by anyone who is being bullied. They find themselves in a vicious circle: bullies criticise them and laugh at their discomfort behind their backs, so they become reclusive, and the bullies are encouraged to make even more fun of them behind their backs ... and so on. It's a no-win situation for the individuals being bullied (the victim). The concept of 'gay pride,' which is very strong here in Vancouver, hasn't eliminated the 'bullies' who make fun of gays, but it has allowed gays not to back down and hide from criticism. Gay pride is about being proud of who you are and being able to look the bully straight in the eye and say, 'What gives you the right to judge me?' (Remember also that those people who condemn gays the loudest are usually those who are very insecure about their own sexual identity.) It allows you to resist accepting the feeling of shame and discomfort the bully wants you to accept. It prevents you from becoming reclusive and thereby inviting the bullies to talk behind your back.

I agree with your assessment of gayness. I'm convinced it's genetic. To argue that gayness is a decision you make is as nonsensical as arguing that heterosexuality is a decision you make. In discussing gayness with students who think gayness (and therefore sexuality) is a choice I

always enjoy seeing their reactions when I ask them, 'So what made you decide to become a heterosexual?'

*The religious conservatives really get under my skin.*

They get under my skin too, and I'm not gay. But I can't assume your reasons are the same as mine. Let me ask you, Why do they get under your skin?

*I want to be liked. I fear that people who like me now would reject me if I told them I am gay.*

Are people who reject gays the kind of people you want to like you in the first place?

*Because of the quasi-military nature of this organisation, I have not come out to any of my friends in the auxiliary. As you know, our military enforces a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy towards gays. I hate being in such a situation. I am proud of my partner. I love her. I would love for her to be involved, but what can I do?*

I'm not sure I understand the 'don't ask, don't tell policy' in all its subtleties. Why can't you simply bring your partner to a potluck meal without literally telling anyone you're in fact a gay couple? If they draw their own conclusion that perhaps you're a gay couple, would that constitute having 'told'?

*I think they (parents) feel frustrated with the situation for gays too, but they are helpless to do anything to change it, so why waste time talking about it? They are very closeted as well.*

People in our society simply avoid talking about all sorts of things that make them uncomfortable like ageing, death, suicide, physical disfigurement, mental illness, sex, and so on. In your case - if your parents were raised in a conservative household - your parent's discomfort is probably a combination of discomfort with the whole topic of sex in general, and then this strange (to them) kind of sexual orientation you are part of. One way for your parents to become less closeted is for you to stimulate conversation with them at home on the topic of sexuality and your own sexual orientation, encouraging them to use what may be 'difficult' words for them to say such as 'love,' 'sex,' and 'homosexual.' It won't be until they become comfortable with the language of sexuality in general and gayness in particular in their own home that they'll be able to discuss it openly with others.

*I have taken what my partner's brother-in-law said to us when we were getting ready to move up here to heart. When he talked to us on the phone, he warned us not to come up here waving our gay pride flags. So, I've taken his attitude to be reflective of this whole town. He and his wife have lived here for over 20 years.*

What makes you think your partner's bother-in-law's homophobia reflects the attitude of everyone in town?

Do you think having a commitment ceremony or admitting you're a gay couple when asked is 'Waving your gay pride flag?' Also, did you know that statistically speaking 10% of any population is gay? This means that there a good chance that 10% of the population of your town is gay. Do you know any other gays in your town? It also means that if gayness is kept silent in your town then the 'tyranny of the majority' (as Plato called it) has kept 10% of the population from leading self-respecting lives.

*I would have to accept rejection from some people. I also think I would be rewarded with wonderful acceptance from some people as well. But in the case of the military reserve, I feel really stuck because I don't want to be kicked out. I don't think they would blatantly kick me out, but maybe they might use other more subtle ways of ostracising me to the point where I just stop going. I am afraid to find out.*

Why are you afraid to find out? What are the possible consequences to you personally?

Also, isn't your fear a bit like wanting to have your cake and eat it too? You seem to want to be open about your gayness within an organisation that you say will not allow you to be open about your gayness. There seem to be only two alternatives available to you: (1) quit the reserve and be open about your gayness; or (2) continue to be secretive about your gayness and remain within the reserve. I can't see how you could change the military. Or am I missing some other alternatives?

*You have seen the words 'fear' and 'afraid' a lot in this email. I don't like being afraid. I want to be strong and courageous as I know I am deep down inside. How do I bring that part of me out?*

It seems to me you used the word 'fear' and 'afraid' in connection with the imagined possible outcomes of certain actions. My question to you is, how much do you want to be able to be a couple in public with your partner? What price are you willing to pay - lose a couple of homophobic friends; be rejected by your partner's brother-in-law; move out of town; upset your parents; be dismissed from the military reserve; and so on? At what point does it stop being worth it?

It seems to me that you don't lack strength or courage as such (you say you know you are strong and courageous deep down inside). It seems to me you are simply hesitant to act when you're unsure of exactly what is the

best thing to do. In other words, the strength and courage to act comes from knowing what action to take. I think your strength and courage will grow as we continue to examine your situation.

Regards,  
Peter

#### K's third message to me:

I am reading a book right now that has given me some new insights into my behaviour. It's called *The Highly Sensitive Person* by Elaine N. Aron. I have always been very sensitive, both in the word's positive and negative connotations. I am very observant of things around me - people's moods, subtleties. I have always been a deep thinker. My mother is also that way. We have always felt we were a bit different from a lot of people in the world. We enjoy, for example, discussing philosophy in our conversations. Many people are indifferent to such topics. On the negative side, I am sensitive to people's moods to the extent of taking on their moods or of feeling responsible for their moods. I am more sensitive to noise and crowds than some. I can't 'shop 'til I drop.' I have to stop and get out of the crowds and have a cup of coffee to regain my calm. (Perhaps caffeine is not the best idea!!!)

But, with regard to my coming out problems, I think my sensitivity to other people's feelings gives me more difficulty with this issue than it might for someone else. I am glad to be a sensitive person. I have for many years wanted to change myself into a bold person, but I am learning to accept myself for the way I am and to realise that sensitivity is a gift.

The book talks about sensitive people's difficulties in social situations (being shy, not initiating conversations easily, being uncomfortable in large groups, etc.). The author suggests the 'putting on of a persona.' Of course, the first thought that went through my head is that that is insincere. But she goes on to explain that having a persona is a very normal thing to the Europeans but is more difficult for Americans to understand. (We want to be always genuine and open.) A German banker, for example, has his or her banking persona, which is taken off when they get home from work.

I thought about applying that idea to my military experience. I could put on a 'K's military reserve' persona when I am on duty. My persona would be at a different level than the other reserve members' because they are able to be more open about their spouses than I am. I would simply have to accept that my persona chooses not to discuss personal matters. I understand, too, that others in my reserve unit also choose not to discuss



their personal lives for whatever reason. Some do; some don't. I think that such an arrangement with myself will assuage my inner 'I-desire-to-be-open-to-everyone' self. With this persona, I will be able to set boundaries and be comfortable with it.

I have lived in Europe three times, and now that I think about it, when we Americans claim that Europeans are not very friendly, perhaps that is just because we are seeing them with their 'personas' on, so to speak. The banker or the cashier persona is professional and more detached emotionally. Personally, among their friends, these same people are probably very friendly.

You are right, though, about my taking my partner to some military functions and not telling them anything personal. I could simply introduce her as my friend or even my 'partner' and let them draw their own conclusions. She and I are also business partners, so they wouldn't be quite sure what I meant. I guess I could live with that. I'm still not completely happy with such mental gymnastics, but I know I have to do something so that I don't suffer as much from this conundrum.

The religious right gets under my skin because I take their insults personally. I feel that I am a good person, and when they say that I am going to go to hell, it makes me angry. In a way, though, I am better now at ignoring them because I don't believe in hell anyway - at least not their version of it - so I am not concerned with their threats.

You have given me some food for thought on initiating or stimulating gay-related conversation topics with my parents. It is true. How could they ever talk about such topics with anyone else outside the home if they uncomfortable with it within the home. I am taking a trip to the southern US next week to visit them. I will try to insert the topic into the conversation when there seems to be an opening and also do that in my e-mails to them.

Regarding the homophobia of the small town in which we live: I probably overstate the town's homophobia. One of the elected council members in this town is gay. People know about it, and they don't seem to care. On the other hand, I still feel a need to keep it low key. If we did have a commitment ceremony, I don't think we would put an announcement in the newspaper. In the long term, however, I think my partner and I will eventually move to a more metropolitan area. The city we live closest to is a bit too expensive for us at the moment, but we are considering moving closer to it. Perhaps to live on the outskirts and be able to go in to the city for socialising.

There are other gays here in our town but since they are as closeted as we are, we haven't met any of them.

Strength and courage are easier when the decisions are cut and dried, black and white. Being gay in our world is a big grey area. I think that is what is hard for me to come to terms with. What do you think of this 'persona' idea? I think it would help me to see my way of being more concretely in the military reserve and would take the ambiguity out of the situation for me. That would put me more at ease.

Before I leave to go to south, I will send you another money order.

Have a Happy Thanksgiving!

K.

My reply:

Hi K,

Thanks for the holiday greetings and for offering to send another money order.

I'm happy to hear that Elaine Aron's book is giving you an insight into your sensitivity. But I worry a little about a couple of things you say you've found in her book:

1) I'm not sure I agree with her generalisation about Europeans being unfriendly in public. My experience is very different. I found Germans to be very friendly in public when I attended a conference in a small town near Cologne there last year, and yet I found New Yorkers rather unfriendly when I was there two years ago. But I'm also generalising from my own experiences in a small town and the big city of New York. And it's a mistake to generalise from some Germans (or New Yorkers) to all. It's also a mistake to assume that someone else would have the same experiences that I had.

2) I talk very differently on the phone with my son, with a student, with my wife, with a client, and with a stranger. But are these different 'personas' that I'm putting on? Some writers have talked about the 'masks' we put on and take off. I'm not sure this is what I do. I don't change that much as a person between the time I talk with my wife and I talk with a stranger. What I am doing is adjusting the way I relate to individuals based on my relationships to them. We all do this. We act differently with people we feel equal to, people we feel inferior and superior to, people we love, and so on. The trouble is, when I feel inferior to a person this can lead me to act in a way I wish I didn't. A temporary solution to this may be to put on a mask or a persona to help me act less inferior. But another, and perhaps better solution, is to determine

why I feel inferior to this person (or this type of person) and change my feelings of inferiority by seeing myself differently. By changing my feelings about myself it will change the way I act.

Here's a typical example: a heterosexual young man might find it terribly difficult to talk with a young woman. The reason is because he lacks self-confidence; he feels unworthy of her attention. Putting on a bold persona might help him get through the situation, but it might also be seen by the young woman as a 'put-on.' Will putting on the persona in this situation help him make friends with the young woman? Will it help him in dealing appropriately with similar situations in future? Will the persona make him feel more worthy?

*I have for many years wanted to change myself into a bold person, but I am learning to accept myself for the way I am and to realise that sensitivity is a gift.*

In light of what I've said above, can you see that it's not simply a matter of changing yourself into a bold person by force of will? It requires that you change your beliefs of being somehow inferior to others into feelings of equality. The 'bold person' you are will emerge when you begin to believe that you are worthy.

*The book talks about sensitive people's difficulties in social situations (being shy, not initiating conversations easily, being uncomfortable in large groups, etc.). The author suggests the 'putting on of a persona.'*

Again, being shy, not initiating conversations easily, being uncomfortable in large groups, and so on are all a function of considering yourself inferior to those around you. It's a matter of lacking self-worth (or self-confidence) not a matter of having the wrong persona on at the time. Putting on a persona is like fooling yourself into thinking you're better than you actually believe. But fooling yourself only works for so long. What you need is to be convinced that living according to who you are is good enough regardless of what others say. This is being true to yourself. This is what the philosopher Charles Taylor means by the term 'authenticity.'

In his book *The Ethics Of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991) Charles Taylor says that each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own 'measure'.

... There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me. . . . Not only should I not fit my life to the demands of

external conformity; I can't even find the model to live by outside myself. I can only find it within. Being true to myself means being true to my own originality. . . . This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity (28-29).

Being true to yourself is being unashamed of being either black or white, male or female, rich or poor, heterosexual or homosexual. It means feeling worthy of what and what you are regardless of so-called social 'norms.'

*You have given me some food for thought on initiating or stimulating gay-related conversation topics with my parents. It is true. How could they ever talk about such topics with anyone else outside the home if they uncomfortable with it within the home. I am taking a trip to Texas next week to visit them. I will try to insert the topic into the conversation when there seems to be an opening and also do that in my e-mails to them.*

May I suggest that you can help make this easier for your parents by letting them know how important it is for you, and how much you need to be able to talk openly with them about yourself. The reason for this is because, as Taylor says,

an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or whittled by significant others. . . . Love relationships (and this includes family) are. . . . crucial because they are the crucibles of inwardly generated identity (49).

In other words, if you want to become self-confident it can only come by being true to your authentic self. But although this authentic self comes from inside you it can be negatively or positively affected by significant others. It is therefore important that your parents not only put up with or tolerate your gayness, but that they accept you as worthy and good. And this involves allowing you to talk with them about what's important to you in your life

*The religious right gets under my skin because I take their insults personally. I feel that I am a good person, and when they say that I am going to go to hell, it makes me angry. In a way, though, I am better now at ignoring them because I don't believe in hell anyway - at least not their version of it - so I am not concerned with their threats.*

Ignoring the intellectual bully is one way to deal with 'him.' Another way is to fight back even if only within your own mind. The religious right contradicts its own beliefs when they attack gays. There are any number of blatant flaws in their anti-gay arguments I could point out to you, and I'd be happy to deal with any specific arguments you care to discuss with me. But here's a couple for starters: The religious right says that God will send gays straight to hell. The problem with this is that a supposedly perfect God is said to be admitting he created

an evil or a mistake (the gay person). God is in a sense condemning his own creation - a creation which in Genesis he said was 'good.' Also ... if God created you gay, how could He then blame you for being gay and send you to hell? It makes no sense. If they want to argue that you're going to hell because you 'chose' to be gay, then they run into another problem. ... If God created us with free will (able to choose), and you chose to be gay, why is He condemning the choice you freely made according to the free choice which He allowed you to have? If He meant you to be straight, why allow you a choice? I could go on and on, but you get the idea. By the way, I love discussing the religious right's arguments against gays. They're all so bad!

Another 'by the way', despite what the religious right says about Americans hating homosexuals, a recent government survey has shown that in fact 84% of Americans approve of Congress passing laws which guarantee equal rights for gays.

*Regarding the homophobia of the small town in which we live: I probably overstate the town's homophobia. One of the principals at one of the schools here is gay. People know about it, and they don't seem to care. ... There are other gays here in our town but since they are as closeted as we are, we haven't met any of them.*

I'm glad to hear that you may have overstated the case. What about starting a 'support group' (or something similar) for gays in your community?

*Strength and courage are easier when the decisions are cut and dried, black and white. Being gay in our world is a big grey area. I think that is what is hard for me to come to terms with. What do you think of this 'persona' idea? I think it would help me to see my way of being more concretely in the military reserve and would take the ambiguity out of the situation for me. That would put me more at ease.*

If you think using the idea of 'persona' will help you, then by all means go ahead and try it. But I think your strength and courage to be yourself will grow as you become more sure of the fact that you're a decent person just the way you are. The more you believe this, the less shy you will be, and the more you'll be able to be more comfortable and even outgoing in public. I hope this message gets to you before you travel south. Have a great trip.

Best regards,

Peter

K's fourth message to me:

Peter,

Sorry it has taken me so long to reply to you. I returned from the southern US a couple of weeks ago and then dived right back into the business. I saw that you visited our web site and signed the guest book. Thank you! We had some problems while our computer was down, but now it is fixed, and we are going full steam ahead. We sell most of our items via an Internet auction site, and we are doing well with that. Recently, we placed an item up for auction. I think we started the bidding at \$50.00. The auction ended at \$575.50!!! We were astounded ... and pleased.

I had a nice visit with my parents in the south. Talking about gay issues went well with them. I think they have sort of reached a new level with the gay stuff. They seem to keep up with gay issues in the news, and they are angered by things they see. ... like the murder of Matthew Shepard in Montana. My dad works with young people, and he asked me for some advice on how he should talk to a young man (16 years old or so) about how he handles his sexual orientation. The boy is gay and is very open about it, but he lives in a small town, and he 'catches a lot of hell' about it, as my dad put it. I told him that the boy is probably feeling very defiant. ... like, 'I'll be who I want to be. ... regardless of what others do to me or think.' I told my dad that I understand that defiance and even admire it. I wish I could be more open like that regardless of the consequences, but I am too afraid to be.

My mom revealed to me that she had known all along that I was gay. I asked her if that was why she didn't want me to get married, and she said yes. (I wanted to ask her, 'Why didn't you tell me?' but she probably felt it wasn't her place to say anything at the time.) She said she knew when I was growing up, but she wouldn't tell me how she knew. I was surprised.

A lot of times the people all around you know something about you even before you yourself know it! I reached sort of a comfortable position about being out, as well, while my mom and I were talking. She suggested that most people probably know that I am gay anyway. ... though I have not told them. So, I should just talk about Sally as my partner, etc. and let them draw their own conclusions. They probably know anyway, was what she thinks.

That brings me to the military reserve. As I have said, though we participate in helping the regular military, we are a civilian organisation. Recently, I was promoted to a higher position in our unit. I am very proud of that.

For the last two days, I went out on patrol with our unit in support of security measures for a very important

international conference being held in the city nearby. I spent two days in close quarters with other members of my unit. The others often ask me about my business. . . . how's your business going. . . . how's Sally? I suspect that they are on to me as well. . . . especially my superior officer. I think she knows I am gay. I think the others suspect it. Nothing has been said to me outright, but I am picking up clues. Right now, though, I am still scared to death to tell them. I think they would probably still accept me okay. My commanding officer has on several occasions asked me about getting Sally to join the reserve. I imagine it would probably be a relief to all of us if I would make it clear. It makes it awkward for everyone. . . . my being in this unclear relationship with this woman. . . . who is she, really? I'm sure is what they're thinking. But, still, I can't bring myself to make it any clearer. . . . If I felt I could confide in one of the members of the unit first to gauge what their reaction would be, I would do that. But I don't have anyone I feel I could confide in. I know they all like me as a person. I am just afraid that if I told them, it would suddenly put a strain on our relations.

Something's got to give eventually, though. I can feel that. I can tell that after being in this organisation for a year and a half, people are wanting to know a little more about me, and I won't tell them much.

I do think, that the straight people in a gay person's life go through a coming out process as well. They go through similar stages that the gay person goes through. . . . denial (no, she can't be gay), to wondering (you think she is?), to wanting certain knowledge (I wish she would just say something!). You think I'm right about that?

I hope things are going well for you. Overall, things are going well here. I'm still in my usual quandary, but progress is being made.

Take care.

K.

My reply:

Hi K,

Wow, I had no idea your products sell for so much. But I guess there is a lot of time and effort invested in each piece. Congratulations on the outcome of the bidding!

*My dad works with young people, and he asked me for some advice on how he should talk to a young man (16 years old or so) about how he handles his sexual orientation. The boy is gay and is very open about it, but he lives in a small town, and he 'catches a lot of hell' about it, as my dad put it. I told him that the boy is probably feeling very defiant. . . . like, 'I'll be who I want to be. . . . regardless of what others do to me or think.' I told my dad*

*that I understand that defiance and even admire it. I wish I could be more open like that regardless of the consequences, but I am too afraid to be.*

I'm glad your visit to the south went so well. I think it's wonderful that your dad asked your advice in this matter. It's not often that parents ask their kids for advice. You're lucky to have a dad like that.

You probably know the old adage that our biological makeup gives us basically two options when threatened: fight or flight. Both these work well, and neither is better than the other in every situation. It sounds to me that the boy at your dad's school has chosen to fight. It may have been because of how others react to his gayness. He may have been pushed into a corner from which the only escape is to fight. In other words, he may have been forced into fighting. This is not an unusual experience for boys who are considered 'different' by their peers.

When I was in grade 11 in high school one of my classmates was known to be gay. I don't know how others treated him, but our gym teacher treated him as though he were ill. He was not required to take gym with us and he was made to sit in a balcony which is where I ended up when my leg was put in a cast from a football injury. In other words, the gay boy was made to go where sick or injured (non-normal) boys went. At the time I thought it was benevolent treatment from our gym teacher, but now I'm not so sure any more. I guess the gym teacher thought he was doing what was best for the boy.

*My mom revealed to me that she had known all along that I was gay. I asked her if that was why she didn't want me to get married, and she said yes. (I wanted to ask her, 'Why didn't you tell me?' but she probably felt it wasn't her place to say anything at the time.) She said she knew when I was growing up, but she wouldn't tell me how she knew. I was surprised.*

Please remember that parents feel responsible (and are held responsible by their community) for the way their children's character develops. And in many communities gayness was at one time considered a weakness or defect in character. It must have been very hard for your mother to accept your gayness when you were young if the community around her saw gayness as some sort of character defect. Admitting that you were gay would have meant your mother (and the community) would have considered her responsible for the 'defective' character you were developing. Many parents don't talk about their children's gayness because they hope that it's 'just a phase' that their children will eventually grow out

of. It's not surprising that your mother didn't talk about it at that time.

*A lot of times the people all around you know something about you even before you yourself know it! I reached sort of a comfortable position about being out, as well, while my mom and I were talking. She suggested that most people probably know that I am gay anyway. . . . though I have not told them. So, I should just talk about Sally as my partner, etc. and let them draw their own conclusions. They probably know anyway, was what she thinks.*

I believe that there are a lot of people who don't really mind gays 'so long as they keep to themselves.' What seems to really irritate people is what some call 'in your face' gayness, like when you see men and women in outrageous makeup parading around half naked in the streets during Gay Pride day, and so on. Students in my classes have said as much. They'll say something like, 'I have nothing against gays. I just don't like it when they flaunt it. We don't flaunt our heterosexuality, do we?' It's a difficult issue, because most people understand that 'Gay Pride' is an attempt to have gayness become more acceptable. But many people see it as gays going overboard. And, of course, because of what they see on TV they think that all gays like to parade around half naked in the streets.

*That brings me to the military reserve. . . . If I felt I could confide in one of the members of the reserve first to gauge what their reaction would be, I would do that. But I don't have anyone I feel I could confide in. I know they all like me as a person. I am just afraid that if I told them, it would suddenly put a strain on our relations.*

I'm sure you know that telling someone something they're not ready to hear can create unwanted problems. If I were you I would wait until I was asked. Why push it on anybody?

Here are some thoughts about straight reaction to gays. . . . The worry many straight men have about a gay man in their midst is that this gay man may 'come on' to one of them. Of course being the target of a come-on, or as Simone de Beauvoir put it 'being an object and prey' defines that person as female in our society. That's why straight men in our society often react so viciously against gay men: because the gay man (who may come on to them) is perceived as an insult to their own masculinity.

But women are used to being openly admired and pursued as objects of desire. Therefore I imagine that a group of women would not feel their female identity threatened if there was a lesbian in their midst who might

come on to them. Being desired is not part of being male in our society, but it is part of being female. So I suspect a group of straight women would not act with the same hostility toward a gay woman in their midst as straight men would to a similar situation. By the way, it is a common mistake among my students that they believe a gay man identifies himself as a woman, and a lesbian identifies herself as a man. I think this fits in with what I have said above.

*I do think, that the straight people in a gay person's life go through a coming out process as well. They go through similar stages that the gay person goes through. . . . denial (no, she can't be gay), to wondering (you think she is?), to wanting certain knowledge (I wish she would just say something!). You think I'm right about that?*

This is a very profound insight that I've never heard or read anywhere before! I agree with you, and I think it makes a lot of sense.

Besides some recent computer trouble, things are going well for me. I'm looking forward to the Christmas holidays. Stay well and write again anytime.

Best regards,  
Peter

This was our last counselling session by e-mail. There followed a few brief friendly exchanges and then K. got on with her busy life. I found this case very rewarding because of the articulate nature of the exchange and, of course, because of the positive outcome. But I also found the exchange somewhat inhibiting due to the natural limitations on messages exchanged in this medium. No client wants to receive a 1500 word essay by e-mail, and yet it would not take very long to speak that many words aloud. In face-to-face counselling session with other clients who were struggling with their sexual identity I have felt at liberty to offer many more insights into the aberrant relationship between sex and logic that is at the root of homophobia.

Due to the lack of technical jargon and famous names in these e-mail messages, it may seem to some readers that there wasn't much philosophy going on in them. But look again. The philosophical issues discussed included personal identity, the morality of lying, the nature (philosophy) of bullying, the origins of sexual orientation, the problem inherent in religious conservatism, the importance of ritual and ceremony (in this case marriage ceremony), the risks inherent in questioning the rules of an organisation to which you belong, the accurate imagining of future possibilities and their consequences, the difference between possible and probable events, the

definition of courage, the problems with 'New Age' and self-help books, the problem with generalising from some to all, an inquiry into what is meant by the claim that we all 'wear masks', an inquiry into the concept of a 'persona', and the philosophy of religion. I have purposely avoided doing any sort of after the fact detailed analysis of this case in order to give readers the opportunity to come to their own insights and conclusions.

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