



QUEERNESS & TEMPORALITY

“Coming out” as a process

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My parents loved that I was kind of a girly-boy as a kid, but this made for a complex sexual identity as I reached teenagedom. While my friends embraced traditional aspects of masculinity, I associated “being myself” with things that were considered girly in the 2000s—playing with dolls, wanting everything to be pink, and having a penchant for rhythmic gymnastics ribbons (an obsession which persists to this day).

But all the while, I imagined my future self in love with a girl. This is something I can now easily attribute to the pervasiveness of heterosexual representation in media and within my own family (none of the adults I was surrounded by were queer, either). I would spend my teenage years dreaming of a future with whichever girl was next on my constantly rotating roster of crushes.

I “came out” when I was around 19. Using quotations and an approximate age seems best here because it wasn’t a single proclamation that instantly shifted everyone’s perception of me, nor my own perception of myself. It wasn’t an abrupt change in attitude or presentation of who I am; I was exactly the same, only I had begun to acknowledge my developing sexual interest in men and started to allow myself to be okay with it. I remember this span of time clearly, especially the growing catharsis that came with letting myself have experiences with men that were, until that point, exclusive only to my thoughts.

It felt how I imagined it was to be a good-looking straight guy in high school. I was assured of myself for the first time in years, and ready to discover new pieces of myself through people that I had only dreamed of being intimate with.

After coming out, I felt excited and liberated, but I also harboured a sense of anger. Shouldn’t I have already “found” myself by now? And why did embracing my sexuality feel like a second puberty? It was like realizing that everything I had gone through to prepare for adulthood was thrown away, the credits of a straight teenagerhood completely untransferable to this new sexual awakening. Where all my friends had already been in relationships (plural!) and had experienced a breadth of hookups (plural!), mine were just getting started. I charged into casual sex and relationships like I’d been sexually starved and locked out of intimacy for decades, because I had been.

I had convinced myself that I didn’t want or need these experiences when I was younger. I told myself that I was some kind of advanced human that could stand at a distance from the hedonistic desires of adolescence. But inwardly, I did want them. I wanted to hold hands with someone in the hallways between classes, and I wanted to black out at a party and hookup with someone I didn’t know. I think I wanted people to know I was doing normal teenager things, and not spending my time convincing myself I was straight. But it wasn’t until I “came out” that I got to have those “teenage” experiences. As the second decade of my life came to a close, it felt like I’d hit reset.

I started to recognize a gap between my own experiences and the timelines of the heterosexual people around me. All of a sudden, I was having a different experience of time and forward motion, and the general idea of “finding myself” seemed unfamiliar and disjointed. I knew that everyone experiences things differently, but something within me still wanted the comfort that I wasn’t alone in my seemingly adolescent worries.

I was lucky to have had support from my friends and family when I came out, but I still felt so isolated from everyone I loved. I knew I could count on them for empathy, but what would that mean to me if they hadn’t gone through a similar shift in identity? I didn’t want comforting gestures, I wanted guidance through the fog.

But I had to learn on the job. Friends would set me up with men they trusted, and I spent time on dating apps trying to forge connections. Those guys seemed so certain about who they were, and I was jealous. I wanted to ask them for advice but I didn’t know how; I couldn’t put the questions floating around my head into words.

I eagerly looked for ways to reconcile my experiences with those of my peers. In my searching, I encountered queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman. She wrote that temporal experiences deviating from the heterosexual norm can actually be considered to produce queer ways of knowing and existing.

Freeman’s theory was a deeply comforting idea to me: What I had long seen as a weak point or disadvantage in my teenagerhood suddenly seemed productive. While at times painful and lonely, my experience was also unique and generative, contributing to a comfortable mode of being that was at the time unknown to me. This quelled the anxiety that I was behind in life, that I was wrong for doing in my twenties what most people did in their teens.

Realizing that it wasn’t a matter of getting things done early in life relieved a pressure I thought was inherent to being queer, and allowed me to focus on parsing out the positive qualities of my own experience. The awareness of different temporalities of queer experience helped me reframe my feelings of isolation, seeing them as moments of individuality and uniqueness that could be shared with other queer folk.

There are so many justifiably negative takeaways from growing up queer, especially in a political climate that increasingly exacerbates the divide between “normal” and “different.” For me, it’s important to do the work of finding the positive aspects of my sexuality and identity lodged in these nuances, so that facing the difficult parts of myself becomes less daunting.

Looking back, my adolescence and teen years were not just a closed off period of unrequited yearning—it was in those years I learned to be comfortable with myself, by myself. Doing that emotional labour alone was hard, but now I have an intimate knowledge of how to care for my own mental and emotional health.

And now, having had my own relationships, I’ve realized that I was not alone in the experience. But thinking I was on a solo venture brought me to a place where I learned to feel confident being there for myself. I am and always will be my own strongest support system.

There are still aspects to my queer identity that I am growing into and learning to love, and not all of them fall into place without strain. But knowing that queerness is an ongoing process, I find comfort in the certainty that the ups and downs of the past, present, and future are all meant to happen at my own pace.