

## **My Story** by Stephanie Shaw

It was a difficult thing to look back on my entire life and try to pinpoint the exact moment when I became certain about my sexual orientation. I guess it was the day that my suitcase popped open. Ever since I was six years old, I knew that I felt more comfortable around girls, but it wasn't until I was thirty-five years old that I finally figured out why.

A number of years ago, I found myself feeling very attracted to a woman whom I had only known for a short time. I experienced very strong feelings for her that I didn't quite understand. I became confused and frightened. "Why am I feeling this way? What does this mean? I can't possibly be the 'G' word, can I? No way! But what is happening to me?"

After a few days of feeling painfully confused, something drastic happened. My mental suitcase that I had been stuffing popped open. Since childhood, I recognized that I was attracted to girls, then to women. When these feelings surfaced, I promptly got rid of them by stuffing them into a mental suitcase where no one could see them. It was hard enough going through those awkward growing-up years without having to deal with the fact that my sexuality seemed different from that of my friends. I didn't want this "thing" that those around me said was such a horrible no-no to be seen in the light of day and to become the subject of ridicule and scorn. So I hid that part of me, even from myself. Shoving my "difference" away seemed safe at the time, but I paid a price for this "safety." I frequently became withdrawn and depressed-not quite able to put my finger on why this was happening to me. And I continued to stowaway my feelings into an increasingly crowded space. But finally, those cramped items in my suitcase burst loose and flew up in my face for me to see-one by one, to remember, to acknowledge, and finally to put on and wear. It would have been impossible to cram one more article into that suitcase. I would never again be able to hide this part of me from myself. I was finally free.

However, those first few months of self-exploration were scary. I didn't know any gay people very well, not well enough to hold a meaningful conversation with, anyway. I felt very isolated, confused, and frightened. The only one I did have to talk to was God. Never once during my "coming out" process did I separate myself from God. In fact, I grew closer to my creator. Even though it was very confusing, this was also a very affirming period of my life; I knew that God had to be at the center of it. Prayer was an integral part of my day, every day. When I started to listen to some of the unkind and condemning societal and biblical words used against homosexuality and homosexuals, I sometimes began to doubt that I was the good person I'd always thought I was. It was only when I approached my creator in prayer that I was calmed and comforted. With each prayer I received a blessing, and I was impressed with the knowledge that God loves me just the way I am. I also felt as if I was being guided to search the scriptures more deeply for the truths contained within them and to search within myself for the good within me. The more I searched, the more I saw and felt the love that the creator has for me. I knew that I, and others like me, were not condemned sinners but cherished children of God.

With that knowledge, I was able to slowly move forward in faith, and "come out" to my friends, my family, and my church. I was scared to death to tell my family members, especially my parents, that I was gay. It was a golden opportunity to find out whether or not all of the tender love and care that I received throughout my life was conditional or unconditional. Although it was the most difficult thing that I have ever done, I finally found the courage to reveal my sexual orientation to my parents. When I did, I received a blessing. My parents, and the rest of my family, have shown me nothing but total acceptance, love, and caring concern both before and after I came out to them. And my good friends treat me no differently now than they did before I told them that I was gay.

During this period of self-exploration, I was very 'active in my home congregation in St. Paul, Minnesota, as I am now. In fact, I am an ordained teacher of the Community of Christ. During those first weeks, when I finally acknowledged to myself that I was gay, my congregation was in the midst of having priesthood meetings. The 'people in the different priesthood offices were meeting in separate groups to figure out ways to effectively serve in their specific offices. In our teachers group, someone (not me) suggested that we do something to affirm the worth of gays and lesbians. We all agreed that it sounded like a way in which we could serve as peacemakers in our church. So we drafted some legislation that proclaimed that our congregation was a "welcoming" congregation. During the numerous sessions in which we carefully crafted our resolution, I came out to my fellow teachers. They were all very loving and supportive. Their love helped give me the courage to proceed with the resolution and to come out to even more members of the congregation.

Although we needed several discussion sessions to adequately prepare ourselves, my home congregation unanimously voted in favor of the resolution. St. Paul Congregation now officially "welcomes and encourages people of all sexual orientations to share in community life, worship, and sacraments, including leadership and ministry." I felt blanketed with the love of my family, my friends, my church, and my creator.

In the midst of all of this self-exploration and coming out, I found the love of my life. Her name is Barb. Before I met her, and when I was still under the mistaken impression that I was a heterosexual, I always felt awkward with the "significant others" in my life. Something always felt not quite right-unnatural. I was never able to experience true spiritual or emotional intimacy. Then Barb came into my life (as did her four adult children and her-our-two grandchildren). Now I have- that intimacy that I craved all those years. I also have a loving, trusting partner who listens to me, takes care of me, comforts me, laughs with me, cries with me, argues with me, and lets me argue with her (in a healthy way). We have been together for over six years now. Four years ago, we had a commitment ceremony. It was a very beautiful and spiritual experience for us and for the people who attended it. Although we knew that this ceremony would not be recognized legally, nor by the institutional church, we still wanted to share this celebration of our love for each other with the people who are closest to us. We wanted to honor our families, our friends, and those who have supported us throughout our relationship by including them in this special moment in our lives.

Although Barb was not active in any organized religion and had developed her own personal spirituality that helped her through some very rough patches in her life, she started coming to church with me almost from the start of our relationship. She wanted us to be there together as a family. She knew how important my church was to me, and she wanted to be a part of that piece of my life. The members of my congregation have been super! They love Barb and miss her when she isn't there on a Sunday. She is very aware of the love that they extend to her, and she gives it right back to them. I'm proud of them all.

Barb surprised me last year. We had attended a GALA retreat in the Kansas City area. GALA stands for "Gay and Lesbian Acceptance." It is a group of (mostly) gay Community of Christ members, their families, and their friends. The service was a special one for all of us. But it affected Barb particularly sweetly. She was aware of and touched by a beautiful spirit in a church setting for the first time in many, many years. The presence of that spirit, combined with the tender love and care shown to her by our many church friends, helped Barb make an important decision. She came to me shortly after that retreat and told me that she wanted to be baptized. I was speechless. Never once had I pushed Barb into even thinking about joining the church. She was influenced by that tender spirit that loves us and is with us. And she was touched by the people-God's loving children-in her life. I couldn't be happier than I am now!

It is my prayer that each of us will open up to that spirit, so that we can listen and learn about what it means to be a child of God and what it means to live among all of God's children, in love, and in peace.