

No One Deserves to Live in the Closet Forever

Around the world, the word “acceptance” resonates as a goal to attain; everyone preaches it, yet not all embrace it. People will tell you how they welcome everyone without distinction. However, should a new neighbor from a different faith, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, move in, gossips and scrutiny will start. In the same constant, what is acceptable to a nation, a society, will not be to another. There is a group of people in our country that is still not accepted by all, and still suffers abuse, whether physical, mental or emotional, and rejection in every societal setting: the LGBTQIA+ community. It has been engrained in our lives for so long, in such diverse ways, that homophobic jokes are displayed in movies or on TV without any second thoughts from the writers. “It is ok, they understand it is just a joke”. No one realizes the damage and pain it can create. People are scared to be their true self, to embrace it, because they feel outcast from the start. And this is why my son’s coming out made his father and I, bearers of his biggest secret.

We are brought up to embrace stereotypical images of what our lives should be. When our son was born, we immediately envisioned him going to college, becoming a doctor or an engineer, fall in love with the girl next door, marry her and fill our house with grandbabies. Both families, along with the in-laws, would gather at Thanksgiving. Christmas would be shared, but children would be spoiled by everyone, as a display of who loves them the most. When our son came out to us last year, this vision shattered. We were watching a documentary, which we thought would be on the latest concert of his favorite band, but which ended up being about the rejection of LGBTQ+ youth by the Mormon church. We were silently watching when Elijah (we will call him Elijah) asked his dad to pause the show.

Elijah: “Mom!!!” His eyes started to fill with sobs.

I asked: “Yes, baby, what is going on? Why are you crying?” As I was started to feel alarmed.

Elijah answered: “Mom, I think I’m gay!!!” He then threw himself in my arms, his body shaking uncontrollably, sobs becoming brutally intense, almost to screams.

For a second, we were at loss. Not because our son just came out, but because it happened in a stream of tears. They were not our tears but our child’s, scared, trembling, as if something got broken and he was afraid of the consequences. He thought he was the one broken, and fearful of the consequences. This realization hurt. It felt as if I were being gutted and each organ being slowly pulled out. No voice, no breath, they were gone.

Our options changed overnight, and for a time there were no replacement, as we were unfamiliar with our child’s sexual orientation. Elijah identifies as pansexual. This identification is often mistaken for bisexual. Bisexuality implies binaries: male and female. Pansexuality implies diversity: a pansexual person can fall in love with males, females, transgenders, whether male to female, or female to male, non-binary people. Put simply, our son gets to fall in love with whomever he wants. Should our child decide to settle, well, the lucky partner will be a surprise. And we love surprises.

We had always envisioned ourselves with grandchildren around us. There was a time when we grieved we might never experience such joy. Grand-dogs soon replaced grandchildren, and the idea slowly grew on us. The old soul that is our child reassured us that there might still be grandchildren, they might just be adopted or obtained through surrogacy.

As Elijah’s fears of non-acceptance faded, fears of our own started settling in. We accepted him without any restrictions, but how would others react? We started fearing he would

be rejected by his friends, by family. Will he be bullied at school? At work? How safe would his world be now?

We decided that the best way to answer those questions was to talk, as a family. We called him in to the living-room:

I said: “we want you to know that we don’t care who you love, we care for you to be happy. We want you to live your truth, without shame or doubt.” He stayed silent, just staring at us. I added: “you know you can tell us anything, we will always be there for you. Whether you are worried, sad. But please, never be sorry for who you are. You are amazing, just be proud of who you are. Just be you”. As I was wondering what he was thinking, he gave us the most teen answer there could be: “ok”. I was not sure at that time our conversation had an impact. But this gave him the courage to start talking to some of his closest friends at school. He was delighted to find out they did not care. Elijah was Elijah, no matter what. He also knew his parents would love him for his true self unconditionally. He felt the support, and it seemed an ugly black cloud was lifted and gone.

We immediately looked into ways to help him blossom, outside of his home. We felt he needed to be surrounded by peers. He had questions we could not answer, and we had questions we did not know who to ask. Our research directed us to a Community Center which offered LGBTQ youth groups, and family support groups. This allowed Elijah to realize he did not have to explain or justify himself to anyone. He could just be himself and decide who to tell and who not to tell. We learnt to consult him on how to handle different situations, confrontational or not. For instance, the adult friend who asks him the name of his girlfriend. We never answer for him. A look tells us how to react, if a reaction is needed. One thing that became obvious was his

confidence. Getting the opportunity to encounter and interact with other members of the LGBTQ+ community really helped him realize his potential and affirm his choices.

We cannot help but worry though, even with all the support we found. The world is changing, the few progresses made with acceptance are slowly fading away. This installs a new fear with each new headline of aggression against LGBTQ individuals. Through educating Elijah and ourselves on the current protections offered, and laws against discrimination, we realized that California is one of the best states to live in.

Rules still had to be established anyways, for Elijah's safety. Caution is of the essence; even if Elijah can live his truth, he still needs to be wary of his surroundings and the crowd he is in. We make sure to never show him our fears, we act with love and confidence. Gatherings and events are planned with his friends, but each scenario is analyzed, every possible outcome considered, all this in order not to leave any room for danger. For instance, Elijah needs to understand that when dating, depending on who he dates, they might not be able to hold hands in public, or hug, or kiss, without risk of being assaulted. Every little detail, every little move needs to be examined, all implications considered. It feels, at times, we are falling into paranoia, but safety comes first, no stone can remain unturned.

We live our new life day by day, learning from each experience. The first lesson was the most humbling. It showed us the importance of love, whether self-love, or altruistic love: knowing you are loved, supported, that your existence is valid, appreciated, can save lives. Being entrusted by our son with his secret, getting to tell him he could love who he wanted to love, took the darkness away from his soul. The road is still long, and there will still be bumps, but we are here, and he knows it. Bearing his secret enhanced the trust we already had for each other. We are accomplices in our fight against intolerance and discrimination. We are not only a

family. We are a safe zone for LGBTQ+ youth, and elders, where they can express their truth. We live our lives by only one rule: Love is love.

But now, our lives have been tried again. Elijah is no more. No more swim meets on the weekends to attend. No more pictures of our little boy on the walls. Memories of times past have been erased. His dad will never teach him how to shave or how to knot a tie. Elijah is now a distant mist in a fog of dreams. But like the Phoenix, from the ashes of our lives, a new love arose, and we welcomed T in his place: our transgender daughter. T is the nickname we affectionately gave her. We cannot express enough how proud, how amazed we are by her strength, as she had known for years who she really was but could not verbalize it until recently. We are taking it one step at a time, still, as we navigate through her transition. We are made so very proud as well by the love and acceptance those close to her showered us with. Friends, family, school officials and classmates uniting to make her feel included. Standing by her side to fight her battles. We were entrusted by the Universe with this admirable soul to nurture and we will do everything in our power to help her grow into the amazing woman we can already see in her. We will be her fierce advocates till the end. For her own sake, and for the sake of all the transgender individuals, children and adults, who are too scared to be who they need to be. We love you, you will always have a shelter in our home.