

So there I was, a new job, a new relationship, a new, exciting life...and having brunch with my Dad. We talked about my work a bit, and eventually, he fell into his usual catch phrases about hard work, being honest, finding happiness. I knew he believed in these things. I also knew when he started talking like this, he was saying he loved me and believed in me. As I listened to him, it occurred to me that I would never have an opportunity like this again. Me sitting with my father, discussing my future and what it meant to be happy. So I looked at him and said, "It's a little ironic that you should be saying these things, because there's something I've been wanting to tell you and Mom for a while."

I took a deep breath and said, "I'm gay, and in a relationship with a man. His name is Stephan Love. We're living together in town, and work with a dance company called The Next Generation Dance Theatre..." I'm not sure what else I said, what I do remember is seeing Dad's face grow completely pale and his body pull back reflexively like he was avoiding a punch. For a few moments, all he did was sit there blinking. Then, he said, "You know your mother and I can't support this..." He talked about the church's teachings; he offered to pay for therapy (I didn't bother telling him I was already in good hands) and then he told me that Stephan would never be welcome in their home. It was exactly what I expected.

Faith Trumps Family.

Our meal faded into uncomfortable silence as we waited for the check. Still, the worst was over – or so I thought. Dad went home and, naturally, told my mother. The next day, he was in the hospital. One of the veins that had been grafted in his bypass surgery a year earlier had collapsed. When my mother called to tell me, she started by saying how hurt and angry she was at not being told with Dad. She said she was worried about "how much your father could take." Then it was my turn to get angry. I fired back, "I am not responsible for Dad's inability to handle his emotions!" And I heard my mother like I'd never heard her before. Her voice grew strong and loud as she said, "But I will do EVERYTHING I can to protect your father and take care of him!" Then she burst into tears. The conversation ended with both of us hurt, angry and crying....and still saying "I love you," before we hung up.

I wrote a coming out letter and sent xeroxed copies to my siblings, wanting everyone to hear/read the same thing, from me (this was back before the days of email). The response to my letter was pretty much what I expected. There was some support from a few, a lot of nothing from others, and one very angry shut down that would be followed by years of boiling silence.

A few weeks later, Stephan and I drove out to the suburbs to hear a friend who was singing at a well-known club, opening for Livingston Taylor. It was after midnight when we finally began the drive back into town. Having grown up in the area, I told Stephan I should drive, that I knew a few shortcuts. He didn't argue. In fact, he just turned up the radio and put his head back and said, "It's all yours." Windows down, one of our mix tapes playing, we drove past sleeping farms while Joni and Phoebe sang.

Half an hour later later, I was nudging Stephan's leg and saying, "I have a surprise for you." I had parked on a quiet street in this dark, sleeping neighborhood, shut the motor off and pointed across the street. "That's the house I grew up in." He was speechless. He just got out of the car and kept staring at my family's house, not saying a word, and not missing a single detail.

Like thieves in the night, we snuck down the driveway into the backyard. I pointed out different things, whispered quick little stories from my childhood as we walked around – the creek that rolled into the woods behind our house where we used to hunt for crayfish, the garden I used to take care of – looking sad and grave like in the darkness, the big lumpy roots of the maple that we used as home base was for kick ball. I told him the story of the winter when it snowed so much, we made these huge snow forts as big as igloos and staged massive snowball fights. For a while, we stood under the big maple and just listened to the different sounds, holding hands – it really was this wonderful, terribly sad moment. As we walked back to the car, we peeked in the kitchen window like two kids at a bakery counter – eyes just able to look past the windowsill into this world that I used to belong to, and Stephan would never know. It was the closest I could bring him, and the furthest away I ever felt. That's when I really got it....I was on my own.

