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gay writes: the essays  
1997

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january 15, 1997

Time and again it is said that people who don't have children should not give advice to those who do. I feel this is true when you are referring to raising a child. I am going to give some advice today on how a parent should react to a child who has just come out as gay/lesbian. As an adult child with parents myself, I believe I can speak to this topic from experience.

As a parent, your coming out process begins when your child informs you he or she is gay. Your gay child has had a head start. Your son/daughter will consider their orientation for a very long time before ever beginning their coming out process. Most likely, they will come out to others before you. This is because young gays are advised, by books or just gut feelings, that it is a good idea to have a support network before telling all to a parent or parents. Please don't feel as if you are the last to know--coming out is a lifelong process. Telling you represents the biggest turning point in a gay child's life.

It is difficult to hear that your child is gay or lesbian. Impossible to hear, you say. Parenting is difficult and now is not the time to stop. You cared for your son when his temperature reached 104 degrees. You watched as your daughter left home for the

first time to go to school. You were there when your son came home bloody after a fight. You stood strong when your teenage daughter experimented with drugs and alcohol. You feared for your child's life when the word "gang" became commonplace in our society. Now, your child has come out to you. What are you going to do? You are not going to stop being that parent. Your love will not end at a time when you are experiencing your son or daughter's greatest gift of love for you: honesty. For the first time in your life you will experience the full beauty of your child. Open your arms.

Before the grieving process kicks in full steam--and it will-- you must gather strength and commit to two things: BEING THERE and LISTENING.

The umbilical cord will never seem so severed as when the words "I'm gay" are spoken to a parent. Your first reaction and your behavior thereafter speak volumes to a vulnerable child. But if you say nothing else, please say that you will be there and that you will always listen. Losing you will hurt more than anything. Casting off your child will accomplish nothing--your child will be gay regardless of whether or not you are a part of their life. Consider today the first real day you are a parent. Feel every emotion--anger, depression, fear, anything. Celebrate that your kid is ready to share with you the joys and sorrows of living.

My parents accepted the words "I'm gay" without fanfare. They treated me no differently the day after I told them than the day before. They were there for me. I remember the first time I told my dad that I was feeling down about the breakup of a relationship. Looking back, the relationship was so short and insignificant that I snicker now that I could even mildly be down about it. But it was important then. My dad didn't know what to say. He tried to mumble some words of wisdom, but I was satisfied that he just listened to me. What I had to get off my chest was important on that particular Sunday and my Monday was much better having had the chance to lean on my father just that little bit.

That Sunday was seven years ago. Our relationship hasn't changed much since then. My parents are my parents and I am their son. Very simple, very straightforward. Being nearly 40 years removed from me in age, I have found that my parents are not the best sounding-board for my gay issues. I have other channels available to me--most notably my close friends both straight and gay. Still, I recently have discovered a new outlet: other parents of gays who simultaneously give me and need my support. My involvement in the local chapter of PFLAG--Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays--is my first step in a brand new coming out stage of my life.

Suddenly, you are driving on a two-way street. Yes! Your child is talking to you as an equal for conceivably the first time ever. There are new hazards and potential roadblocks ahead. You can't stop the car and get out now. The middle of your life is not the place to end this great journey. Step on the gas and start making up for lost time.

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april 11, 1997

Around 4:00 a.m. this morning I was mowing the lawn in a sewing store. The lawn mower was gas operated but it had to be plugged in. I went to my childhood home to empty the grass-catcher.

A David Lynch movie?

Perhaps, but not in this case. It was just a dream. Since you may not know me well enough to analyze the dream, I will do so for you. Yesterday I saw my brother Joe for the first time in a couple of weeks. The dream was probably triggered by memories of my boyhood chores and the fact that Joe did not participate in them. I learned how to mow the lawn when I was 12 years old. When Joe was 12 years old, he got to play--no tasks or responsibilities for him. Since we are 6 years apart in age, I had so looked forward to the day that Joe was old enough to assume his right of passage and start mowing the lawn. My retirement never came. I mowed the lawn for 5 more years.

You have, correctly, been led to believe that my brother and I are very competitive. This May, little Joe turns 28, graduates from Colorado State University with his masters degree and gets married. On the eve of these milestones, I asked my brother some questions. The answers didn't surprise me. I hope you find this dialogue progressive, supportive and enlightening.

DESCRIBE HOW YOU DISCOVERED THAT YOUR BROTHER WAS GAY. WHAT DID YOU DO AND HOW DID YOU FEEL? "I discovered that my brother was gay on accident. He lived at home while taking classes at CSU. I was still in high school. I needed something in his room while he was in class. I can't even remember what I needed--something trivial. I started looking through some of his desk drawers, and I found some gay magazines. I remembered not feeling anything at first, like it was some kind of dream. I put the magazines back and thought for awhile, about an hour. I decided that I should share my discovery with my father. We went back into my brother's room and I showed him the magazines. Together we decided not to tell anybody, especially my mother. My father and I have never talked about the subject again, even to this day. I think my father may still have some sense of denial. I never did feel any sense of shock. In fact, finding the magazines was almost a relief. I finally understood who my brother

was. All the clues he left prior to the discovery finally came together. Everything made sense.”

HOW HAS HAVING A GAY BROTHER SHAPED YOUR LIFE?

“The question should really be restated as ‘How does having a brother shaped your life?’ And as any younger sibling will attest, I have learned values such as sharing, compassion, and competitiveness. As for the gay part, the results are minimal. The fact that my brother is gay did not affect my sexual preference, or any other preference, in any way. For awhile, I felt an added pressure to be ‘the son that my father always wanted.’ But I’ve realized that all my actions, all my decisions were for myself--not for anybody else, not for my father. My brother has realized this as well. Our dynamics together have only helped and enforced this fact.”

HAVE YOU EVER OBSERVED HOMOPHOBIA IN THE WORKPLACE OR AT SCHOOL? WHAT DID YOU DO?

“Homophobia has extremes and a wide range in-between. Does telling a gay joke make you a homophobe? If so, then I’m guilty. No, I haven’t come across a severe case of homophobia. Yes, I always run across homophobia, both at work and at school. For example, the attitude of management at my place of work is aligned toward straight, white males. If someone at work asks me about my brother, ‘Why isn’t he married?’ ‘Who’s he dating?’ I’ll simply answer, ‘My brother makes his own decisions,’ or ‘I don’t know who or if my brother is dating.’ It’s really none of their business anyway.”

YOU HAVE COME OUT TO SOME OF YOUR FRIENDS BY TELLING THEM YOUR BROTHER IS GAY. HOW DID THAT FEEL?

“When my brother came out to me, before he realized I already knew, he entrusted me with the power of who to tell. When I decide to tell a friend, or girlfriend about my brother, it’s usually to accommodate a greater level of trust between my friend and I. In return, I always communicate a friend’s knowledge back to my brother. The one thing I value most is the friendships I keep. Most of my friends and acquaintances don’t need to know about my brother’s preferences and probably never will know. However, a specific subset of my friends, who are most dear to me, needed to know that my brother was gay.

YOU HAVE FORMED SOME OF YOUR OWN FRIENDSHIPS WITH YOUR BROTHER’S FRIENDS. DO YOU HAVE ANY PERSPECTIVES YOU CAN SHARE ON THIS?

“My brother’s friends, by far, are some of the most intellectual, humorous, courageous and caring people that I have ever met. My brother wouldn’t have his friends any other way. I always treat my brother’s friends with respect, and in return I receive it back. By doing so, it fosters the relationship between myself and my brother’s friends.”

SPEAKING OF FRIENDS, YOU WILL BE MARRIED TO YOUR LONGTIME GIRLFRIEND THIS SPRING. DESCRIBE HER REACTION TO YOUR HAVING A GAY BROTHER.

“I knew that my brother was gay long before he told me. Ironically, she knew that my brother was gay before I told her! Her best friend, who is gay, worked at the same place that my brother did. She put two-and-two together and figured out the situation from background information. I’m fortunate that she appreciates people, gay and straight, in the same manner that I do.”

WHAT DOES MARRIAGE MEAN TO YOU? “To me, marriage is sharing yourself with someone you love. Aside from the legal

implications of marriage, it is publicly announcing that you are willing to give what it takes to make a monogamous relationship work 'until death do you part.' Marriage is serious, marriage is fun."

WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON GAY MARRIAGES? SHOULD THEY BE ALLOWED? WHY DO YOU THINK THERE IS SO MUCH OPPOSITION TO THE NOTION OF GAY MARRIAGES? "Why shouldn't gay marriages be allowed? All people, gay or straight, share in feelings, goals and desires for marriage. In fact, most gay couples that I know foster better relationships with each other than the straight couples I know. However, a repressed society is coping with a more and more vocal gay community. Rights in this area may be slow to change. Perhaps it is the last institution that homophobes feel is their own."

YOUR BROTHERHOOD HAS PROGRESSED THROUGH MANY, MANY STAGES. LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE FUTURE FOR JIM AND JOE AS BROTHERS? "Definitely, our brotherhood has progressed through many stages. Our past experiences are too rich and valuable to go wayside. Throughout the years, we've each had changing priorities that have claimed our precious time. However, we have always found a way to rekindle our brotherhood."

FINALLY, WHAT WISDOMS WOULD YOU SHARE WITH OTHER BROTHERS OR SISTERS WHO DISCOVER THEY HAVE GAY SIBLINGS? "Regardless of any preference, any opinion, or any action: your sibling is still your sibling. Chances are that your sibling will need a lot of support when they come out. They have just trusted you by revealing themselves--the least you can do is listen and acknowledge them."

So, how do I feel about little brother having an advanced degree and being hitched before me? That's another dream...

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july 21, 1997

It was the singular, most romantic day of my life: August 7, 1993. It was the day I would, for but a fleeting moment in time, spend with the man who could have been my one shot at a soul mate. And, although we would talk by phone later, it was the last day I have ever seen Mike face to face.

Because Mike lived nearly 100 miles from me in a small farm community, it was difficult to see each other after we initially met. A dinner date here, a phone conversation there. It was, in passing, that Mike mentioned he was the set designer for a play production being staged in Sterling. He hinted that I might come spend the day with him and attend one of the evening productions. Over the next couple of weeks I considered the offer until it hit me that I would really like to see where, and how, Mike lived.

The dog day was unsurprisingly sunny and hot. I drove two hours and met Mike in the parking lot of a grocery store just

inside Sterling city limits. On the way I marveled at the vastness of the Pawnee National Grasslands and wondered why I had never ventured out to this part of Colorado before. The highway had minimal traffic and time seemed to move as if I were asleep and dreaming.

Mike's mom's house was the next stop. A quick tour revealed that Mike was the simple guy I had come to know. Very few trinkets adorned his bedroom. The walls were mostly white and bare. Much like mine at home I thought. The plainness of this fact hit me with such force that, to this day, I can still remember thinking it.

Lunchtime. We chose Subway so we could eat at one of the parks in town. I have always considered picnics to be romantic, and looking back I wonder why this is the only one I have ever shared with another guy. Not before and not since. I have a fuzzy recollection that there was a weird sculpture of a clown in this park and that Mike had childhood memories of it.

A good part of the afternoon was spent on a little tour of Sterling. We visited the grocery mart where he worked, a local store where I met a friend of Mike's who helped with the theatre, and Northeastern Junior College where he attended classes. Mike decided we should visit his uncle on the farm. When we arrived, no one was home. Mike and I sat on the porch swing and talked. I remember distinctly wanting to kiss Mike. Mostly because he was showing me his life and partially because I just wanted to. I must have been paralyzed just gazing at Mike's skinny, dark, Italian features, for the nerve never came to me. Soon, Mike's uncle drove up and after meeting him we decided to head back to town.

Mike loved his family. His grandmother greeted us with open arms when we appeared at her back door. Mike's Grandpa was not feeling well, but I met him nevertheless. He was watching TV, but still stood to shake my hand and welcome me into his home. The next hour was spent talking with Grandma on the couch. I don't remember what we talked about, but it seemed like everything. It was as if I had flashed back in time and was speaking with my own grandmother.

Mike's Mom was finally home from work when we circled back that way. So was Mike's sister. A hasty conversation was required since the afternoon was making way to the evening and Mike was due at the theatre. Mike took me to a small local diner and we ate. Mike paid.

I dashed Mike to the Oak Street Theatre so he could prepare his set for Clare Boothe Luce's: The Women--a play without any

male cast members. I took the opportunity to put gas in my truck for the drive home later and returned to the playhouse to buy a ticket and find my seat. Mike came out to chat with me after making his initial preparations. We made plans to meet at intermission. The Oak Street Theatre was as charming as the day had been. I sat on a chair arranged in a pew-like, church setting. The curtain opened and I was instantly absorbed into the story.

As planned, we met briefly at the play's midpoint for a can of pop and a snack. Mike explained that tonight was the last showing of the play and the cast party followed. He hinted that I was welcome to come with him, but that I might not have much fun knowing beforehand that I am not much of a partier. Plus, he would be distracted by needing to give attention to his friends. It was the prelude for the end of our day.

And, the end came. The play was so much fun I could have stayed and watched a repeat performance right then and there. I walked out feeling melancholy. It was time to say so long and make the long drive home. I made my way to the truck and waited for Mike to receive praise and accolades from the admirers in the audience. Mike knew most if not everyone in attendance. Sterling's small town atmosphere added to the magic of this day.

Mike hopped in the truck next to me and assured me he could get a ride home. He was honestly touched that I had come way out east to see him and his play. I realized then how important this had been to him. We finally kissed goodnight and he sent me on my way.

Mike and I never really had a relationship other than what I have described. We didn't date and the span of time he was in my life amounted to just over a month. A few phone conversations after my visit was the last communication we would have. There was no anger or malice in our parting. Just a bittersweet end. I am left knowing that this could have been "the one." Or maybe just a prescience that "the ones" to come had to measure up to this man and this day. Few have.

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september 1, 1997

We are taught that there are few absolutes in life. That you should avoid saying "never" or "always." This is probably wise advice when debating. I can say, with almost certainty, that I will remain single for the better part of the rest of my life.

I am not one of those individuals who blames homosexuality on every difficult problem I face. Being gay is everything to me. Humanistically, it is the element that drives my personality. I am more sensitive to the issues of both women and men than I would be if I wasn't gay. Philosophically, being gay lets me question and test myself to see if I am learning anything as I grow old. Creatively, it is my source. Without it, I would lose an inner vision which lets me break out of our daily, societal mold. Spiritually, it is a paradox: a calming peace yet an agitating war to be different in a world of many clones. It is a gift most cherished. So, with all of this, how does one come to such a conclusion that, romantically, he will always be single and why?

I think the answer lies by looking deep inside and seeing gifts you have, and knowing the ones which were given to someone else. It is said that there is someone for everyone on this planet. An assessment of my gifts leads me to believe that, while I have much love to offer and can be an excellent mate for someone, that someone will never be. I simply do not have the right gifts for such a companionship. This is not to say that I won't still make an engaging date or that I won't be a complete gay man.

In early 1985, I began my coming out process by calling the Fort Collins Gay and Lesbian Alliance telephone number just to listen to the recorded message. A couple of times a person actually answered the phone and I had to hang up quick since I didn't really want to admit, even to a stranger, that I was gay. It didn't take too long for me to thaw and I jumped into the gay scene eager to meet the love of my life. Twelve years later I have yet to have a relationship last beyond four months. In contrast, I have friends who have made lifelong commitments to the men of their dreams. They are the beneficiaries of the ingredient needed to find and keep love.

My friend Jason, whom I hadn't seen for several years, was in town this past May as a member of my brother's wedding party. After the reception he asked what I had been doing and where I was going in life. He asked if there was anyone special to me. I told him it was as it has always been. He looked at me in a knowing way and said "And you like it that way don't you?" Admittedly, I did not like what he had just said. It is not always pleasant to hear truth. While it is true that I have made the most of my short relationships--by always trying to keep a friendship and to make more out of what happens after we break up than while we were dating--I have never really thought of "liking" the situation. I have never sought out short relationships. Lack of commitment is what gay men and women are criticized most for; that our relationships "never work" because the Bible says they won't and can't. But, many straight men and women also lack the necessary qualities to have relationships. I know many beautiful

individuals who remain single and (never say) always will. So, it remains: how could I like the fact that I can't find love. Surely, this isn't truth. It can be easily excused and dismissed. "I don't live in the right place," or "There are no men my age around." Etc., etc., etc... Wrong. It all comes back to me.

Perhaps I will always be single due to my most dominant attribute of all. A quality that is easily overlooked and what may ail a good number of marriages and relationships in modern times: independence. I, for one, grew up a loner and I still cherish my own time and space. I get all the extrovert energy out of my system at work and with friends. My introvert urges are strong and there are times when I just need to be me and me alone. It took six years for my parents to give me a brother and "sharing" has been, from that day forward, a concept I can only practice, never master.

From the day we are born our society wants us to "couple" with others. We pretend to get married on elementary school playgrounds. We make prom night the single most important evening in the history of our lives to that point. We are expected to have had at least one boyfriend or girlfriend by the time we graduate from college. Heaven forbid if we turn 30 without a significant other to take home to Mom and Dad. The oddest quirk of modern culture is that couples who do hook-up often seek counseling when they feel they have become co-dependant on each other. Or, when friends scare the hell out of them by pointing out any observable co-dependent tendencies. Co-dependency may truthfully be just mumbo-jumbo jargon for the essential component that makes real relationships work. We live in a place where we oppose such melding; a time when few couples are willing to put their lover ahead of themselves even a fraction of the time. Straight women realized long ago that they don't have to subjugate their wants and needs to a man who won't do the same for them. D-I-V-O-R-C-E. It is earthy when your partner is an extension of you--your better-half if you will. It is heaven if such intimacy is reciprocated. Today, it seems uncool to "need" someone. I vacillate between wanting a man in my life and not caring if I ever find one. This multiple personality trait is a curse. If I could, I would just as soon choose the "not care" option and be done with it forever. I didn't inherit the co-dependent gene and I suffer for it.

I've taken speech courses, but never debated on a forensics team. Even without such formal training, I know it is ridiculous to blame independence on my single status. It may also be unwise to speculate that no man will ever cross my path and steal my heart. Nevertheless, odds are I will die alone. Facing this music is as difficult as you make it. For me, it's time to start growing in the garden I am planted in. I am thankful for my uniqueness. I

didn't choose my gifts, and I'm certainly not trading them nor giving any back.

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october 8, 1997

This is the tale of two poems. And, more.

It is ironic that National Coming Out Day falls in the same month as Halloween. Both represent fearsome things. Even before a boy acknowledges to himself he is gay, he knows. The word might not be there to describe the feelings, but he knows. He is different. The mark of society is upon him.

Such was the case for me in the 1977/78 junior high school year. I was in 9th grade. My English class required many writing assignments, including poetry. This sample, a dark, Halloween poem to some, was written nowhere near October 31st.

Creeping sounds in the dead of night  
It's robbers working by moonlight  
Out come the tools the robbers begin  
Unknown to them something lurks within  
The coffin beneath is centuries old  
The grip of death inside is cold  
The work of the robbers is almost done  
The rising of the dead one has begun  
They open the casket and scream out in pain  
The torture is cruel, they go insane,  
The dead one's hideous face of fear  
Shows no mercy, just that evil sneer  
The air about them gets severely hot  
Their bones inside decay and rot  
The revenge of the dead one comes to an end  
All is silent save the sound of the wind

As any junior high kid, I loved comic books and horror films. Naturally, this poem is an extension of that. But it is also a premonition of things to come. My soul was rocked by the differences I experienced from all those other guys in class. In junior high, difference is not accepted. It is odd, then, how I view junior high as a whole. It was my Renaissance. Of all the years I spent in public education, junior high was my finest hour. As an early maturing man, I was an adult in junior high. My teachers respected me and treated me as an equal. I was challenged more than ever before in course work and in relations with others. It was a lonely time, but, for a young loner unsure of why he was different, the loneliness was shelter. Looking back, it was this buffer that allowed me to be who I was inside and still be accepted from the outside.

This is why I feel coming out is a personal voyage. One can

choose to make it a political statement and wave a banner streetside. In society, this definitely serves a purpose and each of us eventually gets to the point where being in the closet is less comfortable than being out of it. The timing is everything and only you can decide when the time is right. No amount of television, newspaper, magazine or even peer pressure should make you choose something that is not right for you. Being out of the closet is relative. No matter how many people know you are gay, there is always someone new who will not know.

Ten years later, in 1987, I wrote another poem. This was not written for a class or any other purpose other than for me to put into words my feelings. I had already been out to myself for about 2 1/2 years and a very small handful, mostly gay, also knew. I had yet to tell my family or my closest friends. Again, from the surface, this poem is an anti-war message. Indeed, while composing, I intended for it to be nothing more than that. Looking back, a deeper meaning may have been superimposed over this theme: a way of coping with a monumental task ahead of me.

It was bronze for a statue  
Warrior to the king  
Mighty battles high and low  
Voices called  
The granite does bleed.

Valleys strewn with soldiers  
God's graves neatly dug  
It was a war I think  
One said  
But I don't know.

It was done for a king  
One man protected  
Behind stone walls  
What a life  
In a war.

Peace  
The sum of the dead  
Was more than the price we had to pay  
Why give to charity one's life  
So that others may hate others more.

Because  
It was done for that man  
Who was it  
Oh yes  
The king.

Now in this park  
Surrounded by city  
Stands a man  
Long dead in his suit  
Of metal plating.

And below him in English is writ  
He died for his country  
Long live the king  
And the king  
Where is his statue?

Such an appetite  
One not satisfied without death  
So it was  
The plate was served  
To a king fit for a meal.

The day arrived to tell my father that I am gay. My dad was a veteran of two wars: World War II and the Korean War. He fought for his country--a man and a hero in my eyes. In our society, being gay and being a man are opposites to many. To me I was ashamed to not be like my father.

As I drove home on that sunny evening in June, 1988 to come out to my dad, I considered what his rejection might mean to me. How I might cease to be a man in his eyes. How certain I would never be one in my own eyes.

I wasn't rejected. I became more of a man than I had ever been before.

I don't write poetry any more. At least, I haven't in the past 10 years. Perhaps as I near the 1997/98 cusp, I will be driven to again take pen in hand and write of a topic which, superficially, seems far removed from being gay, but down deep has very much to do with this life.

Twenty years is a long coming out process and I am not finished yet. I never will be. For those of you who feel different, take heart. Everyone is different. In the end, man cannot be measured by other men. May your journey be safe.

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november 22, 1997

If a 10-year-old boy saw his grandmother collapse in front of him and later die, would it change his life?

It changed mine.

*Mrs. Lou Farmer*  
*August 2, 1896*  
*May 22, 1973*

Dear Grandma,

Today, I decided to sit down and write you a letter. I have the last words you ever wrote to me--the Easter and Birthday cards postmarked April 17, 1973 from your trip to see Aunt Joyce in Leawood, Kansas. It's high time I put some words to paper too. Just to say hello and to tell you how important you have been to me throughout my life.

I think I handled your death pretty well. I don't think I'm over it yet. I hope I never stop learning from it because I am still puzzled by how death is such a part of living. Going to a counselor to talk about death and dying wasn't really an option for kids in 1973. I guess I never expected you to go. How naive, huh? I just wish you hadn't gone that day. You just returned from the airport and I had so much to tell you. I guess it was fortunate that I had attended the Cox Ambulance Service demonstration at school. Still, it seemed like it took forever for them to get to our house that spring afternoon. I was so scared. Sitting for hours at the neighbors with a 4 year-old brother until Mom came home from the hospital to say you hadn't made it. I'm sorry I didn't come to your funeral. Dad said funerals weren't for little boys and I had to stay home and look after Joe. I wish I could have said goodbye, but then, you've never really left me.

I know you already know this, but I'm gay Grandma. I grew up the day you died and because of that I have been able to grow even more through the passage of years. It has given me the courage to embrace who I am. There are so many gay men and women who struggle with life instead of live it. Your legacy to me is the maturity of soul to handle the ugliness of the world, yet a lightness of heart to not have hatred of it. Thank you for that.

Your death did leave some holes in my spirituality that I have been working to fix. Three summers ago Aunt Joyce visited Mom and Dad and, at the last minute, I decided to go see her. Her divorce and new husband have made her a little more human. Inside, I forgave her for looting your stuff when she came back for your funeral. I never told her how I felt, maybe someday. It was enough to let go of the past by facing her and giving her a big hug. Nevertheless, I still harbor ill feelings for the tradition of funerals. I feel there is a lot of phoniness associated with people gathering to pay respects for someone they really didn't give half a thought to while living. But Joyce wasn't in that category. I know she loves you. She just acted out of place at a time when the opportunity to divide belongings was directly opposed to my sensitivity of only wanting you. It is a lesson well taught. As I move toward middle age I am vowing to put more emphasis on loving my friends and family while they are here with me.

Speaking of middle age, it's coming. Time has moved so fast. What if I don't like what I've become at 40? You can't go back and fix anything. I didn't think much about turning 30. But, that's just it. I didn't think. Now I will. I'm taking a seminar and the facilitator asked the class to pretend that we were sitting in a beautiful place at the end of our lives. Sitting there, we were to write down three things that we had accomplished over the course of our life. I wrote that I had been a teacher. Not a classroom teacher, but someone who taught of life. I also put down that I had left a written legacy. Words that future generations could read. And, finally I had a life of peace. A lifetime of teaching, writing and peace. They're not easy goals. I'm afraid of a mid-life crisis.

So, I am going to work toward not having one. I want to embrace my future for however long it plays out. I sometimes wonder whether you had everything in life that you wanted; if you ever looked back and knew you made a difference.

I want to cry, Grandma. I'm a man who doesn't cry. A gay man at that. How did I ever learn this? I am hoping that I didn't learn it the day you died. I feel bad enough that I remember you more for dying than living. The night you left, I remember lying in bed, eyes wide open, with the hallway light shining in on my face because I didn't turn it off. I was frozen. I wanted to cry then. I was supposed to, right? You weren't coming back...ever. I couldn't. I will never forget Mom, sitting in the kitchen, phoning Dad on his business trip to tell him the news. Then, she started the unpleasant task of calling the other relatives. I don't remember her ever crying through any of it. She was, and is, so strong. I look back and imagine her sitting at the hospital that awful night; bracing herself for the worst and when it came, calmly taking care of business. How alone in that moment she must have been. When Dad got home, I wanted to be the brave young man who offered comfort to his grieving father. All I could do was sit on the floor and stare up as he held Mom and cried. Perhaps, then, I am my mother's son. We only weep inside.

It's getting late and I should close. I promise you I will seek some destiny. I'll write and teach so I can look back from that beautiful place and fill you in on what I've done. After you died, it was my deepest fear that everyone I loved would die right before my eyes like you. I've come a long way since then. But I've still got a lot of learning to do. I pray it is gentle. Mom and Dad will die someday. I wish, more than anything, that your passing will in some way help me through those tough times.

I might visit your grave again this Christmas Day like I did last year. I'll say hello in person and, just maybe, shed a few happy tears to celebrate your ageless spirit.

I miss you.  
Love,  
Jim.

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december 21, 1997

Do you remember the 422nd breath you took after getting out of bed on Friday the 19th of December, 1997?

No? I bet you remember the last time you heard the words, "I think we should just be friends."

Do you look forward to the 24th breath you will take on Wednesday, May 27th, 1998?

No? Haven't you thought, and maybe even worried, about that future date when you might contract cancer or AIDS and die in bowel-wrenching pain?

Before I finish writing this essay I could have a fatal brain

hemorrhage, and the moment in which I am writing this sentence would have passed by, unrealized. I could have been tasting the immediacy of life: the here and right now. I should have been paying more attention to the beautiful, passing show that nature provided. Could and should: they are the most damning words in our language.

None of this is original thought. In a nutshell, it is a very simplified example of what Buddhism seeks to teach: living in the moment with compassion and loving-kindness. As children of the West, we learn to carry around the baggage of our past while simultaneously investing in insurance to protect our future ever hopeful that the pain will somehow pass by without touching us. That is a Sunday Comics fantasy world. There is inevitable pain. And few of us have any gratitude for what that pain really is: just one of the clowns in the parade of fleeting time.

RESOLVED: that 1998 be the year I invite the demons in to my house with open arms, and to learn to cherish the moment I am in.

In order to understand the consequences of not fulfilling this resolution, I need to take stock in what not living in the millions of moments before this one has wrought. To that end...I have just died. In tomorrow's newspaper you will read my obituary. The things left undone, the worries which never came to pass, the regrets of missed experiences. This is what it will say:

OBITUARY: Mr. James (Jim) Farmer, longtime resident of Fort Collins, Colorado, died suddenly today. He was 34. Jim had dreams of being a writer, a leader, a teacher of life. He wanted to make a difference. He could have disciplined himself to write daily; to get his essays published. Jim could have summoned the guts to come out publicly, but the rationalization was always, "I am not a political person." Being free was obviously not a priority. This is the leader he became? Jim rarely discussed gay issues with his friends or acquaintances because he was respectful of them and didn't want to throw it in their faces. Sure, he told them he was gay and tried to set a good example, but when did he ever open up? This distance kept Jim from loving fully. Ultimately, such sharing would have allowed Jim to truly reach out and hold the hands of others in pain. And what about his family? What was the justification for his independence there? "We've just never been all that communicative," was a handy excuse. Jim put off all living and loving and sharing. Now it is too late. Long ago he should have forgiven himself for not meeting society's standard of masculinity. Too much effort was spent worrying about others and their points of view to the point of hiding himself completely. How many years were spent looking down instead of ahead? This man was afraid of being an embarrassment, of being different in a world that asks for conformity. Jim was always fearful of being cast out; of losing that identity which he spent an entire lifetime making. How good is that identity now? In the end, Jim was afraid of being afraid and sad and lonely. He selfishly chose not to reach out to his community, both gay and straight--thus never

genuinely becoming a part of either. As a result of all this non-living, Jim never met the love of his life. Living doesn't require one to jump out of airplanes, climb sheer mountain faces, or drive race cars at 200+ miles per hour. Too bad Jim didn't see this in time. Funeral arrangements are pending. By week's end, Mr. Farmer will be cremated and then buried alone in the cemetery. How fitting for a solitary man.

Depressed?

I am.

Writing such a debt-laden obituary does not evoke feelings of joy. Imagine leaving it as a legacy. I do not envy those old men and women who have list upon list of regrets. I am lucky. I'm not dead. How precious to have the opportunity of a second chance to tie up loose ends and live life more fully in each passing second. There is time to close the horrible gaps which could have appeared in the morning edition.

This is the year of living. What you read from me in the coming months will be my hell on earth...and my heaven too. I invite you to join me.

The moment is now...how are you breathing?

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