
gay writes: the essays
1998

may 27, 1998

42 and 37

These would be the ages of my older siblings had they been born. Lately, I have thought a lot about my lost brothers or sisters and how their ghosts are images and metaphors for things in my gay life. What advice would they offer their younger brother who struggles with the (seemingly) easy matter of how to be gay both in theory and in practice.

Sometime between the ages of 24 and 26 my mother had a miscarriage. The baby was lost at home, sex unknown. A second, definitive, miscarriage occurred when she was 31, again sex unknown. Losing a baby can have a devastating effect on emotions, psyche and the family unit as a whole. Why is it happening? What is wrong? Am I meant to have children? Being the strong individual that my mom is, she gave nary a thought to these things. After all it was the late 1950's and early 1960's and she had survived depression and war. Finally, in the summer of 1962 came another chance. I was the secret conception. Because my mom and dad had just moved to Washington state, no one close to them knew I was baking until the mid trimester. How easily this compares to the self-

questioning you put yourself through in grade school when you realize that you are very different from other boys. The eventual awareness of homosexual feelings immediately rewrites the future. No matter the deal you try to wrangle with yourself (“it’s a phase”), it is still there. Same questions: “why me,” and “is it wrong?” You’re gay and that means a whole different lifestyle than the one your parents practiced. For me, I got used to the theory first. Hey, it can be cool to be gay. Invoke the great 70’s mantra: I’m okay—you’re okay. I don’t know why I am gay. I don’t know if it is genetic, if it is learned, if it is some unconscious choice made in the depths of my subliminal self. I just don’t know.

Theory. Being gay is more than being homosexual. Hence the separate word. Being gay is merely that: being. It is the soul and the expression of soul. With any soul comes the natural, tag-along expression of sex. The theory is pretty straightforward. You come out of the closet to someone and, with today’s progression toward more open-minded thinking, you are likely to have a good or, at least, neutral response. For most, “being gay” is a statement of who you are and if they knew you before this revelation they can reconcile that these two words don’t change you after you voice them. Luckily, we have a term which captures the soul of a homosexual: gay. In the mind of the general populace it helps. “Oh, he’s gay, I can accept that.” The big hitch, for everyone including gays, is the practice side. “Oh, he practices gay sexual intercourse. That seems seedy and dirty. I don’t think I can accept that.” It’s a thin line.

When a mother loses her child before birth it can be an experience laden with embarrassment and shame. Not for the biological event itself, but because of all the tricks the mind plays on you. The sudden stop to the excitement and planning being put forth and all those friends who have to be informed of the unexpected circumstances. There can be feelings of guilt—for surely something could have been done to prevent it. A gay man can experience something close to this. I grew up the old fashioned way. A patriarchal family with emphasis on morals and values. These were instilled in me, not from church (for I never went), but from within the core of the family. My dad often says, “no one but your family cares about you—don’t ever forget it.” While that rationale has never translated to me with any of the focus and clarity it holds for him, I understand what it means. It means family first: don’t embarrass us. In today’s society, being gay is, daily, becoming less and less a subject to be furtively whispered about away from others. I am not embarrassed to be gay. It is a miracle to be gay, and there are responsible ways of expressing this miracle. I have always been careful to put the best possible face on my being gay and the associated homosexuality issues. I tread with great awareness not to

blemish my father's name. While this may sound timid and weak in today's dog-eat-dog world of "take me or fuck off" attitudes, it isn't. Gay pride is an interesting device to bolster our feelings of self worth and esteem, but it has always been hard for me to buy. I learned early on that it is better to have pride for what you do than who you are. I try to be gay my way and in such a way that I honor my family and show respect for my friends.

Practice. There are many reasons why no romantic relationship in my life has lasted past four months. Just the other day, I awakened to the realization that I actually enjoy sleeping alone; although, somewhere deep inside, a voice says that a significant other would still somehow meet the needs I cannot fill on my own. Yet would a partner fulfill the needs? Are we each not our own means to the end of our suffering? A gay relationship remains an enigma to me. Mine all end in friendship. This practice of being homosexual is not fully "whole" in my mind. Homosexuality stays in the closet long after the gay person exits. Gay sex is a practice which turns radically with each passing day and with each renewed political stance. One latest fad is barebacking—having unsafe penetrative male sex. Feels better that way, apparently. Never mind the safety issues, watch the face of someone who isn't gay try to conjure up the image of anal sex regardless of whether it is with or without condoms. It can be a bitter pill to swallow. Thus, not-so-mirror images are formed in gay men which allows an expression of being gay but not homosexual which is likely why my best relationships have been more emotional than physical. Remember that the opposite can also be true. A man who is sexual, but without heart is perhaps a more vacant house. There are plenty of men who express their homosexual side rather than ever facing or revealing that their inner spirit is gay.

I suppose with today's medical advances, a mother who miscarries may ask for the sex of her unborn child. She and her husband can name the child and hold a memorial service to bring closure to the many feelings of helplessness that premature loss brings. My mom never knew nor could she ask. The ironic thing is that I have thought more about her miscarriages today than she probably has in her lifetime since they happened. Again, I reflect on my ghost siblings and their effect on my family not because they haunt me, but because of the remarkable parallels in the theory/practice aspect of gay life. Discovering my inner gay self produces its own set of losses. The oldest boy in any family will list for you those unspoken goals laid down in granite: get married and carry forth the family name. When neither happens, the practice of being homosexual seems suspect in the most fundamental of ways. How do you look your father in his eyes and tell him that you are a termination point in the family line. For father and for son, this situation itself can be thought

of as the unborn, unnamed ghost in their relationship.

The greatest fear for a mother-in-waiting must be in the recognition that her biological clock is ticking. At some point, time runs out. For gay men, aging is also a damnation. I am lucky in that I have aged relatively well. A day will come when the opportunity for practice has passed. There will be no takers no matter the level of newfound willingness to be 100% gay in theory and practice.

Exactly what advice would my older siblings give to me had they lived? They wouldn't be giving any. Had they lived, I would never have been born. I wouldn't have the luxury of being a kid brother; wearing hand-me-downs and listening to what I should or shouldn't do in their eyes. Whether it is befitting to be gay in theory and practice is my ghost...my riddle. It comes down to this: I was born. I am gay. There is a reason for all of it. Las Vegas odds are not very good that any of the gay nature/nurture questions will find widespread resolution in my lifetime. So, I must vow to learn the answers on my own terms, to face the fears that stalk me and to be the man in the manner my parents raised me. The answers to the mystery of merging the gay soul with the homosexual animal is in a locked box with me holding a ring of one million keys. So far, none of them turn the bolt.

It's a great age to be me. If only in theory.

june 2, 1998

This essay is dedicated to Cathy Harris. Her heroic efforts to fight cancer is often forgotten amidst the loving and giving which pours from her heart every waking minute. I have no finer role model.

How many of you, as a child, wanted to be a firefighter when you grew up? I guess I was odd because when I was growing up, I wanted to be a doctor. This was due exclusively to my love for the television show Emergency. Even though this drama centered around the day-to-day life of Los Angeles Fire and Paramedic Squad 51, I preferred the scenes with the doctors and nurses at Rampart General Hospital. Nevertheless, the firemen did catch my eye. My first T.V. crush was on fireman John Gage. I should have known then...

A fire department can serve as a symbol for anyone who believes in community. I remember, as a young boy growing up in Loveland, Colorado, the many times the local fire siren would pierce the sky—calling the volunteer firemen into action

and informing the residents to turn off any running faucets so that the city's water pressure would be maximized to fight the blaze. It was a wonderful display of communal togetherness. Today, we don't have a big fire siren, but we still need those volunteer firefighters. And, more than ever we need community participation.

In the days ahead, our gay community will suggest you perform. There will be many appeals to join-in and volunteer because right here and now, the Fort Collins Citizens for Human Rights is gearing up for the election campaign which will determine whether sexual orientation will be added to the city's human rights ordinance. "Is this where I am needed?" you may ask. Certainly, if this is your calling. Committees are formed and there is a lot of important work ahead; anything from registering people to vote to raising funds to stuffing envelopes. Most local gay organizations will focus intently on November and how best to obtain a positive outcome. Pulling together the many factions and cliques which make up the gay community is a daunting task at best. Steady steps are advised. Foremost of these steps is to give up the very notion of "gay community." This term is okay when used to describe ourselves as a collective, but it is a bad example of a functioning group because it limits our thinking and is not inclusive. Giving cannot have boundaries. Another, essential step is to not classify or label the contributed gifts. This promotes competition and dissolves unity. I suggest this modest proposal: Do anything which shows your love toward others.

On the surface, giving for love may seem unfocused. Shouldn't we all be concentrating on showing gay pride? Keep in mind that, although this is 1998 and the times are changing, championing for a gay-oriented cause is not a comfortable position for all of our gay and gay-supportive citizenry. The very fact that we are engaged in a campaign to define human rights shows how uneasy people are. What can you do if being an activist makes your palms sweat? Lots. First, realize that you have nothing to be ashamed of for not wanting to be "out" there. Second, it is guaranteed that, just as now is not the right time for you to leave the closet, there is someone out there—your mirror opposite—who has been openly gay for over 30 years and is totally burned out on the gay activism that the FCCHR campaign will launch anew. For both of you there are other ways to give, volunteer and express your love.

My modest proposal works no matter the length of time out of the closet you are or the degree of your past volunteer efforts. For example, consider giving to someone who has been diagnosed with cancer. Again, purists will say that all efforts should be toward the passage of the ordinance. What would donating time to listen to the fears and hopes of one cancer

patient, or contributing money to cancer research do for the gay community? If it comes from your heart, it is the best possible offering you can extend in the coming months. Whether you are newly out or have been out for years, you are a gay individual being a part of the whole community. You have simply chosen a different human rights approach: giving of yourself to someone who really needs that connection. You may be withholding your gay identity today, but someday you will decide it is safe to come out and people will remember who you are and what you stand for. This admiration may spark something in them to give back to our gay community. If nothing else, maybe it will show one person that being gay has a lot more to do with heaven than hell. Even if you are the individual who has been openly gay for decades, people will see that you aren't so gay-centric and stuck in the "Me! Me! Me!" mindset we inadvertently cling to. Long after this election is decided, the passage or defeat of this one legislative act is not going to be the end of the struggle for such rights. Pouring our love into the process of giving may not make the outcome turn out the way we want it, but it will help insure that we have our hearts intact regardless of whether we celebrate a victory or mourn a waterloo.

As an invisible minority, it is important that we give to the gay community when and where we can. From experience, we know this giving makes a difference. We have built a beautiful culture, but it is very foreign to those outside our circle. In the present and future, attaining balance is wise. "Us" and "Them" has never yielded benefit in any society. Do not forget those in our community who face much bigger hurdles than this vote, and do not judge those who cannot be out during this critical civic juncture. Like it or not our gay culture is, albeit slowly, merging into the mainstream. So, reach out and be a good neighbor; a good human. It may surprise you what your good work will bring back into your gay life. All of humanity has a common denominator: we each live between our birth and our death. While living, you make a difference if you are a compassionate friend who loves and gives. Do what you can. Do it with love. A friend of mine likes to say "it's all good." When he says it, it makes me laugh and fills me with joy inside. It's a wonderful attitude about our lives in just three words.

Your childhood fantasy to be a firefighter was just a dream when you were a kid, but those coveralls, suspenders and helmets are made for adults. I bet they would fit you now. Why not try them on and see where you can go?

As I pause from my regular writing to compose this *interlude*, it has been 2,197 days since I first put pen to paper and began this collection of **gay writes**. Of course back then I never imagined it would become a collection. I started because I thought I could editorialize about the gay condition. What I liked, what I didn't. I can tell you now, I thought I had a lot more to say about what I didn't like than what I did. As it turns out, I had a lot more to say about who I am in this gay life than the superficial stuff I expected to share with you. And, I like the result—with a few exceptions.

Before getting to those exceptions, I would like to briefly expound on what this collection means to me. It represents a journal of my life for six years. I have never been enticed to keep a daily journal. It just isn't me. You may feel that a collection of writings cannot comprise a "journal" of my life until, perhaps, you learn that upon completion of each essay, I am permanently finished with it. It goes into my collection as is, and not one will ever be revised. No editor will ever touch the words which have gone before. Not because they are perfect, but because they are not. Each has human flaws which represent the human who wrote them. I had moments when the words came easy and times when they were a constipated pain. Some were casualties of this tug-of-war and don't appear in this collection at all. Those are the essays started and left unfinished to drift like broken tumbleweeds. But each represents a moment of time that will never be again. I cannot improve on what I thought or felt back when. It might happen that as I put more years behind me I may change my perspective on something, and if I do I will write a new essay and say so. Until then, please forgive any immaturity on my part for I learn something new every day I am alive. Which brings me to my first exception.

Upon re-reading some passages I realize that I sometimes make grandiose claims that seem to be fact. For example, using the words "always" or "never" or "must." Believe me when I say that the words in this collection are mine and mine alone. I take responsibility for everything that is written herein. If pressed on the issue of any absolute claim, I would very probably back down and say that the language used was too strong. It is likely that I got caught up in the fervor of making a point or speaking my mind. I strive to use words that are true for me—and they should be read that way. You may find truth in them and if so, I hope it is a good truth. Early on (in 1992 and 1993), I tried to write for everyone. I tried to speak to the gay community as if I could see the whole like a learned spectator; as if I was simultaneously male and female. It didn't work. I only know what it is like to be a gay man. Only the writings of a lesbian will truly illustrate what her life is like. I am sure that many of

the things I speak to are similarly experienced by the women of the gay community and the men and women of the straight community, but I cannot say so with any surety.

A second exception comes from other re-reads of my work. I feel I often paint a picture of helplessness on my part as to some of the events that have molded me into who I am. This usually rears its head in passages where I lament over my single status. While it takes two to tango and no one can force another to love you, my loner status is a choice. I have done this to myself. I am not the most emotive person in the world and I am certainly not the easiest to get to know or be around. Evidence bears this out, more than I care to admit. Yet, it's there in plain daylight for me to see. I do not shrink from the vital role I play in finding a partner or shunning one as I often am prone to do. I am a firm believer in the saying: "you get what you settle for." Somehow this is related to my strange dualistic life—I'm half in and half out of the closet. If there is a definitive next step in my life it is to stop being an ostrich. I can no longer pretend that people can't see me just because my head is in a hole.

Finally, a third exception is also a regret. I wish over the past six years that I had written more. I stopped writing altogether in 1995 and for nearly half of 1996. Even after revving back up, I became increasingly concerned with writing quality essays. It became harder and harder to top myself without exposing more and more of my tender insides. Thus, more time would pass between my musings. I know that I have made many of you squirm with the revelations I have already put forth. I am not shy, for sure. A hero's journey requires that he (she) face fear and stare it down. So, I must overcome my fear of being who I am and give you the keys to the kingdom. This path may mean my relationship with each of you could change and conceivably it has to. Because my raw innards aren't pretty, I will try to get over my aversion to churning out anything that could be viewed as shit. At the very least I will acknowledge that I can and will write shit. So what? Today's crap can fossilize into something wonderful after many yesterdays.

Now it can be said that I am stalked by my own shadow. You have glimpsed flashes of my depth, but now you know you've seen only the tip of what is. I vow to you that I will provide a better peek into Jim Farmer as **gay writes** moves toward the new millennium.

august 14, 1998

These seemingly unrelated concepts are very much connected. Young men are coming out at a record pace. They set the trend for the new gay male culture. The gay 90's will represent the first stepping stone of a new order; one that will quickly pass the older gay male generations by. The boys of today are wholesome, complete and humanitarian. Evidence offers the best support of this new gay era.

Exhibit A demonstrates that the role models of young gay men are young gay men. The older generation still waits with baited breath for that one big name movie star to come out of the closet. But, it's too late because outing is dead. It matters little to the gay youth of America when a forty year old actor or a fifty year old congressman comes out. Their heroes will not be someone who let over half their life pass before admitting their same-sex orientation. Men in their teens and twenties are embracing the men who come out and stand beside them rather than hover above.

Exhibit B is the way young gay men are living their lives. Gay activism, for them, is not a profession. It is integrated into their daily lives. School, careers, even the Peace Corps rank higher than seeking a permanent partner through marriage benefits. Finally! Hints of a Western culture in the making which considers those starving children in Africa to be more deserving of a better life than we who already have a great one. I feel this comes from the simple fact that gay youth are able to live the life they have rather than seek one that may never exist in their lifetimes.

These are but two good lessons for those of us who are older—me in particular. When I came out at age 22, I was 1980's young and 1980's daring compared to the gays who wouldn't emerge from their closets. But what did I do with it? It was a novelty and a means to an end of finding a significant other. I'm no further along with that goal than I was fourteen years ago. So much time wasted on a search for love when a diverse perspective would have yielded so much more. Slowly, I have naturally seen the light to my blinded thinking. Waking up to this larger reality means I like myself a lot better now than when I was in my twenties, but I am still reconciling the inadequacy of leading a very dual life.

I'm four years from turning 40. In so many ways I feel alone. Like a man without a country. Yet, I can't really argue that point because to be a stranger in your own land you have to have first lived there. I have acted a gay role, as if in a play, and have been laughed off the stage. An audit would bear out all of the errors I have made through this imitation living. The balance sheet of my life, with gay on one side and straight on the other, hasn't

added up. Out of fear, I have chosen an outer life on the straight side of the fence while aimlessly clawing for the premium aspects from the gay side. It is difficult to grasp anything with a barrier in the way. Including love. I'm a straight wannabe. I'm a gay wannabe. This game worked okay when I was younger, but in 1998 the consequences are more severe. As a mature gay man I should be a leader for those who follow behind me. Instead, I am a traitor for being outwardly straight and inwardly gay. Fortunately, I have decoded the clues that tell me I have worn out my welcome. Do I have time to repair the damage?

For me, it may be too late to be gay other than how I've been. At such a critical juncture in my life, I must focus somewhere other than perpetually recycling the fake lifestyle I've already led. Back when I came out of the closet, I felt that I had finally belonged. I had the word "gay" to associate with my feelings and being gay came ready-made with a culture to join. But belonging is conditional upon playing by the rules and I didn't do that. I never would fully sacrifice to be a part of my newfound allies. I would watch from the sideline as others made a stand for rights or found a companion for love. I took a journey into the gay kingdom to find love but wanted no other strings attached. This is not a hero's pilgrimage at all. Thus, I betrayed myself. I am far from being a harmonious voice in the choir of the gay community.

It takes a keen mind to pick up the signs that you are out of style. I cannot pretend that I am still one of the boys. It hurts. I feel abandoned by a caste that I never had the guts to fully be a part of. More now than ever before I am an older gay man trying to fit into a culture which ceases to age. To counter this, I'm backtracking to the one thing that helped me when I felt different as a young boy. I'm becoming a loner again.

This time it won't be to hide my head like an ostrich, but for awhile, this is what others may see. Sometimes, like the Chinese bamboo, a lot of roots grow without much action above ground. My goal is to do some of that growing. I'm moving away from superficial dreams of Camelot where, in my fantasy, Mr. and Mr. Right live happily ever after. I take personal responsibility for what I've become. I cannot change the fact that I am gay, but the orientation has no meaning without an accompanying life. My current gay lifestyle is laid to rest.

By having so many younger gay male friends, I am finally paying attention to how they are with the world. I cannot be young again, but maybe I can do something about the starving. I'll start with my soul and then share.

september 1, 1998

For most of this year I considered writing an opinion for the local newspaper, The Fort Collins Coloradoan, outlining my feelings on being gay and what passage of the human rights ordinances would mean to me. On September 1, I finally found the right words, but not the courage to mail my thoughts to the paper. The impetus to finally submit this as a Soapbox for publication was the beating death of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year old gay man who lived in Laramie, Wyoming. I revised my original draft on October 14, two days after Matthew died at Poudre Valley Hospital here in Fort Collins. It was my hope that this would be printed before the November 3 election. Even though it wasn't, I felt the message contained herein was far too important to be abandoned. I re-submitted it on November 5, but the Coloradoan editors chose not to print this at all.

What is the face of gay?

In the aftermath of the election, it is an important time to press this question. On November 3rd, my community voted against ordinances 21 and 22 which would have defined a human rights ordinance that includes sexual orientation. I'm sad that the legalese of the ordinance and political/religious nature of the campaign affected voters. Regardless, the relationship between the word "gay" and the words "human rights" were front and center and they still are—nothing has changed. Now, more than ever, it is important for me to attempt a correlation for the citizens of Fort Collins and beyond. It is my sincere hope that these words will ease us toward healing and away from the mindset of reification which can ultimately change a Matthew Shepard into an "it" so "it" can be beaten, tortured and killed.

Each day, you have the potential to see hundreds of different faces—at work, in the supermarket, driving home in your car. Some of these individuals are gay. Who are they? You can easily pick a black man out of a group of white people. Almost as easy, is finding the blind woman in the same crowd. It is nearly impossible to see someone who is gay. We don't have distinguishing outer features. We could be that black man or that blind woman or both. Instead of banishing any class to your peripheral vision, why not see people just as they are—as human beings not unlike yourself. What changes the way you view a face when you are informed it belongs to someone gay? Where does the humanity go?

For me, gay is a state of being. Like you, I don't know why I am gay. I just am. The word gay means much more than sexuality and it says nothing of my lifestyle. For you to know all of my

inner beauty, you would have to walk in my shoes. I extend my hand to you. If you are willing to reach back and see even a glimmer of who I am, you might discover that being gay is my heart and soul.

Long ago, I thought I was the only one with a gay face. Before I “came out,” I felt so different without knowing why. To any adolescent, growing up is scary; feeling cast out for unknown reasons is terrifying. I’m so lucky that my family, teachers and friends recognized me as special and protected me while I spent time discovering my inner spirit. Revealing this personal uniqueness to my loved ones took every ounce of my courage. By doing so, I discovered what real family is. On this day, I’ve made my orientation public to you because I still want to live in a real community. When life presents you with a gay man, who will you be? I may be fully exposed to hate, but I’m also completely open to love. It is what Matthew taught me.

I am gifted only with human vision, which is imperfect for interpreting all that is out there. I cannot see what you see and neither one of us looks through the perfect eyes of God. It is impossible for me to interpret the infinity of reality based on my limited scope of the universe. I understand that there are things I will never understand. Until I touch your hand, look into your eyes and hear your story, I do not know you.

Mine is the face of gay. Do you know me?

october 20, 1998

Matthew Wayne Shepard
December 1, 1976-October 12, 1998

My first snow this year was one of peace. My first trip to Casper, Wyoming was one of hope. Both of these feelings merged together on one day: Friday, October 16, 1998. This was the day that Matthew Shepard was honored by family and friends at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church. The occasion was his funeral.

I did not know Matthew—I’m not sure I was ever in his presence in life, but he certainly touched me in his death. On that cold, wintry Friday I felt comfort knowing that I would be in his hometown to say goodbye. In a way, I almost felt like I was going “home” to Casper. My Mom and Dad lived in Casper for a few months in 1961; two years before I was born. Now, my friend Brian and I had made the trek to central Wyoming, braving heavy rains and snow to pay our last respects. For over ninety minutes, a large group of us huddled outside the church

trying to keep warm under tarps and umbrellas before the church doors opened to let us in. Many of us were dressed in formal attire that was not suitable for the conditions outside. People sang to pass the time and to drown out the hateful, anti-gay protestors.

I hadn't expected to learn anything about our own acceptance of diversity while freezing in the church line, but the school of life is convened in unexpected places. Someone whispered, "Uh-oh, here comes trouble," and I turned to see what they saw: two leather-clad, blue mohawked men crossing the street; approaching rapidly. I braced myself—there was no time to do anything else. They straddled the small barrier keeping us in line and the tallest one handed his umbrella to his girlfriend to keep their baby from getting drenched by the wet snowfall. I laughed a little to myself; relieved that the punch line of the joke was that we weren't endangered but comforted by guys whom we were so quick to judge by their appearance.

The service was healing. Brian and I sat in a room adjacent to the main chapel and participated in the liturgy via piped-in audio. A book was provided with the congregation's prayers and music that we read and sang aloud.

A defining moment for the day came as we filed out of the church. Matthew's younger brother Logan stood near the exit and was smiling and chatting with his friends. He is perhaps the one person who will be most deeply affected by Matthew's death for the remainder of his own life and he seemed at peace. My hope is that each of us finds our own peace in the wake of this tragedy.

october 31, 1998

Shawn, this is for you. Thank you for showing me what love is.

In my beginning, I was created from a love shared between two people. From the dawn of that origin some thirty-six and one quarter years ago, I've longed for my own expression of love thinking that it would be held only in the heart of one other. Four autumns ago, I saw the love of my life across a crowded room. Seven days later I summoned the courage to say, "Hi." Between that meeting and the day we decided to be "just" friends, was time filled with togetherness and immense happiness. Our resulting friendship allowed him the freedom, soon thereafter, to find the love of his life. Deep down I've always hoped there would be a way for me to capture and

maintain the essential joys that Shawn inspired.

What is love for me? The weight of this simple query came to full-bear many years before I met Shawn. Michael, a bartender I was dating, dealt a relationship-ending blow by asking me to define love before he would tell me whether he loved me. To say that Michael's game of pitting words against my emotions was hurtful, minimizes the lasting effect it has had. Rarely has his question not passed through my mind when getting to know someone new.

Remembering Michael's words is on a par with remembering my days with Shawn. I re-live those moments which will never be again. Time makes fuzzy all memories, so it is easy to ascribe devil/angel status to Michael and Shawn as the specifics blend into the background of my past. It is why Michael is so haunting while Shawn is so special. Why, then, do I continue to let these opposite poles of experience pull at me? Michael was far from imperfect just as Shawn was not without flaw. They are two ordinary men with extraordinary influences on my life. I'm just now molding the raw material they provided into an authentic picture of love.

In the past year, I have opened my eyes a bit and looked around. At first, what I saw made me regress—I closed my eyes even tighter. Convinced I had reached some imaginary peak of love, I started descending like some worn-out mountaineer whose day had passed. When I took another look, I realized I was far, far from the top because I had never been there in the first place. I had effectively created an illusion so I could excuse myself from trying again.

The impenetrable fog that has surrounded me through the years is lifting. My definition of being "out" has changed from allowing a small collective of friends and family into my circle to putting my life on the table for everyone to see. Before, the insular world of my personal closet allowed me to safely test relationships with others. If they didn't work out, I would still be safe in my little world because I never challenged the boundary.

Thinking that I had this concept all figured out myself, I would often tell gay friends how important it is to start feeling comfortable with being alone. Such advice was not meant to be defeatist, but it did illustrate my own fear of being alone. Denial kept me from really embracing that one cannot experience fullness without also accepting emptiness. I was no more immune to wishing in the darkness of night that I needed a hand to hold than they were. I discounted the love of friendships because that love, to me, was somehow different.

Like anyone who happens to look—really look—into a mirror, I have seen that it is time to play life by the truth I espoused. Significant others do not remove all gaps in one's life—it is these very gaps that allow space for love to continue to grow. I'm learning that even without a primary relationship, the empty spaces in my heart are there to hold the miracles yet to be.

One, intimate love between myself and another special man may never come to pass. Such love is not guaranteed to anyone, but a heart needs love and it is up to me to define my own; to sing to the world my way. It may be that in my lifetime I will only be able to give and receive an aggregate love, and it can be just as profound. Giving and receiving must not have limits. Being open means just that—open to everyone gay friendly or not. Only then will we see a unification of diverse societies.

I'm not sure if my emerging activism was pre-destined. As I become more openly gay it sometimes seems that way. I'm scared, but I must find a way to do this. And, I must do this right. Right, for me, means with love. Many activists I know use their own anger and the fear in others to propel themselves forward. Anger and fear, in the end, are poor sources for motivation because they inhibit the essential love we all want. The question of my life takes on new meaning from now on.

“Define love and I will tell you if I love you.”

My love is created from my actions and it matters not whether the love is returned. Love is what I give not what I get. The karma is that I love and in the moment I love, I am someone who loves. It is such a small shift in thinking that it could have been easily missed. Even by me—for all these years.

Yes, this will be my definition of love. It is what I am here for.

december 5, 1998

Follow the leader. Did you ever play this game as a child? One boy or girl is designated the play leader and the remaining children follow along as directed. As an adult which role have you chosen?

Are you a leader? It is a direct question. Either you are or you aren't. Perhaps you vaguely class yourself as a leader in some situations but a follower in others. For instance, if you are a supervisor it is likely that you are also supervised. Still, I firmly contend that if you answered yes to being a leader, your position as follower is a leading example for others who also follow. If

your answer was no, I urge you to take a second look at your life and explore the unique opportunity you have before you to step from the shadows of anonymity that being gay seems to foster.

I am a leader. I am also a believer in the adage that leaders are born. Leadership cannot be taught. Either it is a part of your soul or it is not. Leaders can learn new things, of course. Experience is the best teacher, and workshops and programs can help focus and enhance what is already present. But, the classroom cannot invent leaders.

Being a leader is not so much a willingness to communicate or coordinate or even perform any other action ascribed to one who leads, as it is a drive to cast a new mold. Every corpuscle of the leader's blood moves in synchronization with this life force known as the ability to lead. You find yourself unable to not be a leader—ever.

Often, I speak of the gifts I have as a gay man. That being gay is more than sexual orientation alone. My leadership is one of those gifts and I own it and I cherish it, to the point that all of this talk may come across as conceited and self-centered. But there is a reason I broach this topic.

The coming out process is primarily a sexual awakening experience first and foremost. It is a realization that the reason each of us has felt different is because we have a same sex attraction. From there, we experiment and enjoy our newfound freedom from the closet. Most of us, regardless of whether this sexual play is satisfying or not, find that we hit a plateau and yearn for something more. It is at this critical point that we either step to the plate or warm the bench.

Take a quick inventory of your life at this moment in time. What special traits do you admire in yourself? Are you creative; an artist perhaps? Are you skilled in your life's work? Are you a good storyteller or do you listen with compassion? What are you good at? Now ask yourself if you think you would have those same qualities if you weren't gay. Is it possible that not being gay would diminish those gifts that you have right now?

Such a listing leads to a more important question. Are you sharing what you have with the world? The world, of course, could be a small neighborhood community you belong to—but are you sharing? I feel that this sharing of very special gifts is the first step to the birth of a true leader. Gays have so much potential to be the born leader because we see everything through eyes of an outcast. While that may sound oppressive at first, think of the doors it opens. Everything is fresh and new. Opportunities don't stop if one of those open doors

slams. There are too many other doorways to experience. It is my belief that not one of us can afford simply to survive. You might as well die now than go through the motions. What will you do with the life you have—live it in a vacuum or share?

Matthew Shepard died, but he also lived. He was not guaranteed to ever find the love of his life or to make a difference in his lifetime. But, he tried. How many of you used his passing as a wake-up call to take the reins of your life? How many of you had good intentions to do so, but gave up as the stories of his murder trickled off? Was yours an empty promise? Only you know and only you will live with the answer.

I'll close with a request. If you can honor yourself by committing to changing the face of society so that being gay is an equal part of civilization, then make that commitment. And, make it a 100% commitment. If you cannot, then make a 100% choice not to. Do something with perfect conviction. There's a hint of leadership waiting inside you to break out even if standing still is your path.

It is a blessing to be gay and to be a leader. I do with both what I can every day. If you can hear the same calling, please answer. You won't be sorry.

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