



Untitled (A Literacy Narrative)

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It's been nearly thirty years since I spent Christmas alone in Shawnee, Oklahoma, and experienced the consequences that can come from trying to write your own story. Ever since that rainy holiday season, I have been wary of those teachers who encourage you to chronicle your life in writing.

I was a 20-year-old man in the summer of 1975. I had just finished two years of college at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee and was home in Tulsa for the summer, working at my old job from last year as a day camp counselor at the YMCA. While the kids could sometimes be a pain in the ass, it was a much better job than digging ditches.

I was the director of the camp, which meant I didn't watch over just one group of kids all day, but instead moved around from group to group in the building and handled the administrative tasks of keeping the downtown camp running. I was supposed to do this job for 10 weeks and then head back to Shawnee and start my junior year.

I decided to keep a journal. Maybe I thought if I ever got famous it would be interesting to go back and read the journal and see how it happened and what thoughts I had as it was happening. Maybe it was the encouragement from writing instructors who seemed to think it was a good idea. In any case, I decided that this was the thing to do that summer, so I got a blank journal with ruled paper and began. Most of the time I wrote about the mundane—what went on at work, what I thought of a movie or TV show, what my hopes were for the next school year—but occasionally, I began to grapple in writing with something that was bothering me.

More and more I was having trouble keeping my eyes off of the men at the Y. This had been pretty difficult for me to deal with the last year when I found myself getting turned on when I was at the Y in a shower room full of men, but it was worse this year, since as director, I had more opportunity to hang out with the adult staff and the men who worked out during the day. I often took an evening swim with the men, and no one wore trunks (skinny-dipping was a common practice in many Ys in the 1970s, when the places were more stringently same-sex facilities). After the swim, we all took showers together. In the middle of a large shower room, naked with seven or eight other men, I feared that I would be caught staring. Or worse yet, that the arousal I felt in my head would reveal itself physically.

At the same time, I was attending a conservative, religious school on a full ministerial scholarship. I had dedicated my life to being a preacher, and I had been dating Christa, a fine young Christian woman, for over a year. We were talking about getting married. In fact, I was scheduled to fly to Chattanooga at the end of the summer to meet her and her parents (her Daddy was a minister of music) and drive back to Tulsa—so she could meet *my* parents-before continuing to Shawnee for school. Homosexuality was not in this game plan.

All of this got discussed in my journal, and this is not surprising to me now that I so fully understand the knowledge-making quality of writing. I wrestled with my sexuality that summer in my journal. I wrote every thought I had about those men and how excited I was by their bodies. I never had sex with them or anyone else that summer, but I wrote about my feelings daily. Through this journal I began to understand that I had to take a different path from the one most everyone else was taking. My life wouldn't have a wedding and children. However, I knew I wasn't alone, thank God. Many realize they're gay before they know anyone else who is and that is so frightening. I didn't know what kind of life being gay meant for me, but I knew there were others and I didn't fear being alone.

I even resolved to talk to Christa about a change of plans. I couldn't have told her my true feelings since I wasn't ready to go public, but I knew that to go on with her was dishonest. Unsure of when to make the move, I went ahead and visited Christa and her parents, figuring the breakup would happen when we were back in Shawnee. And truthfully, I had an okay time in Chattanooga. I'm not sure that I was what her parents wanted in a son-in-law, but they appreciated my religious calling. Christa and I drove from Chattanooga to Tulsa, spent a few days in Tulsa, and then with my parents, brother and stepsister, we drove two cars to Shawnee, about an hour and a half away.

When we got to Shawnee, we unloaded their car into my dorm, so my family could be on their way. All seemed fine to me, but it wasn't. My stepsister, Karen, had spent the last few weeks of August visiting her father, my stepfather. Karen was the one who ended up telling me the bad news: while I was gone to Chattanooga, my stepfather had found my journal and read it. He and I had a troubled history and this piece of physical evidence, a journal that he brandished in my mother's face like a poker, was all he needed to ban me from his house. I was a deviant, and he would not have that in his home. Fortunately for me at the time, he didn't bring up the issue in front of Christa. I delayed breaking off with her for a year and a half. My mother and I didn't talk for nearly a year. I think that it was my younger brother who missed me so much that he begged to come see me, and that resulted in he and my mother coming to see me the following November.

That Christmas, thirty years ago, I learned that telling your story is powerful stuff and the consequences can be hard to take. When we write down our thoughts, our ideas, our speculations, it is possible for them to take on a life of their own and send us careening down a path we didn't anticipate. I don't know what you will do with the information. However, I've learned to accept that uncertainty as part of choosing to live (and write) my life. Ideas that are just in your mind take on a greater power, a greater authority, when they are placed in print, even the handwritten print of a young 20-year-old man. When we encourage people to write down on paper what is hidden from the world, we ask them to expose themselves. It is important for us to remember that whenever we have students write their stories, they may not always understand what their choices are or what the consequences might be. I share this with you so that you'll make sure and tell them.

