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Water Rescue

"As adults we realize that to live with courage, purpose, and connection—to be the person whom we long to be—we must again be vulnerable. We must take off the armor, put down the weapons, show up, and let ourselves be seen."

-Brené Brown

I sat in the far corner of the living room, in the worn green cotton covered wingback chair that had as many stains upon it as I felt I did upon me. When getting in or out of it, the chair would make a certain creak at times. I felt in that a kindred soul. We understood one another. I shifted in my seat to relieve the pressure fatigue of my bottom.

"Criiiiiichh", came the gentle moan.

Yeah. Tell me about it, brother, I thought in the muted world of my mind.

My reluctant presence was obligatory. Since the Mormon Church had finally started broadcasting its General Conferences openly, most people had the great luxury of just staying in their pajamas to listen in or watch the barrage of two-hour sessions from the comfort of their homes, provided the local cable company was carrying the signal.

This was great for people like me who were raising kids that, frankly, would rather be boiled in hot acid than sit confined in church pews listening to the solemn droning of the speakers with their Utah-affected speech patterns. I had often thought how an audiologist or musicologist could take the hundred years of Mormon conference talk recordings and analyze them with sound equipment. They'd be able to plot the very birth and growth of that pervasively blanched and tepid delivery. So distinct. So predictable. It was astonishing that even those very few church leaders from countries and cultures outside of American Utah would still talk in that same, boring, monotone oratory. In the world of public speaking, Mormon General Conference is an auditory Jell-O salad. But hey, if you want a great resource for insomnia, you might want to download a session or two and just listen in as you turn out the lights.

But still, there were perks and relief. Sometimes a speaker was clever and interesting. Sometimes the talk would entail the telling of truly moving, heart-wrenching stories. Occasionally, with the grand freedom afforded only to the very President of the Church himself, he'd tell a joke that made everyone chuckle because it was genuinely funny to hear someone revered as God's living Prophet on the earth crack a silly punchline.

And then of course, the saving grace for me was always and forever the music. There are few things as sublimely beautiful as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing some entrancing and gifted arrangement of a classic hymn. As I've been sitting here typing right now, remembering back to all these dark times, some ten years since I left the church and

all its heavy chains, I decided to call up an old favorite on YouTube and listen in.

*Come thou fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
mount of thy redeeming love.*

*Here I raise mine Ebenezer;
hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
interposed His precious blood.*

*Oh, to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart, O take and seal it,
seal it for thy courts above."
- Robert Robinson, 1735-1790*

Even now, all these many years of healing later, I am writing through tears. The greatest sadness for me in all of this is not that I believe Christianity and the Mormon Church to be devoid of love and beauty, but rather that it is filled with it. It's just that so much of its love is conditional; sequestered. It is a

condition to which those privileged by their unchosen and unquestioned heterosexuality often fail to see because of the blindness of their numbers, sameness, and effortless inclusion.

It was that blindness that was causing me distress at that particular moment, in the form of the infamous Mormon Apostle Boyd K. Packer. Anytime that man would speak, for years of my membership in the church, I'd sit on the edge of my seat awaiting some horrific and condemning thing to escape his mouth. Most of the time, it would be relatively benign, or at the very least, typically passive-aggressive which is the preferred, unofficial language of the church culture. But not this day. This day he was in rare form and, as the luck of the universe would have it, he was launching an all-out assault on sin. And by sin, I mean gays.

"Some suppose that they were pre-set and cannot overcome what they feel are inborn tendencies toward the impure and unnatural. Not so! Why would our Heavenly Father do that to anyone?"

A wave of lava-hot shock-and-blood-lust rose in my body from my feet to my heart. In microseconds it was coursing through my veins. I literally trembled, words of angry defiance rising from my stomach to my throat with all-out, planet-destroying rage.

Why would He do that? WHY WOULD HE DO THAT?! Well why don't you think about it with that tiny brain of yours a little bit and listen to the literal millions of people who are

actually gay, you fucking bastard! The answer to your stupid question is simple: maybe it's that gay is not impure and unnatural at all. Because I can sure as hell tell you that this was NOT something I chose, you ASSHOLE! Who would CHOOSE this life? There is no need to blame ME or GOD. Maybe the problem is YOU.

The words stayed in my chest, though.

No eruption from the vent.

No screaming to fill the earth with my condemnation.

Like hot ash, the thoughts choked me into silence. I hunched back in my pale green chair frozen like a shopkeeper in Pompeii. It had only been three weeks since the bloodletting in my shower. Three weeks since I found the strength to NOT kill myself. And now I had to sit and listen to this? The assault felt deeply cutting and deeply personal.

I am fighting for my life here, you sonofabitch. Fighting for my wife; for my children. Shut your fucking mouth. You have no idea what you are talking about.

It had only been three weeks since The Voice in the shower had stayed my hand. And three weeks since I sought out help.

I had reached out to my friend, Tanner Young, a young, gay, ex-Mormon man who had been recently licensed as a Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner and launched into a private counseling practice. Tanner and I had met early in grad school and I instantly liked him. He was extremely handsome with his dark hair, dark eyes, and boy-next-door looks. *Oh, God. What is it about that combination that turns my insides into windchimes?* He was very sweet,

gentle, and kind. He wore a wedding ring and spoke like a Utahan. I pegged him as a Mormon during the first small group project we did in class one day. *God, they are so easily picked out of a crowd.*

But when I had learned that Tanner's ring was from a husband and not a wife, I perked up with confusion and curiosity. *Was I wrong about the Mormon thing?* I became intentional and got to know him. At the time, I was still deep in the pit of miserable self-abuse about my own identity. But I don't know. I guess the friendship with him had given me some sort of ability to feel connected and to let myself experience gayness, even if it was by proxy. There was a certain relief of pressure in just associating with him. As though being his friend was allowing me some sort of road to say, "this is me, too". Unfortunately, our programs were so vastly different in nature that we really only ever had one or two classes together. But thankfully, it was enough that we connected on Facebook. From there, I was able to peer into his life; to find his little website that he'd created with his husband (also an ex-Mormon) to show the world there were different kinds of families. And that their kind of family was also gentle, and loving, and supportive, and natural.

It seemed perfectly natural to me that the day after I had lost a good liter or so of blood at my own hand, The Voice nudged me to reach out to him. I mean, I was completely alone within myself and he was the only person I knew I could talk to who would *truly* understand. I had no idea where to begin to look for a counselor. The one from Employee Assistance I had seen for my three free sessions the previous year was certainly not going to get me. I had no interest in talking to him about all this. I needed someone who

could really understand me at the intersections; who got *exactly* what was at stake for me. So, I reached out to Tanner, sending him a little note through Facebook. I told him I was gay; that I was suffering; that I was lost. It was only the second time in my life I had put that truth in writing and only the first time I'd done so with intent. He responded quickly, and with urgency.

"Come to my office. I'll email you the address and my number. You won't be my client. We won't make this complicated. When you can you get here?"

I went in two days later.

We met weekly for about an hour-and-a-half at a time in his cozy little office. It was an interesting space. The entire building was filled with small, professional offices that had been converted from what was one of those two-story motor inn hotels built in the 1950s. It was quirky, but it felt so secluded and intimate. I didn't see or hear anyone else in the complex. It was a dark space with warm, incandescent mod lamps and scattered Buddhist figurines. There was a small sofa and a well-loved armchair that he tucked himself into, crossing his legs in a way that struck me as odd because it somehow didn't look feminine when he did it at all. And that stayed with me because I started to realize that gay didn't look or sound a certain way. Since I had inherited all of society's tropes like the rest of us, I guess seeing Tanner – who didn't strike me in any way physically at all as gay – opened new ways of thinking without me really even knowing it.

In those few sessions with my soon-to-be dear friend, I felt myself breathing again. I'd walk in the door, hug him close, sit down on the little comfy sofa and exhale. It was as though I'd been treading surf for the previous six days, bobbing up and down, choking on water just trying to breathe. But then I'd be there. With him. And I felt safe. He drew me in and gave me freedom; a lifeline that pulled me aboard some isolated vessel where I'd collapse on deck from all the boxing I was doing with the waves. But between visits, I'd be right back in the water, punching and kicking and trying to breathe.

But then; this new storm.

Barely in control of the suicidal thinking that would still, at times, rear its ugly head inside of me, I was sitting there listening to that crusty, bitter old man judge me and berate me and belittle me through my own television in my own home. I vowed at that very moment that on the day he would die, I would change my profile picture to that of a red dress to celebrate. (Which, I satisfyingly can report, I did on July 3, 2015.)

But in that moment, reduced to a pyroclastic cast of a man who died sitting upon a chair, there was no celebration or joy. Only utter contempt and acrid resolve that I would be done with it all. I would wash my hands of the likes of this man and all he overtly and covertly advocated in the church. I was done with the Mormon Church. I didn't know how or when I'd be able to say it aloud, but I was done. And I'd be free. It might not make sense to anyone in my family. But I would find a way. My anger would become Aphrodite's blessing, freeing me from petrification and breathing new life into new lungs. I was Galatea. And I was awakening.

I let it all out at my next visit with Tanner. He was a gifted counselor. He had an incredible way of engaging me in conversation that seemed to be natural small talk but, in the end, would reveal a very long-game, therapeutic strategy. I had to admit; he was one of a kind. So warm and empathetic and concerned. It was just like being in the presence of those adorable young missionaries during my conversion in high school. Tanner however, made it so very easy to just say the things on my mind without filters. I was not used to that, but with him I felt a growing ability to say the words, no matter how many years I had been beating them down within me. So, I vented. I told him all about Boyd-Fucking-Packer and he commiserated, showing me an appropriate level of shared disdain in his knowing. And then the conversation shifted. He explored a bit with me about coming out and what I'd been thinking about it.

He was so very good at being supportive and not prescriptive. Never once did Tanner tell me what to do, even though in truth, I'd have given anything for him to just tell me the right answers. But instead, he made a point of telling me over and over again the same miraculous words:

"Aaron, no matter what you choose – to stay in the closet, to come out – it's going to be the right decision for you. You can't get this wrong. And you will know it's right, too. You'll feel totally peaceful. And you will make it when you are ready. There is no timeline here."

It's difficult for me to describe just how powerful those words were. Hearing his calm, masculine, gentle voice produce them was nothing short of a magic spell. I instantly felt my blood pressure drop. There would be a distinct shift of

warmth in my entire body as the very cells of each muscle relaxed and blood flowed more freely within me; unbound life force. My heart would slow. My breathing would become full, deep, and regular. I felt peace. It was just like that peace of that rescue in the pool at my sister's birthday party so many years before, in my early childhood.

In those final seconds that I had given up fighting Captain Lemming in the water and the blackness and peace was settling into my body, I felt two strong, giant arms under me, decisively snapping me away from death and bringing me back to the surface. I was blind. I took comfort in the feeling of the solid concrete ledge against my chest and face. I felt the sting of the grit-dusted surface as it sanded away the fragile, young skin of my cheeks. It was the most glorious feeling to be in contact with something solid in some way. I choked and coughed a bit, but the fog of that waterlogged, drowning peace remained in the wake of the fatigue. When I rallied a little later, and after drying off and resting on a bed in the adjacent room, I went out to find my dad. I just wanted to be near him. I wanted to surrender to the chest of the man who saved me, so I found him and sat upon his lap.

But a man hadn't saved me.

My hero was a girl.

A girl in a black bathing suit. She was overweight and a bit strange. Her eyes seemed narrow and unusual, and I recognized her as being "special" as was said by kind people in those days. "Retarded" was the word used by the unkind people. It was used in ways that were clearly hostile and mocking; in the same tones I recognized when certain people said different but equally hurtful words to me. Words I had learned I wanted to avoid being lobbed at me at all costs.

"You need to learn how to swim", she declared.

I was a bit insulted and hurt, but too tired to protest much. I *did* know how to swim. I just didn't know anything about rescuing other people. There was a difference. But anything I tried to say in my weakened state bounced off of her. She just said it again.

"You need to learn how to swim."

"Okay. Well, thanks for saving me." I relinquished the chain of my pride in favor of silence. I didn't have any energy for conflict within my eight-year old body. I just let her observation and statement be truth. Maybe it was truth. Maybe I did need to learn to swim; maybe her simple acknowledgement of the truth of the situation was what would really allow me to be safe in the longer run. And even save others along the way.

"She's a champion, Buddy. This young lady here is in Special Olympics. She won a silver medal in swimming. Isn't that lucky for us?!"

Honestly, I didn't know what to really make of that. I don't think I really knew much about the Special Olympics back then. *Was the competition even real? Was it even a challenge? Didn't everybody win medals? If they were so good, why weren't "they" in the "real" Olympics with everyone else?*

It would be many years before the significance of this event and its meaning to me became part of my consciousness. But it certainly was one of the most formative experiences that led me toward my career as a nurse who works with children with neurodiversities. I literally owe my life to a Silver Medal Athlete with Down Syndrome who found her passion and purpose in the Special Olympics. I wish to this

day I knew her name and what became of her so that I could more appropriately honor her memory and contribution to my life. But there is no doubt I outlived her, as she was older than me and the life expectancy of a child with Down syndrome born in the 1960s was ten to maybe twenty-five years at the upper end.

"You need to learn how to swim."

I had no idea just how profoundly right she was.

It wasn't long after that October Conference session disaster that my thrashing about in my own suffering would hit another climax. I was talking with Tanner again, his paradoxically masculine crossed legs facing me, and I realized in that moment I had made a decision. I hadn't been consciously aware I had made it. But when he asked what I'd been thinking about coming out, I was a little shocked at my own response.

"Yeah, well, I think January would be a good time to tell Stephanie. We are just so close to Ethan's birthday; so close to all the holidays. I can't bear to think of what that would do to everyone if I came out now. But I think I am going to tell her. I just want to wait for a while until I feel stronger. Until I won't forever screw up everyone's memories of the important days ahead."

He smiled his sweet smile and became a little more animated.

"That's fantastic, Aaron. You'll do this when the time is right. Don't even worry about it. You can't get this wrong, my friend."

I was stunned that I had just said those words. I had not been aware of my own decision about it all. It just sort of leapt out of my mouth before I could catch it.

So, I left his office in one of Portland's hip districts and made my way home thinking deeply about the fact that I had made a decision to come out. That it was finally no longer a question of how to hide or bury or deny my sexuality. But it was a question of when and how would I tell the world; when and how I would tell the person I most loved in all the universe the truth about the years of my increasingly downward spiral.

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Stephanie was worried.

She'd been worried off and on for years about me. But the intensity of my agony was not something I'd been able to mask anymore in the past few months. I had gained so much weight that last year. I was almost heavier than I had ever been in my life. I couldn't sleep. My mood was volatile. I'd barely speak to anyone in the family for days at a time. She sensed something was boiling deep within me; the lava she feared would destroy me. She just knew things had gone from bad to worse. And from worse to critical.

It was late on the night of October twentieth, 2010. She sat on the sofa but, as usual, I was not sitting beside her. I was behind her, in the green chair, focusing upon myself and lost deep in the thoughts of how I would eventually tell her

this truth. The peace I felt with Tanner in his office was sitting just outside of my reach. Dismay began to fill my lungs and chest. I was going to lose everything. This would destroy my life. I needed to let this out because I knew if I didn't, it would kill me. It would destroy everyone's lives in ways worse than coming out would.

Lonely and worried, she called out to me meekly; warmly.

"Come sit with me?"

Reluctantly, I arose and walked toward the small arrangement of two sofas so that I was no longer hidden away. I preferred sitting outside of her gaze increasingly, as looking into her eyes felt dangerous; felt dishonest. *How much longer will she love me if she really sees me?*

I laid down upon the sofa adjacent to her. They were arranged close, at a ninety-degree angle to each other, but with a pathway between so one could enter the formal living room area. I knew she had meant for me to sit beside her. But I was feeling too much guilt; too much shame to touch her. So, I took the seat facing her, but away from her at the same time. I could sense her disappointment and loneliness.

"Aaron. What is it?" She was fighting tears. "I know you are seeing a counselor and I know you say it's helping. I am trying not to pry and I don't want to be pushy. But what is going on? Are you safe? Please tell me you are safe."

"I'm safe, Stephanie. I mean...I wasn't for a while. But I am now. I promise. I'm safe. I'm doing all this to keep myself safe."

I had just admitted to being unsafe. In the indirect dance of Mormon language, I had just told her I'd been

suicidal as clearly as I just typed it. I finally admitted to her biggest fear about me. She could no longer try to contain the energy of her anxiety. Tears formed large and fast, like snowmelt on an unexpectedly warm spring day. They began to flow. I was hurting her, and it was killing me to know it. Seeing all that water on her face was the last straw. I sank. Deep and fast. Boxing with water. Going under.

How can you do this to her? Look at how much she loves you. Look at how much she cares for you. How much you love her back. Fifteen years. You have three sons together. You helped her bring every one of them into the world. Life has been so goddamn hard and yet here she still is. You can't do this. You just can't do this to her.

"I can't do this anymore. I can't watch you do this to yourself. You have to tell me what's going on. It's too much." She was not frantic, but she was resolved and emphatic.

I lay there, aching; drowning. My throat became frozen. I could barely breathe. The pressure on my chest was so heavy. I swallowed some spit to try and force my throat to open and relax. I was crying. Thirty-eight years of fear, shame, disgust, loneliness, hopelessness...they were so close to the surface, that I felt myself losing all control.

She saw my growing reaction. Then she did become frantic, like a mother watching her child going under. Like a wife, watching her husband in the waves.

"What is it? Please, please tell me!"

No. Not now. Not ever. Look at her. LOOK AT HER. You can't. All this talk of coming out with Tanner is insane. It is stupid. She didn't ask for this, you asshole.

"Are you dying? Is this cancer? Are you addicted to drugs? Did you lose your job and not tell me? Are we

bankrupt? What is going on?" She was searching; lurching forward at anything to make sense of it all.

"Is it me? Are you in love with someone else? Are you seeing another woman?"

A small shock jolted me to stability. That last thing she said... I could deal with her thinking any of those other things, had they been the true problem. I could have dealt with all this torture if what I had to tell her was some massive failing of my own choices. I knew that in any circumstances where I had just screwed up my own life by being an addict or losing my job was something she'd love me through.

But the thought that she would blame herself or that she would think I'd stopped loving her? The thought of her worrying that I'd met someone else, no matter how absurd the idea, was the slap in the face that woke me briefly from the impending doom. That was a line I would not allow to be crossed. In no way was this perfect, lovely, devoted woman ever going to think for one moment that this was about her being inadequate, or being cheated on, or some other bullshit. No. I had to respond.

"Stephanie, you are the only woman I could ever love."

This time, it was she who felt the sting of a slap to attention.

In my delivery, there was an unintentional slip; this gigantic truth had expanded to such a size within me that it was tearing out of my body; betraying me and my wishes for it to simply not be true; to not be revealed; to be kept safe. But

it was no longer possible to keep it in. In speaking the words I'd hoped would comfort, I spoke the truth instead.

*Stephanie, you are the only **woman** I could ever love.*

There, with a very slight verbal lingering and emphasis on the word "woman", it hit her like shrapnel; the words exploding in the air. She took a breath. Immediately her tears stopped. She leaned forward on her seat and rose to come for me. She was as sober and calm as a distinguished midwife, taking her place by the side of a frightened young woman giving birth for the first time.

She moved to me and sat down, placing my head in her lap; placing her arms around me, gazing into my eyes.

"Say it. You need to say it." she said, gently and lovingly. She had completely set herself aside for those moments. This was truly about me now.

I shuddered. I coughed and sputtered. I was breached. There was no more wall to hold the ocean back within me. The tears, the saliva – all of it poured from my face. I couldn't breathe. But her arms held firm. She rocked me ever so slightly.

"You need to say this. It's okay. It's ok."

"I. Can't." I expelled the words in fluid ounces.

"Yes, you can. I love you. It'll be ok. You need to say this." She whispered her motherly whisper.

My head tossed side-to-side, shaking 'no' as I boxed, waiting for the end of the pain but knowing it wouldn't come.

"I." First word.

"Yes."

"Am." Metered and deliberate.

"Yes."

"Gay".

And silence.

I fell into the pain. I fell into the truth. I fell into the freedom. Every cell of my body responded. All of my muscles contracted in spasms as I found myself caught without breath...awaiting the moment when I could inhale. There she was, her life being irrevocably changed forever. And I could feel her arms. The warmth of her clothed skin against my face.

"Breathe, sweetheart."

The wait had ended. The contractions of my abdomen and chest gave way. Air came rushing into me, filling me with the first, honest breath of a new life. It was long and forced. I didn't remember how to do it for a moment; how to make the air move in and out. I wailed. I wailed the cry of a small child who had just felt his first true awareness of loss. It was a full-body experience. Huge breaths in. Discordant cries out...the kind that take countable seconds to expel from you.

"I know" she said. "It all makes sense. I know."

It was an interesting return of the tide. Months later, we would talk about these moments that night and compare them to the births of our children. We were kind of famous among the nurses of the small family birth center in which the boys were born. We labored together so closely, Stephanie contracting, and feeling, and being. Me, holding her close.

Breathing with her in tandem, silently. It was the silence and the intimacy of our labors that nurses would literally come to watch. They had seen nothing like it.

But in each labor, there came a live-or-die moment. It was real and it was brutal. There was no instrumentation recording data to back any of this up, but there was a synchronizing between us in the act of laboring and giving birth. Our heartbeats. Our breaths. Our whispers. Our minds. And when that moment would come – that infamous moment when a laboring woman has been pushing and is close to birth but too exhausted to continue – her emotions would pour out of her in a huge flood. And because of our synchronicity and my empathic nature, I would receive them. It would last only a few seconds, but in the act of absorbing all that emotion, when all Stephanie wanted to do was to die and end the pain, I would feel it and I would know it. It would knock the wind out of me, as my grandma used to say. I'd have to let it pass through like a shockwave and catch my breath as quickly as I could. And the second it passed, I was again calm, and she was lighter. And it was then that birth would happen.

During that night on the sofa, that was what she did for me. She returned in kind the fullness of all that presence and devotion and nurturing. She held me in her arms as I wanted nothing more than to die because it was just too hard to go on. And she breathed in my pain and breathed out my salvation. And in short time, I was delivered.

The spasms subsided. Calm and gentle tears flowed from her. Calm and gentle breaths returned to me. And we clung to each other in the presence of a new life. One we did

not know and could not foresee. One for which we had not prepared or even imagined. But in spite of this newness and the re-orienting of our entire relational identity in our midst, there was peace. She was seeing me – the real me – for the first time, like looking at a resting baby, calmed by the rescue from its confining womb.

I don't recall how long we were silent in the stillness of it all. But my mind turned toward Stephanie and her needs and her care. *What is she thinking? How do I protect her? Oh my god, does she wonder about me? About my fidelity?*

I panicked briefly. I shot up to look her fully in the eyes.

"Stephanie, you need to know. Even though I'm gay. Even though I've hidden this from even myself for so very long, I have **never** been unfaithful to you. I would never...I **could never** do that to you. I love you. I love you with all my heart."

She raced with her words to head me off, speaking over me.

"I know. I know you could **never** do that to me. You are the **most** honorable man I have ever known. I **know** you are telling me the truth. I know it."

Together, the crying resumed.

What are we going to do? What is this going to mean? What is going to happen to us? What about the boys?

We volleyed the questions through kisses upon one another's cheeks and eyes, clinging through our frantic embrace.

"I don't know," I meekly said. "I don't know what it all means for us. But it doesn't change **this**." I whispered, using my hand and finger to point between us.

"I don't know what it means. I just know that I'm tired. I'm so, so tired. I'm tired in my bones, Steph. Tired from all of these years and all of this heaviness."

You need to learn how to swim.

Once again, my hero was a girl.

SAMPLE