

I was born in a small Balkan country notorious for its macho culture and lack of diversity. My parents and I lived in a small town in the north where everyone knew each other and worshiped in the same church. Being different in such a small, homogeneous community was particularly difficult as it often felt as though living a private life in this place was impossible. Within the community, but also the country as a whole, the word homosexual was unknown to the lay person. Instead those with same-sex attractions were referred to as pederasts. Openly admitting same-sex attractions was seen as perversion by those that chose to pursue a life of sexual misconduct. Although none would dare admit these attractions in my town, those that lived in the bigger towns and cities who confessed to having same-sex attractions were disowned, subjected to physical abuse and driven out of town in an effort to “restore” the town’s pride and rid it of perversion. Because the culture was so unaccepting, most homosexual men and women would give in to family pressure and enter into heterosexual marriages. Anyone that failed to enter into marriage, even for reasons unrelated to sexual orientation, was seen as a person that was left behind, undesirable and to be pitied.

When I was ten years old my family and I moved to the UK. Even though I was living in a much more tolerant society I struggled to escape that small town mentality that had been bestowed on me since I was born. Unable to see a sensible way of being myself without turning my family against me I decided to hide my sexuality for as long as possible. I was convinced that my family would disown me if they knew I was gay. The thought that one day I could lose my family, my home and end up alone made me become depressed. The fear of others discovering my sexuality made me secretive and distant.

Despite living in London from the age of ten I did not meet another openly gay person until I was 23. We met by chance on the street and from the moment I met him I felt as though I wasn’t as alone as I had previously felt. Following a brief, but happy, relationship I was determined to seek out other homosexuals. After meeting a number of people through an LGBT organisation I discovered that many of them did not share my views on God or religion. Most found my decision to continue being a Catholic peculiar. Some would ask why I wanted to belong to a body that did not want me. Others, however, advised that I should seek LGBT Catholic groups as they could help to reconcile my sexuality with my faith.

In the space of twelve months I went from feeling as though I was the only non-famous gay person in the UK to knowing several other LGBT people and even worshiping with a group of LGBT Catholics in a church that was welcoming of people like me. I can still remember the first time I attended the mass for the LGBT community, their families and friends. I was very concerned that someone may say something about my sexuality so decided not to attend the tea session in the church hall after mass. Despite my fears, I enjoyed the service and was able to attend again two weeks later. As I continued attending mass I met many people that made me feel welcome. Being around LGBT people who were out to their families gave me some hope that my parents could one day be accepting of my sexuality.

As my attendance of church masses and events they organised continued this began harming the relationship with my parents as I didn’t feel comfortable telling where I was going so would lie. My parents were raised in a culture that was centered on the family and they insisted on knowing where I was going and what I was doing all of the time. I would always lie and as a result they would often talk about me and make hurtful accusations. Fed up with feeling judged and fearing that the relationship I was trying to protect was crumbling before me I decided that the time had come to tell my parents the truth.

On the 15th of May 2013 I made the decision to tell them that I was gay. I fully expected them to throw me out of their house. This would have been typical in the old country. To my surprise they did not eject

me from their house, instead they blamed themselves and spent the next two weeks doing what many parents in their situation do, crying and trying to understand why this was happening. My parents are devout Catholics and I had hoped that one day I could take them to the mass. Three weeks after I came out my parents they came with me to the mass because they wanted to know more about homosexuals and not rely on the misconceptions of their culture.

On the 9th of June 2013 my parents and I went to the 6:15 mass at Farm Street. I remember looking at my mother's face during the service and her sobbing broke my heart. After the mass my parents were greeted by some members of the community at the tea gathering in the parish hall. When we left the church my mother wasn't upset, she was pleased she had discovered that homosexuals are just like everyone else. Had it not been for this community I would not have found the strength that I needed to be honest with my family. My parents would have continued to have misconceptions about the LGBT community and in the long run would not have been as supportive. I feel so blessed that at the age of 26 I can finally be myself and still have a relationship with my parents and try to be a decent Catholic. My wish is for the presence of communities like this in the country where I was born and other places of intolerance because that would make being different so much easier.