

Introduction

“But I’m not a saint yet. I’m an alcoholic. I’m a drug addict. I’m homosexual. I’m a genius. Of course, I could be all four of these dubious things and still be a saint.”

—Truman Capote, *Music for Chameleons*

I was born in 1978, came out of the closet at age thirteen or so, and was received into the Catholic Church during my sophomore year of college.

When I became Catholic in 1998, I didn’t know any other gay, lesbian, or bisexual people who intended to be faithful to the Church’s teachings on sexuality. I didn’t even know *of* any such people. As far as I could tell, I was completely unprecedented. Nonetheless, I had all the humility of your average sophomore-year convert, so I didn’t worry about how I’d manage without any forerunners or guides.

Since that time I’ve learned that many other people have walked this road before me. I’ve discovered the Church’s hidden treasures of history, theology, art, and saints’ lives, which have taught me that a faithful, chaste gay life can be beautiful and fruitful. In this book I share what I and others have discovered: that being gay and faithful to the historical Christian teaching on sexuality need *not* condemn you to a life of barren loneliness. I’m honest about the sufferings and humiliations inherent in this way of life—every vocation has its own forms of loneliness, its own typical crosses—but I focus on the forms of love that are available to you. Every person has a unique call from God to love and serve others and to receive their love. This is what Catholics often call a person’s *vocation*. Vocations go beyond obvious ones such as marriage or the priesthood; I explore the vocations, the paths of

love, that are open to people who are not called to marriage or to vowed religious life.

This book is not “about” the Catholic or historical Christian teaching on homosexuality. This is not a book about why people are gay or why the Catholic Church teaches what it teaches. I take the Church’s position on homosexuality more or less for granted here, although I point you toward resources if you do want to explore the theology (see appendix one).

But this also isn’t solely a personal story. This is a book about what God might want *you* to do with your love and your life if you are attracted to and fall in love with members of your own sex—not about what you shouldn’t do or why you shouldn’t do it. It’s not just about what I personally do, although I give you my own story and suggest lessons I’ve drawn from it. But this is a book I hope will help people in many different situations discern how God is calling them.

God wants you to love. He wants you to increase the tenderness and beauty in his world. This book is about the many different ways in which that call to love can play out for people who are gay or experience same-sex attraction *and* accept the historical Christian teaching on chastity.

Here’s where I’m coming from and how this book differs from many of the other books on this topic:

I’m a woman. Most of the people who have written about being gay and celibate for religious reasons have been men. In any question of sexuality, it’s important to hear from both sexes; and it’s especially important that women’s voices be a part of the conversation about sexual orientation, in which the stereotypes applied to gay men are so different from those applied to lesbians.

I’m in no sense ex-gay. In fact, I seem to become more lesbian with time—college was my big fling with bisexuality, my passing

phase. I don't think marriage is part of my vocation, so I've had to explore other paths. Most of this book is about those paths.

I had a good childhood, a gay-supportive family, and truly fruitful experiences within gay communities. For these reasons, what I have to say may not speak as much to people who experienced more childhood pain, who feared or experienced familial rejection, or who found gay communities unwelcoming or shallow. I realize that especially when it comes to my family's acceptance I may be in the minority (although I hope that's changing), and I hope I express gratitude for that throughout the book rather than taking it for granted. But a lot of the books and other writings directed toward gay Christians describe types of psychological pain I don't think I've experienced and that other gay Christians may also have been able to avoid. And—more problematically—these books tend to assume that gay communities are like fairy gold, which looks like real gold but turns to dead leaves overnight. So, too, gay communities are presented as attractive and perhaps even liberating at first, but ultimately hollow and worthless. There needs to be a book directed at people who still find beauty, mutual aid, and solidarity in gay life, even though we believe we've found something much greater in Christ.

Chastity and sexual orientation issues haven't been my most difficult ongoing struggles as a Catholic. I'd say alcoholism has probably been the toughest one. I want to write a book that is honest about how you can find your deepest joy and solace in the Church, yet still remain imprisoned by addiction. I want to get past the clichés on both sides: the sad, angry, and man-hating lesbian drinking away the pain of her sexual brokenness or the miserable, life-denying celibate who has been twisted by the evil Catholic Church. While this book does not focus on recovery, I hope it's honest when addiction and recovery are discussed.

In every gay celibate life, the crosses (and joys) of celibacy will inevitably be accompanied by other struggles, other challenges, other temptations, and other losses. I offer some ideas about how the tools we use in developing chaste, celibate vocations within the Church can also arm us against other demons we may need to fight.

There's a certain catch-22 in writing about celibate gay life. If you write about the joy you find in fidelity to Christ and the Church, you may sound Pollyannaish, defensive, or callous toward others' suffering. If you write about the difficulties, you can be accused of self-pity and masochism. I hope that this book is honest about the suffering that comes with this form of life in Christ but is also quick to note the joys it can bring.

This book is *not* a theological treatise defending the Catholic Church's teaching on sexuality. I admittedly don't always understand that teaching, and I don't think you need to understand every single element of a Church teaching in order to assent to its authority in your life. And you certainly don't need to accept any one school of theology—such as natural law—in order to accept and live by the Catholic ideal of chastity. If you do want to explore the reasoning and scriptural interpretation that shape the Church's teaching, I've included some reading recommendations in appendix one, but you really don't have to spend a lot of time on this stuff if you don't want to.

This is also not a book about politics. Gay and same-sex attracted Christians may disagree among ourselves on the best resolutions to the many heated political debates surrounding gay rights; this book is about the lives we can make for ourselves, in response to God's call, regardless of our political opinions.

When I first entered the Catholic Church I thought of my role—a lesbian-gay-bisexual-queer-same-sex-attracted Christian—as having two parts: the negative act of not having gay sex

and the positive act of intellectually understanding the Church's teachings. I now see my task much more simply, as the discernment and living out of my vocations: figuring out how God is calling me to love and then pouring myself out into that love.

Part one of this book is mostly autobiographical. I give you a sense of where I'm coming from, how I first encountered Catholicism and what I thought of it, how I ultimately found myself saying yes to the Church, and what happened in the long years after my Baptism and Confirmation. I also offer a more theoretical discussion of "origin stories" for homosexuality. Does it matter why you're gay? Should it matter to Christians? I argue that there are many different kinds of homosexuality, some of which may have psychological origin stories and some of which don't, and also that the contemporary American Christian focus on the psychological past has distracted us from the far more important subject of the vocational future. And I emphasize the diversity of the ways Christians can understand our sexuality while remaining faithful.

In part two, I turn to the concept of vocation in more depth. What is vocation? How can you tell what yours is? And why does it matter? (This will also be where I explain why I'm not a nun, although I suspect I could rock a pantsuit.) I also discuss Christian community and its difficulties; devoted, sacrificial friendship as we see it in Christian history, theology, and contemporary practice; and why service to others is an area in which celibate gay people may have especial gifts to offer.

I also talk about common problems with faithful, chaste gay Catholic life. You wouldn't trust a marriage manual that was written as if nobody ever had to deal with fighting about money, childrearing, bad sex, or farting in bed. I want to be equally real about the challenges of celibate gay life, including loneliness, lack of accountability, and anger at the Church. I offer comfort and

support, as well as describe ways in which I've sought to ease these struggles in my own life.

Finally, in the appendices, I give my take on the resources available to gay Christians today. I'll address the most common life-advice questions people bring to me when I do speaking engagements. And in appendix three, I offer suggestions for things you can do, no matter what your own orientation may be, to make the Church a more beautiful and welcoming home for gay or same-sex attracted Christians.

When we hear rhetoric of "healing" used about homosexuality in Christian contexts, I think we often assume that the speaker means that gay people should be healed of *their homosexuality*—turned straight. But my friend Ron Belgau noted that mature, spiritually fruitful celibacy requires its own forms of healing. We can think of *healing* as the process by which we are freed from self-obsession so that we can love others the way God is calling us to love.

Notes on Language

Throughout this book, I mostly use either *Christian* or *Catholic* when I mean "Christian who accepts that sex is only licit within heterosexual marriage." If I want to talk about Christians who reject what I suppose we must call the "traditional" teaching on human sexuality, I generally either name the denomination or use a long clunky phrase like the one I just wrote. I hope the concision I gain from using *Christian* or *Catholic* is not too off-putting to non-Catholic readers. I know many Protestants hold similar beliefs and face similar issues, and this is all the more true of Orthodox Christians, but since I am not steeped in those traditions myself, I thought it was better to speak from a Catholic perspective rather than trying to speak for everyone and accidentally misrepresent other churches. I also hope that Christians

(including Catholics) who reject the “traditional” or Catholic view of human sexuality don’t take offense at my word choice. I’m not questioning the depth of your faith, even though I disagree with the implications you draw from it in this area. I don’t think people want to read a book that uses the phrase “accepts the belief that sexual activity is only licit within heterosexual marriage” on every single page.

I switch between the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, *queer*, and *same-sex attracted* more or less based on instinct. When I want to emphasize difference, alienation, or the radical vulnerability of the celibate, I probably say *queer*; when I want to talk about gay cultures or my own self-identification I mostly say *gay* or *lesbian*; when I want to speak specifically about eros directed at a member of one’s own sex, without implying anything about involvement with or approval of contemporary gay culture, I’ll try to remember to use *same-sex attracted*.

But please don’t read too much into my choices here. The discussion of homosexuality within the Christian churches, at least in America, has become obsessed with finding the right identity label. An insouciance toward all of these labels—a certain lightness of touch, a willingness to accept all of them and reify none—would do us a lot of good. However, I’ve identified specific other people in the way they prefer. If somebody calls himself a man with same-sex attraction, it’s not my place to say that he’s “really” gay.

And now, come! We are ready for the floor show!

————— *part one* —————

Coming Out Catholic

chapter one

A Charmed Life

I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, the younger daughter of two law professors. (My mother later became a prisoners' rights lawyer, first with the American Civil Liberties Union and then under her own shingle.)

When I was three, my family moved to Washington, DC. While our neighborhood was not exactly a Ray Bradbury small-town idyll (our house was broken into and our car stolen, both more than once), it was still the kind of place where packs of children roamed freely in and out of kitchens and backyards under the watchful eyes of the local grandmas. My childhood memories have a lot of lilacs in them, honeysuckle, hand-clap rhymes, double Dutch, poodle-shaped pink barrettes, watermelon on the Fourth of July, and pretending to be an Alaskan husky driver—or sometimes an Alaskan husky—when I had to walk to school in the snowy depths of February.

I was, and perhaps remain, a fairly stereotypical youngest child (of two), irresponsible, diva-esque, and often oblivious to others' needs. Nonetheless, my childhood was basically lovely. My parents had and still have a strong marriage. In elementary school, I usually had a gang of girls to play with. I was teased a bit for being a genuinely weird kid. (I explained that I would change my name to Zilla when I grew up, which got me the obvious Japanese monster-movie nickname, and said that I had a special destiny and could see visions of the future.) But I was never bullied and was generally even protected from the usual childhood fights. I think I was very self-centered, in the way that privileged children often are, because the adults in my life

protected me from their troubles rather than forcing too much responsibility on me at a young age. I don't remember ever being punished by my parents, not once—not because I was spoiled, and definitely not because I always behaved, but because the mere expression of disapproval was usually enough to make me genuinely sorry. (For about an hour, at least. I was a pretty mercurial kid.)

I was born with life-threatening birth defects, which were detected when I was an infant. The main problem was that a blood vessel had gone rogue, wrapping itself around my trachea so I couldn't breathe. At the time, only two hospitals in the country would perform the necessary surgeries on a six-month-old, so my parents and I flew to Boston Children's, whose doctors saved my life. For a little more than half of the next year I breathed through a tube, which my parents had to clean and care for. Everyone in my family suffered through this period, not knowing whether I was going to make it.

Out of all of us, I suffered the least by far. I don't remember any of this. In later years I got bronchitis and pneumonia a lot—about once a year until I was in college—and while my fevers and deep coughing frightened my mother, I saw my illnesses as a week off of school in which I could reread Diana Wynne Jones and watch *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* on Nickelodeon. The stress my mom felt when I was sick was hard for me to understand because I had never experienced the fear that I wouldn't get better. I only learned about what my parents and sister had undergone on my behalf—the stress my birth defects had put on each of them individually, and on the family—gradually, and many years later.

I didn't think of myself as a "happy" or "unhappy" child. I don't think most children consider themselves in those terms. I knew I had a terrible temper, was pretty poorly behaved, and lied

a lot. I also felt smart and was confident in my abilities in school and, for the most part, in my friendships.

It's easy to get defensive in describing one's childhood. At one point I asked an online forum to recommend memoirs concerning alcoholism or addiction in which the writer came from a basically loving, happy, and stable family, and the response I got was, "Have you tried looking under 'fiction'?" But this response is based on a misconception. Two misconceptions, really. First of all, if you'd like an answer to my question you can check out David Carr's terrific memoir, *The Night of the Gun: A Reporter Investigates the Darkest Story of His Life—His Own*. One reason I love this book is precisely that although addiction runs in Carr's family, and not in mine, his upbringing was basically loving and supportive. But the idea that no kids from "good homes" end up addicted is based on a much deeper misunderstanding. Good parenting can't in all cases prevent addiction. Parents can sometimes make the fall shorter and the landing softer, but they can't keep their kids from ever falling down.

In many respects my childhood was about as good as childhood gets. There was a rougher undercurrent of loneliness and a certain insecurity that caused me to seesaw between self-aggrandizing fantasy and intense self-blame. I'm not sure that I felt these things more deeply or frequently than other children (Harriet the Spy goes through some tough times), but it's interesting that most of my actual memories of childhood have some element of unhappiness or loneliness.

One moment, which was repeated many times throughout my childhood and which I came to consider central to my sense of self, captures my uncertainty about my place in the world. In this composite memory, it's a hot summer afternoon, with the air honeyed and humid. I'm in my bedroom playing with the toys I kept on top of my dresser drawer: a village of miniature unicorns,

rag dolls, and china salt-and-pepper shakers shaped like cats. Some of these dolls and knickknacks had recurring characters (there was one teddy bear who was usually a lady pirate and a doll who was usually a sort of trickster), but the story lines varied wildly depending on what I'd been reading. Only one toy was fixed to a specific storyline—the exiled soldier.

The soldier was a tiny unpainted tabletop figure, which I think I found in someone's backyard. He was a waxy yellow, with blurry features and a yellow base to keep him upright. His story always began after its major precipitating event: He had committed some great crime, for which he was exiled from the tchotchke village. He had to stand at the edge of the dresser, facing away from the other knickknacks, guarding the village that had cast him out; he was not even allowed to look back at his home.

I can't remember what I thought he might have done. I think the crime itself shifted around at random, since it didn't seem to matter. It was a bad enough crime that he accepted exile as a fitting punishment, and although in some versions of the story he began by feeling great bitterness toward the villagers, over time his resentment softened, and he grew to love them and even find solace in his task of protecting them.

At last, one day, a threat came to the village. A giant polar bear! A purple dragon! A whole Lego army! Whatever it was, the plastic soldier set his face valiantly against the threat and defended the village with all his tiny might. Often, he died in the attempt. About half the time, whether he survived or not, I allowed him release from his punishment: The villagers recognized his penitence and valor, and either welcomed him back home or at least forgave him enough to bury him within the grounds of the village rather than on the cliff's side. The other half of the time I indulged my more depressive or cynical tendencies