

**A Hint of Pink: The realities of being queer from the perspective of a  
mother and a son**

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March, 2004

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the degree of Masters of Social Work.

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*Your file    Votre référence*

*ISBN: 0-612-98845-7*

*Our file    Notre référence*

*ISBN: 0-612-98845-7*

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the reality of a queer individual's life and the reality of a mother of a queer individual, where the author himself and his mother are the subjects. The paper seeks to explore these person's experiences/realities using both an autoethnographic approach and a life history approach. Coming from a postmodern and feminist position the author delves into such issues as power, oppression, social construction, personal voice, and identity. Personal narratives and academic literature within this paper are going to display queer realities and the broad range of oppression (such as heterosexism, homophobia and gendering) that they face (in educational, familial, and religious settings) and the experiences of a mother who has a queer child (such as emotional reactions, lack of resources/information).

The methodologies used within this paper also seek to explore and expand the use of alternative forms of academic research, focusing on the autoethnographic approach. Personal narratives, emotions and experiences take center stage within the body of this paper and seek to represent the realities of queer youth and their families to the reader, and hopefully, expose the need for more queer awareness, education, and advocacy.

## Résumé

Cet étude exploré la réalité de la vie d' une personne "queer" et la réalité de la mère de la personne "queer", ou l'auteur et sa mère son les sujets. Cet étude vise à explorer les expériences/réalités de ces personnes, en utilisant les approches autoethnographique et histoire de vie. Provenant du point des vues postmoderne et féministe, l'auteur regarde les questions de pouvoir l'oppression, voix personnelle, l'identité et construction sociale. Les narrations personnelles et la littérature scolaire dans l'étude démontrant les réalités "queer" et la grande diversité de l'oppression (comme l'hétérosexisme, l'homophobie et la schème des genres) à laquelle ils fait face dans les domaines (d'éducation, familial et religieux) et les expériences d'une mère qui a un enfant "queer" (comme les réactions émotionnelles, manque de ressource/informations).

Les méthodologies utilisées dans cet étude cherche aussi à explorer et développer l'utilisation de genre alternatif en recherche scolaire, focussant sur l'approche autoethnographique. Les narrations personnelles, les émotions et les expériences prennent le plan central dans le corps de cet étude et cherchent à représenter les réalités des jeunes "queer" et leur familles au lecteur, en espérant, d'exposer le besoin pour plus de conscience, d'éducation et de soutien "queer".

## Acknowledgements

Who do I thank and how do I do it? It's a puzzling question and dilemma of sorts – there are so many people who have influenced me and who have influenced the outcome of this paper. The paper that I have written and the issues that I have chosen to explore are of a very personal level, filled with experiences and life events that so many other people were a part of. There are those people that are blaringly visible and of great importance within my life and who shown me and taught me to be the person I am today (I hope a good person). My mother, my father, and my sister are of a huge importance; I have been blessed to be a part of this family. My mother is a beacon, a foundation stone within my life a person that I try to emulate everyday – she is what I hope to be as a person and what I hope to be as a parent. Although my father is not very present in the pages of this paper, he was of great importance to every aspect of my being – a stoic man, whom I respect and admire more than he will ever know (and his hands, I love my father's hands, as they show a roadmap of his life; rough and callused, strong yet kind). And my sister, she is she – a perfect person; a person who I look up to and who provides me with strength. There is no better way than to say that she is my hero. My family has always been an important aspect of my life, and my new family is no different. My partner, Clement, is and will always be that support and person who I can rely on. He provides me with the broad range of emotions that all should experience – love to anger, aggravation to wonder. With him came two of the greatest human beings that I have ever had the pleasure to know and love, Sarah and Stevens, our children. Although my family is of most importance to me there are those that have shaped and influenced me and therefore this paper.

Although I don't know them, Matthew Shepard and Lady Miss Kier have been huge influences, as have Boy George, Pete Burns, and James St. James. There are also my friends such as Emily Balla, Dean Payne, Jason Matlo, TJ Taylor and Liz Mutka who have always been there and provided me with so much. I also have to thank the countless individuals who I have come in contact with over the years that have given me the experiences which I will always possess (glittery drag queens, the sweeping scenes of nightclub goers, amorous lads, highschool and university mates, tea partners, fashion gurus, and the many others that provided me with a sense of community and belonging as I entered into my life in pink).

There is also a big thank you to Shari Brotman. Thank you so much Shari for being there, as a voice of encouragement, a voice of knowledge, and as a voice of fabulousness. Thank you for the edits, the many supervision meetings, the suggestions, and for the guidance. You were there to guide me through my work and be there to talk to on a personal level – a feat that all educators should (in my humble opinion) strive to attain. I hold you in my heart, not only as a teacher but also as a friend – thank you for that.

I would also like to thank all of those teachers and fellow students who expanded my mind and encouraged/influenced me to explore academia and myself. Thank you for being there for discussion, for ideas, for encouragement, for stimulation.

Thank you to the Kwadacha Band for giving me the support and opportunity to pursue my academic career. I am so proud to be a member and I one day hope to be able to give back to the community as much as they have given to me.

And I would once again like to thank my Mom. This paper could obviously not have been done without her. She lent me her words and her voice so that we could explore issues that we both feel very strongly about. Thanks so much Mom – although I know there were hard times and hard periods, I thank the Divine for your presence and for the opportunity and blessing to be your son.

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*Once Upon a Time...in the beginnings of my life in pink.*

*I was surrounded by pink, soft noises, and caressed by soft flesh. Everything that I experienced was soothing, as if it were built and designed especially for me. My life was an experiential affair. The light that streamed through my mothers taught skin was like a prism that only produced the color pink. Everything that was around me was tinged that color; I was conditioned to like it. I could only hear muffled noises and the repetitive noises of my mother's body around me. It was soft and natural sounding and with me always. This environment comforted me and lulled me to sleep; dreaming of a perfect future. But then a slice of light cut into my world and I was pulled from these depths of joy into a cold stark reality.*

*Cold stainless steel instruments and colorless walls became my environment. Echoing off the walls was my voice screaming for comfort. I had never been in a position where I did not feel enveloped with love and protection, and now, I was naked and alone. I was separate from my mother for the first time and I had no way of communicating that hurt, that pain. From the outside it appeared perfect. I was healthy; I was a perfect baby boy with ten toes and ten fingers. However, I quaked to be warm, to be in, to be comforted, to be surrounded by the pink womb that carried me for so long, but this was to no longer be. I was enveloped in a cotton blanket donning a new color that irritated my being; blue.*

## **Chapter 1 – Introduction to a Pink Boy**

I am a queer man. To my knowledge, when I was pulled from the womb I was a queer boy, and I see the world through the eyes of a queer person. I have always lived in a society where I was slightly different from the average person beside me. Ever since I was young and first uttered the words, “I want to be a shladly and wear shlipstick”, I was viewed with a weary suspicion. Is he? My life is not out of the ordinary; it is not spectacular in any sense, yet my life does illustrate society’s complex relationship with people such as I. This paper is going to try to lay bare this relationship using life experiences as a tool to convey the broader society’s treatment of queer individuals. This paper will use an autoethnographic approach combined with a life history method to explore certain aspects and events of two individuals lives; my mother and my self. I will be using my memories, my experiences, and my narrative to give voice to a son, a male, a child, an adolescent, and an adult who lived through the life stages and life events that many queer individuals go through and experience. I am not attempting to state that my life experience and my narrative will be able to be inferred to the lives of all other queer individuals, I am just narrating certain events and experiences of one queer person in an attempt to give a glimpse of what one person went through. The notion of generalizability is a troubling one. Ellis & Bochner (2000) note,

[a] story’s generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experiences or about the lives of others they know. Likewise, does it tell them about unfamiliar people or lives? Does it work...does it have ‘naturalistic generalization’, meaning that it brings ‘felt’ news from one world to another and provide opportunities for the reader to have vicarious experience of the things told? (p.751).

And so, I do not intend to generalize or essentialize my experience but to use it as a stepping stone to understand themes in the lives of queer people and their families. Although my work or my research was not exhaustive, it can have meaning for others and for the development of understanding.

This paper will also look at the experiences and events of my mother, Patricia Van Somer. I am going to be using my mother's narratives to peer into my mother's relationship with me, hopefully examining a parent's perspective. Being queer does not just affect the person that lives with that sexual orientation; it affects all those around them. By using my mother's narratives I am hoping to give a glimpse of the emotions and experiences of a parent of a queer child. Although I know that every parent reacts in different ways in response to the knowledge of having a queer child, I am hoping to give one account that may reflect other parent's reactions. Through an exploration of my experiences and my mother's experiences I want to further the understanding of the needs and realities of queer youth and their parents; although the experiences within the research will be mine and my mother's, the experiences that we have lived through (the coming out experience, generational and religious difference, lack of understanding by each party) have been lived by many and will be lived by many. With this research I hope to, by looking at the individual experience (mine and my mothers), allow others to better understand and relate to queer individuals and queer life.

I have experienced many things and I have been influenced by many people, but for the purposes of this paper I want to solely focus on certain experiences that I feel deal with or contributed to my identity as a queer man. My sister, Meaghan, my father, Bill, my partner, Clement, and my children, Sarah and Stevens, are huge parts of my life but

for this paper they are only going to be whispers. Although they are indeed important to me, I have chosen only to cover certain things within this paper; what you read is what I have chosen. I have chosen to include the reactions/experiences of the one person who was affected the most while I came out, my mother. This will be elaborated upon further throughout the paper. This paper is not about my entire identity, my entire family or what shaped me into the complete person I am today, it is about how I experienced being a queer individual and how my mother experienced having a queer child.

### **Breakdown of Paper**

Chapter 1 will introduce the paper and it's subject. This chapter will also introduce the format and appearance of the paper. Chapter 2 will illustrate my theoretical position and it's origin. This section will also be linking such notions as power, subjectivity and situated knowledge so as to justify my chosen methodology. Chapter 3 will provide an overview of queer history, societies changing perspectives and attitudes towards queers, and a focused view on schools, the family and religion in relation to queers. This section will also be critiquing the current knowledge concerning queers, whereby bringing up the need for different forms of research/methodology that explore voices/narratives. Chapter 4 is an explanation of autoethnography and the life history approach. This chapter will also explain how I went about gathering the information (narratives, stories) that was necessary for the paper and the process of analysis. Chapter 5 will provide an analysis of the narratives and interviews. This chapter goes through my experiences and the experiences of my mother, through such time periods as birth, childhood, adolescence and coming out. Chapter 6 is an overview of the findings and an exploration of the main themes that arose from the findings, such as homophobia,

heterosexism, and gendering. While Chapter 7 will reflect on what this paper (and autoethnography) can teach us and how it can impact the field.

### **Situating “I”**

The paper will be written in both the first person and the third person. The majority of the paper will have my voice throughout it; however, there are sections, in particular the literature review that will be composed in the third person. Although most sections will have my voice entangled throughout them, there are stories throughout the paper that are solely my voice. These sections will be put into italics so as to distinguish them from the body of the paper.

I have chosen to write the paper in this manner so as to allow the reader to “see” myself in the paper. Also the methodology that I have chosen to use encourages, if not demands, the use of the first person. On the other hand, I have chosen to write specific sections of the paper in the third person so my voice is just a whisper. I want certain aspects of the paper, such as the literature review, just to be an overview of what has already been said (by others).

*A story about myself? Research about myself? Data about my mom and I? Although I knew autoethnography seemed to be a good methodology for the subject matter that I wanted to cover in this paper, I really did not know how to begin. How do I sort out an entire life in the pages of a short thesis? How do I convey my personality and my emotions into these pages? The task seemed daunting. Everything and anything distracted me away from my research and my writing. I got a new job; I went on vacation: I had to argue with my partner; Big Brother was on. Every once in awhile, however, I would get nudges (be they direct or indirect) to work on my thesis. These*

*hints may come in the form of a nagging mother, catching a sight of unopened books, or a feeling invoked by an event.*

My son Matthew did not look like a winner. After all, he was small for his age—weighing, at the most, 110 pounds, and standing only 5’2” tall. He was rather uncoordinated and wore braces from the age of 13 until the day he died. However, in his all too brief life, he proved that he was a winner.

My son — a gentle, caring soul— proved that he was as tough as, if not tougher than, anyone I have ever heard of or known. On October 6, 1998, my son tried to show the world that he could win again. On October 12, 1998, my first- born son—and my hero—lost. On October 12, my first-born son— and my hero— died 50 days before his 22nd birthday. He died quietly, surrounded by family and friends, with his mother and brother holding his hand. All that I have left now are the memories....

Matt officially died at 12:53 AM on Monday, October 12, 1998 in a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. He actually died on the outskirts of Laramie, tied to a fence that Wednesday before when you beat him. You, Mr. McKinney, with your friend Mr. Henderson, killed my son.

By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself but he wasn't alone. There were his lifelong friends with him- friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time- one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all, he was breathing in , for the last time, the smell of Wyoming sage brush and the scent of pine trees from the Snowy Range. He heard the wind- the ever-present Wyoming wind for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday School and as an acolyte at St., Mark's in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew's in Laramie. He had God. I feel better, knowing that he wasn't alone. (Nov, 4. 1999. Dennis Shepard speaking to the court, as cited on [www.matthewsplace.com](http://www.matthewsplace.com), visited on October, 30, 2003.).

*I become enraptured by the name, Matthew Sheppard, (Just the name...*

*Matthew...invokes something in me; a sadness) because I do view him as a modern day martyr; a hero by just being he. His name and his memory often bring tears to my eyes*

*and a weight to my heart (Images often flash through my mind of him being tied to that fence – tears streaming down his face; the pain that his mother and father must have felt). I never knew Matthew, I have never been to his hometown or met his family, but his story and his life hit a chord with me. This is a story that could have been mine, could have been my friend Jason's, or my partner Clement's. Matthew's fate became our (many queer person's) worst case scenario – being killed for who they are. This was a young man who was killed for a number of different reasons; religious teachings, societal beliefs, and intolerance. These are some of the same reasons why I wanted to write this paper. I, as well as most (if not all) queer individuals, have suffered for these same reasons, or similar reasons. Although Matthew Sheppard paid the highest price for these reasons, all queer people suffer at some level for them. Laramie was a town that many queer people can relate to. A town that doesn't understand you, a town full of people that harbors and breeds intolerance, most of our hometowns. This is a reason that so many queer people relate and are touched by the Matthew Sheppard story; it could have been any one of us. Matthew, since his death has always been an inspiration to me. His end nudged me to be proud of myself and to give voice to the potential Matthews in us all.*

This paper is not about queer bashings or hate crimes in particular; it is about more subtle forms of violence against queers. In this paper I want to explore the violence that takes the form of alienation, ignorance, prejudice, and strained family relationship.

My life has always been a medley of stories that enabled me to survive. This paper is just one more story. I once acted as a straight man, who liked women; this enabled me to go to school and not be beaten up. I once was a boy who believed in the teaching of my religious leaders; this enabled me to blend in with my family. The story of

my birth is another such story; it enables me to make sense of certain aspects of my life.

Although I cannot say that a blue blanket irritated me, I can say that the gendered mores of Canadian society did. Blue did hurt me, when I was not allowed to wear pink.

## **Chapter 2 – Theoretical Position; where the boy sits – somewhere in between red and white.**

Research papers and the products of academia are often a dialogue among members of similar fields featuring exclusionary language and an airy demeanor. As a result, they are often of limited relevance to other groups and the general public. Although these academic papers and texts may have great impact in certain academic circles they often fall short of reaching the public (including the public they may be writing or postulating about) or articulating the actual experiences of the given group of people. It is noted by Himani Bannerji (1995) that information/experiences, which are correct in their portrayal of a group of people, may become “inert or inverted” if they are “inserted into the tentacles of an alienating interpretive device’ because they can lose their frame of reference and original voice” (p. 64). Bannerji (1995) goes on to note that modes of producing knowledge (be it analytic/interpretive frameworks, methods of writing text, or theoretical paradigms) are embedded with politics and power; which can exclude certain groups, misrepresent certain groups or highlight and further the position of certain groups. I have struggled with methodology and theoretical positioning, as I am aware of the power that can be embedded within these. For the purposes of this chapter I am going to focus on the difficulties I had positioning myself in a certain theoretical framework and how I came to terms with this.

Not only are many of the theories and texts difficult to understand, they are also often overlapping and confusing. Theories abound and seem to breed more theories; where do I go and what do I hold on to? Do I hold on to this postulate or that idea? Isn’t that the same as this? I’m sure Foucault or Derrida also said that (or maybe that was

White). Each of these theories has a different (often slightly different) lens in which they look at the world and the actors in that world. Important to this lens is the way in that they focus on or understand what counts as 'knowledge'. The next section of this paper looks at the ways in which I have come to position myself in relation to 'knowledge'. I am also going to show that the concepts of 'knowledge', personal voice and narrative, and subjectivity are important parts of my research and the methodology that I have chosen.

### **Knowledge: A Journey**

*Know: if you know something, you have it correctly in your mind.*

*Knowledge: information and understanding about a subject, which someone has in their mind.*

- Collins Cobuild Dictionary (1999)

*What is 'knowledge'? This is the question that has been posed to me. This is the question that I have spent weeks trying to dissect. According to the definition that was given by the dictionary that I possess, 'knowledge' is having correct information and understanding about a subject; or in other words, the truth. This definition of 'knowledge' has always been problematic to me, as I have always questioned 'The Truth'. The religion that I grew up with had many ideas and beliefs (aka Truths because God said so) that I have questioned from the time I was very little. I questioned whether Jesus really did walk on water. It seemed too...out there, too much like showing off for me. As I aged, the more critical I became of the truths that supposedly guided my existence (or that should be guiding my existence). So my question became, where does*

*truth come from? Is there truth? This is where I am sitting: questioning the relevance or even the existence of truth. In my childhood I was taught that God is Truth, but as I aged I began to question this belief. The more I read and the more information that I took in, the more this truth seemed to be flawed. My mind, the mind of an inquisitive youth, was trying to make sense of the world. So if God did not equal truth then what did? As I aged the further I became indoctrinated into the societal belief in science as fact; that science equals the truth. Peter Leonard (1994) notes "[t]he notion of science as objective knowledge of the physical world was to become the cornerstone of what was later to be called "modernity" (p.13). Modernity has become culturally indoctrinated; we are socialized to believe that science is flawless; that science holds the answers; that reliable knowledge comes from rational and scientific methods, not subjective, emotionally messy methods.*

*With their words and their choices of readings, modernity, and it's postulates, were on there way out and new modes of thinking and perceiving the world were on their way in. Behar, Rosaldo, hooks, Bannerji, Derrida and Foucault became my authors of choice; Durkheim, Comte, and Hawking were put on the wayside. I began to deconstruct the wall of modernity and positivism that surrounded me; brick by brick the wall was removed until all I could do was look around and see what was beyond. What I saw and what I learned changed my life and eventually my theoretical positioning. I latched onto theories that touched me personally; theories that supported my experiences and my reality. I live in a reality where I am oppressed. I live in a reality where my truth can result in discrimination. I am gay and I suffer for being gay. I receive glares and threats for not fitting into gender norms. I am not allowed to get married to the person I love.*

*Why? Modernity cannot answer questions like these; my experiences are outside of its scope. Numbers or formulas cannot capture human experience and emotions. With this realization I began to question ideas of universals and objectivity, grand theories and emancipation and how I fit into these paradigms. It was feminist and postmodern thinkers/authors that appealed to me and influenced the work/research that I wanted to pursue.*

### **Feminisms: Voice, Narrative and Knowledge**

Feminist paradigms are the first that took me and shook me; they opened my eyes to humanity. Jary and Jary (1995) note that it is more accurate to talk of feminisms rather than feminism. They note over ten political tendencies within feminism ranging from an equal rights position to a female supremacist position. The following tendencies were listed - aboriginal feminism, academic feminism, black feminism, cultural feminism, eco-feminism, lesbian feminism, liberal feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, political feminism, radical feminism, postmodern feminism and socialist feminism (Jary and Jary, 1995).

These paradigms took into account that there were human actors with emotions, feelings, and experiences. These paradigms took into account power inequalities, human interactions, and oppression. Whilst there is no single ideological position that unites all feminists, most would accept the notion that the subordination of women to men is the result of socioeconomic and cultural factors and not the effect of biological determinism (Sebestyn, 1979). The goal of such thought is to bring down the current systems and institutions that use gendered power, male privilege, and patriarchal structures, so as to create a system that would liberate women and equalize the playing field. One such

method is through the rejection of the notion of 'expert knowledge', due to its androcentric construction and its perpetuation of patriarchal control (Leonard & Leonard, 1999). Susan Faludi (1991) notes, "feminism's agenda is basic, it asks that women be free to define themselves instead of having their identity defined for them, time and time again, by their culture and their men" (p.12). Feminisms hold that subordinated people must be given a voice in which they can express their position and their narrative. They further hold that this voice helps examine the nature/procedures/products of oppression (Faludi, 1991). The subordinated, themselves, feminists note, hold certain keys (their voice, their experiences, their situations) that allow others to better understand the oppression or marginalization that they face.

Within the feminist statement 'the personal is political', is condensed the understanding that the seemingly most intimate details of private existence are actually structured by larger social relations; our lives and our experiences are imbedded within political issues. This saying rings very true to me. We must dissect our lives to understand what is impacting us, what is influencing us and what is limiting us. We need to understand and question what version of reality is being produced. Catrina Brown (1994) echoes my concerns about the production of knowledge and reality, when she states,

[t]he hegemonic or dominant ideology of a society influences the 'objective' truth as one is always a perspectival knower; "one always knows from a particular location, which is only masked when knowledge production does not identify the location of the knower through an assumption of neutral objectivity. The diversity of people's experiences are obscured and homogenized through these objectified accounts. Such truth claims invariably represent the interests of the social elite (p. 34).

It was feminisms postulates, and feminist writers, such as Audre Lorde and Kath Weston, which/whom inspired me. It was also the feminist notions of incorporating the personal voice into the written word, the importance of personal experience and a focus on oppression that influenced me and rang true (Faludi, 1991; Bannerji, 1995; Weston, 1996).

### **Post-modernism: Constructs and Knowledge**

“[O]nly one truth appears before our eyes: wealth, fertility and sweet strength in all its insidious universality. In contrast, we are unaware of the prodigious machinery of the will to truth, with its vocation of exclusion” (Foucault as cited in Leonard, 1994, p.12).

Post-modern theories are implicated in or accounting for the change from modernity to post-modernity. Post-modernity is seen as involving such features as a world without absolute values, an end of the dominance of an overarching belief in ‘scientific’ rationality and a unitary theory of progress (subjectivity over objectivity), the replacement of empiricist theories of representation and truth, and a plurality of viewpoints. (Leonard, 1994)). Postmodern theories are also relativist in nature, due to the postmodern belief that states there is no one single universal standard from which to judge what we know or what we should do (Leonard, 1994. p.17). Rather than relying on universal truths, meta-narratives and ruling ideas that are postulated and perpetuated by dominant groups, we are “encouraged to recognize the diversity of experience and value difference in such areas as culture, class and sexual orientation” (Carniol, 2003, p.3).

Postmodernists, however, do not accept the idea of meta-narratives as they

assume the validity of their own truth claims, however, mini-narratives, micro-narratives, local narratives, traditional narratives are just stories that

make no truth claims and are therefore more acceptable to post-modernists (Rosenau, 1992, pp.7-8).

Feminist theories and my queer identity made me question some of the postulates put forward by the postmodern perspective. The postmodern emphasis on difference (the continuum rationality) is problematic. My human experience has concretized the notion that there is oppression based on societal structural issues such as race, gender, class and sexual orientation. This, however, relies on the basis of a 'meta-narrative' (specifically a meta narrative of oppression), which is opposed to the post-modernist stance of relativism (Ife, 1999). The postmodern idea, that subordination and marginalization can be understood by looking solely at personal narratives rather than looking at societal issues, is questionable. Himani Bannerji (1995), a feminist academic, notes that we must refuse the containment of settling into 'difference' and instead look at broad cultural and social issues.

To me there appears to be two sides of post-modernism, a positive side and a less positive side: the positive side compatible with a 'continuum rationality' and a less positive side with no hope of avoiding license and disorder. The positive side opposes dogmatic versions of rationality and can bring respect for different traditions. The other side might seem to support the potential for relativism and a resurgence of intolerance (Ife, 1999). Peter Leonard (1994) states "[t]he challenge presented to forms of emancipatory politics by the idea that there are no universal truths is a considerable one" (p.15).

Although there are posits of postmodernism that I question there are others that I embrace. I embrace postmodernism's belief in the power of the personal narrative. I also

embrace postmodernisms discussion on the constructed nature of reality; that those who are powerful create our 'knowledge' concerning reality. Foucault notes that power equals knowledge (as cited in Leonard, 1994). He challenges the idea that knowledge leads to liberation as he views knowledge as being a method of social control as only those that are in power are able to produce 'true' knowledge. Knowledge represents those controlling systems of thought that become legitimized and institutionalized and which an individual must master in order to become powerful. The position that Foucault and post-modernism take, that knowledge is not innocent rings true with me. The constructed nature of knowledge and the power that seeps from it are evident; knowledge shifts and changes, creates and destroys.

Universal truths are an ideology of modernity, whereas the focus on oppression and subordination are notions of feminisms, and ideas of social constructions are ideologies of postmodernism. Leonard (1994) clearly highlights my dilemma by noting "the uneasiness lies in the problem that, in rejecting [modernity], perhaps feminism [and queer activists] limits [their] own political claims" (p.15). I am unable to dismiss the importance of universal phenomena such as heterosexism and sexism, and therefore I am unable to solely take a postmodernist perspective.

The ideas of postmodernism are attractive but as a member of a marginalized group the 'glitter' of those ideas are lost when one tries to relate it to reality. Because of this, I found it hard or even impossible to be monogamous with a theory. Church (1995) notes " [w]ithin academia [she] was unable to be theoretically monogamous. [She] was seduced by many conceptual frameworks..." (p.46). Church (1995) further states " [her] research refused to be unitary. Regardless of [her] desires, it would not fit inside any

particular tradition or theory. Gradually I came to see that it existed in many different intellectual places ...” (pp. 46-47). The old adage ‘one cannot serve two masters’ seems not to apply.

Academia and society’s other major institutions are dominated by antiquated, androcentric, and heterosexist methods and ways of knowing, which excludes non-normative or disempowered groups and their experiences. I grew up a queer individual which no doubt shaped my theoretical beliefs and the ways in which I viewed the world. Accordingly, my experiences as a queer person, and the realities that I faced growing up queer influenced what theoretical postulates I focused on and highlighted in the paper.

Feminisms have brought me the importance of personal voice, identity and focus on oppression. While postmodern theory highlighted the notion of constructed social reality, the notion that truth is dictated by the powerful, that power dictates social relations and interactions, and a focus on personal experiences. Postmodernism also highlights the fact that the powerful within society dictate what is knowledge, and “privilege forms and sources of knowledge that are eurocentric, patriarchal and bourgeois [which in effect equals] ideological domination” (Leonard, 1994.p.22). Dissecting these theoretical notions and using the concepts, such as personal voice, realities of oppression, construction of knowledge and the importance of power, have provided me with a lens that I consider to be appropriate in analyzing queer realities, my own queer identity and the life experiences of my mother.

## Chapter 3 - A Queer Overview

*"Most of the men and women who have contributed to our civilization or our culture have been vilified in their day....As we denounce the rebellious, the nonconformists, so we reward mediocrity, so long as it mirrors herd standards."*

*-Tallulah Bankhead, Tallulah (1952)*

*"Theoretically, the issue of adolescent or childhood homosexuality brings into direct conflict two fundamental socio-cultural beliefs. One upholds the innate innocence and goodness of children, and the other decries homosexuals as "assertive, destructive, and deviant." The two perspectives are difficult to reconcile in the case of the adolescent who claims to be gay or lesbian."*

*- Remafedi, (1987)*

*My 'differences' made me a target. If I slipped up and held my hand a certain way, there was chastisement; "Jared, don't hold your hand that way it makes you look fey". If I would have voiced my 'difference' the outcome was uncertain; would my parents still love me? Would I go to hell? Would my friends abandon me? Would I be beaten up? I did not know. Even as a young child these thoughts went through my mind due to the fact that I knew I was 'different'; and I knew that 'difference' was not looked upon with glad eyes.*

Queer<sup>1</sup> identities are historically and culturally situated; not all queers suffer oppression in the same way as each person is located in a space where different intersections meet. Every person is a member of different communities; for example a person may be an African American, Baptist, middle class, queer man, or an Iranian,

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<sup>1</sup> Queer: a vernacular term for those who do not conform to mainstream ideals concerning sexuality. Once a pejorative name only used by intolerant and homophobic individuals, "queer" is being reclaimed and used as a positive self-identifying term. This term can be used to encompass the homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, and two-spirited communities. The term has also been used to describe any person who stands outside the mainstream regarding issues concerning sexuality; heterosexuals who support gay/lesbian rights; those who practice S&M; etc. (Barker, 1999).

Evangelical, married man who lives with multiple sclerosis. Where each of these community's meet is termed an intersection (Brotman & Ryan, 2004). The intersectional identities that make up a person provide a framework from which that person will enter and experience the world. It is because of these intersections that make each person unique and their lives unique; it is also these intersections that can play a role in the oppression that a person will face. Audre Lorde (1984) sums it up when she says "[b]lack women and white women are not the same" (p.118). Lorde is noting that although women share a similarity in the fact that they are women, their experiences will differ as a result of other intersections, in this case, racialized identity. Such identities as race, religion, family income, geographic location, gender and age all play a role in the type or amount of oppression a person faces. Although all queers are composed of varying intersections and experiences, *all* queers are oppressed, I among them (Davies, 1996). Hate and violence based upon sexuality and gender 'deviance' is still common in today's society; the civil liberties of these populations are limited if not absent. It is still common to hear the words "faggot" or "homo" in public conversation; queers are still a target of stares and slurs if they are seen holding hands with their partners in public; a person risks life and limb if they cross gender norms in dress or action; one can still hear, such authority figures, as ministers, rabbis and other holy persons denigrate and vilify queer persons.

While the youthful members of other minority groups suffer exigencies related to their group membership, the problems of queer youth are different. Gerald Unks (1995) notes that "unlike their counterparts, [queer youth] do not enjoy the sort of social allegiances, educational resources, or cultural support that are routinely established by the

adult society for other youth subcultures” (p.4). It is further noted by Maylon that queer youth may not even be recognized as a group, the author notes,

many theorists and clinicians have regarded all reports of homosexual fantasy or behavior as an indication of sexual identity confusion and that any type of same-sex eroticism as no more than a transient developmental phenomenon (Maylon as cited in Appleby & Anastas, 1996, p.127).

It is noted that queer youth grow up as members of an unrecognized minority as they are by and large an invisible minority, a minority that is societally forced into a closet of secrets, and a minority that is not often talked about (Blumenfeld, 1992). This is also, a group that is considered repugnant and abhorrent by many, which can include family members, friends, schoolmates, clergy, and the government (Unks, 1995).

Queer people inhabit many different communities and are spread over the full range of age cohorts, and include millions of people (Tully, 2000). Within this paper I will be focusing on queer youth and the issues that this population faces. I will be focusing on several main issues, including experience of coming out, experience of living behind closed doors, and interrelated to these issues, the family issues and dynamics that are spawned as youth come out. I will begin this paper, however, with a brief history of the oppression of queer people that will help contextualize the current realities of queer individuals.

### **A Queer History**

Queers have always existed. The term homosexual, however, was not coined until 1869 (by Karoly Benkert) but the population that is defined by the term has been in existence from the beginning of time (Davies & Neal, 1996; Tully, 2000). Michael Warner (1999) notes,

[t]he best historians of sexuality argue that almost everything about sex, including the idea of sexuality itself, depends on historical conditions, though perhaps at deep levels of consciousness that change slowly....As ways of classifying people's sexuality, these apparently neutral terms [heterosexual and homosexual] are of relatively recent vintage, and only make sense against a certain cultural background (p.10).

The beginnings of western civilization are thought to have their origins in the fertile valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in southern Iran and Iraq some 5500-5000 y.b.p. (Boswell, 1994). It is well recorded by historian and anthropologists that same sex practices were evident if not common within this time period (Boswell, 1994). The same findings are found in many past civilization's artifacts; same sex practices are evident in past Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Khmer, Indian, and Aboriginal civilizations (Greenberg, 1988; Boswell, 1994; Tafoya, 1997). The evidence suggests that queerness has existed across time and space and has been a part of all cultures and societies.

The roots of queerness reach far back in time but the roots of current day western societal oppression towards queers really begin to make itself known in the beginning of the Christian era (roughly the last 2000 years). With the advent of Christianity came a conservative wave that swept the Roman world. J. Boswell (1994), in his book *Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* notes "[t]he liberalness of the roman era gave way to increased violence and persecution towards Jews, heretics, political dissidents, and other non-conformists – including those engaged in same sex activities" (p.19). Boswell (1994), however, does note that persecution of same sex behaviors was not intensely instigated in the early Christian era, but rather began in the medieval period of European history (500-1500 AD). It was during this time period that saw the slow movement of same sex behaviors from differing to heinous sin. It must be noted that this time period also saw the bubonic plague decimate the European population. Boswell (1994) notes

that the Church increasingly took the position that sex was strictly for procreative purposes and since queer sex was not procreative in nature, it became dubbed as sinful. It is also noted that in order to respond to the population decimation, masturbation and contraception also became sinful. It was during the late middle ages that saw the intolerance and persecution of same sex practices take full force. It was during this time that church officials wrote the Canon laws. These officials termed all forms of homoerotic activity as sodomy; sodomy in turn was seen in Canon Law and theology as the most heinous of sins, equivocal to murder and punishable by death (Boswell, 1994; Greenberg, 1988). This concept and belief that same-sex behaviors are sinful has continued in the belief systems of many religions to the present day.

Western society on whole, however, due to the decreasing power and influence of religions, has had differing viewpoints and levels of tolerance. Carol Tully (2000) states, “...same sex relationships evolved from a sin for which one could atone, to a crime against nature for which men could be executed, to state sodomy statutes where punishments varied (p. 27).” Then during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century same sex attraction began to be seen as a psychological perversion that required therapeutic intervention. This viewpoint continued until 1973 when the APA took homosexuality off its list of dysfunctions (as a result of a political liberation movement) (Davies & Davies, 1996). The thirty years that have followed have been an era where political, individual, and institutional contestation has occurred; bringing the queer communities to their current positions within society.

According to the Canadian Census, Canada has a population of around 31 million people ([www.statscan.ca](http://www.statscan.ca) visited on November, 21, 2003). Of that total number it has

been estimated that between 3 percent and 10 percent are lesbian and gay (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin 1948; Kinsey et al, 1953). This would mean that there is a total between 930,000 to 3.1 million gays or lesbians in the country (and between 7.8 million and 26 million in the United States). Even though the queer community in Canada may number in the millions and the North American population may number in the tens of millions the queer community still faces much oppression and intolerance due to the historical construction of same sex behaviors as errant, immoral, and unwell. It must also be noted that it is difficult to identify young people as queer without their labeling themselves as such. Most demographic data concerning queer youth is done within the context of schools, and as such, one can infer that there is an under representation of queer youth due to the larger societal culture of homophobia and the reality that many queer children (and adults) must hide in a closet of secrets (or feel as if they must hide) to protect themselves from such issues as violence, ostracism, and abandonment.

### **Queer Youth: An introduction**

*"Dear God, I am fourteen years old...[L]et me know what is happening to me."*

- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

How do they come to be? Do they learn it? Maybe it is because they were abused? Maybe it was because they had an over attentive mother and distant father? We live in a society that has constructed the notion that queerness is somehow acquired, be it in childhood or in the womb (Bain, 2000; Signorile, 1995). There is evidence that suggests that there are biological connections to the development of sexual orientations (Bailey & Zucker, 1995), and there is research done on the environmental affects on sexual

orientation (Bain, 2000, p.92). There are political and moral reasons for the support of both arguments, but what we really have to be concerned about is the queer individual and the legitimacy of their identity. Although some right wing organizations and religious based groups preach that one can change sexual orientation, professional organizations have spoken out against reparative therapy. In 1993, the American Academy of Pediatrics stated that “[t]herapy directed specifically at changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving change in sexual orientation” (Ryan, 2001, p.240). Moreover the American Psychiatric Association states “there is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of ‘reparative therapy’ as a treatment to change one’s sexual orientation” (Ryan, 2001, p.240). We as a society should not be seeking to change sexual orientation but rather we should be seeking to change the negative and discriminatory societal beliefs that create an unhealthy environment for queer people. Margaret Schneider (2001) notes “if same sex attraction were acknowledged and viewed as legitimate just as other-sex attractions are, then [queer] development would unfold just as heterosexuality does...” (p.74). It is the western cultures’ belief systems, and encultured homophobia<sup>2</sup> and heterosexism<sup>3</sup> that supports the negative myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions about queer people, not the orientation itself, that is a major life stressor for young queer youth (Zera, 1992).

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<sup>2</sup> Homophobia is the fear and hatred that individuals have of homosexuals, and the discomfort and self-hatred homosexuals have of their own homosexuality. (Unks, 1995, p.5) Although the terms queerphobia and biphobia have been used, homophobia is the dominant term to describe the hate perpetrated against queers. Homophobia will be used to describe the hate perpetrated against, not just homosexuals, but all the communities that make up the described/focused upon queer population.

<sup>3</sup> Heterosexism is an ideology that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community (Appleby & Anastas, 1998).

## **Sexuality in Youth**

Sexuality in youth is often dismissed and if it is addressed it is assumed that the sexuality is heterosexual. Many professionals regard notions of childhood/adolescent same-sex sexual activity or fantasy as an identification of “sexual identity confusion” and view any type of same sex eroticism as a transient developmental phenomenon; it is just a phase, not a fixed sexuality. (Appleby & Anastas, 1998, pp.126-128) Isn't childhood and adolescent queerness just a passing phase; an exploratory period? Can youth really know their orientation at such an age? For many youth, same-sex sexual activity is not merely sex play or experimentation; it is rather an outward manifestation of their internal queer orientation. I am using the term queer orientation in this circumstance to mean “consistent pattern of sexual arousal toward persons of the same sex encompassing fantasy, conscious attraction, emotional and romantic feelings, and sexual behaviors” (Remafedi, 1987, p.332).

Sexuality and sexual identity, as noted by Savin-Williams and Cohen (1996), is embedded in the natural self; “it is present from the beginnings of childhood development” (p.97). It is noted that although most people first act out upon their sexual orientation in adolescence, sexual orientation is set before a person even enters school, and that it is not subject to change thereafter (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). To deny this identity is to deny the child's perception of their identity. It is important to note, however, that many queer adolescents begin or continue heterosexual activity even with an awareness of their queer identity. In a Chicago study of queer teens, three quarters had experienced heterosexual intercourse (as cited in Anderson, 1995). This could be a time

of exploration of sexual identity and preference, it could also be a method of hiding/blending by participating in hetero-normative behavior (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Tully, 2000).

## **Gender**

It is noted by Blumenfeld (1992) that gender identity and sexual orientation have been conflated by scientists, mental health professionals and many members of society; people who step outside of gender norms are perceived and labeled as deviant and most often as queer. This control of gender and ultimately of sexual orientation has been linked to patriarchy. Appleby and Anastas (1998) note,

controlling sexuality legally, medically, and psychologically is a way for men, who are at the top of the power structure, to retain and strengthen their position. Because sexuality – and the gender arrangements ...that develop in conjunction with it – is such a powerful urge, its control is necessary for establishing and reinforcing a hierarchical structure. Same gender sexuality confronts both the gender and sexual aspects of this control. Because many [queers] do not conform to strict gender assignments, they are perceived as a threat to normal sexuality (p. 82).

Heterosexism can become the agent and homophobia the product. Suzanne Pharr argues, “[w]ithout the existence of sexism, there would be no homophobia (Pharr as cited in Pelligrini, 1992. p.48). Although, the oppression of women and the oppression of queers are not identical, they seem to be part of the structure of sexism (Pelligrini, 1992).

Although not all queers manifest cross gender behaviors or appearance, these cross-gender behaviors and appearances can be seen as a way of identifying oneself to/with the queer community and highlighting one’s difference from the non-queer dominant society (Blumenfeld, 1992; Unks, 1995). The non-conformity to society’s rigid gender rules may also have a subversive potential.

Kath Weston (1996) notes that cross-gendered actions and/or appearance could “signify [an] in-your-face rather than [an] in-your place [attitude] (p.27).”

Within society youth are socially ‘guided’ to hide feelings that are socially defined as different; this may be an active guidance (by parents/teachers/ peers/religious leaders telling children to not do that, or to not think that, or to not say that) or a passive guidance (through media representation of homosexuals, to the predominance of heterosexual lifestyles in the media, to the way our parents dress us, to the manner in which schools gender programming) (Herr, 1997; Signorile, 1995; Appleby & Anastas,1998). Because of these various methods of socialization, youth are taught to hide ‘difference’ and to internalize feelings of ‘difference’. Queer youth are embedded in a society that rejects difference and loves similarity. Queer youth, like their non-queer counterparts understand that there are social rules for the genders; boys walk one way and girls walk another; boys wear certain clothes and girls where others; boys kiss girls, and girls kiss boys, etc. (Appleby and Anastas, 1998; Weston, 1996; Pellegrini, 1992). With this notion is the notion that those who are different will violate some if not all of these rules. This leads to a situation where those that stray from the societal norms are persecuted. Most youth will, therefore, try desperately to adhere to these guidelines, queer and non-queer alike (Anderson, 1995).

The notion that gender roles constrain both males and females is widespread. In western cultures, concepts of masculinity and femininity have historically and currently been used to promote the dominance of males over females (Weston, 1996; Blumenfeld, 1992). Males are encouraged to be physical, independent, competitive and unemotional. Females on the other hand, are taught to be nurturing, sensitive, emotional and

expressive. Gender roles maintain the sexist structure of society, and homophobia reinforces those roles – for example by casting such epithets as “faggot”, “dyke”, and “homo” at people who step outside gender norms (Weston, 1996).

Our society is full of gender experts; these are people that police those individuals that do not conform to societal ideals of gender norms. In general the clues people seek are not about sexuality per se but about gender. Rather than ask whether anyone has spotted so and so kissing another man, people are more likely to assess his gay potential/identity based upon the tone of his voice, the style of his dress, or the way he carries his hands (Weston, 1996; Warner, 1999). Using gender to infer sexual orientation is not new in the high stakes game of representation. Kath Weston (1996) notes “[d]uring the first half of the twentieth century (and a little beyond), psychiatry gave credibility to the notion that homosexuality is accompanied by gender inversion” (p.7). Gender inversions became linked to sexuality, and we all became fascinated by the man down the block with the sashaying walk and the pink fedora.

*Everyone developed an expert eye for locating and zeroing in on the difference . My family contained two of these experts (not PhDs, doctors or the such, but parents); my father and mother. I was young when I began to realize that I was different from what was expected of me and the everyday analysts that surround us began to pick up my ‘differences’. I had to be conscious of how I walked and how I held my hands, or I may have heard my mother or father state that I should walk like this, act like that or hold your hands like a man. I became an expert at watching my father, and picking up on the actions of a ‘man’s man’. I never excelled in this but at least I passed.*

I, along with everyone, live in a society that seeks to fit its members into constructed boxes that have rigid and definite boundaries. Although we are given slight room to become individuals, the parameters that we are able and allowed to cross are specified. And when we are talking about children those boundaries are given a little more leeway until they reach a certain age (Blumenfeld, 1992). Little boys are usually allowed to play with dolls and makeup until a certain age when it becomes seen as inappropriate, and little girls are allowed to play with trucks and G.I. Joe until fathers and mothers begin to think of it as strange and unhealthy. We are compartmentalized from the time we are children into pink and blue boxes (Blumenfeld, 1992). For those that dare to stray from those boxes and those rules that are written on the walls of those boxes, there are consequences: they obtain titles, such as sinner, pariah, sodomite, freak, faggot, dyke, fem, butch, strange, different. I obtained the last title first; I was different. As a result of this, Anderson (1995) notes “[m]any [queer] teenagers will [accentuate] gender typical behavior while avoiding any behavior which may be considered more typical of the opposite sex, or even just gender neutral” (p.22).

### **Societal Stressors**

Queer adolescents face all of the same stressors and developmental stages as non-queer adolescents, however, they also face stressors that are unique to their status as stigmatized and oppressed individuals in society. These unique stressors can include: 1. A lack of easily accessible, adequate and unbiased materials to determine the realities of a queer lifestyle. 2. A deficiency in adequate and appropriate role models in the media, books, or life. 3. An overabundance of stereotypes and myths concerning the queer lifestyle. 4. Feelings of anomie, stigmatization and isolation. 5. A lack of an appropriate

support network. And 6. Incongruity between the non-queer norm and the internal queer feelings or actions (Tully, 2000; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996.). These combined stressors and the possible realities of a queer lifestyle (verbal and physical abuse, employment discrimination, legal restraints restricting personal interactions, family disruption or crisis, rejection from family and or friends, emotional distancing of family and or friends, a lack of compassion, guilt, etc) can have many consequences including isolation, fear, developmental delays, poor self image, chronic stress, severe psychopathology, and an increased risk of substance abuse, suicide and prostitution (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Tully, 2000; Dempsey, 1994).

The lack of identity, lack of support networks, lack of role models, often a lack of family understanding and support, an anti-queer society, and a heterosexist society leave queer youth with no acceptable or feasible way in which to achieve adulthood as defined by traditional theories and environmental expectations (Appleby & Anastas, 1998. p 132). The societal structures for healthy development do not exist for queers.

Although statistics do vary, all researchers note that queer adolescents are a group at risk. Remafedi (1994) reported that among a sample of queer teens 34% had attempted suicide, 31% had been previously hospitalized for psychiatric problems, 48% had run away from home, 58% had regularly abused substances, and 72% had previously consulted mental health professionals. And O'Connor (1992) had reported that nearly one third of all successfully completed suicides are queer youth.

Unks (1995) notes that there is little evidence to suggest that queer youth experience any less prejudice and discrimination than is visited by their adult counterparts, but there is evidence to suggest that they experience more.

First, as is typical of all youth, their political, economic, and social expression is restricted because of their age. However, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, they do not enjoy the same social allegiances, educational resources, or cultural supports that are routinely established by the adult society for other youth subcultures. Second, they are children in a minority that society has chosen to regard as solely adult (Unks, 1995, p.4).

Queer culture has become centered around pub and club life – both arenas that are lawfully demarcated for adult only<sup>4</sup>. Not only are the sites of queer culture focused in adult oriented locations but society has also constructed the queer in stereotyped terms, that society views as adult-oriented, such as sex fiend, campy drag queen and child molester; society views queers as adults (and often negatively viewed upon adults) but never youth, and especially never children. Further, closeted queer youth cannot gain comfort or support from family, peers, religious institutions, school or teachers, nor are there any role models to aspire to. In almost every way, queer youth are worse off than their adult counterparts.

Queer youth come from all cultures, racial groups, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds and are identical to their heterosexual counterparts in interests, behaviors, and appearance. The only difference is that queer youth have to face interrelated processes at the same time – growing up, coming to terms with an oppressed and invisible identity, and coming out (Dempsey, 1994; Rofes, 1989; Unks, 1995; Appleby and Anastas, 1998).

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<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that the 'club and pub culture' of queers can be socially and historically situated. It has been noted by Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Kominars & Kominars, 1996 that bars and clubs were historically one of the only 'safe' spaces in which queers could gather and socialize. Particular bars and clubs became meeting points for queers when the outside culture was vehemently anti-queer. Appleby and Anastas (1998) further note that alcohol consumption is also one way in which queers escape the pain of living in a homophobic society; an escapist strategy.

## Coming Out

*"Out of the dark confinement! Out from behind the screen!"*

- Walt Whitman, *"Song of the Open Road"* from *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

For a long time coming out has been likened to coming out of a closet of secrets. This closet holds a lot: special, tender feelings; wild and spontaneous erotic desires; shame and fear of stigmatization and discrimination; a fear of being discovered and the conflict of being "different" from the majority. Michelangelo Signorile (1995) notes that 'the closet' can rob people of a full and rewarding life and can force people to live in fear and shame. It can also prevent a young adolescent from getting kicked out into the streets; it can keep queer people isolated from the people they love; it may also help them to maintain a level of safety in the face of ignorance. Coming out doesn't have to mean telling everyone you meet that you are queer, what it really means is not having to worry about being discovered by those who are close to you. The when's, where's, how's and why's of coming out are different for everyone.

It is noted that queer youth make one of three choices in dealing with their knowledge of homoerotic feelings: 1. Try to change them. 2. Continue to hide them. 3. Accept them (Anderson, 1995). Anderson (1995) notes that these three stages usually follow each other sequentially, but this is variable. Very few adolescents adopt the last strategy initially, and some spend decades suppressing their queer identity. The first two strategies place queer youth in at-risk situations because they become "discreditable persons. i.e., those whose stigma is not known or visible, but for whom discovery may be disastrous" (Rofes, 1989, p.447). Therefore, their major developmental strategy is learning to hide, which forces them to suppress their feelings and thoughts and to lie to their parents, friends, siblings and teachers. While this hiding may help them avoid

humiliations, violence and possible expulsion from their families, it also prevents them from developing 'normal' social interactions with their peers and adults (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Tully, 2000).

Personally accepting one's queerness, the third choice, is often recognized as the second step in the coming out process. There are many models that seek to explain and document the coming out process, these include the Cass Model, the Coleman Model, and the Woodman and Lenna Model (Davies & Neal, 1996. Tully, 2000). Upon examining these models it is noted that there are commonalities in most coming out models. These being:

1. The developmental phases of coming out are not linear. Each individual person moves through the phases at a different pace, certain phases may be skipped and individuals may start/ or end at different phases.
2. A belief that the coming out process includes the whole person; cognitive, behavioral, emotional and sexual.
3. There is a time when the individual becomes aware of their difference from the non-queer population because of their attraction to members of their own sex. That person may then choose to ignore, repress, deny, question, accept or act upon those feelings.
4. After identifying the awareness and accepting the reality, the person will begin to interpret the concept of being queer so that it suites their identity/personality. This may include confusion about the identity, initial involvement in the queer community, and a beginning alienation from the non-queer community, same sex experimentation, opposite sex experimentation, ambivalence, denial, or acceptance.

5. If and when a person develops a positive internalized acceptance of being queer, that person may become more closely aligned with the queer community, start developing intimate personal relationships, internalize the queer identity, disclose their identity to others in the community and to those from out, and develop a psychologically healthy view of self in spite of institutionalized homophobia.

While coming out can be a difficult, anxious and tense task for anyone, for those coming out in early life it is especially so. The disempowered nature of childhood, the reliance on others for financial and emotional support, a changing body and outlook, a homophobic and heterocentric society, and an invisible minority status all make the process of coming out for youth a difficult one (Blumenfeld, 1992; Anderson, 1995; Unks, 1995). Although the notion of coming out may seem dire, Tully (2000) notes,

disclosure of one's sexual orientation during adolescence has been shown to decrease feelings of guilt, help synthesize identity and ego integration, increase psychological adjustment, self esteem, and positive identity, and increase the sense of individual freedom from having to lie (pp. 121-122).

It must be noted that not all queer youth come from similar backgrounds; we must take into account the notion of intersectionality. Coming out is a process that each person experiences in a different manner. Intersections such as race, religion, urban or rural location, or geographic location can all have impacts on how a person may come out or the possibility of coming out (Tully, 2000; Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Signorile, 1996).

### **Schools**

*I can remember the first day that I began school. My mother and I walked to school (we lived very close to my elementary school) that September morning holding*

*hands. I can also remember the ache in my stomach as the time approached when I knew that my mother would have to leave and I would be left alone at school with a teacher and a class full of strange children. My mother dropped me off at the door of my classroom, the teacher introduced herself and my mother kissed me on the cheek and said she would see me after school. The ache that had been with me for the last minutes erupted into tears that streamed down my cheek. I can remember the words that my new teacher uttered (as I had heard them before), "There is no need to cry Jared, you're a big boy, only little girls cry."*

Due to heterosexist and homophobic administration, queer youth do not have the same opportunities to learn about their emerging sexual identity in sex education classes in their schools, to learn about queer history in history or sociology classes, or to learn about queer issues in ethics or social sciences (Rofes, 1989). Consistently, the very existence of queers is denied by faculty, the student body and in curriculum (Lipkin, 1995). Most curriculums have either limited information about queer issues or completely ignore these populations. According to most school curricula there are no queers; queers did not write books, did not play roles in history, invented nothing, composed no music and created no art (Lipkin, 1995; Tully, 2000). The purpose is clear; to eradicate queers from history and to create the image that queers did nothing of consequence. To the queer student this omission has great consequences; there are no role models with which to aspire to, there is no acknowledgment of their identities, and this non-acknowledgement creates an environment that breeds homophobia (Lipkin, 1995; Khayatt, 1998). Armed with very little or no accurate information, these young people may often rely on misconceptions, stereotypes and myths about queer people/queer

lifestyles to serve as their knowledge base. Internalization of these negative images, misinformation and stereotypes may lead to dangerous behavior of queers and non-queers alike. Violence against queers may be a result and so may lowered self-esteem, unsafe sex practices, and self-hatred (Rofes, 1989; Appleby & Anastas, 1998). The lack of understanding and acknowledgement of non-heterosexual sexualities and denying the right to be non conformist in behavior, dress, and appearance can create serious social problems that most schools are not prepared to deal with; hate crimes, bullying, and suicide are all realities (Tully, 2000; Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Lipkin, 1995).

Curriculum is not the only culprit when looking at the school system. Eric Rofes (1989) states that he has been confronted by teachers that state that the term gay youth is a contradiction: “youth were essentially sexually neutral until late adolescents as this is when sexual orientation was concretized” (p.455). Faculty beliefs/biases such as these, along with a lack of student services (such as a lack of queer positive/appropriate counseling), after school activities (such as a lack of clubs and groups for queer youth), school policies (concerning dress codes, gender/sex discrimination in school events, etc), peer relationships, student body and faculty awareness of queer issues/lifestyles, may all contribute to an unfriendly environment for queer youth (Ryan & Futterman, 1998).

Arthur Lipkin (1995) notes that school life is not just dominated by teachers and curricula, it is also seeped in anxiety, hope, wonder, fear, experimentation, anger , challenge and *sexuality*. The sexuality that is promoted however, is heterosexuality.

Proms, gossip columns, and dances all cater to and promote heterosexuality; there is a king and queen of the prom, not a king and king or queen and queen. If one should stray

from the prescribed sexuality and orientation (and the ascribed rules that apply to these), the perpetrator can expect to be taunted and ostracized at best, and beat up or killed at worst (Lipkin, 1995).

## **Family**

*"Oh, honey, I'd be so proud if you turned nelly. Queers are just better. I'd be so proud if you was a fag and had a nice beautician boyfriend. I'd never have to worry. I worry you'll work in an office, have children, celebrate wedding anniversaries. The world of a heterosexual is a sick and boring life!"*

*-Aunt Ida imploring her nephew "Gator" to give up his heterosexuality, in John Waters's film Female Trouble (1975)*

*I hated the clothes Mum bought me, sensible things that would last. I dreamed of bright colors, flouncy new romantic pirate shirts, red velvet, up to the knee knickerbockers, a sky blue satin jacket (like the kind cheerleaders wear). I knew that I couldn't have them though, and anyways, she said that I would get bored of them in five minutes.*

*I knew my aunt suspected I was gay. She used to ask me if I fancied any of the male hairdressers. 'He's cute. What do you think of him?' They were all skinny queens with Neil Tennant wannabe caesar haircuts and pastel Lacoste sweaters tied around their shoulders. I laughed it off. I didn't dare tell her I preferred tattooed thug types.*

There is no one standard stereotypical family. Queer youth are a part of all types of family configurations, and as such, all types of families will have to 'deal with' queer youth and the issues that may arise (Bain, 2000). People are not born with innate knowledge on how to rear children; it is a learned skill (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). If a

child gets a cut, a parent must draw on knowledge on how to deal with the situation. However, when a child comes out, a parent is unlikely to have a template or knowledge base to enable them to appropriately deal with the situation. We live in a heterosexual society where parents are conditioned to believe, dream and expect that their children are going to grow up, get married to a person of the opposite sex, probably have babies, and maybe a small dog (Appleby and Anastas, 1998; Bain, 2000; Blumenfeld, 1992). When a child's reality does not conform to this idealized parental notion there is likely to be a shock or sense of disbelief. These parents are members of the same society where religions preach the sinful nature of queer life, where laws discriminate against queer people, and where lay individuals speak negatively about queers; homophobia and stereotypes about queer people are deeply interwoven into every aspect our society. It is no wonder that parents and other family members often react with shock, denial and anger when a member comes out (Signorile, 1996). Michelangelo Signorile (1996) states,

[parents] may be stunned and even grief stricken and may react with intense sadness, anger, revulsion and fear...They will have to get over the initial shock and mourn the loss of the 'old you', before they can accept the new you (p.89).

Griffen et al (1986) further note,

[h]owever, when parents had dealt with some of their pain, this allowed them to understand their child's needs and wants; moreover, a comfortable and familiar relationship was restored (pp. 88-89).

Queer people generally want to come out to their family as it enables them to share their life without lying. Although not all parents will end up marching with their child in the pride parade, the children will generally desire support and respect.

The process of going from non-acceptance or tolerance of a member's queerness to acceptance and then pride is challenging for a family. Each family is different; some

families may disown their children, some parents may only take a few days in becoming a full-fledged ally, while others may take years.

Parents are not only concerned for their child's sexual orientation but also the implications of that orientation. Parents worry about everything from homophobia to discrimination, what will happen to their children in old age to health concerns (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Jerald Bain (2000) notes that parents are bombarded with myths and misconceptions about queer reality that taints their image of what their child's life is/or is going to become. These myths include: queer people are pedophiles or sexual predators; queers will likely contract HIV and inevitably die of AIDS; queer men are effeminate and queer women are masculine; queer men want to be women or dress in women's clothing; parents can cause queerness; queerness is caused by sexual abuse; and that queers can be 'repaired' into non-queers (Bain, 2000; Johnson, 1997; Appleby & Anastas, 1998). It is important to recognize that these beliefs are just societal constructs; they are acquired knowledge, not instinctual knowledge. With the help of unbiased information parents can unlearn and deconstruct these harmful beliefs.

Appleby & Anastas (1998) note that parents also have to grapple with the implications of their child's orientation on themselves. Does this mean I am having no grandchildren? I must have done something wrong. People are going to think that I did something wrong. Why has my child done this to me? Why can't they just change back? There is/are stigma/misconceptions that is/are attached to having a queer child. Bain (2000) notes that society has constructed the notion that parents of queer children must be deficient in some way (the over attentive mother and distant father myths); that the parents must have done something wrong. Stares, gossip, marital difficulties, mental and

physical health problems are noted as being a concern and a reality for families of queer children (Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Bain, 2000).

## **Religion**

*I grew up in a fundamentalist theistic religion that taught that queerness was a sin; the Mormons. Although I love the religion from which I came I am no longer an active member as my 'lifestyle' is at odds with the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I cannot but abhor what it does to queer individuals and their families. I belonged to a religion that taught that I was a sinner because I was attracted to people of my own sex. The religion even perpetuated the lie that over-attentive mothers cause their sons to be queer. I often question how I was able to live in such religion and not come out with shame and self-hate. The Church has a strong belief in the family; that the foundation of the Church and society is built into the family. My parents have given my sister and I copious amounts of attention and love, which has begot a strong belief in the self and an impenetrable self-worth. I believe that the religion from which I came has given me obstacles in my life that I have had to deal with, but also tools and resources from which to overcome these obstacles. It is a weird relationship I have with my church; She is like my mother – I love Her but I hope She will one day see and fully understand the Truth.*

There are very few mainstream religions that accept queerness as a valid and healthy expression of the self (such as the Quakers, and the Unitarians) (Lynch, 1996). This is a testament to the pervasive homophobic ideals that guide and make up society.

Religions, like other institutions in our society, pass along the prejudices that are built within them, be they based in sex, race or sexual orientation. Although these prejudices may be blatant, theistic religions have a built in response, 'My God is the true God, and my religious practices can, therefore, be nothing but the way of truth.'; the prejudices become sanctioned by God (Bain, 2000). Connected to this is the notion that many mainstream religions use or follow doctrine laid down in sacred texts or books, and they use this doctrine to justify their biases.

Most people don't consider the philosophical nature of their faith, but merely accept the teachings, without question, thought, deliberation or challenge (Bain, 2000). For most of us this questioning of faith is not easy. Most of us have come to rely on others to inform us, to interpret for us, to explain to us what, for example, the Holy Scriptures mean, what god means. Most mainstream religions rely on authority to articulate doctrine and require compliance to doctrine for membership. Lynch (1996) notes that religious leaders often uses, what he calls, 'Bible bingo' to vilify the queer. He notes "this is the selective and destructive use of Biblical passages to back arguments for a patriarchal, heterosexist and homophobic worldview. At the same time the historical and cultural contexts of the passages are completely glossed over" (Lynch, 1996, p. 201). Bain (2000) notes, however, "[i]n the end it may not be possible to find a way to reconcile religious beliefs and practices with a child's homosexuality. Parents might have to take action independent of their religious dictates (p.126)."

It is important to note that queer people can be religious and spiritual people; some religions have denominations that are queer friendly and some spiritual movements do not discriminate on sexual orientation (Tully, 2000; Signorile, 1996). Just because a

person comes out does not necessitate that they give up their faith or faith in general; faith may be a tempestuous journey, but it is a personal journey. Queer people, although disregarded and often vilified by mainstream organized religions, have begun to fight for their right to explore their faith and to participate in rituals and ceremonies that mark or celebrate important periods/events within their lives. There are several religions, such as the Unitarian Universalist Church (who work towards and fight for queer rights) who are allies, and queers spawned movements that create space for the expression of faith, such as the Metropolitan Community Churches, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, and Dignity in the USA (Lynch, 1996).

*The literature that has been written on queer issues is extensive and the amounts of topics/subjects that are written about are vast. I have read a lot of literature on everything from older gay men to queerness in childhood, from living an HIV+ life to queer parenting. The literature provided me with important and interesting information, but for the purposes of this paper I chose to focus on the information that I felt was important to my experiences, such as religion/faith, coming out, the family, schools, and queer youth. Although, as mentioned, there was a broad foundation of research from which to explore, I did feel as if there were missing pieces, such as personal narratives, and especially personal narratives of family members of queer individuals.*

### **What was Missing?**

The majority of the books and articles that were read to research the information in this paper were 'traditionally' academic; they were steeped in quantitative research and

traditional qualitative research. There are great books such as *Not Just a Passing Phase* by Appleby and Anastas (1998), and *the Gay Teen* by Unks (1995), that share with us a great amount of knowledge and insight in to the queer communities. Although these books provide us with valuable information, the reader is primarily left with generalized information, models, and theories. There are also great books such as *Outing Yourself* (1995) or *Coming Out Everyday* (1996) that provide the reader with first hand accounts of queer individuals as they come out, but the accounts are fragmented pieces of many narratives that are pieced together. We do not get to know a person; we cannot contextualize the experiences that are written. I found it difficult to relate personally to the research that I was reading. The only literature or mediums that enable me to connect with individuals have been novels, such as *Maurice* (1970), biographies such as *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), or alternative research such as *Translated woman* (1993), or movies such as *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997) or *The Laramie Project* (2002).

The purpose of the literature review is to demonstrate what is available in research and what is missing. Although there is plenty of good literature concerning queer issues, coming out, and queer youth, it is hard to find literature that explored the stories of persons growing up queer and coming out queer, and is near impossible to find narratives of mother's of queer children.

*Although my life and my experiences were/are unique, the things that I have had to live through (such as coming out, growing up queer in an isolated town, having to hide my sexual identity, misinformed parents) are experienced by many. Most of my friends had similar experiences to me, and most of their mothers had similar experiences to my mother. Although none of the experiences were the same, they possessed similarities.*

*Even though I could talk to my friends and hear pieces of my own story, I could not find many pieces of research/literature that mirrored my experiences or my mother's experiences that were written in a human voice.*

*Rather than seeing numbers and large-scale surveys I wanted to see and read stories and narratives from real people. I wanted to know the name, the details of the person that I was reading about. I wanted to relate to that person. This is the reason why I decided to use an autoethnographic and life history methodology. I wanted the reader to be aware of me as a person and my mother as a person. I wanted the reader to know who was writing the paper they were reading, and whom the paper was being written about. I wanted the reader to sense feeling and emotions rather than just reading a neutral, emotionless study.*

## Chapter 4 – Methodology: digging into the pink

bell hooks (1984) notes that we must develop alternative ways of knowing and writing, so the disenfranchised have a voice and method in which to be heard. Our reliance on orthodox social science methodology comes at a price, exclusion.

Postmodern, feminist and queer theorists have critiqued these modes and have argued for the acceptance of alternative methods of describing and gathering knowledge; two such methods are autoethnography and the life history approach (hooks, 1994; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

*I have always felt that the voice, the narratives of people needed to be heard. Throughout my schooling I have constantly read and been lectured about studies involving large amounts of people, statistics and surveys. The individual persons experience is lost. To me the work that touched me and reached me, were works that involved individuals, individuals that I, as a reader, were able to get to know. Books such as William S. Pollock's Real Boys' Voices (2000) and Ruth Behar's Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story (1993), are books that shook me and opened my eyes. These books dealt with real people, with whom I (the reader) felt I had a connection with.*

### Alternative Ethnographies and Autoethnographies

Experience is at once always an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political. Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. This kind of approach does not undercut politics by denying the existence of subjects, it instead interrogates the process of their creation, and in doing so, refigures history and the role of

the historian, and opens new ways of thinking about change (Scott, 1999, p.38).

Alternative forms of representation have been used particularly well in representing deeply personal events, emotive voices and stories, and for making the author a visible presence in the text. They have also been especially relevant in the representation of the self. Such examples of representation have been used to relate the experience of illness, and to explore personal relationships and experiences (Ellis and Bochner, 1992). These personal autobiographical narratives can be located within the genre of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Neuman, 1996). Bochner and Ellis (2000) note, “like many terms in the social sciences, the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition and application difficult” (p.739). They go on to note that there are many terms that fall under the umbrella of this term, such as narratives of the self, critical autobiography (Church, 1995), ethnographic biographies, and experiential texts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). David Hayano is most often considered the father of the term ‘autoethnography’, but his narrow definition (of anthropologists who study their own cultural group/people) implores me to identify the term in the manner which Ellis and Bochner (2000) seek to describe it.

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autobiographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.739).

Mark Neuman (1996) notes that what autoethnography may able to do is “to open up the realm of the interior and the personal, and to articulate that which, in the practices of everyday life, lies below any conscious articulation” (p.188).

Autoethnography can also take on many different forms. Ellis and Bochner (2000) note that autoethnography can appear as “short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (p.739). Within the body of autoethnographic texts, we may experience dialogue, actions, emotions, memories, and self-consciousness, which appear as “relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought and language” (p. 739).

### **The Roots of Autoethnography**

The issue of representation in qualitative research practice has long been an issue of contestation. Qualitative writing has always reflected variety – of disciplinary styles, genres, textual conventions and subject matter. And in recent years innovative notions concerning representation and authorship have been at the forefront. Postmodernist and feminist theories have problematised the conventional notions of authority, knowledge and methods. These critical theories noted the authoritative and oppressive nature of conventional methods and texts, which have led to the formation and diversification of alternative genres and styles of representation, including the rise of autoethnography.

The authority of the traditional text has been questioned by feminism and postmodernism – both of which questioned the taken for granted assumption that the researcher was speaking for the other (Coffey, 2002). The privileged power and position

of texts have been explored by such researchers as Bannerji, Fordham, and Jennaway.

Fordham (1996) summarizes this position and power,

[t]hose empowered to use one of society's most powerful weapons – the pen – can permanently shape and transform our thinking. If this premise is accurate, our perceptions of an entire generation could be entirely altered as a result of [traditional] ethnographic images (Fordham, 1996, p.341).

Issues of representation have formed part of the sustained dialogue between feminism and ethnography. The feminist critique of ethnographic and other social texts has gone beyond simple considerations of gender at the level of social actor and or author – to issues of voice, representation, exploitation and power (Coffey, 2002). Feminist qualitative research praxis has brought to the fore relationships between the personal, the biographical and the social. Also as noted by Jennaway (1990), many of the developments embedded in a postmodern ethnography have a basis in feminist discourse.

The move towards egalitarian relations of textual production, dialogical, polyphonic cultural scripts, collaborative efforts, the decentering of the self and disalienation of the ethnographic other, the move away from systems of representation which objectify and silence the ethnographic other, are things which feminist theory...has long been adverting (Jennaway, 1990, p.171).

The impersonal nature of the author has been questioned, the readability of texts has been posited, and the power relations inherent in traditional textual production and representation have been critiqued (Bannerji, 1996; Mascia-Lees et al, 1989). The conventional methods of ethnographic texts have been criticized for failing to do adequate justice to the polyvocality of social life and the complexity of social forms, experiences and biographies. These critiques have highlighted the need for alternative forms of representation. This has led to alternative or experimental methods, which

present new ways of seeing and representing. They also reflect a more feminist and postmodernist agenda of addressing how research is translated into representational and knowledge forms (Coffey, 2002). Traditional texts have been justified and perpetuated because they have been seen as embodying an essentially modernist set of assumptions –“predicated on a discovery of social truth and reality, through selective, unproblematised and scientific acts of engagement, inspection and notation” (Coffey, 2002, p.322). Postmodern agendas treat the status of texts as representations or interpretations of social reality, which allows for the transgression of literary boundaries. While feminist agendas seek to expose and limit the oppressive nature of texts by allowing/creating space for personal voice and personal representation through narrative. It should however be noted that these new forms of representation do not necessarily remove issues of power from the ethnographic production, but rather a more self-conscious approach has been prompted (Coffey, 2002).

Autoethnography is a first person account that draws on personal experiences of the author. It is a method that blurs the boundaries of traditional qualitative research by allowing the personal voice, the ‘I’, to be apparent. It is a method that “reworks dichotomies between subjectivity and objectivity, autobiography and culture, the social and the self” (Coffey, 2002. p.326). Ellis and Bochner (2000) go on to note that autoethnography “connects the personal to the cultural” (p.740). Although autoethnography has been gaining acceptance within academic fields it has also been critiqued. Critics have also challenged autoethnography claiming that it is “nothing but self indulgent writing, produced under the guise of social research” (Coffey, 2002, p.326). Critics also note that autoethnographic texts can have therapeutic and analytic

values, but take away from other forms of qualitative research methods in understanding the social world. They note that autoethnography should be the beginning of a journey but not the whole journey (Coffey, 2002).

Critics also question narrative truth, by noting that stories/narratives are incomplete, are revised, and are influenced by current social situations. The critics note that narratives therefore become fiction, rather than real life experiences. Critics also argue that if your work is story telling rather than story analyzing, then that work is more therapeutic rather than analytic, and therefore cannot be academic text. It is noted that if you don't subject narrative to sociological, cultural, or some other form of analysis, treating stories as social facts, then you are not doing social science (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In response to these critics, it is noted by Ellis and Bochner (2000) that stories and narratives are not meant to be accurate, complete images of the past. Rather they note,

[a] story is not a neutral attempt to mirror the facts of one's life; it does not seek to recover already constituted meanings.... The truth of narrative is not akin to correspondence with prior meanings assumed to be located in some sort of prenarrative experience. One narrative interpretation of events can be judged against another, but there is no standard by which to measure any narrative against the meaning of the events themselves, because the meaning of prenarrative experience is constituted in its narrative expression....Narrative is about living and part of it (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp.745-746.).

The authors state that the question is not whether or not the story reflected the past accurately, but what consequences does the story produce? How does the story impact the reader or the author? What new possibilities do this story produce/introduce for living life (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). They note, "personal narrative is part of the human, existential struggle to move life forward" (2000, p.746). Ellis & Bochner (2000) go on further,

stating that we need to question academic guidelines that promote “arguments over feelings, theories over stories, abstractions over concrete events, sophisticated jargon over accessible prose” (p.746). We shouldn’t feel bad or lesser than or non-academic, if our work does not go further than the personal, or if our work does have therapeutic value or personal value. We should question why institutions require certain guidelines and seek to silence the personal voice or personal emotion. Feminist writer Jane Tompkins calls the “trashing of emotion,” a war waged ceaselessly by academic intellectuals “against feelings, against women, against what is personal” (as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.746).

### **Life History Approach**

The life history method is found within the tradition of interpretive biography that also includes individual biography and oral history methods. In a biographical study the writer can tell the individuals story using various sources, such as the individual’s own narrative, archival documents, and/or historic documents (Mason, 2002). Brotman and Kranjou (1999) note that a life history approach is used to document a full and complex account of a person’s experiences in their own words. They go onto note that “[t]he researcher focuses questions on special or major life events and pays special attention to thematic interpretations of these events and the way they are shaped by social context” (Brotman & Kranjou, 1999, p.420).

It is also noted by Jennifer Mason (2002) that life history interviewers will try to guide the interviewee to tell their narrative/or their story rather than directing the conversation. This method, of allowing the interviewee to tell their own narrative by

simply facilitating the conversation rather than directing it, allows the interviewee to bring up their own concerns, experiences, and perspectives (Mason, 2002).

It must be noted that the narrative constructed by the interviewee is imbued with cultural conventions and norms; it is not a neutral method in which we can just gather 'facts'. The story or narrative that is told can be influenced by the interviewer, the mood of the interview, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Mason, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2000); the life history approach is not a 'hand's off' approach in the case of the interviewer, as the context of the interview will play a role in the outcome of the narrative spoken.

In this thesis I sought to explore and record what my mother and I went through as I came out as a queer man. I also wanted to explore my mother's perceptions and memories of me as a child and as an adolescent – the pre-coming out period. Although many would say that I could have done research on queer individuals who had come out and the experiences of their parents, I felt that I intimately knew my experiences and felt that I could best do justice of this topic by exploring my own experiences. My life is not extra-ordinary and it probably would not make a good movie, but I did go through events/experiences/issues that many other individuals face as they grow up queer. Due to the subject matter and the subjects that were involved (my mother and I), I didn't want to be too formal in my research. This coupled with my theoretical positioning that included the use of narratives, the belief in societal oppression of minorities, alternative ways of knowing, a replacement of 'traditional' truths, and a belief that the personal experience/voice has importance, guided me towards methodologies that would allow the

expression of these posits. Autoethnography and the life history approach allowed me to focus on my and my mother's personal voice and enabled me to keep a focus on the oppression of queer individuals (through narratives).

In the beginning, before a thesis topic was picked or before a thesis was even a concern, my mother and I had talked about recording the tumultuous time period of our lives when I came out. We knew that what we went through was important and difficult, and should not be forgotten. We were both acutely aware that what we went through, and the pain that I caused us, should not and need not occur. Having a queer child and coming out as queer are often painful and demanding times as society has constructed them to be so. Although I know that my thesis cannot alleviate the problems of a heterosexist and homophobic society, my mother and I would like to lay just one more brick into a foundation of acceptance/knowledge that may one-day support an accepting society. We would hope that as parents and children go through experiences such as ours, that they talk about it, so their voices may make it easier for future families to deal with the same issues.

To capture the importance and reality of my mother and my experiences, I decided that I would use informal interview/conversation to capture my mothers experience of raising a queer child and her experience of having a child come out as queer; a life history approach. Before talking about this topic with my mother, I gave her a very general guideline on what I would like to cover. This guideline consisted of a timeline (from before my birth until the present); which also explained that I wanted to talk about her feeling/experiences throughout this entire time period. I did not want the conversation to focus solely on my coming out period, but rather my entire life up to a

certain point. As this time period is vast and covers a wide range of experiences and topics, I also included a very general guideline on issues that I would like to cover. It was noted to my mother that I wanted to cover issues/experiences that dealt with my queerness and her reaction to it. This was left open – it could be issues with character, incidents, time periods, etc. This information was sent to my mother about a month before the interview.

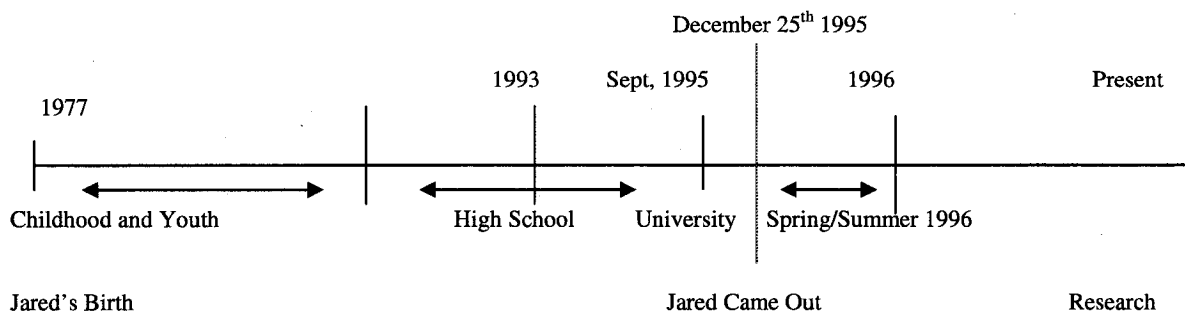
For myself I decided to use an autoethnographic approach. I would, personally relay my experiences/emotions to the reader; a first hand account of growing up queer. I would be using memories, quotes, stories and even musical lyrics to try to capture what I went through.

My mother and I sat down on two separate days and talked about our lives and our experiences. Each conversation was about 45 minutes in length and took place at my mother's home in Kamloops, British Columbia. My mother and I have a very comfortable relationship and have extensively talked about the experiences we went through as I came out. As a result, there was little if no nervousness and little sense of tension. The only aspect that was formal was the tape recorder on the coffee table and the signing of the consent form (appendix 1). There were no real guidelines, other than a timeline that I wanted to cover.

The conversations took place in the living room with us sitting on the overstuffed living room furniture. The surroundings were home – for both of us, and the characters knew each other well. The conversation was not forced, but rather it flowed from both of us as similar conversations had occurred in the past. We both understood that the topic at hand was not neutral, not innocuous. The topic held different meanings for both of us

and held emotional baggage. This reality, rather than heed the process of the conversation, seems to propel it. It is as if when my mother and I talk about our experiences and these time periods of our lives, it takes on a therapeutic tone – it helps to talk about it.

The following time line was used to facilitate discussion and to highlight time periods that I wanted to cover and explore. The timeline was given to my mother a long with a list of events/time periods/questions that I would want to cover in our conversation (these events/time periods/questions are available in appendix 2).



## Analysis

The analysis of the findings/narratives was solely qualitative in nature. As mentioned the method by which information was gathered was through interview, where the interviewer was the author. After the conversations were completed, I transcribed them and the conversations were broken down into different parts or categories. To accomplish this, I went through the conversation line-by-line, highlighting sections that dealt with repeated concepts/themes or themes that I felt were relevant to the topic that I wanted to discuss/explore, such as 'coming out' or 'misinformed beliefs'. It was through

analysis of the conversation and personal memories that I was able to come up with highlighted concepts and experiences. Although the conversations held a lot of information and dealt with a broad range of issue, I had to choose what information to use and what information to exclude. Many concepts and experiences were blatantly apparent, such as 'coming out', but there were other categories that had to be winnowed from the conversations, such as 'parental reactions' or 'ignorance'. The usable/relevant information that was gleaned from the conversation was then used in the finding section of the paper. The body of the finding sections is broken down in a rough timeline (that includes relevant events), that includes such categories as childhood, adolescence, and coming out. Quotes from the conversation and personal experiences/memories are used to drive the findings chapter, where analysis follows the quotes.

### **Validity**

The notion of generalizability, as previously mentioned, is relatively useless in feminist and postmodern research, as these theories tend to critique the notion of homogeneity and universality, which are inherent in notions of generalizability (Brotman, 2000, p. 146). Although generalizability is often linked to the validity of a study, Ristock and Pennel state,

[f]or feminist researchers, however, the concept of validity reflects a different understanding of the nature of research findings and a different understanding of 'reality' ... Instead of asking whether the project design permits the researcher to uncover the truth, we ask how we can ensure that the research has integrity. Our concern is not to bias the results in favor of a particular community, but to ensure that the information we gather will 'ring-true' – that it will resonate with the experience of participants – and that we are accountable both to them and to the broader communities that may be affected by our research (as cited in Brotman, 2000, p. 146).

## **Credibility**

Shari Brotman (2000) describes credibility as “activities that increase the probability that credible findings and interpretations will be produced” (p.148).

She notes these as being:

### **1. Prolonged Engagement**

“Prolonged engagement is a research strategy of staying in the field long enough to build trusting relationships and to ensure understanding of context from which participants stories originate” (Brotman, 2000. p. 148). The relationship with my mother has extended for the entire period of my life, which gives me a long history full of experiences that enables me to better contextualise the stories of which my mother speaks. This time period of 27 years, also gave me a prolonged period in which my mother and I were able to build a very secure and strong relationship that enabled a high level of openness and trust.

### **2. Persistent Observation**

Brotman (2000) notes “persistent observation refers to the researchers task of remaining open to multiple dimensions and focusing on relevant information in detail, providing depth to analysis” (p.149). To satisfy the criteria, I conducted in-depth interviews with my mother, being flexible and allowing the conversations to take their natural course. I also focused, in detail, on any information within the conversations that were relevant to the subject of study.

### **3. Member Checking**

Member checking is a strategy for ensuring that participants have an opportunity to review both the research process and findings to see if they 'ring-true' for them (Brotman, 2000). My mother was given an opportunity to review her own transcript and given the right to delete or add to her responses. She will also receive a copy of the entire paper upon its completion to ensure its authenticity.

## **Chapter 5 – Findings: whispers of pink, screams of pink**

### **My Mother – Patricia Van Somer.**

My Mum is a 63-year-old retired Australian Canadian woman who currently lives in Kamloops, British Columbia. She, Patricia Hill, was born into a large family in the poor coal-mining city of Newcastle, Australia, where she lived with her mother, father and 7 brothers and sisters. She graduated from high school in Newcastle in 1956. After graduation she was baptized in the Mormon faith. Also, after high school she received a job from the Ministry of Housing in Australia. She continued this for a number of years (making more money than my poppa ever made in his life), until she received a job from the Australian consulate. This is the job that gave her freedom to do what her heart so desired. She desired to go to America, like many living abroad at that day and age. It was the land of prosperity and excitement. She moved to Los Angeles in the summer of 1961. She stayed there for 6 months working for the Australian consulate. She then moved to New York. Again she only stayed there for 6 months. She then quit her job and moved to Salt Lake City, stayed there for a few months and moved on. It was to Vancouver next, then Powell River and then Mcleod Lake. Mcleod Lake is a small northern community ( I mean small - population 15). It was 1966 and she was waitressing. But fate has its twists. She met my father at the restaurant that she was working at. My father, Bill Van Somer, a 26 year old 6 foot 4 inch tall imposing First Nations man, noticed my mother, a petite 5 foot 3 inch raven haired woman, right away, however, my mother did not notice my father right away, as she was engaged at the time. Actually this was her fifth engagement. My dad persisted, and my mother eventually

gave in. They went on a date and my dad proposed (on the first date). My mother not being overly infatuated, right yet, said no. But she did break off her engagement to the "other man". Well my parents eventually did start dating, they got engaged and, 6 months after meeting, got married. The day was April the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1969. My parents settled in Prince George and my father worked out of Mackenzie (as he owned a freighting company on Williston Lake transporting materials up and down the lake, and therefore had to travel back and forth from Prince George to Mackenzie almost everyday). My mom stayed at home, running the financial end of the business, was an active member of her Church, an active member of the Van Somer family, and dreamed of getting pregnant. On January the 10<sup>th</sup> 1971 my sister was born. Then on January the 27<sup>th</sup>, 1977 I was born (after much difficulty I may add - yes, I was a little miracle).

### **Me – Jared Van Somer**

I am a 26-year-old, 6-foot tall, dark haired, queer man. I was born into a Mormon household with a loving mother, father and a six-year-old sister. My childhood was not unusual; I loved G.I. Joe and I loved my cabbage patch kid. I grew up in a small northern town named Mackenzie, in a house, on a beautiful quiet street, that was surrounded with caring neighbors and perfectly manicured lawns. I attended Morfee Elementary School and then furthered my young mind at Mackenzie Secondary School (the fighting Trojans!). I excelled in school, had a plethora of fantastic friends, fought the curse of teenage acne, loved the town I was in and yet dreamed of the day when I would be out. I eventually moved to Vancouver to pursue post secondary schooling, at Simon Fraser University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts. I also studied and graduated from Helen

Lefaux School of Fashion Design, and The Blanche McDonald Institute for Makeup Artistry. I then moved to Toronto, worked at a large Aveda salon, and then finally to Montreal to attend McGill University, where I currently live with my partner.

### **An Introduction to Our Stories**

The following section of this paper is going to be exploring how my mother and I describe various events and time periods of our lives. The following section is going to be chronological, starting in 1977 – the year of my birth and will go up until the present, 2003. Although predominantly chronological, there will be sections that are thematic in nature, where relevant. This chapter of the paper will be looking at how my mother and I experienced the same time periods and events, and how these events/time periods shaped our relationship and our persons. The core of this section is to display how one mother experienced having a queer son and how one individual, myself, experienced being a queer person. This section of the paper is going to be predominantly chronological, but with theme sections where relevant.

Although there will be some analysis in this section, my voice and the voice of my mother will often stand alone allowing the reader to take from it what they may. Like me, everyone is an analyst; each person will take something different from the narratives. I want there to be movement between the reader and the narratives, where the reader can act as voyeur, theorist, and critic. However, there will be discussion and analysis of certain themes within the discussion section of the paper.

*My life, as mentioned, did begin in the womb of my mother, but the intricacies of this life and the experiences of it occurred after I left that warm embrace. I cannot*

*remember very much from the early days of my life – just snippets really. I can remember going fishing with my father, I can remember driving across the United States, I can remember certain smells, but other than that...it's quite a haze. Up until I was about four my life really must be remembered through photographs and the memories of my family.*

## **My Birth**

Not only were your Dad and I excited to hear the news of my pregnancy... with you but all the doctors who had been treating me for years were just as excited - it had almost seemed a hopeless case...another pregnancy that is...you know that we had been trying for 5 years. I had been having operations to open my ovaries and taking fertility drugs for years and we had been praying for another child.... At that time your sister was our only child and we desperately wanted another; you know I had always wanted a large family,...uhm... but I would have been happy with just one other child.. I wanted someone for your sister...it worried me that she may be alone.... It was an eventful pregnancy lots of excitement and planning to be done... I really wanted a boy and I think that your Dad did too, but it didn't matter what the sex, healthy would be nice too, but we were ready for anything (Mom, lines 37-53).

Although my mother notes that she was ready for anything, the reality is that she also had preconceived notions of who her baby would be and would become. My mother notes that from the very beginnings of life, she had expectations of who I was and who I was going to become.

I had you in the afternoon of January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1977. It was supposed to be the 26<sup>th</sup>, Australia day, but I got the date wrong. You were the ugliest baby I think I had ever seen (laughs)...to this day your Dad, doesn't believe that some of your baby pictures (the ones from the first 2 days) are you. But within a couple of days after the wrinkles had went away and your head came into shape...you were the most beautiful baby any mother had ever had. I know all mothers say this, but you really were. Even from your ugly first minutes (laughs) I loved you with all of my heart...and from that moment I had hopes and dreams and desires for you...from minute one I

was planning your life. I wanted you to grow and be a good man like your father, to be a good husband and a good father (Mom, lines 65-74).

Even before a child's biological sex is ascribed onto the birth certificate, there are assumptions that have been made about that child's life course; assumptions based upon societal constructed gender expectations and heterosexist norms. We may believe that a baby boy will grow up big and strong, get married to a woman, and have some babies. While a baby girl, will grow up to be a beautiful and elegant woman, marry the right man, and bear a couple of children.

My mother notes,

[a]s a mother you never really expect that your child is going to be anything but normal...well not normal...but like all the other children. You never really think that your child is going to get an illness, or will get hurt, and you never expect your child is going to be gay. Well, I don't think so...Well I've never known a mom who expressed that to me. You just don't. You think that if they are a boy, they will grow up and get married...to a woman (Mom, lines 76-81).

Although these stereotypes and gender roles may parallel the lives of many, when they are contrary or not fitting, the assumptions versus reality can cause discord or dismay. Parents may have such strong expectations of what there is child is, or what they may become, that deviation (even minor) from that expectation can cause severe discord. People often state that 'we hold our hopes and dreams in our children'. This is very interesting to me as the hopes and dreams are not necessarily the children's, potentially setting the stage for disappointment or discord.

*When I was small there were things that I knew my parents wanted me to be, and there were things that I wanted to be. The first toy that my father ever bought me was a small rubber hockey stick. Embedded within this gift was a desire and wish that I would*

*one day grow up to be a hockey player like my father. I would have no part in this wish. I purposefully did not learn how to skate, so that I would not have to play hockey; I preferred gymnastics. Instead of skates I wore little white ballerina-like shoes and I loved every minute of it. My father is a large man, a man's man, who loved mechanics, boats, hockey, and baseball; I was not this by any stretch of the imagination (society would have termed me more feminine). Although my parents would never trade me in, I was not exactly what my parents expected or dreamed of, and as a result, I was often told not to talk that way, not to walk that way, or not to hold my hand that way.*

### **Childhood: An introduction**

*It's a troublesome world.  
All the people who're in it  
are troubled with troubles  
almost every minute*

*Just tell yourself, Duckie,  
you're really quite lucky!  
Some people are much more...  
oh, ever so much more...  
oh, muchly much-much more  
unlucky than you!  
-Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?  
-Dr. Suess (1973)*

*My childhood was like most people's childhoods that I know, or maybe even a little more idyllic. I had the complete Dr. Suess book collection, which was read to me whenever I wanted. I seemingly lived in an environment as a youth where it seemed as if I was 98 ¾ percent guaranteed to flourish. I really was, just like Duckie, very...very lucky. I grew up in a small northern community, Mackenzie, which was a little Eden in the middle of the coastal mountains in British Columbia. I grew up within an amazingly*

*close family; a loving mother and father and the greatest sister a brother could have. We lived in a perfect house on the perfect street; an almost leave it to beaver environment. Mrs. Calwell taught me everything I wanted to know about gardening; Mrs. Gratten always had room for one more at the dining room table; Mrs. Roy was always watching MTV. My life was full of happiness, stability and love.*

### **Early Childhood**

*This time of my life is largely colored by Technicolor images of cartoons and toys. A red headed cabbage patch kid named Oddley (birthdate Sept, 6) and images of sassy pigs and frogs fighting it out on the small screen of TV. It was also a time of Barbie, my queen and her fabulous boyfriend Ken. I can remember playing with Barbie and Ken and Ken #2 at my cousin Melissa's home, where Barbie would be left to the wayside and Ken and Ken #2 would be kissing and frottaging their skin toned 'bumps'. This was an explorative period, and this inquisitive mind wanted to know. I can remember a young female friend and I discovering each others bodies, and discovering the shocking difference in our genitalia. Even at that young age I was convinced that my equipment was better and that hers just wasn't to my taste.*

My mother can remember times in my childhood when she began to question her previous suppositions of my heterosexuality.

There were many times when I would question in my head...but then I would just think that you were a little different from the rest of the boys. I just assumed that you had a sister, so you would like girl things also (Mom, lines 81-83).

My mother recounts one of these times in our conversations,

[y]ou were 2 and I was trying on lipstick...and then so were you. I was had just got a collection of small lipstick tubes in the small green tubes...there was like 20 or 30 of them in a case.... I can remember that

happening...everyone thought it was cute and you were just so happy with that red lipstick on your face. Then you stated "I wanna be a shlady and wear shlipstick" Maybe that should have been our first clue (Mom, lines 87-94).

She notes that I stated, "I wanna be a shlady and wear shlipstick." This story, from the beginning was one of those family tales that was told over and over again. Ever since I have come out it has, however, taken on a new meaning. First it was just a cute story of a boy in his infancy, now it became a form of foreshadowing; an ahhh –we-should -have -known moment. My mom notes, "I guess you can see [queerness] in others before you can see it in your own children...or maybe not see it but accept it in others before your own" (Mom, lines 127-128).

Although my childhood was almost utopian, there was something that I knew from a very young age, probably 4. My mom notes, "I know that you say that you have known ever since you were young..." (Mom, lines 128-129). I note in conversation,

[y]ah, I have know ever since I was little, ever since I was a small kid. I didn't label my self as gay, but I knew I was different than others. Just knew something was different. I knew I had to act while others didn't. I don't know if I ever told you but I can remember a time in my life when I even believed that I would die of AIDS. I just figured I would get it, because gay men got it – cause I just thought they got it because they liked other boys too. Even at that age I equated myself to gay men" (Jared, lines 130-137).

I knew that I was different. Not like, I had green-polka-dots-different, but different nonetheless. From this age I knew that I was different from the other boys around me. There were little things, such as the things that I liked to play with and whom I liked to play with. I liked GI Joe just as much as Strawberry Shortcake, I liked to play with Courtney just as much as I liked to play with Randy. There was also a feeling that I had about the other boys. This feeling is hard to describe, as it wasn't a sexual attraction, but

rather just an attraction. Even at this young age I can remember having crushes on boys, when the other boys had crushes on the girls. At the age of 4 or 5 I knew that I shouldn't talk about how I was feeling, as even at this age, I knew and so did the other boys, that having these feelings was not good. We all knew what a gay person was, and we knew that being gay was not a good thing. We all heard people use derogatory terms; fag, sissy, gay, homo, "girl", fudge-packer – these were all terms that even as young kids we heard on a daily basis.

I also note,

[y]ou have to understand that I never really knew any thing about queer people. I knew general things, but I didn't know really anything. And you also have to understand that the Church taught that being queer was wrong and sinful, and therefore that notion impacted me, colored my image or ...uhmm...my idea of what a queer person was. They were sinners who got smote. I know you or dad never said things like that, but you never said the opposite either, so I just had to make-up things for myself (Jared, lines 139-145).

## **Late Childhood**

*By the time I hit 8 or 9 I began to rehearse my act as a heterosexual; I pretended to have crushes on girls, I began acting certain ways so that I wouldn't get the looks, I stopped asking to try on makeup, and I never once uttered the feelings that I had towards other boys – I entered into the closet and I began (as best as I could) to live by the rules of the gendered and heterosexist society in which I found myself. I wanted desperately to be able to look like Nick Rhodes from Duran Duran (glitter shadow and all), I wanted desperately to kiss Simon LeBon, I wanted to pose and swish like Boy George, and I wanted to scream my undying love for the fabulous young man in the soft cell video for tainted love – but I could not. For me it was fake crushes on neighbor girls, and jogging*

*pants and pressed slacks. The closest I got to 80s glam was fluorescent, overly printed, Hammer pants. And the closest that I got to fulfilling my dream of kissing Simon LeBon was kissing the inserts in the Rio album.*

Even at a young age the powerful role of societal gendering was dictating my dress, actions, mannerisms and relationships. Even from a young age I began the long road of lies and deceit of which I was forced to travel. Although I may have wanted to wear my sisters frosty silver eyeshadow to school, carrying a Tigerbeat picture of Nick Rhodes, and wearing madonnaesque lace gloves, I could not or I would have been ostracized by my peers, chastised by my parents, maybe questioned by my teachers or religious leaders. I knew even then that I had to live a secret life to maintain a level of comfort and acceptability with those around me.

This time period of my childhood also coincided with my first explorations of my sexuality. My mother notes, “You and [male friend] had been playing in your room and I walked in and you were lying on the bed naked and [your male friend] was running his hands all over your body” (Mom, lines 115-117). My mother notes that she “proceeded to pretend it didn’t happen” (Mom, Line 120). My mother ignored overt sexualized same sex activity because she notes she wanted “to pretend it didn’t happen...to make it not real” (Mom, line 121); even in the face of same sex activity in their children a parent can ignore or not confront it for fear that it may be their child’s reality. In the case that the children were of opposite sex a parent might explain ‘the birds and the bees’ but in the situation of same sex activity parents might be too dumbfounded, ignorant or unable to offer information to their children due to a lack of personal understanding, resources, information, or desire.

## **A Worrisome Story**

*I can remember in the early 80s there was a lot of news and media surrounding a new disease that was just becoming known; GRID (Gay Related Immunodeficiency Disease). I can remember, clearly, a magazine article, I must have been about 6, which my parents were talking about – about how gay men were getting sick and dying from a new disease. The ways that it was spread, the death rates, where it came from – these were all unknown factors, but gay men were the people that were getting sick. I can remember thinking to myself that I would therefore be getting sick. I, even at that age, internally regarded myself as gay. My parents never knew any queer people when I was growing up, and they never really talked about gay issues, and they certainly never said anything that was intentionally mean, but they did explain what gay meant from their perspective – it was men and women who loved people of their own sex. Boys who like boys, like dad and mom like each other – they were also people who sinned because God didn't like what they did - but we were not to judge them. Although I didn't really know what the word meant (or what it entailed), I knew that I was gay and therefore must be going to die from this disease (probably as a result of sin). I can remember thinking that I shouldn't tell my mother as she would be so upset that I was going to be getting sick (and may question how I got sick). This is something that I lived with for years; it wasn't until a few years later when medical science started solving some of the mysteries of the disease (now called AIDS), and AIDS was the number one topic of conversation that I became aware that I couldn't be sick. Now as a 9 or 10 year old I could live life without thinking that one day I may become mysteriously sick and I wouldn't have to explain the*

*situation to my mother. I could go from worrying about AIDS to worrying about GI Joe and his growing relationship with Barbie.*

### **Adolescence**

*Groove is in the heart  
the depth  
of hula groove  
move us to the nth hoop  
we're goin' thru to  
Horten hears a Who  
I couldn't ask for another  
dj soul  
was on a roll  
I been told  
he can't be sold  
not vicious or malicious  
just delovely and delicious  
Groove is in the heart.*

- Deee-lite, *Groove is in the Heart* (1990)

*Years came and went, my friends and I aged. Elementary school faded into high school and my world began to change; the usual became the unusual. Like every other adolescent, my hormones were raging and I began to assert my individuality in a society that fears the individual. My mother remembers that point;*

*I can remember asking Meaghan in a joking fashion if she thought that you were a little different from other boys. She hadn't noticed anything and you always had girls over to the house and Meaghan never really had many close girlfriends, always boys. So once again I filed it away in the back of my mind (Mom, lines 226-230).*

*I was different than my friends. My mind and body were telling me that I was attracted to boys, but the society around me was screaming against my biological and mental urges. All my other friends were talking about their girlfriends and boyfriends, their fantasies, their triumphant score with so and so, while I could not utter a word of my thoughts. A spoken thought of mine risked me being outed and potentially shunned from*

*everything that I loved. So I acted. I pretended to be attracted to girls, I talked the talk and walked the walk (maybe with a bit more swish – but my best nonetheless). Although my acting included the occasional, “Pamela is hot”, or “Madonna’s the bomb”, my façade was, however, not completely opaque; hints of pink always shone through.*

*By this time in my life, my sexual orientation and sexual identity were personally accepted; I thought of myself as a gay person and personally felt comfortable with this. I often question why I felt so comfortable with my queer identity when I was surrounded by nothing that supported it. I believe that my parents beliefs in personal pride and their parenting that led to positive self esteem helped me attain a level of comfort with myself. It was a bizarre time in my life as the only glimpses of queer culture and queer people I had, I had to glean from the resources that were available to a frustrated young man in the far northern reaches of Canada. The local cinema didn’t play movies like “Maurice”, but rather Hollywood blockbusters like Die Hard; there was no internet at this time; there was no out gay men or women (but I often dreamed that a gay man or gay youth would somehow find me and fulfill my dreams – but worst me it did not happen); and the only resources in the public library that even hinted at queer issues was an old copy of the Joy of Sex (the dewey decimal system did not save me). Although the fodder was limited, my only connection to queers during my adolescent years was through the media. I rented every movie that dealt with ‘gay ‘ themes, and I read queer oriented magazines such as Detour and Details. This was all done in secrecy, as I could share this secret with no one. Like many gay youths I felt very alone in a world that was dominated by heterosexual thought and heterosexual people.*

*My world of acting became a burden; every waking moment I had to plan what I was going to do and what I was going to say. The only aspect of my life that I did begin to relax was my outward appearance. My days of jogging pants were coming to an end, and a whole new world was about to open up. I can remember when this took place; it sounds funny to think that there was an actual time, person or event that changed the way that I dressed and the way that I expressed myself – but there was.*

*She was about 5 foot tall and she dressed like a personified acid trip. There have been many incidents and people in my life that have changed me. Surprisingly one of the most important people in my life, I have never met or never even talked too. But I have seen her. The first time that I did occurred in grade ten at a much music dance party that was being held in my school gym. The moment that I saw Lady Miss Kier of Deee-lite in her deee-licious outfits grooving on that huge video screen, I knew my life had changed. Lady Miss Kier had opened my eyes to the wonders and possibilities of self-expression. This deee-groovy songstress literally changed the course of my existence. From the moment I saw her, I became aware that I had the right and the urge to express my individuality; to express who I truly was. From that moment on, I dressed differently, I acted differently and I thought differently. I would say The Lady provided me with the most comfort and acceptance of who I was, by just existing. Just the knowledge that there were people like her was enough for me to take comfort. During the course of the next two years at high school I pushed boundaries of gender identity and gender roles, and as a result, incurred the wrath of the homophobic community in which I lived; and as a further result I felt uncomfortable within the community I had loved. I slowly began to lift that protective façade; I began to let people see underneath it. I plugged in the pink –*

*it was like a flickering light at a rundown old porn shop, only I wasn't advertising 25cent booths, I was advertising my identity.*

My mother also notes that she remembers this time period; she notes that it was a difficult time to understand and accept.

As the years went by you did start to change in your dress...(pause) at first it wasn't too different but by grade 10 it had drastically changed and I became very critical in ways I guess, the boy I knew was becoming different but then I thought that is the way of all teenagers...(Mom, lines 221-224).

I can remember that in grade ten you started to wear flare pants...that you would make...big platform shoes...tight little t-shirts...hats all the time...glasses.... You were the only different dresser in your school.... I can remember when we went to Vancouver with your... your girlfriends in grade ten to go shopping...after that I thought...that it...that that trip was a big mistake...uhmmm... you came back with big platforms...and heaps of strange clothes from Vancouver. ... I can remember thinking to myself, why can't he just wear normal jumpers and slacks. Even just jeans and a t-shirt...but you had little t-shirts with like cartoon characters on them...and big flared pants and giant shoes. It was a big mess in my eyes...but you were young...and I still hung on to the thought that you may be going through a phase or something. Some kids went through mouthy stages, or experimenting phases...maybe this was yours (Mom, lines 247-253 and 258-264).

It is important to realize that many things with our lives are coded with respect to gender; be it gestures, occupation, sexual practices or fashion (Weston, 1996). A pair of 501s has a different significance than do a pair of apple green sailor bell-bottoms. What a person wears and how they wear it marks a person, be it as 'the boy next door', punk, or queer. What a person wears and how the society codes the wearer can influence or effect that person's access to resources, their position in the social hierarchy, and how people respond to them. When I began to wear 'different' clothes I was othered by the community; I was the local 'freak'. My teachers reacted and made statements, my church leader questioned me about my clothing, my father made snide remarks and my mother

sometimes cried. Although I did not lose all of my friends, some of social relations became strained, certain people became aggressive towards me, and I began to be labeled as 'gay'.

My mother, in conversation, stated that she was always questioning my sexuality, and this time period her thoughts about my sexuality came to the forefront.

The more serious thoughts about you being gay or queer ...or whatever you like to call it...came to mind more after your trip to Quebec with the French class from school and I started to hear a few remarks from different kids about your actions over there...really I think this is when I started to know (Mom, lines 278-281).

I can remember the rumour mills in Mackenzie after that trip...people were saying things...even the adults...I used to get so defensive and angry (Mom, lines 298-299).

I can remember that time of my life clearly. That French trip opened my eyes.

When we were in Montreal, the hotel that we were all staying in was located in the center of the gay village. (Lucky stars). Walking outside of the hotel was like walking into a dream; queer men holding hands; men kissing (and I was awake); fabulous fashion and men, men, men. It was also the first time in my life that I was hit on by a queer man - and it was so exciting. After this point I became focused on the future and the reality that I would one day live in a city where this 'Montreal reality' would be my reality. As mentioned, this time period is likened to an opening of the eyes - a glimpse into the possibilities of my life. I had up to that point only saw pictures and read odd pieces on gay culture and gay life, and now I had experienced a portion of it and I wanted more. I craved more. It was one of those times when I wished I could have bore my soul and my truth to all that would listen, but I knew I had to bide my time. I was only in grade ten, still living at home and still living in a homophobic town and I could only imagine the worst if I would have come out. I began a countdown until I was graduated, when I

would leave that small town and would be able to open the closet door that encased me in blue anticipation.

### **My New Reality**

*Vancouver is where the rest of my personal drama unfolds. Grade twelve finished and I knew a new era of my life was about to begin. I had been accepted to Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and I could not wait to move. I was leaving a community of exclusion and I was moving to a community of inclusion. Mackenzie was a town filled with barriers and walls that sought to restrain the individual from straying too far from the fray. Social success in the community was tantamount on conforming to its ideals. I was not ordinary, I did not fit into its ideals, my 4" platform shoes and giant flares made sure of that. But I survived. I did face remarks and stares, the town gossip engine, and the occasional chastisement by my Church official, but I was not a social outcast. I often question the origin of this resiliency. Why was I able to retain confidence and self-esteem, when so many other queer youth are not? Was it luck? Was it parenting? Or maybe, ironically, was it my Church's position on the family? Or a combination? It is unclear, but I am thankful for whatever it was.*

*Vancouver was a very different arena. In a city filled with diversity, the ordinary can get lost in a sea of monotony; individuality became a positive trademark rather than the mark of the pariah. In Mackenzie my individuality was viewed upon with weary eyes and was still able to happily survive, but in Vancouver I flourished.*

*I arrived in Vancouver with boys on the mind. I began university in the beginning of September 1995, and by the second week of September I had discovered the gaiety of*

*being gay. In Vancouver I never even had to come out, I was just gay; it was assumed. In the liberal atmosphere of SFU my sexuality and identity never became an issue; I was just me, being me. It was very liberating. I entered into a world of numberless gay, lesbian and trans peoples; I had entered heaven. I had left a community of having no one to compare myself to and now I had a multitude of images and peoples to serve as a template. The world that I had left was also a world of stereotypical images; in this 'real' world I began to see the entire spectrum and diversity of the queer community/ies. On any given Saturday night I could witness leather daddies and their slaves, drag queens and their campy friends, business suit clad gay men, and most intriguing to me, a menagerie of young gay men.*

*Even though my sexual orientation and sexual identity had been firmly established years before this point, my sexual behaviour had not been established. This changed quite soon after I moved to Vancouver. Within three weeks of moving to Vancouver I had my first boyfriend, within three and a half I had my first sexual experience. Everything was so new and exciting to me; I went to the clubs almost every night; I had friends who accepted me and embraced me; I dressed in wild, flamboyant clothes; I had sex with quite a few sexual partners; and I loved every waking moment of my life. I had become comfortable with who I was, with how I felt and with whom I had sex with. I lived in a world where everyone knew my name and where everyone knew I was queer – and it didn't affect a thing. The pink was plugged in and I kicked the sign – I was a fluorescent sign that marquee'd my identity; I wanted everyone to know – I'm gay and I can wear these apple green sailor pants with this white and mauve striped fur jacket, and what the hell are you going to do about it.*

This time period was such a positive junction in my life (fun, exploratory, exciting); but to my mother – it was the opposite. It is interesting to note that at a time when I was experiencing life fully for the first time, being free and finally being me, my mother's life was collapsing around her. Leading up to the time when I would be leaving for Vancouver our family relationships started to become strained; my mother's moods changed, she became sullen and withdrawn. Everything from choosing a toaster for my new apartment, to the mention of university life became ripe grounds for an argument. My mother notes,

[t]his whole time period was hard for me. I can remember trying to convince you to go to UNBC...but you insisted on Vancouver...and I knew it was better for you but I just didn't want to see you go because I knew that I would lose my baby...I knew you would change. It's hard for any parent to see their children leave for the first time...but I was also thinking that I would lose you to something else...I...I look back and shudder to think of those years for you...the ones before this date. You must have been so excited as you would be able to be you for the first time. It's really hard to think as a parent that you stood in the way of your baby being able to be himself...to be honest with himself (My mom is getting visibly teary eyed). I thought I was such a good mother...(pauses)... and here all this time you had this burden to carry and I was too caught up in what my plans for you were that I couldn't see your dilemma and wasn't there for you. That fact...really pains me...I wasn't there as a support I can't imagine what it was like for you, no one to confide in no one to turn too, so very sad. (pauses) You have told me that you knew from a very young age as young as four...that was fourteen years that you had to be ...alone (crying as she speaks) (Lines 359-374).

At the same time, when you were ready to go to University in some ways it was a relief I wouldn't have to worry about and see your differences so much, I asked Ilean to go with me to drive you down because I knew that this was the moment of truth in a way. I can remember being...well, I was very disappointed to see that you had been housed with three girls and that you were ecstatic about it, shopping partners and club dates and weird ways to dress were on the horizon and I knew it as we drove away... I knew the son that I had imagined I had all these years was gone for good and my heart broke and I finally broke down and admitted that you were gay, to myself and Ilean, still of course hoping and praying, lots of praying. There was sadness, there was crying. And then there was lots of

anger at God, anger at Bill, Meaghan, and anger at you. I was angry that you were doing this to me, but most of all, I as angry at myself... me what had I done that was so wrong...what did I do wrong to have a son like you...and...uh...also I thought about what I had done that I had a trial like this to deal with...feeling very sorry for myself and wanting MY boy back not this stranger I didn't know. This period was very hard for all of us (Mom, lines 385-402).

It is interesting, that even after 8 years, I still get filled with emotion, more specifically anger and hurt, when my mother talks about how she got angry at me for being queer. Although my education and the literature explain this point to me, my emotions do not let me forgive this point. Like many mothers, the time period when a child leaves the fold can be a stressful time, but when the outcome of that departure is unknown (or undesired) the reaction to the situation can be heightened. In this instance, when I was departing and my mother was also accepting that I may be queer, my mother notes that she had a confusion of emotional feelings – she felt everything from self-blame to sadness, self-pity to anger. In other words the acceptance of a child's queer identity can be confusing and an emotionally trying time/event.

### **Christmas Day, 1995. The Day.**

This is the day that I told my family that I was gay. This is when I opened the closet door. This is a day that changed my life. It was also a day that changed my mother's life.

*I can remember it clearly. I was underneath the fan, right near the living room door, when my mother uttered the words, " I think we need to talk." I knew what was coming and I knew I was going to be honest. I was shaking, ever so slightly. I was so nervous; it is hard to explain that kind of nervousness. I did not know what was to come;*

*was I going to be disowned (I didn't think so, but I didn't know. I had heard stories from friends about their parents kicking them out. I knew friends who had to prostitute because they had no support after they came out). I was also very excited. I had been carrying something around for years and years and I knew I was about to unload it. It is like that strange excitement you get before going into surgery or going into find out blood test results; it is excitement but it is drenched in fear. We made our way into her bedroom and she turned off the lights and we sat on the bed that I had grown up on. The bed smelled of my mother and father, and the lotion that my mother used to put on her legs. It smelled of home. My mother bluntly asked if I was gay. And I, just as bluntly, replied, "Yes." I can remember that period of time. I have never had a slow motion time in my life before or after that instance, but that is what it was like. Slow; what was going to happen? Was she going to scream, going to die of a heart attack, going to hold me and say it was alright. There was silence and I could hear the sobs start to come from my mother. The bed no longer felt like home, but rather an uncomfortable bunch of springs covered in cloth. She asked me questions concerning boyfriends, disease, sex, religious conviction, my future, my education, etc. She then stated certain things concerning religion, disease, the nature of men, and my future. I was going to be the target of old men, I was not going to have children, she would not ever accept this, she would never accept my boyfriends or partners, she said I would probably be alone in life, I was sinning, god was just testing me, and things would never be the same. This was the first time that I felt truly alone. It was also the first time that I felt disappointed in the person I held in the highest esteem. My mother had failed me and I didn't know how to handle this. We are always told and taught that our parents would always be there for us; that*

*their arms would always be there to hold us and envelop us. They forgot to tell us that there were exceptions! My body and my heart ached for tenderness, for understanding and for acceptance. I ached. There is not a better way to describe it.*

To me the day was a day of unburdening, while to my mother it was a day when new burdens were piled on. To me the day was about sorting out things and letting things go, while to my mother it was a day that intensified the confusion.

You and I were lying on the bed and I asked to talk about this...I remember I had to ask because I had to get it off my chest. And when we started talking about it and my fears were realized....it was like the world stood still. It's true...uh...things starting running through my head and I just started asking heaps of questions. I was like a ...uh...crazy person...I didn't know what to think. I only knew that my world fell apart, all the stages you go through- were you sure? Could it be just a fad? If you prayed about it God would help? You must be sick. Your mind must not be working right. What did I do wrong? Why didn't you tell us earlier? Maybe we could have gotten you help, just an absolute jumble of everything (Lines 465-473).

My mother's narrative covers many of the usual questions that parents ask or ponder when a child declares their queer identity. Although the actual event (of coming out to my mother) was quite short (maybe an hour) the range of questions and emotions that are birthed from it are vast. My mother notes that everything that she had heard concerning queer men (every stereotype, every ignorant remark) flooded into her mind. Due to the influx of notions and emotions, she was unable to formulate any concrete thoughts and therefore her thoughts became a "jumble" – intensifying her confusion.

What did I think? All the usual, poor me, what will my friends think, what am I going to say, I will never have grandchildren from you, you will never get married, what will my family say, would you get AIDS, would you start using drugs? There were so many questions. It was peculiar too...I never really thought of real gay people as being young...I pictured them as older men. And you saying that you were gay made me afraid

that you were going to be taken advantage of by older men who just wanted sex. It was very much about sex for me...the being gay. I had combined the ideas of being gay and child abusers. There was also confusion because at that time I questioned whether you wanted to be a woman or something. I just couldn't understand how a man could like another man that way, without being a woman inside or something. Then, like I said before, I questioned whether I had done something wrong as a other...maybe it was because your sister and I had...uhm...like pampered you too much...coddled you. I was so afraid, and there were times when I was angry, like ...why are you doing this to us....just be like you were before...why are you being so selfish. That was a big emotion for me at that moment...I thought you were only thinking about yourself. Everything was wrong at that moment.... I only had stereotypes and hearsay ...that's what I had to build on. It was probably the hardest thing I ...well no...it was the hardest thing that I have ever had to go through...it really felt as if I was losing my baby. (There are tears on my mothers face and her eyes are glossy). It was like you were dying. My baby was far from me...and was beginning not to even...to even know him (there is a long pause in the conversation...silence...uncomfortable)(Mom, lines 492-519).

As mentioned, my mother notes that this was the hardest thing that she had had to go through. She compares it to the death of a child. As stated in literature, the coming out of a queer child, has been likened to a death, where one has to go through the stages of grieving. Her story illustrates the complexity and depth that a coming out of a queer child can have on a parent.

*This time period became the most amazing time period of my life, but also the most painful. I was able to tell the truth to everyone and show the real Jared, but at the same time I became very alienated and isolated. It was a different form of isolation than I had felt as a youth, as I now had the support of friends and other queer youth. But, it was much more difficult – I was losing my foundation. When my mother was going through her mourning of me, my pain intensified (as I did not understand how my mother could be reacting this way to me – she was my mom, my world, my support...and now she*

*was acting as if I had died. As if I had changed in some manner*). In my mother's narrative, she notes, "To know that you felt alone...that's something that I will always regret...that I made you feel alone." (Lines 539-541). Although it is hard to state that your parents made you feel alone, it is true. This is the closest that I have ever felt to not having a mother; I had no family member to talk to; there was no guidance, no direction or positive advice or encouragement. This is something that most queer children have to go through; trying to find their way without help. I had always had people to talk to and help me; my sister was my confidant, my mother was my foundation, but they were dealing with their hurt, pain, anger, and confusion at this time – so I became lost. I had to find my own way, and I did this by using my friends as a lifeline; as a support. The only people that I had as a support were my friends, especially my queer friends; they became my adopted family. These people, who I had only known for a few months, became my confidants; my shoulders to cry on; my comfort. Peter Nardi, in his book *Gay Men's Friendships: invincible communities* (1991), parallels my feelings. He states,

[t]here is comfort in being among my gay and lesbian friends and even in being among the gay strangers in my neighborhood and on city streets. This comfort comes from more than just a psychological sense of who I am; to participate in spaces also occupied by others who have grown up with stigmatized identity and who may have experienced - despite other significant differences - at least some similar forms of personal and social marginalization is a social political connection, perhaps one of brotherhood and sisterhood (p. 110).

*Everyone asked why I was gay; was it one of our fault?; was it because I pampered you too much?; even Oddly was a culprit. ...[A]nd it is so hard to know that you are responsible for the pain that your family members are facing. On top of that ...it is often...even in my case...it was as if I was being blamed for being gay...something that*

*I had no control over. I especially resented implications that I was being selfish – that I had chosen this. That I was thinking of no one but myself. It was extremely frustrating and angering realizing that people (especially those people that you loved the most, wanted me to change ME because they felt uncomfortable with it. I just wanted to scream that I could not change my skin color, nor my eye color and I sure in the fuck could not change who I was attracted to. It angered me to think that my mother (a person who lived her life so honestly) wanted me to lie to myself, so that **she** could feel better.*

*When my mother would send church literature over that tried to convince me that I could change (I would just throw that shit into the garbage), or when she would say “well maybe one day your ‘situation’ will be different and you’ll meet a nice girl...blah blah blah.” I would react with tears and shouts. I think that I may have even accentuated my behaviors and dress that irritated my mother, just to say – SEE I’M A FAG. I WEAR MAKEUP AND SKY BLUE SATIN JACKETS. GET THE FUCK USED TO IT.*

After I came out, my mother and my relationship took a nosedive. It was difficult for us to talk; it was strained and full of tension. My mother notes that during those months she entertained many ideas. She had often told me that she worried that I was being taken advantage of by men, that I had somehow been coerced into being queer. She also notes that she worried extensively about me getting sick. She notes,

I worried about AIDS, hepatitis C and any other sickness that could occur. Every time you phoned and you didn’t sound well I would go into a panic. I was convinced that you would phone one day and say you had AIDS or something...literally every time the phone rang for those first few months my heart would sink (Mom, lines 572-576).

Like many other people, my mother had attributed AIDS to queer men. Society, the media, and homophobes have skewed the reality of AIDS and focused attention on queer

men, creating the notion that queer men are the primary target of this virus (Lipkin, 1995). In the 1980s, statistics do show that 90% of cases in the United States were gay men, however, during the 1990s and up into the 21 century that proportion has shrunk dramatically (Tully, 2000). Although queer men are at risk, we, as a society, have to be aware that all sexually active people are at risk and have to be vigilant in fighting against this virus.

My mother, other family members, and friends during this time period were exposed to many of the stereotypes about queers that are circulating in society. It is amazing what the media, people in power and the hate mongers can spread (and be believed!). My mother notes, "I was still carrying around stereotypes. I hadn't really met many of your friends until after this period so my knowledge of gays was to say the least, uninformed" (Mom, lines 578-580).

My mother had compiled many stereotypes within her mind during the course of her life and when I came out they all came jutting to the foreground. She had concerns about everything from pedophilia to cross-dressing, not being able to maintain relationships to drug abuse, promiscuity to predatory men. Although some of the stereotypes are true with certain queer men, it took a while for my mother to learn that just like any other group of people, stereotypes highlight certain characteristics of a few people and then are applied to the entire group. In other word my mother had to learn.

Have my attitudes changed? Of course I have met some of the nicest friends that a person could have, your friends, Jason always comes to mind, he carries himself with dignity ... I have got to know and interact with many gay people since that time period so I have gotten to understand and realize that gay people are not just the stereotypes that I was ...I was...well that I had (Mom, lines 631-634).

## **The Time After: Red receding to pink**

Months passed by and the pain began to recede. My family began to accept the fact that I was gay. My mother stopped giving me church literature that talked of changing homosexuals to heterosexuals, she stopped using the term “your friend” when she spoke of my boyfriend at the time, and we once again felt comfortable to talk and be around one another. I am not saying that my mother just became 100% comfortable with everything; it was very hard for her. Even to this day she questions things, or things are brought up that she has to come to terms with.

I have always been a strong member of the church and you children were brought up this way to and I do find it hard to listen to people who judge gay people...during this time of legalizing gay marriage there is a lot of talk and controversy in the Church. How do you explain to people your feelings and get your opinions known, I know that nobody would choose this lifestyle, can you imagine how hard a lifestyle it is, why would anyone choose it, it is a matter of birth, what causes it...I don't know. It is hard to balance my strong beliefs in church doctrine and my equally strong belief in your rights to be happy... (Mom, lines 642-649).

I also have had to come to terms with certain things; my mother is from a different time period. She has lived 60 odd years with a certain mind frame and with certain beliefs and it is not easy to change things that are that embedded. There are things, such as how I dress, ideas about gender, or events such as pride parades, that my mother has a difficult time grasping. I have tried to explain everything that she questions, but often it ends without her grasping the concept or understanding it. But today I do think there is a difference, she may not understand it, but she doesn't respond to it the same way – she now just accepts it and moves on; to each their own.

To this day, my mother still is becoming accustomed to my life and me. She is still learning, she is still in a process. My mother notes,

... like when your first major relationship ended, you were, heartbroken, my heart broke for you, but at the same time it made you ...and... you being gay more...more like me I guess. I saw in you the same questions and hurt that I had felt when I had been heartbroken (Lines 632-635).

I have not lived at home for 8 years, and I only get to visit a few times a year, so our relationship is lived through daily telephone conversations. Although we are very close and she knows almost everything about my life, when we see each other in person there are still some instances when she notes that she gets caught off guard.

There have been things that still embarrass me sometimes...you know that inside embarrassment...not like...ashamed or anything. The first kiss I saw you give Clement, walking holding hands sitting on each others knees, but after I thought about it... but it is just like other people in love and in a relationship if it were you and a young lady I would probably thought-how cute (Mom, lines 778-782).

I have also changed in how I respond to certain things. Religion is very important to my mother, and she is unswaying in her dedication to her faith. I no longer argue about Church doctrine, as it is a no win battle. I just let it be. Her faith brings her joy, and so do I. It's a good balance.

Mom: Ummm...I remember when we were talking that Christmas you said that if I could choose anything I wanted you to be what would that be. I said I would wish that you would go on a church mission, marry in the temple have children. You responded by saying, what right did you have to possibly mess up all their lives by living a lie. Where would my happiness be? Many people have done this and have brought misery to so many others as well as themselves. I remember that well. It's interesting cause...I... at that Christmas I never thought I could be at the space I am today. I went through the denial period, where I thought that everything would change and you would be straight ...and all that, and then I was like ok...I tolerate this, but I don't like it. Now, I am so proud of you and what you stand for and how you live your life. I am very open about your lifestyle...not lifestyle...I know that annoys you...but your...you know what I mean... and your partner and ...well everything about you. I used to shy away from talking about your life, but now I am so proud of you.

Jared: I know that it has been a long road to get to this point but it is amazing to me also, because at the beginning...like you said...on that Christmas...there is just no way that I thought that it could be as good as it

is today. I thought that you would just tolerate my life and I thought I would be stressed talking about anything and I never dreamed that I would be able to bring my partner home to meet the family or anything...I thought that I would always be somewhat of an outsider (Mom & Jared, lines 754-773).

Homophobia and stereotypes about queer people are deeply interwoven into our society.

Signorile (1995) note “[we must remember that our parents] have been raised in a homophobic society, coming of age in a time when [queerness] was even less understood and accepted than is now” (p. 84). It is no wonder that parents and other family members often react with shock, denial and anger when a member comes out (Bain, 2000). Parents often have to go through stages, as mentioned, it is like mourning the death of a child. It is a process of reconciliation, where parents and children have to adjust to the new situation and the new family relationships (and family expectations).

Mom: ...It has been hard...it took a long time for it to get to how it is now, and I am so happy that we are now able to talk about this and be comfortable with it. That time period was hard for all of us, there was so much pain and emotion. So much, it is hard to describe. I think we all shed tears on too many occasions...and now...with a lot of help and time...we are able to move forward.

Jared: Thanks mum...you know that I like talking about this. We went for a long while that we couldn't discuss my life without...uhm...arguing or ending in tears...and now that we can I am so happy for it. It was such a hard time in our lives, like you said, it is hard to describe...it was something that shouldn't have to happen...that kids shouldn't have to bear...but now we can talk about it freely. That makes me feel good...you know...like...makes my heart warm (Mom & Jared, lines 787-796).

## **Chapter 6 – Discussion: A pink talk and a pink end.**

*This thesis represents several things to me; it is an account of my life, an insight into my mother's experiences and a voice from which others can learn (or just witness). Although the narratives from which this thesis are built are finished in print, the narratives and stories will continue on. My mother and I will still have these memories and will build further memories. It seems strange to put an end to something that is ongoing, but I feel that an incomplete story is better than no story at all. This is not a full exploration of our identities, but rather my mother and I used our narratives to give voice, to what we considered to be, an important time period of both of our lives and an important part of my personal identity and my mother's identity of being a mother of a queer son.*

*As in any written piece about a person or about people, only a fraction of their experiences could be told. I questioned whether or not, I told all that I needed to tell, or if my mother told everything that she needed to tell. After a retrospective look, I believe that we could not tell everything (it would be impossible), but what we did tell, we told for a purpose – they were the events/experiences/stories that we felt were important to our narratives. We also understand that readers may 'see' things in the narratives that my mother and I do not (or do not yet) see. Just as in any circumstance in life, others interpret things differently and take away a different meaning. One such notion, that I can see becoming an issue with readers, is the idea of 'mother blaming'. Although it is understandable how one could take that idea from this paper, the intention was not here – my mother and I have always had an immensely close relationship and this paper is just*

*meant to relay the pain and division that oppressive ideas and societal beliefs can have on even the most loving of relationships. It is also important to note that one must sometimes look past the words in the narratives and contextualize the words, actions, and experiences. Things may not make sense to everyone, but I will try to pull out the main aspects of our narratives and record them in a manner that may provide, you the reader, with the heart of the stories.*

### **Making Sense of the Pink**

*I came from a family that had few money worries, a family that rarely fought, a family where there was no abuse, a family where drugs and alcohol were not an issue, a family where we said “goodnight I love you” every night, a family that played board games every Monday, I was even called Beaver occasionally by my friends – but unlike Beaver Cleaver, this boy came out as queer and my perfect Cleaver world became a memory.*

### **Ignorance**

The overwhelming issue that appeared in the narratives was ignorance. The accounts given by a queer man and a mother of a queer man exposes the lack of appropriate information that could lessen the challenges of growing up queer or dealing with a queer family member. The presence of ignorance in all aspects of society shows how dominant societal beliefs concerning queers have seeped into common life and contributed to a culture of oppression. The narratives illustrate the effects of this ignorance and how that ignorance can be manifest, through such oppressive societal

realities as heterosexism, gendering and homophobia, also through blatant misinformation, or lack of any information.

## **Oppression**

It is important to note that oppressive realities such as heterosexism, gendering and homophobia (as well as issues such as intersectionality, sexism, racism, and classism) have their basis in power; the power to enforce or propagate a particular perspective; the power to restrict resources to certain individuals based on sexual orientation, 'race', sex; the power to define and/or efface difference, and very importantly, "the power to set the very terms of power" (Appleby & Anastas, 1998. p.10). Pharr notes that the following are all steeped in power and are all elements of oppression;

[t]he imposition of normative behaviors supported by institutional and economic power; disincentives to nonconformity, including the threat and use of violence for those who do not conform; social definition of "other"; invisibility of the "outsiders"; distortion and stereotyping; blaming the victim; internalized oppression; and the isolationism or assimilationism with tokenism of the "outsider" (Pharr as cited in Appleby & Anastas, 1998, p.11).

Those who do not hold power often feel powerless and do whatever necessary to feel a sense of power (Appleby & Anastas, 1998). They may display power, by such means, as issuing control over their bodies, by what they put into their bodies, how they act, what they say, and what they wear. As a result, issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, promiscuity, prostitution, violence, and spousal violence can all result due to this powerless feeling (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Tully, 2000; Unks, 1995; Rofes, 1989). Also a feeling of having no power can also result in mental health issues, such as depression and feelings of anomie (D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001).

## Heterosexism

My mother noted that she never expected or even entertained the idea that she could have a queer child. The heterosexist assumption that is apparent in almost all aspects of society has damaging implications, not only on queer individuals, but also to society as a whole. A heterosexist assumption perpetuates the homogenous notion of society – we should all be the same, we should all think the same, we should all look the same. Many different groups in our society have had/or do have issues as a result of this same thought process; racism, religious persecution, and political persecution all have their base in the belief/or desire in a homogenous society. Although not entertaining the idea of having a queer child may seem innocuous, the reason for not entertaining that idea is far from innocent. Carol Tully (2000) notes,

[m]ost gay and lesbian children are born into and raised in non-gay family settings where parents, siblings, and other relatives have little understanding of, and often negative feelings about, homosexuality....parents assume that their children are heterosexual and often the developing lesbian or gay [child] is at odds with herself or himself, the family, and society (p.122).

The heterosexist and gender conformist society in which we live encourages certain social realities which effect queers, one being social invisibility. Appleby and Anastas (1998) note that “[s]ocial invisibility makes it possible for the general public to be ignorant of social diversity” (p. 88). Those that do not fit into society’s notion of what is queer or who is a queer are assumed to be heterosexual, thereby perpetuating ignorance and creating stereotypes.

My mother’s complete expectation of a non-queer child illustrates how well society has hidden the queer. Even after I had come out, my mother still held onto the

belief that I was going through a phase; he *can't* be gay, he *has* to be straight, he is not like *them* – that is how it is *supposed* to be.

Heterosexism was also apparent in the various institutions that I belonged, such as my religion and the school that I attended. Within my religious environment all males were expected to marry women (preferably within the Church) and have many children. This was a belief and an ideal that was instilled within all male children of our religion from the time of early childhood. Family is the foundation of the Church and therefore the role of people within the Church was to create families (go forward and multiply); although the Church's idea of what constituted a family was limited to 'traditional' male/female relationships and their offspring. Similarly, the elementary and high schools that I belonged to were focused solely on heterosexual ideals/issues/history. Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) note,

[i]n [school there] is little material about lesbians and gay men included in classes, even if it is relevant. For example, few history classes address the gay/lesbian rights movement. Few literature classes mention the sexual orientation of the authors covered, so they are presumed to be heterosexual (p.215).

Not once in my 13 years of public school education did I encounter information about queers. I was not taught about the prevalence of queer authors or queer historical figures, I was never even informed about the possibility of alternate orientations in sexual education. I was left ignorant and to my own devices, and as mentioned the only information available was through the popular media (which was scant and predominantly featured stereotypes and misinformation).

Intertwined within the notion of heterosexism is the notion of identity. Bannerji (1995) notes,

[i]t will not take much insight to recognize that people who are most exercised about the issue of identity in terms of political and personal power relations are all people who have been repressed and marginalized. They range from nationalities,...to those who have been constituted as subaltern cultural and political subjects or agents, or minoritized on grounds of sex, sexual orientation and/or... "race" (p.20).

Heterosexism seeks to create an environment where queer identities are non-existent; where queers are not able to have an identity – they get put under the identity label of heterosexual. Our queer identities are not only suppressed by institutions with blatant power such as the government, schools and religious institutions, but also by family (as an institution) (Appleby and Anastas, 1998; Anderson, 1996). The heterosexist society in which we live not only distorts queer individuals sense of their identity but also markedly distorts queer identity and realities to the non-queer population by silencing the true representations of queer individuals and enabling the proliferation of stereotypes and ignorance (Tully, 2000; Blumenfeld, 1992; Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Unks, 1995).

### **Gendering**

Closely linked to heterosexism is societies belief in male attributes and female attributes; gendering. Almost all of us gender (often very innocently); Oh, aren't you a big boy, going to grow up to be strong; Oh, aren't you a pretty little girl, going to grow up to be beautiful. Although innocently said, we are perpetuating a societal belief that impacts us all. Due to these societal beliefs we are expected to have certain attributes or characteristics and if we don't, we are somehow wrong or broken. In the current narratives there are many instances where gendering is apparent. From a teacher stating

that only little girls cry, or to a family being concerned about what a child is wearing – shows that gendering (and the belief in gendering is powerful).

The foundations of gendering are built upon the beliefs that there are masculine attributes and feminine attributes (Weston, 1996; Blumenfeld, 1992). Masculine things may include a deep voice, being non-emotional, being aggressive, being dominant, not wearing makeup, not being into fashion, and despising dolls. Feminine things may include having a high voice, being emotional, being submissive, wearing dresses, loving makeup and adoring flowers. Although these attributes vary across time and space, whatever the 'list' is at your junction in time denotes how you are going to fit in. If you follow the 'list' you may be fine, but if you don't you will have to face societies wrath. In my narratives I note that I was often focused upon because I did not conform to this list - I walked with a swish and talked with a 'tone', I loved fashion, I adored flowers and I was very emotional. These facts signaled me out as broken, as not 'quite right'. Individuals who do not fit into these gendered ideals face societal punishment, ostracism at best and death at worst (Unks, 1995). This gendered system we live in effects us all as it discourages or even prohibits people from living the vast range of emotions and experiences that should be available to everyone. Warren Blumenfeld (1992) echoes this statement by noting, "I believe I was robbed of my childhood when my individuality, my creativity, was denied me [because of societal gendering]" (p.32).

## **Homophobia**

Much has been written about homophobia and it's impact on queers, ranging from negative beliefs about queers to outright violence against queers. It is illustrated in the

accounts and noted by Blumenfeld (1995) that homophobia seems to act on 4 different levels; the personal, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the societal.

It is noted that personal homophobia refers to personal belief systems (a prejudice) a belief that queers are less than in some ways (Blumenfeld, 1995). In the accounts given by my mother several such types of homophobia were present – beliefs that queers were immoral, genetically/ or psychologically defective, sick, or unnatural.

Interpersonal homophobia would refer to personal prejudices that effect relations between individuals; an active prejudice or discrimination (Blumenfeld, 1995). This would be the most visible of the levels of homophobia in the accounts. Queer individuals often face interpersonal homophobia at all stages of their lives; being called “fag”, being bullied because they do not fit into gender norms, being focused upon because they are holding their partners hand, being denied support from their parents as they come out.

Institutional homophobia would refer to the ways in which government, religion, educational policy, businesses and the like systematically discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation or identity (Blumenfeld, 1995). Although this level of homophobia may not be *as* present in the accounts, it still is evident when I state,

...there were obviously some issues with religion that affected my life and my being queer. Just like I was taught that my attraction to men was wrong, I have been attracted to men for as long as I remember. For me it was a constant internal battle. Being taught that your feelings make you unworthy or in contrast to your social beliefs is not easy (Jared, lines 690-694).

Religious teachings that preach against queers, governmental policies that do not allow queers to marry, state laws that forbid queer sex, and educational policies that do not teach the broad range of sexuality are all culprits at this level.

Societal homophobia would refer to the ways in which society works to disempower the queer (Blumenfeld, 1995). Although this is accomplished without the use of written policies, it is as powerful as any law or doctrine. Stereotypes, misinformation, lack of visibility, and the fear of visibility are all tools of this level.

Like any other forms of oppression, heterosexism, gendering, and homophobia seek to maintain the current social order; the dominant group uses such tools to hold power and sway over the disenfranchised. Although this paper's subjects were a queer man and a heterosexual mother, this form of control was apparent on many levels. It is important to note that although the effect of these forms of oppression are or can be devastating the perpetrators of it are often unaware that they are committing such destructive acts. A mother who seeks to believe that queerness is a phase or mother who suggests therapy may be acting on innocence or lack of knowledge, but nonetheless the damage is the same.

### **Lack of Information/Resources**

Although there are many things in the narratives that can be attributed to a lack of information/resources, there are several issues that became highlighted, such as a lack of information about childhood sexuality and appropriate information on queer issues. The narratives covered in this paper illustrate, although much literature and society like to ignore it, sexual identities in children do exist. It is hard to find good academic literature that speaks about the sexualities of children and youth, but as parents and youth know, children are sexually active, but as these accounts note, parents may not accept, acknowledge it, understand it, or even recognize it. Although children may not be having intercourse, they are experimenting with themselves and with others. D'Augelli and

Peterson (2001) do note, however, “[even though] exploratory behaviors in children are more common, sexual behaviors such as intercourse have also been reported in the late childhood years” (p.6). To deny or not understand this aspect of childhood or youth could potentially harm an important aspect of their person. The accounts of my mother noted that she witnessed sexual activity between me and a friend, “I walked in and you were lying on the bed naked and [a male friend] was running his hands all over your body” (Mom, lines 116-117), but felt uncomfortable talking about it, and as a child I felt uncomfortable talking about my sexual feelings. And if sexuality was discussed, it was in adult terms or ‘sin’ terms; there was no arena for divulging interest in or curiosity about sexuality. As a result, confusion, misinformation and ignorance resulted; the cycle of misinformation was perpetuated.

Similarly, I was also denied access to appropriate information/resources concerning queer issues. I became lost and confused in a sea of media representations of queers; I had lesbian vampires, queer psychopaths, campy drag queens, homicidal transsexuals, and the snippets of queer realities that I could glean from magazines such as *Details* and *Detour*.

### **Construction of False Identities: Stereotyping**

Within the interviews that I conducted it was ignorance/lack of information/resources that perpetuated myths, stereotypes and assumptions of queer people. This oppression is consciously and unconsciously maintained by societal structures to maintain power and the current heterosexual system. We live in a society where conformity is the rule, where the queer identity, the “other”, is oppressed. Society is so effective in its campaign that even parents of queer children may become repulsed

by their children or conclude that their children must be different people than they thought they were; even the queer themselves; societal and internalized homophobia are pervasive (Appleby and Anastas, 1998. Anderson, 1995. Bain, 2000). Most members of society are not informed on queer issues and in our search to understand it or condemn it may rely on stereotypes, hearsay, or “facts” to backup our thoughts or arguments (Bain, 2000).

Society has also been very successful in its birth of stereotypes surrounding the queer communities. Within the short interviews that were conducted the following stereotypes/myths were mentioned or alluded to:

- Queer men are pedophiles, child abusers and sexual predators.
- Queers cannot maintain long term relationships.
- All queer relationships are modeled after the masculine/feminine (butch/femme) roles.
- Queers are psychologically damaged and sick.
- Reparative/conversion therapy can “cure” queerness.
- Sexual orientation is a choice.
- Queers are more promiscuous than their heterosexual counterparts.
- Queers are easily identifiable because of the way they look/act/dress.
- Queers do not have children.
- Parents can cause their children to be queer.
- Queer men get sick (AIDS, hepatitis, and other STDs).

## **Language**

Another issue that was manifest by the conversation was the importance of language. Blumenfeld (1995) notes,

[I]language is not immaterial to the experience of oppression...In language lie the assumptions of a culture, its rules of conduct, what it will acknowledge as possible and permissible. No mirror of nature, language, rather constitutes a prism through which the human knowers organize, interpret and give meaning to their experiences (p. 43).

My mother's and my use of language shows the power that language can hold. For example, my mother and I have different interpretations of the word queer. I hold that queer is a positive term, a reclaimed term that encapsulates a wide range of identities; a non-exclusive term, a term not steeped in a male dominated language, such as 'gay', or 'homosexual'. My mother, however, notes,

[g]osh, I hate that word, queer...I like gay. Queer to me is a negative word" (Mom, line 110). "Some of the words I don't really like, queer seems so belittling, lesbian has a harshness to it, gay I don't mind because it always brings to mind cheerfulness because when I was young if you were referred to as gay it meant you were happy and outgoing (Mom, lines 723-726).

To my mother, the term queer is negative. She notes that the term queer has always been used to describe something that was off, not normal, and as such she does not like to use the term to describe her son. The difference shows the constructed meaning of language, and the reality that meaning; language and culture can shift and change over time.

Another term that holds significance in the conversations, is the term 'lifestyle'. To me the term 'lifestyle' is used in place of 'sexual orientation' to show a belief that my sexual orientation is chosen. I choose my lifestyle, as in how I live, what I wear, where I work, whom I befriend, but I do not choose my sexual orientation. My mom, in conversation stated, "I am very open about your lifestyle...not lifestyle...I know that annoys you...but your...you know what I mean..." (Mom, line 764-765). Although my mother may have stated the word innocently, the meaning behind it and the implications of it are not innocuous.

### **A Process**

The narratives illustrated that there is a process to coming out and a process to accepting a queer child. A child may know about their attraction to others of the same

sex, or may know certain aspects of their queer identity from a very young age but it may not be until much later that they actually tell others of those feelings; “I have known ever since I was little, ever since I was a small kid” (Jared, line-130). Anderson (1995) notes queer youth often go through a number of phases in coming to terms with their queer identity. He notes that queer youth may be “aware of feelings of differences, sometimes dating back to early childhood” (Anderson, 1995, p.23). This is the first step in many versions of ‘coming out models’, which have already been covered and highlighted. Disclosure to non-queer peers and family members of one’s queer identity, a coming out event, is often considered the final stage (Anderson, 1995). To me Christmas Day was that day; it “was a rebirth...a moment in time when I finally told the truth” (Jared, lines 522-523). It is important to note that not all queers will go through all of the stages. As mentioned in the literature, coming out is a process, for myself the process took about 14 years, and could be arguably stated to be continuing. Although I am an out and proud queer man, I undoubtedly hold deposits of internalized homophobia (such as stereotypes about queers, gendered beliefs) within my being and it could be argued that only until I let go of these will I actually be free from the closet that has entrapped me.

Parents may also go through a process, rather than just accepting the queer reality if their children (Bain, 2000). A parent may suspect that their child is queer, but when that suspicion becomes a reality their world may turn in on itself:

It was probably the hardest thing I ...well no...it was the hardest thing that I have ever had to go through...it really felt as if I was losing my baby. (there are tears on my mothers face and her eyes are glossy) It was like you were dying. My baby was far from me...and was beginning not to even...to even know him (there is a long pause in the conversation...silence...uncomfortable) (Mom, lines 514-519).

The process of going from non-acceptance or tolerance of a member's queer identity to acceptance and pride is challenging for a family. As has been outlined by Griffen, Wirth and Wirth (1986), this progressive experience involves looking at one's own feelings, becoming aware of one's prejudices and wanting to change them and becoming aware of a family member's pain, thereby resulting in new understanding and pride.

In the study by Griffen, Wirth and Wirth (1986) results found that in order for the process of acceptance to begin, feelings needed to be explored. These included a sense of grief, anger, sadness, loneliness, guilt, failure and shame (Griffen et al, 1986). Many of these feelings are related to the misconceptions that parents have about queerness. In addition, parents may question if they had been the cause of their child's queer identity. My mother notes, "What did I do wrong? Did I cause this? What did I do to make you this way?" (Mom, lines 471-472). Furthermore, parents may express grief at thinking that their child was not going to have children or get married; "I will never have grandchildren from you, you will never get married" (Mom, lines 493-494). In addition, sadness was a result of the fear that their child would experience hardships due to their sexual orientation.

A parent's awareness of child's pain becomes possible when parents deal with their own hurt feelings. The parents are feeling pain also and must deal with that pain before they can concentrate on their child's pain. This pain is apparent when my mother states, "...there were times when I was angry, like ...why are you doing this to us....just be like you were before....why are you being so selfish. That was a big emotion for me at that moment...I thought you were only thinking about yourself" (Mom, lines 504-507). Michelangelo Signorile (1996) states,

[parents] may be stunned and even grief stricken and may react with intense sadness, anger, revulsion and fear...They will have to get over the initial shock and mourn the loss of the 'old you', before they can accept the new you (p.89).

Griffen et al (1986) further note,

[h]owever, when parents had dealt with some of their pain, this allowed them to understand their child's needs and wants; moreover, a comfortable and familiar relationship was restored (pp.88-89).

Griffen et al (1986) demonstrated that as perceptions changed and as parents became aware of their child's courage, they found a new sense of pride. One could say that the real work is done when parents realize that it is society, which is flawed and imbued with stereotypes, myths, and not their children (Griffen, C., Wirth, M. & Wirth, A., 1986). Despite these existing/ or past myths and misconceptions people *are* becoming educated and *are* educating others. Parents may have to educate themselves, be educated, take time, ponder, pray, or talk with others before they can begin to accept their children's 'new' identity. My mom notes, "it was time to let go of the boy we had raised and accept the man you had become, accept the changes, lifestyle, allow you to be independent and believe me it was a struggle to let go and it didn't happen overnight it is a step by step process and is still going on" (Mom , lines 620-623). This may also be an emotional and trying time for parents, as they have to come to terms with a new understanding of their child. Parents may take time in accepting their child's identity and may even take longer in becoming an ally, who actively participates in their child's community. Unfortunately some parents may be so indoctrinated by societal beliefs that they can never accept their queer child; there are times when oppression wins.

To fully address the range of issues and individuals that are affected by queer issues, we must broaden our scope of who/what is involved and to what extent. It is through interviews, personal accounts and narratives where we learn the most about the human condition and the human experience; we are not the experts, our clients are; they are the ones that have lived their experience and therefore have the most to offer about their reality. (Simon and Whitfeild, 2000). “Anecdotal data continues to point out how hard it is for parents to accept a lesbian or gay child and that it is risky for children to make their sexual orientation known to their parents” (Tully, 2000. p.123). It is this reality that we must address; we can do much to lessen the effects or negative perceptions of this coming out phase. Tully (2000) notes, “ the primary focus of social research is to enhance human well-being. (p.232)” These truths allows us, as a society, to comprehend that to help construct a non-oppressive environment for queers we must begin working at the foundations. It is oppressive personal and societal beliefs that should be the focus, not just doing after-the-fact work with queers and their families. They may have already suffered needlessly. To accomplish this we must, educate concerning queer issues, provide and encourage visibility of queer issues and lives, continually fight for the acceptance and creation of research that seeks to give a forum to queer voices and experiences.

## Chapter 7 - Conclusion: What we learned

### Personally

*It was interesting to me to do this paper; more precisely it was interesting to analyze the conversation with my mother. I have, for the last few years, felt as if that part of my life was over, that the hurt of my coming out experience had ended, that those wounds had healed. Talking to my mother exposed that there was still pain associated with this issue. I have learned that the painful experiences and family tension that followed my coming out has affected me to a greater degree than I had believed.*

*The time had been horrible. The things my mother had said to me had been horrible. The absence of support had been horrible and all my pain and anger had been directed at my mother. I thought that those feelings were gone, but even after 8 years they were retained in some form – maybe milder and etched with age, but still apparent. Eight years ago I never really expected that my mother and my relationship would ever really be the same; that we would never really be comfortable around each other. Fortunately, over time, my mother became more educated on queer issues, and moved from denial, to tolerance to acceptance. Today, you may even say that she is an ally in her own way. She may not belong to PFLAG or march in the gay pride celebrations, but she does speak openly about her experiences, she talks to other parents who are going through similar things that we went through, and she speaks with pride when she utters my name and my partner's name. Even though her beliefs concerning queers and her attitudes concerning me have turned almost 180 degrees, my life is still marked by the horrendous pain of those few months. Some may say that I am pitying myself or doting on my pain, but one has to realize that my family is and was extremely close, and then to*

*be denied that sense of comfort and security leaves a scar. This is what I have learned, anything that I can do, even if it is just to share my and my mother's story, to alleviate some of the pain or even prevent that pain, is the least I can do; this is just one way that I can contribute.*

### **Professionally**

Queer youth grow up within a society (media, family, religion, school, etc) which denies their identity; it is our responsibility as professionals to make their reality as comfortable as possible, by transforming the current oppressive institutions and systems. It is our job to empower these individuals to best cope with their situations, and it also our responsibility to empower society, through education, awareness and advocacy, to overcome the homophobic and heterosexist practices, ideologies and institutions that govern our society. It is also important for professionals to become aware of queer realities. Tully (2000) notes that this reality can include:

- a lack of easily accessible, adequate and unbiased materials from which to determine the realities of a queer lifestyle.
- a deficiency in the number of appropriate adult role models in life, books, or the media.
- inadequate resources to effectively cope with racial and ethnic diversity coupled with sexual identity.
- an overabundance of misinformation, myths and stereotypes about queers.
- a scarcity of adequate social support structures at the micro, mezzo and macro levels.
- incongruity between the non-gay norm and internal gay feeling actions
- feelings of stigmatization, isolation, and anomie; the development of defense mechanisms to deal with such feelings (which can be negative[drugs, alcohol] or positive).
- institutional sanctioned/ based oppression (religion, family, government, schools).

Oppression has many faces and has many victims. Oppression also has many actors, peoples and institutions that perpetuate oppression for their own benefit, be it

financial, political or individual. The oppression of queer sexualities has many such actors who are participating in oppression in an active and/or passive manner. There are those individuals or institutions whom are actively seeking to oppress queers. There are those, however, who are perpetuating oppression of queers in a passive manner. By not understanding the existence of homophobia and the sites in which it is located, people passively perpetuate it by not fighting against it.

Homophobia and heterosexism have had an impact on North American communities. The intolerance and ignorance that are perpetuated by homophobia and heterosexism have created communities that do not provide an arena where queer sexualities can be expressed. They have artificially constructed the notion that community members are homogenous by silencing 'deviants' from the norm. This has created communities that are un-accepting of difference. Not only are queer sexual orientations 'othered', it also provides fertile ground for the othering of other minority groups; homogeneity can also exclude differences in race, class, ethnicity, etc.

Professionals can combat this othering approach by incorporating a non-heterosexist approach to their practice. Brotman and Ryan (2001) note:

- Validate all relationship models
- Don't assume sexual orientation
- Be inclusive with all youth
- Heterosexuality does not guarantee happiness, homosexuality does not guarantee sadness
- Find the problem, don't assume it's homosexuality
- Don't brush off homophobia
- One homosexual experience doesn't make a homosexual and one heterosexual experience doesn't make a heterosexual
- Accompany, don't diagnose
- Tolerance or acceptance

Homophobic and heterosexist communities are spawned by a multitude of factors including legislation, religious beliefs, familial thought processes, and cultural beliefs, and as such, professionals have to confront all of these entities through education, awareness, understanding, and vigilance. Communities have to recognize that the queer population is not an 'invisible' minority that can be ignored but rather a dynamic and important part of the community.

We as professionals must also be acutely aware that adolescence and childhood is a time of significant physical, emotional and cognitive changes. It is a confusing time where some youth may need support to navigate through the tumultuous time and events of this stage (D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001; Appleby & Anastas, 1998). This time is especially stressful for queer youth as they are unable to express their emotions, confusions, feelings, physical desires, etc without the fears of negative consequences, such as social isolation, abandonment, or violence (Unks, 1995; Tully, 2000). This is also especially important for professionals, as this group of youth may have no one to express their truth to – unlike other oppressed groups queer youth cannot rely on family or even friends to encourage, support and understand them. Brotman and Ryan (2001) note that there are benefits to health for coming out, these being:

- Improved self esteem, self acceptance and self-affirmation
- Reduced risk of physical and mental health problems, substance abuse and addictions, suicide and engagement in risky behaviors
- Building relationships based on honesty
- Increased likelihood of finding friends, community, belonging
- Increased personal advocacy for adapted treatment, demand to have needs met
- Appropriate and timely use of health services.

In order to create bridges of acceptance, inclusion for queers, and arenas for disclosure, Grossman (1997) has indicated that we, as a society, must acknowledge four basic assumptions:

1. Homosexuality is a normal variation in both sexual orientation and sexual behavior; 2. Adolescent homosexuality is not a phase leading to adult heterosexuality; 3. Sexual orientation is established during early childhood (or before), and attempts to change sexual orientation are unscientific, unjustified, unethical, and psychologically scarring; and 4. Homophobia...like other forms of prejudice...is a devastating and insidious condition which closes off life options and stifles the spirit (p.54).

The narratives within the body of this paper also highlight the need for greater resources for parents and children struggling with queer issues. The narratives illustrate that a child's coming out or queer identity not only affects the child, but also can greatly affect people in that child's life. There are hundreds of organizations that are focused on queer issues and individuals, which parents and children can access, such as PFLAG, Gay and Lesbian Community Services, Parent Groups, Project 10, Rainbow Coalitions. However, these resources are usually only available to those individuals who are located in larger metropolitan areas. There are also internet resources, bookstores and some religious organizations (such as Quaker Lesbian and Gay People and their Supporters, Metropolitan Community Churches, and Unitarian Universalists). We as professionals must also continue to urge for the development and funding of resources that deal with queer issues. We need public libraries to stock books that deal with queer issues, we need schools to have resources to deal with queer individuals, and we need to argue and urge the importance of queer issue education for professionals, students, government officials, and all others ( a dream I know, but still a necessity).

We must also support and encourage all to use their voice to express the trials and oppression that they have lived through. Alternative research methods such as autoethnography provide a mechanism for representing and exploring deeply personal experiences, emotional stories, and for making the author a visible presence in the text (Coffey, 2002). This form of research can be used to connect to individuals; to let others see their experiences with a body of academic text that is understandable and accessible. Ellis and Bochner (2000) note that autoethnography can be a way “to say something meaningful and attract a wide audience” (p. 761). It is also a method where oppressed people can express their experiences and identity using their own voice and their own language; it is a method which can be used to take back oppressed voices from the grip of traditional heterosexist, androcentric, racist forms of research that currently dominate social research.

By embracing truths such as these, people (queer youth, family members of queer youth, professionals, and all else) can realize a conceptual framework for overcoming societal fear, misconception, misinformation, stigmatization, and discrimination against queer people. Through education, policy revision, awareness campaigns, support networks, and personal voice we can all contribute to creating an environment that nurtures and supports all identities and all people; to hopefully overcome the homophobic and heterosexist practices, ideologies and institutions that currently govern our society.

*Fortunately, some stories do end happily. There are some days that I am pained by the blue blanket that I am supposed to wear. There are still some days when I hide my pink being; where I open the door to the closet and put one foot in. I am an out and proud gay man, but I am still a queer man in the real world of oppression and violence. Sometimes my pink being has to be tinged blue to be safe. I one day hope that my children will not have to live in a world that is challenged by societal rules which seek to 'normalize' all; where difference is not tolerated. I hope that one day my children will be able to live life without thought of persecution because of the people they choose to love, or the color they choose to wear. Although I do not know that this day will come; I hope and I pray for it. I do not know to whom I pray, but I know that when I pass from this world I will be accepted into the next with love, praise, and complete acceptance; pink will surround me and embrace me like that long forgotten womb. Everything that I will experience will be soothing, as if it were built and designed especially for me.*

## Consent Form

I agree to take part in the interview, which forms part of the research study on the realities of queer people conducted by my son Jared Van Somer. The proposed research project aims to generate understanding about the realities of being a queer youth through an exploration of the experiences of a queer male and his mother. I understand that I will be participating in a series of interviews with my son Jared in which we will discuss experiences related to Jared's identity including periods/events/dates that have been identified by Jared and myself as being significant. The purpose of this study and the potential benefits and risks to participation have been adequately explained to me.

In agreeing to participate, I understand that:

- I will not be penalized in any way if I do not take part in this research;
- My involvement is entirely voluntary;
- I agree to have the interview, of which I am a part, tape recorded and I have the right to speak off the record;
- I may withdraw from the research at any moment and ask that my portion of the interview be excluded from the research;
- Due to my relationship to the researcher (and the nature of the research), my identity will be known and it and my narratives/experiences will become part of the public domain;
- I understand that my narratives and experiences will be a part of a thesis that will be read and marked by various individuals;
- If I wish, I may contact an objective outside person, Shari Brotman (514 398-7054), if I need to. I understand that she will be able to furnish me with resources/services related to information that I may disclose during the interview;
- At the end of this study I will receive a copy.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

**MCGILL UNIVERSITY  
RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD-II**

**Ethical Considerations of Proposed Research Involving Humans**

**Title of Project: Out of the Pink: The Realities of Being Queer from the Perspectives of a Mother and a Son**

Applicant's Name: Jared Van Somer  
Dept: Social Work

Phone#: 514 524 3276  
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Status: Faculty \_\_\_\_ Postdoctoral Fellow \_\_\_\_ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_  
Ph.D. Student \_\_\_\_ Master's Student \_Yes\_\_ Undergraduate \_\_\_\_

Type of Research: Faculty Research \_\_\_\_ Thesis Yes\_\_

Honours Thesis \_\_\_\_ Independent Study Project \_\_\_\_

Course Assignment (specify course #)\_\_\_\_\_  
Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Applicant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty Supervisor (if applicable): Shari Brotman  
Email: shari.brotman@staff.mcgill.ca

Faculty Supervisor Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Other Researchers Involved: Not Applicable**

**List all funding sources for this project and project titles (if different from the above). Indicate the Principal Investigator of the award if not yourself: Not Applicable**

### **1. Briefly describe the research topic.**

The proposed research project aims to generate understanding about the realities of being a queer youth through an exploration of the experiences of a queer male and his mother using an autoethnographic method. Through an exploration of my experiences and my mother's experiences I want to further the understanding of the needs and realities of queer youth and their parents; although the experiences within the research will be mine and my mother's, the experiences that we have lived through (the coming out experience, generational and religious difference, lack of understanding by each party) have been lived by many and will be lived by many. With this research I hope to, by looking at the individual experience (mine and my mothers), allow others (parents of queers, future parents of queers, out queers, not out queers) to better understand and relate to queer individuals and queer life.

Alternative forms of representation have been used particularly well in representing deeply personal events, emotive voices and stories, and for making the author a visible presence in the text. They have also been especially relevant in the representation of the self. Such examples of representation have been used to relate the experience of illness (Paget, 1993; Tillman-Healey, 1996) and to explore personal relationships and experiences (Ellis and Bochner, 1992; Ronai, 1996). These personal autobiographical narratives can be located within the genre of autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autobiographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000. p.739).

The proposed study will combine the autoethnographic methodology with the life history approach (Brotman & Kranjou, 1999) as a tool. The life history method is found within the tradition of interpretive biography that also includes individual biography and oral history methods. In a biographical study the writer can tell the individuals story using various sources, such as the individual's own narrative, archival documents, and/or historic documents. A researcher using the life history approach, questions on special or major life events and pays special attention to thematic interpretations of these events and the way they are shaped by social context (Brotman & Kranjou, 1999). I want to explore a queer individuals reality in relation to the parent's reality; looking at differing experiences of the same events or periods of life (such as the coming out of a queer child). To uncover these experiences/narratives I will be partaking in a dialogue with my mother, using a timeline with dates/time periods that I have highlighted as being relevant, as a source of reference, so that we can explore what each of these periods/events/dates

meant to us. I will begin the dialogue with us going over the timeline so that my mother can also highlight key periods/dates or events that she sees as relevant and in need of discussion/exploration.

**2. Who will the participants be?**

A dialogical interview will be conducted with two participants, my mother and I.

*3. How will participants be recruited? (Attach copies of all written or spoken material that will be used in recruiting subjects, such as newspaper ads, posted notices, verbal announcements.)*

***Recruitment was unnecessary as my mother volunteered for the research project.***

*4. How will organizational/community/governmental permission be obtained (if applicable)?*

***Not applicable.***

*5. How will data be collected, i.e., what will the participants be asked to do?*

***The main body of data will be acquired using an autoethnographic method (Ellis & Bochner, 1998) in order to uncover a personal narrative of being a queer individual (see further information in Description of Research Topic section). The experiences/narrative of the mother will be collected using interviews guided by the life history approach (see Description of Research Topic section). These interviews will be conducted in an informal setting, will be dialogical in nature between mother and son, and will focus on relevant themes. A loose interview guide will be used to ensure that***

*all relevant areas will be covered; the interview guide will be based upon a timeline of relevant dates/events/periods in the life of the researcher. The interviews will be tape recorded and then transcribed.*

6. Does the study pose any risks to participants? If so, please state why these are necessary and explain how you plan to deal with them.

***Physical and Mental Stress:***

*The benefits and risks have already been discussed both from the point of view of myself and my mother. The benefits and risks will also be explained to my mother before commencing the dialogue. Although the only direct benefits may be a greater understanding of researcher and participant (son and mother) and therapeutic in nature, it is felt that the information (narratives and experiences) will add to a body of knowledge that will further the understanding of queer people and their realities (including their familial reality). Risks associated with participation include the expression of difficult feelings, the expression of difficult shared experiences between researcher and participant (such as the coming out experience), exposure of a vulnerable self, and maybe feelings of shame or regret on part of researcher and participant. It is also noted that due to the nature of the subject and the relationship of researcher and participant, that emotional stresses and difficulties may arise. Due to these potential emotional stresses an outside person, Shari Brotman, will be available for my mother. This will allow my mother to discuss any issues that she may not want to discuss with me with an objective individual. This will allow my mother the*

*opportunity to express her difficulties, her potential discomfort, or any potential issues. Shari will be able to furnish my mother with further resources/services that may be needed due to participation. It must also be noted that the interviews will be conducted in my mother's home where she has supports (husband, daughter, friends, family).*

*7. Does this study involve deception? If so, please state why this is necessary and explain how you plan to deal with potential negative effects (e.g., by post-experimental debriefing).*

*My mother and I will have the opportunity to fully discuss the process and goals of the research. My mother asked that her narrative also be told as she understands/has lived the experiences of being the parent of a queer individual. Due to this fact, my mother and I have thoroughly discussed the research project and the goals of that project, and therefore the study is free of any deception.*

*8. How will you document informed consent to participate in the study? (Attach written informed consent form. If written consent is not possible, how will you document verbal consent? If it is not possible to obtain informed consent, explain why this is the case.)*

*The participant will read and sign a consent form (see Appendix).*

*9. How will participants be informed of their right to withdraw at any time?*

*Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and consent can be withdrawn at any time. Participants also have the right to speak off the record. This information is*

*included in the consent form. As well, the participants will verbally be informed of their right to withdraw prior to the beginning of the interview.*

*10. How will subject/data anonymity and confidentiality be maintained?*

*Due to the relationship of the participants in the study, the identity of the mother will be known. The mother is keenly interested in participating in this study and recognizes that her identity and her narrative will be in the public domain.*

**11. Please comment on any other potential ethical concerns that may arise in the course of the research. If the proposed research involves testing subjects in situations where particular problems may arise, please explain how researchers will be trained to handle matters in a sensitive and professional way.**

See potential risks section.

## Interview Guide

**Interview based on a dialogue that will cover the following timeline. Although the interview will be dialogical in form, certain questions will be posed regarding time periods/dates/events and the meanings that surround them. These will be:**

### Timeline to be covered

1977 – Birth of Jared

- Expectations, dreams, wishes for Jared?

Jared's Youth

- Did you ever question my demeanor? Did you ever think that I may be gay? How did you come to those conclusions?

High school – Specifically 1993

- How did you (mother) interpret my change in dress during this time period? What did you think about this?

September 1995 – Jared leaves for University in Vancouver

- What were your reactions to my changing dress, club life, friends (queer friends)? How did this make you feel? What did you think about this?

Dec 25<sup>th</sup> 1995 – Jared comes out

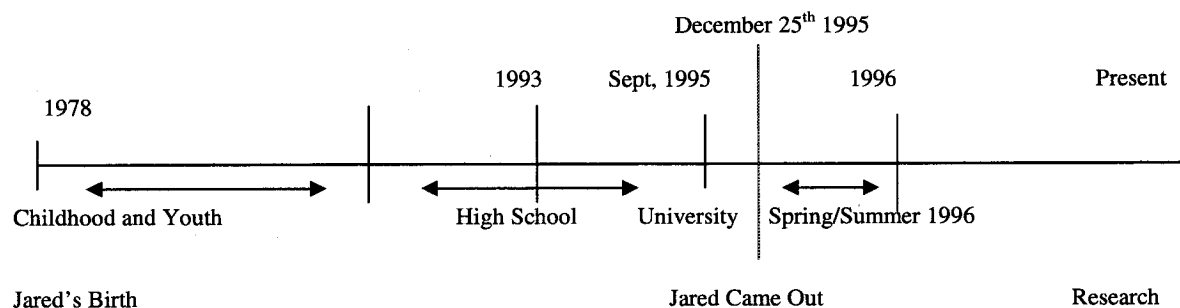
- Can you remember this day? Can you describe it to me? How did you feel at this event? What did you think? How did you interpret it?

Dec – June 1995 - 6 months following

- Your concerns, worries, changing attitudes? How were you coping? What were you feeling/thinking?

June 1995 – present

- Changing attitudes? What has changed over the years?



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