

A Different Life

"I am going to ask to you to put aside something that is very important to you. What I am asking you to put aside momentarily are your memories. I am asking you to suspend your reality and call upon the wonderful gift of imagination. Your imagination is the key instrument in this exercise of guided fantasy. We will be taking a chronological journey through your mind's eye of what your life might have been if you were gay. You may experience a variety of feelings as you take this tour. Allow yourself to examine your feelings, but try to not let your feelings distract you from participating in this exercise. Please realize that my intent is not to manipulate your feelings or to change who you are. The goal is to help you to understand some of the feelings and experiences that someone who is lesbian, gay or bisexual might feel. The experiences that I am about to take you through are not universal for lesbian, gay or bisexual people, but some of the themes presented are somewhat common.

"On the six cards I have handed out to you, please write a name, word or phrase, which fits the following five categories. Please use a separate card for each category.

1. A person from your childhood with whom you shared secrets
2. The names of your best friends in grade school
3. A small valued material possession from your early teenage years
4. Your favorite place
5. A person who is very close to you
6. A goal or dream

"As you undertake this imaginary journey, keep looking at the cards in your hand and consider the personal meaning of what you have written. Imagine how you would feel if any or all of these things were suddenly no longer there for you.

"Let's go back to your early childhood. Choose an age at which you have your earliest consistent memories. Perhaps you'll be four, or five, or six. You are sitting in front of a television set watching a show. One of the characters, Chris, is a person of about your age who is the same gender as you. This character is your favorite and one of the main reasons that you watch this particular show. You feel drawn to Chris. You would like to be Chris's best friend. You turn to someone that you could always share secrets with and say, "I love Chris."

"That person makes a face at you and says, "That's disgusting! People shouldn't feel that way." You are confused and scared and ashamed. Tear up the card with the name of the person with whom you shared secrets. You no longer feel that you can talk about your innermost feelings to this person.

"You are now eleven years old and in grade school. Your teacher takes you and your classmates to the lavatories. As always, the teacher stays right outside the door and tells everyone to hurry up. You wonder why you and your classmates are always being rushed out of the bathroom. Of course, no one really has to go to the bathroom, so you and your friends get together and talk about the other people in your class. Someone starts talking about how cute another classmate of the opposite gender is. Everyone else agrees that this classmate is very good looking and seems to be very interested in this classmate.

"You, however, are not interested. You feel uncomfortable and out of place. Someone in the group laughs a little too loud and the teacher rushes in to see what's going on. The discussion ends and you head back to the classroom feeling alone and isolated. You know that you're different from your friends and you feel like no one will understand. You don't understand your feelings and you want to talk about them, but you know you can't. Tear up the card with the names of your best friends, you no longer feel as close to them as you once did.

You're now fourteen. You've been looking forward to entering high school. You think that things will be different, that you'll make lots of new friends, and that you won't feel so isolated anymore. You avoid looking too closely at the classmates to whom you're attracted. You don't want them to call you the words that you've been hearing for so long: fag, queer, dyke, lesbo. You don't want people to think that you are gay. You wish there was an older gay person that you could talk to, someone who understands what it all means. But you don't know any positive role models who are openly gay.

"And you're not comfortable talking about what you're feeling to anyone else, because all you've ever heard about gays from your parents, your friends, and religious leaders in the community is how weird they are, and that they want to molest you. You start to wonder if growing up gay means a life of misery. All the gay people you've ever seen were on television, and they were always villains or being killed. You remember one movie in which a bunch of criminals take over a subway car. One of the passengers is obviously gay and gets abused for it. Later on in the movie, he gets killed and no one really seems to care. You don't know what you are, but you know you can't be gay. You tell yourself that it's just a phase and that you'll soon grow out of it. Deep down, though, you're terrified that it really isn't a phase, that this is who you are.

"One day, while in line for lunch, you forget yourself and stare at someone who you find very attractive. Someone sees you looking and calls you a "queer." It's starting over again: the names, the hatred, and the feelings of worthlessness. Later you go back to your locker and find that someone broke into it and threw ketchup all over your books. You find a note saying, "All queers should die." One of your most prized possessions that you had kept in your locker was stolen. You feel like the whole world hates you and you wonder why this had to happen to you. You feel so alone and isolated, and you start to wonder if suicide is the answer to stop the pain. Tear up the card with your prized possession on it; it is gone forever.

"You're now eighteen. After years of hoping, praying, wishing, and struggling, you've come to realize that you really are gay. It's not just a phase. It's not something that you chose. It's just who you are. You've just met someone named Terry who is like you. This person is open and seems happy about being gay. You talk with Terry about your feelings and innermost desires. Finally, you've met someone who understands, someone who knows that you're not evil nor sick nor twisted.

"You feel attracted to Terry and you want to get to know Terry better. There's a place that you love to go to, so you suggest that you and Terry meet there later. You arrive early and wait with excitement and anticipation this is your first real date. Terry arrives and you want to hug Terry. You start to when you notice a look of panic on Terry's face. You realize that other people are around and that they are looking at you and Terry suspiciously. You and Terry both feel very awkward and uncomfortable, and you quickly decide to leave. Tear up the card with the name of your favorite place, you no longer feel comfortable here.

"You are twenty-one years of age today. Someone who is very close to you has decided to treat you to dinner to celebrate your birthday. Dinner was wonderful, the food was great, the atmosphere was comfortable, and you both did some reminiscing about the past. You both laughed a lot and you have come to realize how important this person is to you, and you no longer want to keep a part of your life a secret from him or her. You've decided that the first chance you get tonight; you are going to tell this person that you are gay.

"Soon the opportunity presents itself. You start out telling this person how important he or she is to you and that there is something that you have wanted to tell him or her for a long time. Finally, you say it, "I'm gay."

"The person looks back at you for a second and says nothing. He or she finally says "Well, that's okay. You're still my friend," but something seems different now. There's an awkward silence and this person obviously feels uncomfortable. You try and break the tension with a joke, but it doesn't work. This person is looking at you as if you were a total stranger, and you feel as if a bond has been broken. Tear up the card with the name of the person who is close to you.

You have graduated college and you are ready to enter the real world. You've just been hired for a job that you're very excited about. You start immediately. You feel pretty good about yourself. You've made it through all the tough times, yet you have a healthy outlook on whom you are and what you can accomplish.

"You are now proud of being gay. Your pride comes not solely by virtue of your sexuality, but also from the fact that you are a survivor in the wake of incredible oppression and prejudice. You've been able to unlearn many of the lies and distortions about what it means to be gay. You think about your goals and dreams and you know you'll someday be able to achieve them.

"Later that evening, you meet some friends at your favorite club. You want to celebrate your good fortune. You all have a few drinks and a few laughs. You decide to leave a little earlier than everyone else because you want to be ready for your new job tomorrow morning. You say goodbye to everyone and walk through the parking lot. Three men step out of a nearby car and approach you. They have baseball bats. One of them says, "Say goodbye, queer bait" and swings his bat at your head. The others join in. Throw away the card with your hopes and dreams."

Facilitate a discussion with the class regarding this exercise.