

INTRODUCTION

For years, I felt desperately alone as I allowed the church and dogmatic opinions surrounding me to be my guides. This predisposed me for a destructive course that resulted in a protracted period of anguish and crippling self-loathing. My ultimate admission to being gay—and finally accepting it—freed me from the injurious effects of being immersed in an evangelical, gay-intolerant environment.

If you or someone you love is gay, let me assure you that you are not alone. You are in the company of millions who are all part of God's creation and as much loved as your straight counterparts.

The last thing I ever saw myself doing was writing a book. However, I felt compelled to do so with the intent that my experiences might bring hope to anyone who is in a lightless tunnel. I have attempted to be inoffensive, PG-rated (one section is probably closer to an R rating), frank, and humorous. The hands that wrote this are now punctuated with some wrinkles and creases—all representing the years I have been blessed to live. I am grateful for each one and view them with a smile.

While the primary focus of this writing pertains to sexuality, I have included other significant facets of my life history that are unrelated or tangential to the topic—yet they are all pieces of the puzzle. My overarching goal was to accurately chronicle who I am as a human being and to highlight the drivers that have steered my life course. This journey, led by the tip of my pen, has taken me through a “countryside” that I now view with a much wider lens than the one with which I was equipped when most of life was in front of me. Having this expanded view has given me a more objective ability to conduct a thorough self-study. This autobiography, *Easing Out: Accepting My Gay Self*, is the result.

Chapter 1

WAS I BORN GAY?

This question has haunted me my entire journey through life (at least the portion following puberty), and I am convinced the answer is a resounding yes. I think most of the unbiased scientific community agrees with my conclusion, even though the evangelical element in which I was raised does not.

Chapter 2

BACKGROUND SNAPSHOT

My life began in the summer of 1948, when my parents decided they wanted to make a baby. They already had one kid and five years had passed since my brother was born. You could say their decision to add me to the household was not rushed. Thus, I was well planned and conceived. I remained a content fetus, happily swimming around in my mother's amniotic pool until the spring of 1949 when the dam broke. And out I came—the first time, that is.

I have no memory of my entry into this world, yet my birth certificate is proof the event occurred when I was told it did. It was during a time when scads of babies were littering hospital maternity wards. They called us baby boomers. Back then, there was an instruction book for raising babies; Dr. Benjamin Spock wrote it. I would later discover I was born with a sexual “preference” for other boys. There was no instruction book for that, and we were labeled queers. It is necessary for me to explain why my use of the word preference is not really accurate. Here is why. If I am offered a choice of vanilla or chocolate ice cream, I strongly prefer vanilla, although I will eat and enjoy chocolate. The same principle of preference didn't apply when it came to sex. My “choice” was assigned and that assignment was purely same-sex. I figured out early on that I had minimal sexual attraction to girls; however, it took many years for me to come to grips with the reality of it.

My Town

I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, which was characteristically southern—complete with requisite drawls, hominy grits swimming in butter, and Spanish moss dripping from the trees. The St. Johns River flows right through the heart of the city, which lies about fifteen miles west of the Atlantic Ocean in the northeastern corner of the state. Jacksonville was a “muscular” city, as many residents derived their livelihoods from shipbuilding, stevedoring, fishing, aircraft mechanics (US Navy), and other blue-collar-related jobs. The city lies a scant few miles to the south of Georgia and, from an ideological

perspective, has typically identified more with Georgia than with most of Florida. Not surprisingly, “Jax,” as the locals call it, was a paragon of conservatism and resistance to social change. Even so, it was a sweet place to grow up, where a small-town flavor persisted long after the city was no longer so small. Weekend attire (at least in the part of town where we lived) was primarily composed of T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops, except when chilly weather demanded flannel shirts and jeans. It was a mellow kind of place which corresponded to my own relatively easygoing personality.

Summers in Jacksonville were hot—really hot. In fact, the “swelterness factor” was magnified when I was a kid because air conditioning was not yet commonplace in most middle-class homes—including ours. Attic fans, ceiling fans, and window fans did little to mitigate the heat; however, these devices did at least create an electrically-powered breeze that moved the heat around. At night, we slept with the windows wide open, with no concerns of an intruder coming into the house (we were too hot to care). I recollect the sultry night air permeating every pore of my body as I lay in bed, acutely aware of distinct sounds and wafting smells I will forever associate with childhood and hot nights. Most prominently emblazoned in that reminiscence were the occasional dissipating wails of ships’ horns in the distance, muted roars of lions at the nearby zoo, the aroma of coffee beans roasting from the downtown Maxwell House plant, and the perfumed pungency of night-blooming jasmine. The sweet smells were reflective of growing up during a sweet time.

Our neighborhood was close-knit, “lily-white,” and composed mostly of gospel-music-loving, churchgoing folks who knew and cared about each other—that was the norm back in those days. While our particular neighborhood was understated middle class, the general area of town where we lived encompassed sections where folks had less and were forced to scrape for a living. Many considered our part of town to be on the wrong side of the St. Johns River, although in my estimation, growing up where I did was a huge blessing. The attitudes and values were much like what existed in the fictional town of Mayberry from Andy Griffith fame. We even had our own version of “Aunt Bee,” as well as a neighborhood “drunk” who added “interest” to our sheltered environment.

In my estimation, I was born with all the advantages. I was gifted with wonderful parents who loved each other, and that love extended to my brother and me in the form of true devotion, appropriate discipline, and emotional support. My dad was employed in the insurance industry, and Mom chose to assume a stay-at-home role. She and my dad agreed this arrangement was the best way to ensure my brother and I didn’t end up as deviants. The Vicarson household was much like the Cleavers from *Leave It to Beaver* TV fame, without the country club. The church assumed that role and it was indeed central to our lives.

We were not wealthy. Even so, I didn’t understand how good we had it until after I graduated from college, and realized that only a minority of graduates in my high school class had the same opportunity. It was clear most of my classmates were not able to further their formal education due to family economics or because their parents didn’t steer them in that direction. My parents provided the financial access, and instilled within

me the expectation—and desire—to obtain a four-year college degree. Regardless as to whether or not college is attended, I recognize that family tone sets the stage for a child's ability to succeed in life and adapt to adversities. I am extremely grateful to my parents for all they did for me, and I frequently expressed that gratitude to them.