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Topic: On the Virtue of Courage

## *My Courage*

My mother said, "I've always known."

This was several years ago, when my mother confronted me about being gay. I felt a familiar sense of panic. At the time, I had a long history of dodging this talk with her. It would have been easy to hang up the phone, or to lie about having something to do — anything to escape the discomfort of the moment. But this day, things were different. My mother knew I was gay, but I was about to let her know something more. In fact, I was about to let myself know something more: I was done with dodging the question. This phone call was my chance. I took a breath. I took a chance on being courageous.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself: I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along" (Goodreads). This certainly has been true throughout my existence. As a child, I had always demonstrated a certain level of bravery, outspokenness and strength. After all, I was born on International Women's Day! When other children tried to bully me, I stood up to them. When I felt my voice wasn't being heard, I spoke out. And whenever there was a contest based on physical abilities, I gave it my best. However, accepting that I was gay was something much more difficult. Perhaps it was because I knew how my mother felt about it. I knew that she believed it was wrong and didn't view it as "normal." That's how most people in my world felt about it, too.

A study conducted by Dr. Evan Goldstein, founder of Bespoke Surgical, found that 35.6% of LGBTQ individuals had a negative experience coming out (Bespoke). I was certainly among them. I figured if I could find a way to pretend to be heterosexual, everything would be

fine. This didn't just include my mom but everyone who I knew who had a problem with homosexuality. It started off with my mom. Then my family and friends. Then with just everyone.

Around the time that I wasn't being truthful about my sexuality, society wasn't very accepting of the gay community. People would still use homophobic terms nonchalantly. And the Marriage Equality Law was something the LGBTQ community could only dream about. The prospect of coming out in this world was grim.

But hiding placed its own pressure on me. I had begun a relationship with someone, and it bothered me to pretend she was my roommate. The larger my lies grew, so did my anxiety. The more homophobic injustice I saw, the more I also grew angry. And when I feel anger towards any type of injustice, it's in my nature to fight for what's right. I just didn't know how to do that without compromising my lie. I knew I needed to change and start somewhere.

At this point, I had a feeling that most people were questioning my sexuality. But I still didn't have the courage to come out. I didn't even know where to start. I felt stuck. Whenever I have difficulty solving a problem or understanding something, I find that reading helps me. In 2010, I wasn't quite sure what help I could find in a bookstore, but I was looking for comfort in a familiar place.

What I found was musician Ricky Martin's autobiography titled *Me*. He'd written the book that year, and he'd also shared with the world that he was gay. I liked his music, but I didn't really know his story. Intrigued by his "coming out" but not expecting to relate to a celebrity, I bought the book. I thought, if anything I'll gain some insight. To my surprise, I gained a lot more than that. Many of the insecurities and fears he faced were similar to

mine. And knowing that someone else had gone through what I was going through brought me a lot of hope.

In Chapter Four of *Me*, he talks about denying his sexuality and how much this was costing him. He says, “the rumors and questions only increased my insecurity and my self-rejection; they reminded me of all the reasons why I was uncomfortable in my own skin. At times, I felt I hated myself” (Martin 140). I understood exactly what he was talking about because I wasn’t dealing with the real problem. I wasn’t choosing to accept my sexuality. It was time to take control of my life. It was time to start building courage.

At first, I simply needed to embrace my sexuality. This required undoing the brainwashing I had experienced as a child. The dictionary definition of brainwashing is “to make people believe only what you want them to believe by continually telling them that it is true and preventing any other information from reaching them” (CambridgeDictionary.org). This closely defines my experience growing up with religion. To be gay meant I was sick, and that I would burn in hell for eternity. But no, I wasn’t sick. And no, I was going to hell. As an adult, I’d come to understand this.

After I was able to undo these beliefs, I started introducing my partner as my girlfriend to strangers or people I hadn’t known for long. Simply introducing myself as a gay person was intimidating at first, but it relieved me of awkwardness and anxiety. I still remember the first time I introduced my partner as my girlfriend. A co-worker had invited me to his house for a cookout. I immediately asked if I could bring my girlfriend. He paused for a moment and answered, “Of course!” I kept doing this, and it became easier with time. I started to build confidence and cared less and less what people were thinking of me. The courage that had been

buried for some time started to lift me up. I was ready to introduce the new and improved, Jessica Gonzalez.

Yet, my work wasn't done. Easing into ownership of my identity was important preparation for the ultimate test: I had to be honest with my mother. Despite all my growth, I still dreaded having this talk with her. There had been certain moments when I could have just said to her, "Mom, I'm gay," but I was afraid to lose my mom and not have her in my life. But my new life as a braver, more confident person had become valuable to me, as well. When she called me that Sunday afternoon several years ago, it was time to truly face my greatest fear.

I answered her call. She asked me how I was, and what I was up to. Our small talk led to some petty argument about something I can't even remember, when out of nowhere she said, "I've always known that you're gay, I've known since you were a little girl." My heart started to race and for a moment I felt like panicking and just denying it. But as I said in my opening statement, I wasn't going to do that anymore. It was time. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and said to her, "Well, I'm glad you've always known...if you always knew, it would have been nice for you to let me know. Maybe you could have helped me." I was annoyed with my mother's delivery, but I also I felt a final brick had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt free. My mom was letting me know that she understood who I was, and that she *loved* me for who I was. This was the one thing I always wanted.

William Shakespeare said it best when he said, "No legacy is so rich as honesty" (Shakespeare Act III, Scene 5). It's hard to understand this at first, but it's true. In order to leave behind a legacy, it has to be real and honest; anything less would not last. And honesty, in turn, requires courage. Since finally opening up to my mom, I've learned that standing up as a

member of the LGBTQ community is a never-ending test of courage and resolve. Almost daily, I find myself taking the test.

Early this year, I did not hesitate to scold a client for using a homophobic slur during a meeting. That's something my former self would have seethed about, but likely not responded to. I would have been too afraid to lose the client or, maybe worse, that my taking sharp offense would put my identity as a gay woman in the spotlight. But I don't fear this spotlight anymore. In fact, I take pride in the work I've done to practice being courageous. What began as a journey of self-acceptance led to a reckoning with my mom, but the journey isn't over and I expect it to lead to even greater things. I'm armed for the challenges. I'm grateful to my former self for taking the necessary stand.

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