

## **If Things Had Been Different**

Good evening. Well, although I don't think that my story is exceptional—I don't have anything particularly unusual to say—I do believe that sharing our personal experiences can help other people who are experiencing a similar situation and help them to see things in a different light, from a different perspective.

So, today we'll hear my story. I was born in 1980 in Patras. A provincial town. I went to school in the 1990s. I don't have that many memories from school...I certainly don't remember any overt or explicit events happening with gay people, and I didn't know anyone who was openly gay.

I only remember one situation with a particular girl who dressed more masculine than most and her hair was somewhat different from the usual; shorter, kind of spiky. And I remember one day she came to school with her hair gelled up in a Mohawk. The principal was very upset and took her into his office and washed her hair. He actually got a basin and made the girl stick her head in it, wash out the product, and then combed her hair down flat. This was a shocking event, I remembered that we kids talked about it for a long time and the girl didn't come back to school for two or three more days. She was scrutinized and punished for her hair, her clothes, everything. We were curious about her but also very awed by the principal's reaction.

There were also two girls in school who we thought were a couple, but no one said it openly. They were very good friends of ours, so no one said "oh, they're gay, they're lesbians." That was a taboo subject, no one wanted to discuss it directly, not even to joke about it or make fun.



Of course it was normal to hear slurs when kids called people names, you know, you'd hear things like faggot-this, dyke-that. But it wasn't necessarily said in a way directed toward a particular person, just kind of, general swearing.

In my family, gay themes were never mentioned at all. My parents didn't swear or use terms like dyke, faggot, whores, none of that. I didn't have any idea of these manner of things, it was as if they were not even real people who existed. And I didn't see them out and about in the town, so it was like they didn't exist at all.

I think my family didn't touch this subject, they didn't talk about it, because it was taboo. And that's how it stayed, hidden. I wasn't exposed to the idea of two women walking hand in hand, or two boys together. I just hadn't seen anything like that.

I don't remember seeing overt examples, I mean, not even in magazines. I only remember one Angelina Jolie movie in which she played a gay girl. I don't remember seeing any other movies with gay characters. And in my family, we didn't have anyone who might be gay either.

Eventually I left Patras for my university studies, I'll tell you about that of course. But I remember the first experience I had in Athens when I came here 15 years ago. I had gone out for a drink with some friends and quite by accident we had gone to a gay bar. See, we decided to sit out in the courtyard, and we were there very early, so there was barely anyone there yet. But after two hours when it started to fill up, we knew something was going on because it was entirely women inside. We were a little surprised, not upset, it was more like this impressive thing, like wow, look at all those women in there!



And at one point when we were outside smoking, or doing something else outside because of course back then we just smoked inside. But anyways, we were sitting outside and I saw two girls who had stepped out of the bar. They were hugging and then they started kissing and my friends and I were so surprised to see it! It was almost like, I don't know, seeing an alien, that's how surprised I was to see them just comfortable hugging and kissing out in the open like that.

We were a bit shocked and we finally put two and two together. We were these five girls from the country who had never seen anything like that before. Leaving the bar, we were a little nervous, thinking that maybe if we passed by this place with all the women they might, attack us? Or grab our asses or something? I mean we really had no idea what to expect.

I felt like this naive villager in the big city and I really didn't know how to deal with a situation like that. But I was intrigued and I liked it, even though I was afraid of being chased down by the women from the gay bar. Overall it was a nice experience: my first time seeing a gay couple so open, so openly out.

I had an experience in my university days, with my best friend actually. She was a very good friend of mine, and we experimented one night. We both had a great time, but it was understood as just an evening of experimentation and it never came up again.

It never came back and, I don't know, it never came back with another girl either. We kind of buried that and left it. We never talked about it. I guess that's where the social stigma exerted its power. How stupid, of course, because we both had such a good time. We could have explored it a little more and I wouldn't have lost so many years.



But, we dropped it. After that friend, I didn't have any more sexual experiences with women. For many years I was with men only; I liked them too at that time. Eventually, I met a man that I fell in love with, we got married, and stayed that way for some years.

We were married for nearly 10 years. And towards the end of that period, around the eighth year, I started hanging out more with gay people. I started to avoid straight couples and groups, too. I started to go out in Gazi, which was at its peak for gay night life at that time and you could see people walking around outside and hugging and kissing, all the gay bars... I had a gay friend, so I started going to bars with her.

I remember very vividly how much fun I had one night for the birthday of a friend. She had invited us all to a gay club. We were out until dawn and I had an amazing time. Amazing. I mean, we danced, I really liked the people, how lively it was compared to the bars I usually went to back then and the straight people I normally socialized with. It was a night of madness, it was. We had had an amazing time, I met new people, and somewhere in the midst of it all I realized that I was more suited to that kind of fun and with these kinds of people. I felt much more comfortable with myself, more confident, so much more beautiful. I felt like I had found a little bit of family.

So I started going out more often with my gay friend and getting to know the scene. I started growing my gay circle and I began to realize that I was very comfortable with women, much more than I thought I would be. I started to notice women's bodies much more. I started to talk more deeply with some girls. I met a girl that I really connected with and that's when I realized clearly that I like women.



The hard thing about all of this was that in the beginning I couldn't share it with anyone because I was married. I was also in a parallel relationship with a woman, and I couldn't talk about that with anyone.

The first people I felt a little bit comfortable sharing with were two female friends of mine, a couple, that I hung out with. I told them about what was going on and my confusion. Because I did like the person I was inside my marriage, and I loved my husband, and I had a nice relationship with him.

The girls were there for me, they helped me a lot in that part, but then it started to get harder because at some point I wanted to share it with other people, straight friends, and I wasn't sure how they would take it. That's where I struggled. It took me time, but I wanted, I needed those people to know about me too. I wanted to share the truth.

So finally I told them. I had different reactions, one friend asked "Well, are you sure you're not making a mistake? Do you want to try something else instead?" That was kind of a weird reaction. The rest of my friends took it pretty calmly. One even said "Well, I had already figured as much and I was wondering how long it would take you to realize."

But for context, we're talking about people living in Athens, where gay issues are mostly accepted. These are all people who have gay people in their social environment, most of them know a thing or two about life and how the world works. It wasn't the end of the world that their friend suddenly is with a girl and is getting divorced about it.

The hard part is with my family, where I still haven't opened up and told the truth. I mean, they don't know that my partner is my partner, they think she is a friend I spend a lot of time with, and that's one of the things that bothers me. I



wish my partner could be embraced by my family the way they embraced my ex-husband and accepted him as part of our family. I wish she could be, let's say on New Year's Day, eating at the table with us as my partner rather than just a friend.

When I was with a man, they were assured that we take care of each other, whereas now I can't share my situation. And they can't accept her into the family the same way. She has to be just a friend who comes to the table. This is one thing that bothers me. I'd like to share it with my family and not have to feel so weird about showing up to holidays with my partner.

Okay, we're slowly working on it and it will happen eventually. But it's hard for everyone, I think, to open up to their family. Especially when we have an older family, with parents living in a province, who have not been exposed to very much.

The professional piece is hard too. Let's say you have the expectation at your job to show up to some kind of lunch with your husband. How are you going to go with your husband if you don't have one, if you have a wife? How easily will your co-workers accept it? And how relaxed will you be? How comfortable will you be when you know that afterwards when you leave the table, everyone will be gossiping about you.

Of course everyone will be talking, or is that just what I'm assuming? Because that may come from my own experiences, being from the country and what kind of gossip was typical there. Maybe it would be fine, like: ok, they came, they ate, they left, it's all good.

And then of course it depends on the industry you work in. There are companies now that are very progressive and that are open to everything, that



are gay friendly. But there are other professions in which it's more complicated, for example if you are a teacher working with children you could never openly say that you are gay.

I haven't felt that I've experienced any homophobic behaviour or harassment. But of course, like I said, I'm not that open. I'm not out in my workplace, for example, so how could I experience homophobic behavior? But in my social circle, people know, and I'm very well supported and comfortable.

I've never been directly threatened by anyone. I have heard of some incidents. One in particular at a bar that I go to. I wasn't there at the moment it happened. But in any case, it's a gay place with tables outside. Some girls were sitting there waiting for their drinks and a motorcycle goes by with two guys on it who start throwing eggs, lemons, who knows what else, while shouting "oh, you fucking lesbians," and that kind of thing. I personally haven't experienced an attack like that, but they happen.

I think if things had been handled differently while I was growing up...well, the outcome would be the same but I think everything would have happened a lot sooner for me. I would have realized much earlier that I was attracted to women. If I had had more role models to look up to, if I saw more people, open, out. If it wasn't so weird or so taboo to talk about this stuff. If I could have explored this more easily myself, if I had had more outlets, like some magazines? I don't know, some organizations to support me? If I had grown up in Athens, which is a bit more open than the provinces, I think things would be a bit different. I would have realized much earlier that I liked women, because I always have liked them, I just didn't have the tools to understand it.

I remember back in high school my friends and I would write each other letters. I still have some of them, and reading them now, I'm shocked. It's not



just that they have erotic undertones. They're full on! They could have been written by a couple who were sharing messages full of love, romance, eroticism. Very strong feelings.

But at the time, we justified it by thinking that that's how friends were. So in love that they need to share every moment and every minute of everything and when they can't be together, they need to send messages. We didn't have cell phones, of course. If we did, we would probably be texting twenty-four hours a day. The moments we weren't together we would write to each other and when we were at school we would exchange letters so we could read them when we were apart again. And we thought this was something so normal, just the way girls were.

And I wonder now, if I had grown up somewhere else, if I had had people to look towards, role models, if I had seen examples of gay couples in my environment, would I have been able to interpret those letters with their expressions of love between me and my girlfriends differently?

And maybe if I had realized then, if I could have actually made that connection that what my friend and I were doing was more like what lovers do, maybe I would have tried to do something with a girl way earlier. Even right now, as I'm speaking about this here, I feel very strange. From the first moment I thought about sharing my story here, I realized that there's so many things that I haven't processed yet, it still feels too fresh and too soon. I haven't figured out a lot of things. How did this happen, and how might it have happened differently? What could have inspired these realizations to come sooner? What could have helped me, what more could I want right now than the rest of the world to support me?





I did a year of psychotherapy during the period when I was still married and also in a relationship with a woman, and that helped me a lot. Because at some point I had to make a decision and there were very strong feelings for both people in my life. So it was hard to separate from my husband, but it was also hard to stay in the marriage and pretend that I was fine being with my husband and having another relationship simultaneously. Overall there was a lot to deal with. A lot of difficulties and a lot of conflict within myself and that's where therapy helped me a lot. I made the decision to divorce and to be alone for a while in order to process all that was happening to me. And after giving myself time and actually being alone, completely alone, I consciously decided then who I wanted to be with, which gender I would pursue. And at that point I eventually met and got involved with my current partner.

At first I met some girls through friend groups, at the various gay places we went to and in the gay social circle I had. But I wasn't really finding what I wanted, someone I could really connect with. I learned about the dating apps that are out there. Ok, I might have made fun of them at first, but I learned about Tinder from my straight friend who was using it to go on dates with men. I wondered, "hmm, do you think I can use that to find women? Let me try it." So I tried it, and I didn't say anything to anyone at the time, not even to my friend who had told me about it. I told her something like, "Yeah, I'm in and out, but I'm also looking for men." But obviously I was using it to look at girls. And I did find a girl that I connected with.

We talked, we got to know each other, we exchanged Instagram, if I remember correctly, or Facebook or something, and we went on a date. It was one of the most pleasant and comfortable dates I've ever been on. I really felt like myself. I really liked it, I liked the girl, we had a good time and we enjoyed ourselves. It all happened so effortlessly and there was no stress, no anxiety, no wondering what I was doing. And no, it didn't seem weird because it was a



woman, it felt very, very comfortable and it went very. And I have to tell you that we stayed together for quite a while. After that I went back to using the app again. I now feel comfortable, I mean, very comfortable going out on dates and talking to women. Okay, now I'm in a relationship so I don't do it, but I didn't have any problem going on dates, I didn't feel weird, I didn't feel like anything was unusual, I just felt like this is how things should be.

I have experienced odd situations though, meaning that maybe the dates were going fine, but after a while things got a little weird. I'd heard about these lesbians stereotypes, you know, that when two women go out for a coffee, get to know each other, have a good time, hook up, the next day they're moving in together. But I hadn't experienced that myself. Well, at one point I met a girl, and we hadn't been going out for very long, maybe a month or so, when she started sharing these dreams like, "oh, we're going to buy a house, we're going to do this, we're going to do that. Hm, what kind of internet do you have? Because I need good bandwidth for work, so we should change your internet, because now that I'm living at your house I can't work with such a slow connection." I thought she was joking.

But, it wasn't a joke. It was reality. She really did want to change my internet service, to make it faster to suit her. She wanted to change some things in general because they didn't suit her, and well, more than that, she wanted us to find a new home together because she didn't like mine very much. You can guess that this relationship didn't last much longer. And with that experience under my belt I started to actually understand what my friends, the lesbians, the genuine experienced lesbians, already knew. That yes, there are weird relationships, uncomfortable experiences, and I experienced firsthand how intense and possessive women can get sometimes. As a former straight girl coming from dating in a very different context, I found these tropes a little intense. Of course I've come to the conclusion that it's not always like that after



all, I don't think all women are like that. And of course there are also men who act that way. These days, I've met a lot of men who have these attitudes and these reactions and these demands they put on relationships, becoming possessive and controlling. And nowadays we're hearing that men are the ones invested in investing in having children and all that. So all of this, it's not a characteristic of lesbians per se, anybody can have those problematic characteristics. Certainly not all lesbians are trying to U-Haul with you! There are also very nice people who can have normal, healthy relationships and there is a balance. That's the kind of person I am.

And I'm currently in a relationship; with a girl. OK, to be clear, from this point forward I'll be with girls only. We have nice chemistry and a balance in our relationship. She hasn't brought her little suitcase to my house. I feel very complete and satisfied with our relationship. And I also feel very pleased with myself that I've gotten to the point where I've been able to have a healthy relationship and feel good about it, because you go through many, many processes within yourself to be good with yourself, so that you can accept the person you are. Like I said before, after a year of therapy and a year of being on my own I've learned how to connect with another person.

A lot of women are in the same situation that I was in: they are married to a man and simultaneously in a relationship with a woman, or thinking about women even if they've never dared to try anything. It's so scary at first. For me, it was so scary, but when you take that small step, OK, it's a huge step. I say small now, but at the time it seemed huge. Well, somehow it all sort of slowly unravels, step by step, within yourself and in your social circle and then somehow you're accepted for who you are and the whole thing has already happened.

I have a friend who is married, she has two kids, and is regularly maintaining relationships with women. It would be very difficult for her to break



up her marriage and she has almost convinced herself that she doesn't want to do that, she has convinced herself that she likes this situation she is in. It seems clear to me, to my eyes, someone who has been through a divorce, that she just can't take that step we are talking about. Of course, it's much harder because she has two kids but I think she would sigh a huge breath of relief and her life would change tremendously for the better if she could take that step. You definitely need help when you're in a situation like hers which is why I believe in therapy. And I also think people like this need to talk to others who have had similar experiences and can help them. They need some contacts to teach them a few things, to sit down and help them. Not every case will lead to divorce. Some people may do some work, some therapy, and come to the conclusion that it was more of an experimentation. But regardless it's good to get somewhere where you can calm your inner self down, because it's not pleasant to be torn between two people and not really able to have either of them. All while not fully knowing yourself, where you're going or what you want.

Because that's a very difficult component of being with two people at the same time: you struggle because you can't have a healthy relationship with either your husband or the woman you've chosen to be with. I don't think you can fully be yourself and be a complete person with either of them, because all the pressure that the second relationship puts on you and not knowing what's going on inside yourself, not knowing who you are... eventually you're going to take out your stress in your relationship, and it's not fair. In general I'm against parallel relationships, whether it's man and woman, woman and woman, man and man, whatever it is. I think you can't really share like that, you have to come to a conclusion at some point. That's why I say, step back a little bit, be alone for a while, see what you want, and when the next special person comes into your life, be ready and be present so you can have a balanced and healthy relationship.



Nowadays, how do I see myself? How would I like to be some years from now? Because I'm still in process, I'm still working, I still have a long way to go. I would love to continue to have a healthy relationship with my partner. I don't know if I will ever want to get married again, that's an open question for me. I would definitely like to be embraced more by society and by our families. I hope that in a few years, we will all be at the same table eating lovingly and not having to pretend to be friends or acquaintances from work. I hope that we can be there openly as a couple. I hope that we can feel free not just here in Athens, but that all of us can go back to the countryside with our partners, hand in hand in our own villages, and it won't seem weird and no one will turn around and look at us because we're just couples walking down the street. I think this is slowly happening.

I think things are changing, evolving. I think the younger generation in general, I see the kids that are completely different. They are much more open than us, they are much more free than us. They have role models, they have people to support them. There are movements happening, a lot of them, and it's something that makes me very happy and makes me feel optimistic. I hope that we will see much more beautiful things in the future. It would be very helpful if mothers and fathers and older people in general would start to open their minds a little bit and accept some things because this can make a huge difference.

A friend of mine told me a very nice story. She went to a baptism in Crete, in a very small village. We all have some assumptions about what that is like! The baptism was for the child of her friend, who is a lesbian, butch, no hiding or denying it. This woman's mother, in the village, had accepted her daughter right away. She was a typical Cretan woman, very well respected in the community, and from the moment she accepted her lesbian daughter, the whole village accepted her. From the moment this mother said, "She is my daughter, whoever



has a problem can keep it to themselves because we'll have nothing to do with your disapproval." And the whole village accepted the situation and everyone was better off for it. She and her partner had the baptism of their child in the village, and everyone was there celebrating and drinking and having a wonderful time. Because of the grandmother's support, they had the whole village behind them with no nastiness. So acceptance is one of the most important things that we want, and we need. If parents accept their children, then everyone has to follow suit. Then there is no need for gossip, nor will we have anything to fear.

I would conclude, after everything we've been talking about, that it's better not to get caught up in sticky situations, whatever they might be, whether it's a marriage that isn't right, or a strange relationship, or an uncomfortable feeling that we can't explain. Whatever it is that you have in your head, don't make it more complicated than it is. It's not as impossible as it may seem. Communicate, talk to the people around you, talk to the people who might be relevant. Don't feel alone in this. I think we all have someone who can understand and support us. It seems very scary at first, but once you take that first step, everything becomes a little bit lighter and it all seems a lot easier from then on. Communicate with those around you and everything will get easier and things will keep improving.

