



**Camille • Val Wick**

I scrubbed the tattoo from my face, the skin irritated under the washcloth, I felt like I was failing every person at that pride festival and like I was somehow not proud enough. Later, in the bathroom of a Pizza Ranch in Missouri, I did the same to the rainbow on my wrist. When I was at the church we partnered with and heard one girl talk about “the wrong kind of love” I felt camouflaged, and I hated it.

I know now that wanting to avoid conflict or stay safe does not make me less queer, or less deserving of the community’s love. I wasn’t ready to come out to every stranger I met in the deep South like I was ready to come out to my friend over the phone. And that’s okay. The tension between pride and safety is all too common, and the reality is that sometimes safety comes first. There are a multitude of reasons to not come out, and

sometimes, you're simply not ready. No one reason is more valid than the other. It is a nebulous process that never truly ends.

It has been a long time since I first came out. Five years and a month, to be exact. But I continue to discover new nuances to my identity every day. My journey has been complicated and sometimes I doubt that it is truly over. In moments when I have to share my pronouns in a group setting, I find myself hesitating to say she/her. I have avoided putting pronouns in my Instagram bio, not because I don't understand the importance of them, but because I struggle to commit to one set. Gender is a whole part of my identity that I don't talk about very often because I don't have the answers to my own questions. While I may never formally come out again, giving myself space to change and grow is something I'm still working on.

I was among one of the first people in our grade to come out, so I very rarely have to come out nowadays. It also may just be that I fit just about every stereotype in the book (the hair, the button downs, the theater, the camping.) Still, I remember the feeling of being in the closet, unsure and confused and scared. I remember having just come out, and feeling like I had to justify my identity to every person I talked to. And I know I'm not the first person to do a speech similar to this, but I believe there is value in repeating this message over and over again.

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Queer joy looks like the immediate connection I feel to people with similar identities — the little secret codes we have to acknowledge each other, like complimenting pride shirts or certain haircuts, or TikTok trends (which I won't reveal here — they're secret for a reason.) Queer joy was when my friend came out to me in middle school and I responded with "me too." Queer joy is seeing a queer couple in public and making eye contact with them and feeling just a little more seen.

As cheesy as it may be, I hope that my words have resonated with even one person in the audience today. I know that even in a supportive community, coming out is scary. My advice: take your time. You don't owe anyone anything. You will find your people. They will find you. They always do.

I am proud to be queer. I am thrilled to celebrate that queerness with my community. And I am determined to continue to fight for queer joy. 🏳️‍🌈