

Belonging

“Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it,” read one of the questions for applying to U of M. I paused when I read this, trying to contemplate what group I could pick to define me. The truth was, especially at this stage in my life, I had never been more distant from... everything. Where did I fit? Theatre, Student Council, the GLBT community—sure—but in all truth, did I feel like I had been fermented into anyone of these groups internally? No. There had even been many moments where I prided myself on this. “Groups require too much sacrificing of self,” I would explain. “I’m just me—not a we.” In my life, the road to belonging had been, twisted, jagged, forked multiple times, and led to a dead end.

There had never been many places for me to belong. My home had been a divided one for most of my life, my parents divorcing twice, shipping me between houses every other day. As I child with siblings seven to ten years older than me, there was always a large chasm separating me from the close bonds of family. My siblings played with me as babysitters, not as friends. Once I had reached an age for conversation with them, they had already reached the adolescent stage in their life, engaging in a social world that I could not yet be a part of or even comprehend. I couldn’t understand my sister’s incessant conversations on the phone or the obnoxious sound of rap coming from my brother’s room (ironically, it is now my favorite genre of music). The largest amount of interaction I had within my home was the conversations I had my Lego figures act out, moving their bodies as my puppets while they went on the incredible adventures of my imagination.

Once I had reached adolescence, my siblings were already out of the house, and a new level of separation presented itself to me. Sexuality came into play. Not only did my high-pitched voice set me apart from the rest of the boys within my school, but my complete refusal to conform to the gender norms of sports, video games, and pubescent dating marked me as a foreign creature. I was a boy who had all female friends, a boy who wore collared shirts habitually and a boy that couldn't throw a basketball. So in the minds of my classmates, what kind of a boy was I? There wasn't much of a place for me within my small town of Hartford, which worshiped its high school football players like they were Roman soldiers protecting us from our rivals (at any moment the Panthers could strike). There is a mark of death in adolescence: being different. This mark was all over me, scribbled on my hips as they swayed a bit too much with every step I took, almost flew out of my mouth in a colorful stream with every word I spoke, and gloved my hand with every football I fumbled.

I can distinctly remember a moment from my English class: I sat in a row of girls. On the other side of the room, facing us, was a row of teenage boys. They intimidated me with their baggy gym shorts and ill-groomed hair. The line of carpet between us seemed as if it could never be crossed (I certainly didn't have the courage to be hurt physically or emotionally in the process of doing it).

"Do you feel like a dude," One of my classmates asked from across the room, the Atlantic Ocean.

I could feel my face going red. The entire class had heard.

"Yes."

The one place I felt like I had some semblance of belonging over my youth was within a children's production company. I was a moody elementary student, which led to my dramatic

mother's insistence on me seeing a therapist. "Get him involved in something," the therapist had suggested to my parents, her bony face of wisdom looking at me with a smile. I made a life a half an hour away from my home where singing was praised, acting was admired, and being feminine was...normal. However, as I got older, the scene seemed to be for a younger crowd, and I exited the stage.

Then there was high school. The cliques had been arranged and I lingered somewhere in between them all, drifting from one group to the next. My sexuality still remained a mystery to everyone at my school and though many could assume the truth, my answer to the commonly asked question "Are you gay?" was "No." I barricaded myself from my classmates in order to delay the truth, not letting them into my house without hiding the incriminating "Will and Grace" seasons or Madonna CDs. I had no shame in this trait of mine—it ran in the family—and wasn't that I thought there would be much reaction fueled by my coming out, it was just the loss of convenience within the denying of it that I didn't want to face. Life was easier when you could still say no, when you could walk into a party and have something to say to stop possible violence. "Really, I'm not." My mother had direly warned me that to tell one high school kid was to tell the world so I kept my obvious secret contained.

The first person I told, the first person that I formed a true friendship with, was someone as distant as I was. She came from across the Atlantic, a German accent lightly coating her words, and carried a mentality far different from those around me. Sonja was born in Tehran, raised in Munich, and then moved to Köln. Around her, with her openness, I found it easy to be authentic. I could say about anything, and there wasn't any fear of her *knowing*—the best part was, she never had to *ask*.

There was a connection I found with all of the exchange students. They were different. I

was different. We were both outsiders who didn't belong in a small American town. I could relate to them, their accents like my girlish voice. I appreciated and understood their big-city sentiments.

After becoming true friends with Sonja, I realized "I can do this. I can...trust." However, I took this a bit overboard, poring myself into many friends in a matter of months. Truth flowed out of me like I was a stone fountain with "I'm gay...I'm gay..." spurting from my lips. However, my confession always ended with "but don't tell anybody." I knew this secret would escape—all that water from the fountain had to go somewhere—I didn't mind. This new world of connection led me to a stage in my life like no other: inclusion.

This level of comfort with others brought about the roughly year-long period in my life where I found out a way that I would "fit in with the guys." I couldn't throw a football, or talk about what girls I would most like to "bang" but I could party. The party culture was spread throughout my area, high school students looking for an escape from their mundane existence within a fifth of Captain. Quite honestly, I hit the party scene, like many do, in an attempt to belong. Though it had had its moments of elation, surprise, and mindless indulgence, I was addicted to the feeling of connection from it. I was also in love with the image I was creating, as were many others. I was a living contradiction: Class President with a bottle to his lips... a 4.0 student with smoke hovering above my head, not a halo. I was the portrayal that you can have it both ways, and I wanted people to love me for it.

The truth, however, was that even within these moments of rash decision making that took place within crowded trailers, I was still distant from those around me. I got a weird high off of analyzing peers. I had been introduced to a level of socialization that had been denied from me for years, and while I sat back and watched the inebriated people around me as a cerebral

outsider, I felt like I was on a safari in Africa. I became acquainted with their mating habits, hierarchy and even learned that a joint and a blunt were not the same thing. I did not feel like the ones around me. I didn't fit. Within the often sexually charged atmosphere, there wasn't much of a place for someone desiring the same gender. The saddest realization that came to me was that once the bottle was dry, and the smoke was merely something just staining the walls, the people around you would be gone. The ceremony of worshiping the Id had ended, and Within a second, their presence would evaporate, rising to the next plain of distraction.

There was a compilation of events that drove me away from this stage. The first factor was fear based. Two parties I had been too had transformed into absolute nightmares. One was nearly stormed by the police, forcing me to spend an hour of my night hiding in an attic. What a way to live it up, right? The other was within an isolated trailer. Looking back on it, I should have known not to be there; the creepy florescent light shining from within the home from miles down a dirt road should have been enough of a warning. The night didn't even seem to be much of a party, merely a small gathering of people smoking a bowl and enjoying a couple of beers. However, this was a night that would radically turn my world upside-down.

A boy entered the trailer with his friend (both of whom were belligerently drunk). Something about his thick brow and patchy facial hair resonated with my mind. He was the boy I had passed driving, squinting into the sun. My face had been contorted and I didn't want to give him the impression that I had been looking at him in an offensive way. "Hey, are you..."

"You dick-sucking, faggoty-ass..." The list of the homophobic slurs he threw at me could fill a novel. "You were talking shit about my buddy jumpin' a kid in..."

"No," I tried to explain, looking into his threatening beady eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. Really! I..."

“Wait! What’s your name?” The boy’s friend asked me.

“Jacob Stroud.”

My inquisitor stormed towards me, knocking me flat on the ground with a blow to my ear, then my hand. My chest swelled with fear as a numbness spread over the left side of my head. It was my first time being hit. My brain could barely process the situation. “Okay, Jacob you’re on the floor...two drunk red necks want you dead or something, and...wait...luckily a guy is fighting them off for you.” I chose to take flight, grabbing my friend Mary and running to my car. “It’s not worth it! I’m not doing this anymore. I could have been killed. He hit me in my ear. You can kill a person by hitting them in the head—snap their neck and it’s done.”

I chose to believe what they had done was simply, as they later explained it, a drunken mistake, without meaning. Even now, the question *he knew my name, that’s what got his reaction...right after his friend had been calling me faggot, was there a reason behind him hitting me besides the Miller Light?* I would remind myself that faggot was the trendiest insult for modern high school students. I didn’t want to think of myself as a victim of something more important. I didn’t want to acknowledge that I had put myself in that position and that my party-boy image hadn’t made me immune.

That wasn’t the only factor in me deciding to separate myself from the glamorous life of Hartford “cool kids.” The following summer I visited Sonja in Europe, getting a fleeting glimpse of a different world, geographically and socially. Sonja’s city became my play ground, her friends, my own. In a matter of three weeks, I felt a sense of belonging within Koln, the flashing lights of its clubs permanently burnt into my soul. I witnessed a different way to party. Though there was plenty of drinking (they’re Germans, it’s in their culture), Sonja and her friend’s meetings consisted of gathering for friends and fun, not for mind numbing escape through

substance usage. I left part of my heart across the Atlantic, finding friends within the three weeks I was there, and when I returned...my world seemed immensely different. I returned with a deep drive to start working on myself, get involved in theatre outside of the school again, take dance classes, and finish the book I had been working on, or at least start writing again. Partying didn't fit into the picture anymore.

Sadly, this meant I didn't fit into much of a picture either. I began my senior year feeling a depressing level of isolation. Honestly, I didn't want to be close to the school any longer. I spread myself out upon South West Michigan. I dual enrolled in a college, performing in one of its plays. I began to take dance in a city distant from mine. When I walked through the halls of my school, I no longer felt like I was in a familiar land of adolescence, but an institution in which I needed to be free from. It was as if I had been lifted out of the planet's orbit and found myself floating between Earth and Mars. Senioritis had taken its toll on me from the start and was metastasizing to every area of my life while I slipped away into a new world. I didn't even eat the school lunches anymore. Instead, I would hide out in the library for that period, risking being chastised by the new principle—this year, lunch was *only* for the cafeteria.

“You must get pretty bored at lunch if you come down here and talk to me,” The librarian chuckled one day. I had always liked her—she was a theatre woman, naturally having an in with every stage loving homosexual that had once walked the halls of Hartford High School in the past twenty years.

“Yeah,” I sighed, spinning in the chair across from her, “I just don't feel like I'm part of this.”

So, where *did* I belong? The real answer to the essay question came to me as I worked on my class float for homecoming. While I crafted a Lady Gaga costume for a live person who was

to be part of the float, I looked around at my classmates, hard at work with their tasks (to be honest, half of them were standing around stoned—they were receiving community service for this). We were all working towards a goal, brought together by a fate that had placed us in this town at a certain year. It hit me “this is where I belong.” There was no getting around the fact of the matter. Though my family had been strained and distant, I was part of it. Though I had lived the life of someone so different from the mainstream of my small town, I was still a part of it. The people and places within it had crafted me as a person, and even if I had drifted through the past eight years of my life feeling that belonging was something missing, I was a Hartford Indian. Green and white flowed through my veins. Without me, who would have be running their hands through the fur of this Wild-Cat mask, ready to hot glue it onto a hood just to add that Gaga touch?

It doesn't matter if you are a lonely child, a feminine outcast, a partying social light, or even the boy trying to become a man, you belong within what made you. I am composed of the bits and pieces of my past. It created my life story like I had drafted the epoch tale of my Lego figures. My part within it was merely being...just being me with all of my quirks and changes. The small world of Hartford wouldn't have been the same without me, nor I without it. Even as I progress into a new life, my home will resound within me, filling me with nostalgia as I look back on what was completely familiar. I shouldn't have been searching for belonging, but realizing that I had belonged all along.