

We Didn't Come Out to Blend In:

The Demands of This Moment

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I came out when I was 15 years-old; and not in some soft, quiet way. I came out in a blaze of adolescent chaos which left no room to turn back. It was the mid-90s, in rural Delaware, where being gay was something whispered about, laughed at, or outright denied. This act could have been dangerous and isolating — and I did it anyway.

By stepping into my own power, I laid claim to my identity — immediately stripping others of the authority to define it for me. I began the slow transformation into the person I was meant to become; and, decades later, I am grateful for this experience. The fire which was lit inside me still burns — and now not just for myself, but for every kid who's ever believed they had to choose between safety and truth.

Now, at 44, I know that truth of living as an out queer person teeters between revelatory and complex. The same is true for coming out. It isn't a one-time deal, or snapshot in time. It's richer than that — it's a reckoning which demands the burning of old bridges, not out of spite, but so the flames can light the way forward.

Like any reckoning, though, it has not been without its challenges. Many folks who are out know the real wounds don't always come from the bigots. They come from the people who love you the most — family, friends, teachers — people who think they're protecting you by asking you to shrink; and people who think they're showing care by asking you to be quiet.

Fortunately, as a teenager, I knew better — instinctively. I never wanted to be quiet about who I was. I wanted to live out loud, to be open, to be honest. Queerness, I would learn, was more than just personal truth. It would become a lens for viewing the world around me. It would be the drum beat which kept me in rhythm. It would be the call for personal rebellion against a system which, historically, was better at suppressing than supporting.

Now, as some version of an established adult, showing up authentically is part of my personal mission statement. I do this because we still live in a world where that's a risk — and with risk often comes a cost.

I would pay the price early in my career. I worked in a place which loved to tout equity in mission statements but often fell short in follow-through. At first, I turned a blind eye. Then, I played along. I wore the right clothes. I sat in the right rooms. I nodded when I should have questioned. I took the path of least resistance, believing I could bend myself just enough to fit. But slowly, I stopped recognizing the person I saw in the mirror. My voice got smaller. My joy dulled. My dignity — the part of me I'd fought so hard to build — started to fray at the edges.

Walking away wasn't easy, but it was necessary. I reclaimed my voice, my values, and the self I had almost abandoned. I remembered what too many queer people are taught to forget: surviving isn't the same as living. And no job title, paycheck, or LinkedIn endorsement is worth trading away your truth.

I understand why people are hesitant to show up as themselves — especially when they're queer. They don't want to make it political. They just want to live, to work, to exist in peace. But here's the truth: everything is political when your existence challenges the status quo.

That's why serving as guest co-editor of this special issue of the *Delaware Journal of Public Health*, focused on LGBTQ+ health and equity, is such an honor — and a responsibility — because the stakes right now are terrifyingly real.

Every day, we are watching hard-won rights be eroded. We are witnessing queer and trans people, especially youth, targeted by legislation designed to erase their autonomy, their access to care, and even their existence. Hate has been rebranded as policy. And it's not just happening "out there." It's happening here — in our communities, in our schools, in our clinics — and yes, even in our boardrooms.

This moment demands something from us.

It demands that we show up — especially those of us who are out. Especially those of us who carry any kind of privilege — because of our race, our income, our education, our position at the table. We have a sacred duty to speak up and to advocate for those still being pushed to the margins.

This includes Black and brown LGBTQ+ folks, trans youth, queer elders, unhoused community members, people with HIV — anyone navigating systems which remain stuck in a time when equity was just a three-syllable word.

Our duty is not to blend in. It's to disrupt, to build, to tell the truth, and to make room.

It means showing up in policy meetings and hiring panels where equity is imperative, not performative. It means interrupting injustice even when it's subtle, and uncomfortable — even when it costs you something. It means mentoring queer people, fighting for them, and handing them the mic, and never expecting credit.

None of this is easy, and like many of you, I am growing weary. The headlines, the trauma, the gaslighting — it all adds up. Then I remember the 15-year-old version of myself. The one who passed a note to his mother which read "I'm gay," and waited for the world to shift. It wasn't the proudest moment of my life, but it was the most honest. That kid didn't have a blueprint, but he had resolve, and some chosen family who helped him find his way (including drag queens with bigger egos than most CEOs).

Now, I carry that resolve into every part of my life. Not because it's easy, but because I know what it feels like to think you're alone. And I won't stand by while others feel that way.

So, this is a call — to every out professional, every LGBTQ+ leader, educator, artist, lawyer, clinician, nonprofit director, barista, bartender, and bureaucrat: your presence matters. Your visibility matters. Your fight matters.

If you are out, and you are powerful, and you are not using that power to make life better for someone more vulnerable than you — it's time to ask why.

James Baldwin wrote, "*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*" This is our moment to face it. Loudly. Publicly. Without apology.

We didn't come out to blend in. We came out to build something better. So, let's do it — together.

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