

Sydney Inger

FAM 487- Honors Option

Final Paper- Supervised by Professor Karen Myers

Courage Through the Years

Historically, members of the LGBTQIAP+ community have faced challenges growing up in a world where they are told they are different. The following three memoirs were all written from different perspectives. Specifically, the memoirs were written in the viewpoints of growing up as a part of the LGBTQIAP+ community or by a parent raising a LGBTQIAP+ youth. *Boy Erased* by Garrard Conley is written a short while after Conley went through conversion therapy at Love in Action. Additionally, *Oddly Normal* is written in the perspective of the John Schwartz as his son Joseph grows up and discovers his sexual orientation. *Surviving Madness* is written by Betty Berzon on her journey through life as a lesbian women growing up during great change and activism. While reading the three memoirs, there were various themes connecting each journey.

Garrard Conley, Joseph Schwartz, and Betty Berzon all went through a portion of their lives in which they were not accepting of their own identities. However, through strength, resilience, support systems, and believing in themselves each individual was able to live and tell their extraordinary journeys. Specifically, Conley felt as if he was living a double life, like many LGBTQIAP+ people often do. For the period of time Conley was at Lyon College and Love in Action (LIA), he felt as if he had to keep his struggles of homosexuality a part of his “secret life” (Conley, 2016, p. 242) from his college friends due to not wanting his family name to be

dishonored. After spending a few months at LIA Conley, as well as his conservative family, realized that being gay was not a disease and he did not need to be cured. This allowed Conley to slowly accept his identity as a gay man and eventually marry his husband. Similarly, Joseph (Joe) Schwartz had an extremely hard time accepting his identity as a young gay man. At around 13 years old Joe made a suicide attempt by taking Benadryl. Luckily, Joe survived and began to have a different outlook on life in respect to his identity. Furthermore, his parents, who were always supportive, began reaching out to local organizations that would allow Joe to have a greater support system beyond them. Jeanne, Joe's mother, expressed "I am DONE with all this secrecy! We'll just tell *everybody*" (Schwartz, 2013, p. 176). The love, support, and guidance the Schwartz's gave Joe was extraordinary. In addition, Betty Berzon also struggled with accepting her identity. As a young Jewish female growing up in the 1940's and 1950's Berzon believed that being h*m*sexual was unacceptable. For a great deal of her life, Berzon explained to therapists her "fear that homosexuality would continue to ruin [her] life" (Berzon, 2002, p. 84). Berzon's frame of mind did not begin to change until she met her life partner Terry. After meeting her, she started to realize that it is possible to love someone of the same sex and is acceptable as well as normal. Each individual went through the Cass Model of identity development at their own paces (Dente, 2019, pp. 119-120). Along the way, with the help of their support systems, Garrard, Joe, and Betty found themselves. While reading the stories of the incredibly strong individuals, I saw myself in each one. I too struggled with accepting my identity. I believed that it was unacceptable, I could change, and everything would just be easier that way. But, once I realized there was nothing wrong with me, I began to learn how to accept myself for who I am.

Another theme threading through each person's journey was their experiences of stigmatization and minority stress (Dente, 2019, pp. 115-117). For example, in *Boy Erased*, Conley experienced stigmatization in his family system who was extremely religious. He was ostracized by his father, a pastor, after being outed by a peer from Lyon College. As a result, Conley's family sent him to LIA where he was traumatized by the activities that were believed to cure him. Thankfully, Conley is a survivor of conversion therapy and lives to tell his story and advocate against sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts. Similarly, Joe experienced both stigmatization and minority stress while he attended school. Right before coming out, Joe experienced bullying for being slightly more feminine than what society deems as acceptable for masculinity. The continuous bullying that Joe faced caused him to reach a really dark place in his life. Luckily, Joe was able to realize his friends in the school theater program and from summer camp as well as his family were there to support him every step of the way. Their support allowed Joe to become confident in his identity and overcome the torment he was experiencing. Moreover, Berzon also experienced instances of minority stress. Berzon told her story from a unique perspective that allowed the reader to see how her fears of being a lesbian influenced most of her life. Furthermore, during the time period of her life, 1928-2006, many ideas evolved across the country in respect to sexuality. Growing up Berzon struggled with the idea of being different or diseased. This caused her much anxiety and insecurity which led Berzon to a lifelong battle of self-contempt. By and large, all three individuals demonstrated significant strength which showed their ostracizers that they are more than their sexuality. It was truly inspiring to hear the stories of Garrard, Joe, and Betty from various perspectives because they allowed me to realize, while people may grow up in similar time periods or in the same

geographic location, it does not mean their experiences will be the same. These lessons will allow me to help future clients more effectively who are coming from various locations.

Equally important are the four tenets of cultural humility. First, is the tenet of respectful partnerships. In *Oddly Normal*, there are many instances of respectful partnerships, however, the two I believe impacted Joe the most are his relationship with his therapist and the relationship Jeanne forged with the school administration. Joe's relationship with his therapist allowed him to freely express what was occurring in his life and how it impacted him day to day. I really respect his therapist for understanding when to advise Joe and when to just listen critically. Furthermore, the relationship that Jeanne forged with the administration of the school allowed for Joe's ease of education. Amongst anxiety and identity development, Joe also struggled with a learning disability that impacted him in the classroom. With the help of Joe's therapist, the school, and his parents, he was able to learn the material he needed in order to continue academically. In like manner, Betty Berzon was able to develop strong relationships with her clients. Berzon was able to draw on her own experiences to connect with her patients and make them feel safe and heard. For example, as she continued her work later in life, she would make house, hospital, or hospice calls because her patients were too sick and could not make it to her office. Both of these examples show just how powerful being heard and understood is for a person to feel. I will be able to use the examples of Joe's therapist and Berzon's discoveries for the entirety of my career to work towards every single one of my clients feeling safe, heard, and understood.

Secondly, is the tenet of recognizing and challenging power imbalances. This tenet of cultural humility can be especially seen in *Boy Erased* when Conley is outed. After being outed by a peer in college to his family, Conley's father decided that he needed to be sent to LIA immediately. That being said, neither Conley nor his mother had a say in what the father decided

because the father ran the house. The power imbalance that was present caused Conley much pain and suffering, not just at LIA but also in his life afterwards. Likewise, Berzon experienced something similar with her first therapist. Her therapist at Westerly Sanitarium explained, “he wasn’t at all sure that [she] really was homosexual, but [she] certainly didn’t need to be. We would work on it together. [She] felt renewed hope that [she] could be a normal person” (Berzon, 2002, p. 84). First of all, this is absolutely heart breaking that a therapist could make a client believe they are broken and disgusting. The therapist knew that he had more power in the relationship and took advantage of that in order to try to force his ideals of sexuality on Betty. As one can see, the power imbalance in relationships can significantly impact how an individual sees themselves which can create permanent damage.

Another component of cultural humility is institutional accountability. Throughout Garrard’s time at LIA there was a lack of institutional accountability being practiced. Specifically, LIA continued to administer “therapy” even though professional organizations like the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics have explicitly stated that ex-gay therapy is extremely unsafe and is not effective (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Furthermore, in *Oddly Normal* John described the tough situation Joe experienced in fourth grade. Markedly, Joe’s fourth grade teacher (Mr. Fourth) gave him an extremely difficult time. Mr. Fourth consistently singled Joe out and disciplined him publicly. After the Schwartz’s had many discussions with the administration, the problem was still not resolved. The school should have held Mr. Fourth accountable for his actions and protected Joe, but that was not the case; instead the administration turned a blind eye to the situation. In middle school, the Schwartz’s and the administration were able to work together to help Joe continue to blossom. They drafted an

Individualized Education Program to help guide the teachers on how to help Joe learn. Similarly, Berzon's hard work as a psychotherapist and activist contributed to an increase in institutional accountability in relation to the treatment of LGBTQIAP+ patients across the country. She was able to take her influence as a well-known advocate and therapist and increase the awareness in favor of LGBTQIAP+ individuals. The awareness spread allowed fellow therapists to understand that LGBTQIAP+ folks were not broken and did not need to be cured.

The final component of cultural humility is lifelong learning. All three memoirs showed strong examples of lifelong learning. After LIA Conley described that he was able to learn slowly that he was not sick. Conley began to start the learning process of loving and accepting himself as a gay man. Additionally, Conley briefly touched upon that his father was able to begin to learn and accept the LGBTQIAP+ community. By his father doing this, he was showing pastors everywhere that being an ally of the community is just as important. Identically, Jeanne and John Schwartz were extremely supportive, loving, and always put their best foot forward towards learning as much as they could to help their son through discovering his sexuality. Joe's parents took amazing steps towards lifelong learning by assuring that Joe would always have a support system who was educated about the situation. Equally important, Berzon spent the entirety of her life learning about how to best assist LGBTQIAP+ folks in the medical field. Additionally, Berzon spent most of her life learning how to accept her own sexual orientation. She was able to do this with the help of her life partner Terry. All in all, each individual displayed that it is essential for everyone to be open to learning about ones identity in order to grow.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading each one of the memoirs. The lessons and journeys that I learned from *Boy Erased*, *Oddly Normal*, and *Surviving Madness* are immeasurable.

Additionally, the memoirs allowed me to learn about the different perspectives from across the nation. In my future work, I will definitely be able to draw upon the experiences of Garrard, Joe, and Betty to help my clients with the struggles they are enduring. Learning about the journeys of the three incredible individuals took in order to grow have forever changed my outlook on life and my thought process going into my career.

References

- Berzon, B. (2002). *Surviving madness: A therapist's own story*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Conley, G. (2016). *Boy erased: A memoir*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
- Dente, C. (2019). *Social work practice with LGBTQIA populations: an interactional perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2018). *Policy and Position Statements on Conversion Therapy*. Retrieved 2019, from <https://www.hrc.org/resources/policy-and-position-statements-on-conversion-therapy>.
- Schwartz, J. (2013). *Oddly normal: One family's struggle to help their teenage son come to terms with his sexuality*. New York: Gotham Books.