

NICK AND CECILIA'S STORIES

Cecilia was looking for a husband who was sensitive and sweet like her father. She thought Nick filled the bill, but when he began avoiding physical contact with her, she felt the core of her personhood had crumbled.

I Lost Myself

I was born in Ontario, but when I was seven we moved to Mountain View, California, where my dad was an artist for the Review and Herald Publishing Association and my mother was an elementary school teacher. In my dad's family, Adventism went back several generations and our family were fairly conservative.

After attending all-white elementary and secondary church schools, I entered an integrated Columbia Union College and began the process of expanding my understanding of the world. This was during the late 60's/early 70's, and I observed, from a safe distance, the race riots in the District of Columbia and the Vietnam moratorium riots. Though politically conservative, I was becoming open to new ideas. As a student religious leader, I was also becoming open to change on a variety of fronts in the spiritual arena.

I graduated with a degree in elementary education and taught in Adventist schools in Maryland and Michigan for eight years. To earn credits toward my graduate degree, I signed up to go on an Andrews University European tour. This trip, the dream of a lifetime, was life changing for me. I dared to do something different, see new places and people, and I felt a sense of accomplishment. It was also on this tour that I met my future husband.

I was looking for a husband who would be like my father. I had always been very close to my dad. He was a man of many interests and ideas. He was an outdoor person who found peace in observing nature. He grew up on a farm, had gone hunting and trapping, and was truly a self-made, hard-working man. He was also a carpenter and a writer, as well as a free-lance artist. My parents seemed quite Victorian sexually, displaying their affection in gentle kisses and holding hands. I wanted a husband who would be gentle and caring.

Nick seemed to fill the bill. We shared many interests – art, travel, and classical music. We were both interested in learning and, unlike previous boyfriends, Nick challenged me to go ahead and be bright. We were both serious about life and liked to be socially involved with many people. And we came from similar backgrounds with similar family values. His family were Germans from Russia and he grew up in the Pacific Press “ghetto” on the west coast, while my family were Dutch Mennonites from Russia and I grew up in the Review and Herald “ghetto” on the east coast. We knew many of the same people. We were both English teachers and enjoyed reading and research. And Nick was sensitive and sweet.

Nick and I were repeatedly thrown together on the tour. We were part of a “foursome” that did everything together. Our physical relationship was pretty chaste. It was a month

before he held my hand. And it wasn't until the end of the tour that he tried to kiss me. He was obviously inexperienced. We continued our courtship through long letters and periodic phone calls; then I got a teaching job just 90 miles from him and we spent weekends together. On New Year's Eve, we got engaged. We were cuddling and, as I remember, I asked him to clarify our relationship. His memory is that I proposed. At any rate, we were married at the end of the school year and spent eight weeks that summer traveling around the United States, seeing old friends and relatives and visiting 22 national parks and monuments.

From the beginning, sex was something I was much more interested in than Nick. His approach was rather stilted and "book-learned;" nothing came naturally for him. I wanted passion and abandonment, but Nick feared that, preferring gentleness. Nevertheless, he initiated sex quite frequently in the first few months; then it slowed down to once a week over the next few years.

We both wanted children and were overjoyed when we realized our first baby was on the way. But once I started to show, Nick no longer had any interest in sex, while my hormones made me wild with desire. This was extremely frustrating to me, and I felt rejected in an important way. After the birth of our baby, we had sex two or three times, but the birth process had stretched me out and Nick no longer found me interesting. I was devastated because he made me feel it was all my fault. He would say he loved me but didn't seem to understand why I begged for some physical affirmation of me as a woman. At one point I lost some weight and became quite attractive to other men, but Nick never acknowledged this. We had sex only one more time when we decided to have another child.

I have always been physically demonstrative, but Nick tried to avoid me. We slept on opposite sides of the bed. I felt highly rejected and unlovable and couldn't understand what was wrong. My self-esteem took a big hit, and I thought it was because I wasn't pretty enough or sexy enough. Our communication dwindled to little more than what was needed to maintain our home and children. Nick became more internally focused and excluded me as he tried to sort out his feelings. He began to travel more with his work and became very involved in his hobbies.

Meanwhile, I felt empty and hollow as a person; I had no real sense of self. At my core, there seemed to be nothing that commanded my husband's love and respect. In order to cope, I became a workaholic, seeing my only value in service to others and taking care of their needs. I kept trying to find more and more activities to give myself meaning, both at work and in the community at large. I was unable to see my own needs. This "hole" in my center kept me from having close friendships because I was afraid I might blurt out my problems and ruin my husband, so my friends found others to be close to who were able to talk and share themselves. The result of all this was that I was a very overextended person who was overwhelmingly depressed and frequently irritable at home.

Nick seemed to become more and more angry with me and our fighting escalated. I think he was taking out all his fears and unhappiness on me, and also using this to keep me at a distance. From time to time I would suggest divorce and, at least in the early years,

this would bring him around for a while. But after a few days of relative peace, the emotional abuse would start again. He seemed unable to face his own shortcomings and always looked for someone else to blame. I was his favorite target.

Shortly before our wedding, a friend had intimated that Nick might be gay because some of his friends were. When I asked him and he denied it, I believed him, because I knew homosexuality wasn't "catching." After the birth of our second child, I knew something was terribly wrong with our marriage, and again I asked him if he was gay. Once more he denied it. Gradually, the number of his gay friends increased and he began reading a lot of material about gays. He would then inform our circle of more liberal Adventist friends of his new views and understanding of homosexuality. I read the material, too, and decided that Nick didn't fit the stereotype of the typical gay man who was very concerned about his dress, appearance, and housekeeping. But in spite of my denial, the problems in our marriage and his interest in and defense of gay people kept alive the seeds of suspicion in my heart. Finally, when I found the receipt for a post office box while he was on a trip, I confronted him by e-mail and he, at last, admitted that he was gay.

We tried for another three years to make the marriage work. Only now it was me who was in the closet, while Nick was coming out of his for the first time. I simply shut down emotionally, lost all my friends, and found my only solace in work. We were in counseling the last year, and I had to face my co-dependency, my strong resentments, and my loss of a sense of self. Eventually, I decided that there was no reason why I had to lose myself as a person and accept emotional abuse, and near the end of the year I told Nick that I wanted a divorce. He had convinced himself that he could have both his gay life and gay friends and his family. He found it very hard to admit he had to give up one or the other. I just turned the whole thing over to God, and the relief and release were overwhelming!

During much of this time, I was an insatiable bundle of hormones, needing desperately for a man to affirm my femininity. I fell hard for my therapist, but he maintained a professional distance. I noticed other men and wanted to attract them, but at the same time I was padding up with fat in a sub-conscious effort to protect myself from doing something I might regret later. As a result of my counseling, I finally found myself as a person and no longer had such a desperate need for a man to make me feel complete. Now I can relate rationally and warmly to men without demanding something they are not ready to give.

While I was taking a separate vacation for the first time in my life, someone "outed" Nick and he was fired from his position in the Adventist institution where we both worked. While promising to befriend and support him as much as I could, I continued to stand firm on my decision to go ahead with a divorce. There were no possibilities of a replacement job nearby, and I was not willing to leave my home, job and support system for a marriage as shaky as ours. We continued to live in the same house for another nine months while the divorce was being processed and Nick was looking for another job. This was difficult, but we agreed on the goal of remaining friends and co-parenting to the best of our ability. We were able to learn better communication skills during this time.

Our children had been caught in our marital difficulties all their lives. Their relationship with each other somewhat mirrored that of Nick and me, with Bret being abusive to Lindi. At the time of our divorce, Lindi was 12 and Bret about 15. Bret went to live with his dad and Lindi stayed with me. For a while, they each resented the opposite parent, but eventually, they have come to accept and love us as caring parents who want the best for them. They have seen us work out our co-parenting relationship in friendship and respect, and I think it has been helpful to them. The happiest times they have known have been since the divorce, and they realize that their dad is happier than he's ever been before. They both defend his right to be gay and get upset by narrow, bigoted views of homosexuality.

As a member of a very large Adventist community with many subsets, I was fortunate to have belonged to a supportive and open-minded group that continued to support both of us during our years of crisis. But there were other members of our church family who, though willing to support me in the role of "victim" of a horrible and sinful hoax, would back off when I explained that Nick and I were still friends and that I supported his efforts to find himself as a gay man. Though my marriage experience had caused me to lose trust in everyone, including God, through the help of my therapist and the material he gave me to read I learned to trust God again, and I am now a strong Christian who finds joy and gladness in fellowship with Christians of many faiths. I only wish I had gotten counseling earlier so I could have understood that my husband's crisis didn't have to devalue me as a person.

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The world was not a safe place for Nick when he was growing up, so he locked his secret deep in a closely-guarded closet. When the closet door burst open in midlife, he learned that the world of his church community was indeed unsafe.

It's Not Safe To Grow Up "Different"

His name was William, and he died in 1931. I recently stood in a remote country cemetery near the Missouri River looking down at his headstone. He was only 13 years old when he died – what a shame. Family tradition says that he took his own life because he wasn't "like the other boys." There was no safe place in this world for a boy like William who was "different."

That story was a deep family secret until after I came out to my mother at age 45. Like William, I too grew up with a secret that I didn't feel safe in sharing with anyone, a secret so awful that I must bear it alone, a secret which, if known, had the power to destroy my life, as it very nearly did. The isolation that came with that secret was like living in a triple locked closet—with compartments for family, society, and church.

And so I grew up "different" from the other boys, but terrified to tell anyone, although many seemed to know. It was a truth that was usually silent, although at times it could

be heard in the taunts of others. There was no support for a gay boy in my family, church, school or society. I was subconsciously aware of my sexual orientation at around the age of eight, but it was not something I could openly admit, even to myself. I grew up in an ordinary Adventist home. My father was a church worker, my mother a nurse, and I had two sisters. I went to church school through a first graduate degree. I enjoyed being sociable but dated girls only as a social necessity.

After graduating, I taught church school for several years, but dated only for friendship, if at all. On a European tour, I met my future wife. We liked each other and had many common dreams, and so one New Year's Eve I got up the courage to propose marriage. Social and family expectations were surely present, as were the hopes of family and "white picket fence," but we also enjoyed doing things together. And so we were married on a summer Sabbath afternoon in South Carolina.

I did not have a strong sexual attraction to her but there was mutual care and affection. Being a good Adventist boy, I was chaste going into marriage, but hoped for the best and was able for a time to be intimate with her, as befits a husband and wife. I was relieved that "I wasn't gay," a truth about myself that I had long denied and repressed. Perhaps some sort of magic would happen that would take away all those feelings and doubts. She had heard rumors about my sexual orientation before we were married. When she asked about them, I denied them, as I wasn't able to deal with that issue myself, let alone share this terrible secret with anyone else.

She worked for a year while I got additional education, and then we began our careers working for the SDA Church in higher education. We both enjoyed our jobs and helping others. We bought a house, and I threw myself into an avid interest in gardening. In due course, our two children came along, and what a blessing they have been. It would be hard to imagine life without them, but after the birth of the second, our intimate life dwindled to nothing.

At middle age, I finally found that I could no longer continue to keep this part of me locked up in my triple-closet. I simply HAD to find out who I really was before I died. In this process, doing developmental work that most people do as adolescents, I did some things that were hurtful to my wife and were not in integrity with her or others. Although there had been several occasions during our marriage when we had the opportunity to talk about my sexual orientation, we always managed to avoid it. It finally became clear to her when I was on a camping trip with a gay friend, and my coming out to her was via e-mail. I later came out to my parents. During this time, I was also active in a community of gay married spouses and attended several events, one with my wife, to explore our options. Few of those marriages survived.

I continued to feel alone and emotionally isolated in a large Adventist community where it is common to have many casual acquaintances but few if any real friends. Finally, I was outed at work (at least partly, I believe, through the malice of others). The president, who did not want to have *his* institution "associated with such an issue," asked me to resign my position. It was at that difficult time that I came out to my children, as I did not want them to hear about it from someone else in a community that, paradoxically,

has many secrets that become common knowledge once they are out. They would also have wondered why I wasn't going to work.

Under the circumstances, it is hard to imagine how we could have continued to live together in marriage, though we had shared and built many dreams together and though a local dormitory dean suggested this as a possibility. My wife was not interested in pursuing such a possibility, and we agreed to divorce. However, we continue to care for each other and are friends, and share custody of the children, one child living with each of us.

I spent a very isolated and lonely winter, a pariah in my own community, while I searched for another job. With a few very notable exceptions, I received little social support from my community. Though it said it cared and, I believe, wanted to, it didn't seem to know how. My "friends" were always "too busy," it seemed, and so I left my family, a church community that couldn't find a way to care for me, and the place where I had lived for so many years. The associate pastor came by once, but the head pastor of my church never visited me in my home during twenty years in that parish.

My relationships with my two children have improved markedly after coming out to them. It was not possible to be "real" with them while I was hiding such a large part of myself. They have adjusted pretty well to the truth, although they are not always comfortable with sharing this with their friends, but this has more to do with community prejudice than with a desire to hide. Last Father's Day, my daughter wrote a wonderful note to me in her Father's Day card. She said:

I just wanted to say thanks. Thank you for always being there and especially for teaching me that it's ok to be who you really are. Thank you for not being ashamed that you are homosexual. There is absolutely nothing of that to be ashamed about. I love you so much, you and everything (almost – you aren't perfect!) about you.

During that winter of my discontent, I was nurtured spiritually by a wonderful female Episcopal priest. At a high price in every way, I was finally in integrity with myself and those around me, and the closet doors were unlocked. I am still a part of the body of Christ. My one wish for all of my Christian brothers and sisters, including those in the Seventh-day Adventist church, is that they truly love each other and let God do the judging. My life mission is to create a world where it is safe to grow up "different."