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Professor Bair Van Dam
Capstone Reflection

Persuasion and Prose
The Challenge of Telling "My" Story

I didn't have a clear goal in mind when I started writing my first article. I knew I wanted to tell my story, but I wasn't sure how or why. The process of writing and reflecting forced me to focus on what I wanted to accomplish, not just tell a story that people would forget about in a few days. Catering to my hometown audience, while stressing the need for change was a tricky balance to strike. I had to use a prose that didn't sound flashy or come across as elitist, yet would command authority and give the readers my perspective. The style of my writing was more important than any story because before I could change any minds, I had to establish my character. I knew I would receive many comments, good and bad, and the more credibility I had as an individual, the more persuasive my articles would be. But beyond the experience and difficulty of writing the articles, my capstone gave me a new perception of my childhood and "coming out" in Ohio. After I came out in college, it was easy to forget the challenging memories of questioning and to discard my hometown as a place I'd never live again. Fortunately, this project changed that, and I've found a new power in writing and persuasion.

Consolidating all of my jumbled thoughts into 800 words wasn't easy. My story could be told from so many angles, and choosing which one was critical to open up a genuine conversation. I knew I would be judged by what I wrote, and I wanted to tell my story just right. First, I had to frame the story in my mind and get past my personal discomfort with the need to label my identity. Just the words "coming out" leave a bad taste

in my mouth. They sound so fake. When I first "came out" two and a half years ago, it felt so official, like I was entering some exclusive club. I remember telling a few close friends and soon everyone knew. All of my college friends were "so happy for me," and life went on pretty much the same way it did before I "came out" or was officially "gay." Most of my friends claim to have known, and I'm not surprised, but I also think they said so to make me more comfortable with myself. They thought I needed validation – the same sort of affirmation I needed when I was "straight." Despite the tackiness that's coupled with the coming out process, I appreciated their support and it was comforting knowing that at least these people, in my real life, knew.

I went on to tell my family a year or so later and now everyone knows. But that whole process seems so distant today. After leaving Findlay, it was pretty easy to forget just how hard it was to be gay in such a narrow-minded culture. It's not that the people are dumb or mean. They just see the world from one perspective, and it's nearly impossible to shake the way of things. Growing up in Findlay, Ohio, was great for a lot of reasons. It gave me good character and authenticity – characteristics hard to come by in D.C. – but Findlay is basically a white, generally well-off, heavily Christian bubble. The people are nice and life's much slower there, but some things were always unspoken, especially if you were gay.

The idea of my capstone was simply to open up a conversation. As I noted in my articles, the issue of homosexuality isn't completely ignored, but often the public discourse dwells on the political or religious implications of tolerating gays in society. In Findlay, the "debate" never focuses on the individual, and "gay" is viewed as a disease more than an identity. With my articles, I aimed to provide a new context for the discussion, but first, I had to piece together my own story. I had to sharpen old memories, string together my

experiences, and pinpoint what it was that made being gay in Findlay so difficult. It took dozens of drafts and countless revisions before I sent my first article to the editor.

Deciding which personal stories to include in "my story" in my first column wasn't easy. So many memories come to mind when I think about my childhood and questioning. As a kid I remember hearing the expression "light in his loafers," and knowing to judge whomever the comment was direct toward. I wasn't sure why I was supposed to look at that person differently, and when I was young, the concept of being gay didn't exist to me. But the gut feeling of hatred did. Whether it was during daycare as a five-year-old at the YMCA or middle school health class, we were all taught that gays were perverts. Most of the time the conversations never even used the words "gay" or "homosexual;" the issue was just implied and understood, even at a young age before sexual maturity.

Throughout my childhood I had the usual mix of "girlfriends." In fifth grade I had a girlfriend named Chelsea. She was one of the popular girls, and everyone knew she was a catch. On the last day of fifth grade, a bunch of my classmates were huddled together behind a shed at recess, and a few of my friends began taunting me to "hug" her in front of them. This was a big deal in fifth grade, and the memory is still pretty vivid. Physical interaction of any sort was "taboo" at such a young age, yet we knew it was what we were supposed to do. After one of the other popular couples succumbed to the peer pressure and hugged, we decided it was OK to hug too. It was an incredible feeling of validation, and as an eleven-year-old, I felt on top of the world. I established my place among my peers as a normal, popular guy. Knowing that others respected me was important, and my need for affirmation would follow me years to come.

Four years later, as a freshman in high school, I had a similar experience with another fling. Her name was Emily. She was a bit clumsy, but she was nice and we got along well. One night, she and several of my close friends were at my house playing hide and seek in the backyard. As we were hiding behind the pine trees on the side of my house, I made the big move. Awkwardly, my nervous hand grabbed hers, and we sat in silence. I knew it was what I was supposed to do and I felt awesome. After a few minutes passed, we walked out from behind the trees and sat on my front porch so everyone could see – almost like a little parade. Naturally, all of my friends began to "discreetly" whisper to one another, and I couldn't have been more proud. At fourteen, the same reassurance of normalcy that I needed in the fifth grade still mattered. I was impressionable, and in small town Ohio, image was everything.

There are plenty more embarrassing stories from my childhood, but I tell them for another reason besides the humor. It was those recurring moments of self-identification and self-reassurance that made coming out so difficult. Growing up I was trained to be straight so well that I even convinced myself. Certainly, sexuality isn't something most fourteen-year-olds, let alone eleven-year-olds can comprehend, but all of the social cues along the way solidified how I identified myself. Whether it was making fun of the "Village People," or taunting the effeminate guys at recess, there was never any question that the "homosexuals" should be avoided. With such certainty in the back of my mind, calculating the right approach to start a conversation in Findlay was daunting. I had to think through the height of my uncertainty, and the moment I knew, beyond any doubt, that I was gay.

It wasn't until I was sixteen that I began to wrestle with the thought of being attracted to other guys and even then the attraction didn't have a name. I was terrified that

if I even thought of the word “gay” or “homosexual” there would no going back. At the time I went to church and believed in God, and I hoped that if I squeezed my eyes shut praying just long enough, one day I might wake up and it would all go away. Not surprisingly, at the peak of my insecurity was when I was the most vocally homophobic. One of my best friends, Brandon, was openly gay, and I supported him in person, but I made comments to everyone else. I tried to avoid talking about Brandon directly because I didn’t want to hurt him, but I found any excuse to remark about anyone else who might be gay.

By my senior year of high school I’d toned down the comments, perhaps in part from maturity, but also because the larger realization that I too might be gay. Finally, as I wrote in my first article, I began to see a guy, Alex. Alex was a high school classmate and we were both in the show choir. We didn’t start to hang out until a few months before graduation, yet something clicked. We didn’t act on our impulses for months, but the unspoken attraction was obvious. I would find any excuse to go over to his house after school. We’d go to the reservoir late at night, when we knew no one else was around, and we’d talk for hours. I got a sense that my then girlfriend, Abby, noticed a change in the way I acted so I began to plan the breakup. It took about six weeks for me to finally muster up the courage to cut things off, and I fumbled through the whole process. Understandably, she wanted to know why we had to break up, and all I could say was that college was four months away and I thought a long-distance relationship was a bad idea. That didn’t go over so well. Nevertheless, with my conscience clear from no longer faking my attraction to a girl, Alex and I got together.

The relationship lasted through the summer, and barely a day went by that we didn’t see each other. Then college came. Although I had recognized my sexuality to the

extent of acting on it in private, I was by no means prepared to act openly. I couldn't bare the thought of the shame or judgment. So Alex and I tried to stay together through my freshman year, but for obvious reasons (we lived 500 miles apart), it didn't work out. All the while at college, I pretended to be interested in girls, but never acted on anything. After a turbulent summer at home, following my freshman year, trying to fight off the feelings I still had for Alex, I came out two months into my sophomore year.

Looking back on the whole thing, it seems ridiculous that I waited so long to accept my sexuality. Now that I've become so accustomed to the person I am, it's hard to rationalize the painful suppression I put myself through. Although it was ultimately my decision about whether or not and when to come out, so many psychological and social barriers stood in the way. As I wrote in my articles, the silence was what hurt the most. There were no adults standing up to say "It's OK". No schoolteachers, ministers, or parents ever talked about homosexuality, and all I had were the few pieces of evidence I'd gathered along the way. I only had the implied disgust for "the homosexuals" and the remarks about the perversion of our culture, and that is why I had to write my articles.

The original title of my first column was "Breaking the Silence." It was maybe a little dramatic, (although not as bad as the editor's title, "Shedding the Layers of Lies"), but my title emphasized the crux of the problem in Findlay – the silence. With the issue in mind, I hoped that people would respond and quite a few did. Most of the emails were from people I knew, and I received a few interesting letters from people I never met. One email was from Deborah. Deborah took it upon herself to explain how my "homosexual actions" would lead to my eternal damnation and the collapse of American civilization. Another email, from Barbara, had similar predications about the doom of mankind. A few

"extremists," like Barbara and Deborah, even wrote letters to the editor that resembled hate speech, more than substantive opinions, but I wasn't surprised. I also received several positive letters from grandmothers, community leaders, and Catholic youth ministers who never spoke publicly about the issue, yet my column compelled them to write me. They expressed admiration for my efforts to challenge conventional opinions in Findlay and I was surprised by their receptiveness to my article. Their support was by all means appreciated, but as I wrote in my second article, I was more interested in the people who would remain silent.

My first article gave me the exposure I needed and provided me the opportunity to establish myself before actually pushing the envelope. Telling my story in the first column wasn't a cakewalk, but the second column was even harder. As aforementioned, there was some feedback from my first article, but to most readers I was just nice guy with a little story to tell. I needed to figure out a way to capitalize on the fragile amount of creditability my first article gave me and pressure the community to speak up. Like my first article, my second column went through a lengthy process of drafting and rewriting. Because the article didn't focus on me, it was easy to slip into my old college writing habits. My initial drafts lost the tangibility of my first article. They were professorial and preachy, and a little sarcastic. I incorporated words no one in Findlay uses, and wrote in the abstract. In the process of writing, I forgot what made my first article so compelling: the personal connection I developed with the readers. So I weaved a few stories in, and focused on the group that I thought had the most power to change the conversation.

The response to my second column was more intense. I incensed a few people who didn't understand why I was still writing. Carrie, a busy mother of five kids wrote, "You

suggest that by not grabbing a pen immediately we are trying to "make [you] and the 'problem' go away." As if the community as a whole had some obligation to weigh in on your situation and drop everything to write to you… Do I need to wear a t-shirt every day that says "gay friendly?" Or can I just live my life in such a way that demonstrates it?" Carrie posed a great question and I was ecstatic to read her response. If everyone in Findlay were like Carrie, then growing up gay wouldn't have mattered. But the few moments of conversation are dominated by the Deborahs and Barbaras of Findlay who scream the loudest and flush away any hope for tolerance. I responded to Carrie that while I appreciated her sentiment, I was, in fact, challenging her to speak up and publicize her tolerance. Findlay needs to know that the typical, hardworking mother can accept homosexuality, otherwise the conversation is left in the hands of religious extremists. Further emphasizing my point, Deborah (who emailed me after my first article) was so infuriated by my second column that she wrote a lovely letter to the editor about the "infestation of gays" who have been duped by Satan. Several other Deborahs wrote in as well. It was heartbreaking to see that the fanatics were still the ones most vocally responding, but in the weeks following, more tolerant letters to the editor trickled in, giving the conversation some sense of sanity.

It's probably a bit dreamy to think that two short pieces will change much in Findlay, especially with comments like Deborah's. But I'll bet a few questioning people read them and feel a little more empowered, and I know many people gained a new perspective. I posted both articles to my Facebook wall and received hundreds of comments, several from old high school friends whom I knew to be "homophobic" growing up. What gave me the most hope were the emails I received from people like Judy, a sixty-five-year-old "fairly

conservative… Christian," who has lived in Findlay for forty-eight years. She wrote, "You asked the question "why do adults still care who's gay and who's not?" and I'm struggling to answer that for myself… I really want to understand what it's like growing up gay (especially in Findlay) and accepting it as a lifestyle. I'm particularly interested in how you think God views it." Judy is the reason I wrote my articles. She embodies the honest and somewhat naïve character of most Findlayites, yet she's open to a conversation the community has never had.

People like Judy give me hope that Findlay in twenty years won't be the Findlay it was for me. The small town, conservative, American culture will stay, but perhaps the community will be more open to people like me. I know my two articles won't be the end of the conversation, and maybe I'll keep writing as long as people are listening. There will inevitably be the naysayers for years to come, but hopefully someday soon, they'll just be background noise. Twenty years ago, *The "Republican" Courier*, wouldn't have considered printing a story like mine. The fact that I was given the opportunity to challenge the norm in good old "Flag City USA" is a step in the right direction. The struggle to frame my message taught me the right approach to open an uncomfortable conversation. Persuasion isn't about using the most words or yelling the loudest. It's about knowing how to develop an idea and understanding your audience. With this approach, I have faith that tolerance will win out.