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WALKING GAILY FORWARD

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KEY POINTS

This chapter will:

- Explore why, to lead fully and wholly, I must be true to my identity as a lesbian woman;
- Show why, to be open to growing and evolving, I must live in truth;
- Show how, to be an example to others, I need to embrace the #WomenEd 8 Cs; particularly for me, *connection, community and challenge*.

INTRODUCTION

Fear, secrets and shame do not allow people to grow. Parker J. Palmer in his book *Courage to Teach* (1998) talks about the inner landscape of the teacher. The condition of our inner landscape impacts how we project who we are, what we know, and our very soul to those around us. If my inner landscape is sown with fear, shame and secrets, I can only mirror this in my interactions and in my work. To evolve as a woman and develop as a leader, I have learned that sharing my story is a powerful tool. Living in truth draws people closer, whilst hiding in the dark pushes people away. One person who lives in truth can also inspire others to do the same. In a school, where leaders live and tell their personal narratives and embrace vulnerability, creativity flourishes and *community* develops. It has become particularly important to me to share my identity as a lesbian woman; as I advocate for others to live their truths, I must live mine.

BECOMING

I have often felt, and occasionally still feel, as if I am on the outside looking in, and I think this is because I have been holding back. Before I came out as a lesbian, I know this feeling of isolation was because I was holding a secret coloured with shame and felt that I didn't have the courage to invest fully. I have always been committed to my work and driven to succeed, and through the years began realising that the good, deep work I wanted to engage in had to be sown in truth. Secrets and shame are pervasive and stop us short from being fully present. Brene Brown, in *Dare to Lead* (Brown, 2018: 119), describes shame as the 'never good enough' emotion. If we feel 'not good enough' in one area of our lives, this feeling can quickly engulf our whole being. We need to be, I need to be, truthful in order to evolve fully as an effective leader.



EARLY DAYS

I came out quite late as a lesbian. I simply didn't have the language, experiences and certainly not the exposure growing up to understand or to know that there were such things as lesbians. Growing up in a heteronormative home, I had assumed the role of straight girl who would meet a boy, date, get married and live happily ever after. Today, young people see gay people on television, have access to gay characters in books, have role models, education and, of course, social media that can both enlighten and confuse. Young people today also live in a more accepting world, although there is great room for improvement. There was little room for being different when I was growing up.

I remember when a physician first asked me, 'Which way do you swing?' I was utterly perplexed. I asked for clarification and, upon receiving it, felt instant calm. Of course, that was it. I had never felt an attraction to men, had never had a relationship and the concept of dating, marrying and having children was entirely foreign to me. I did not live in that calm place for long. Fear and shame took root in my heart and soul and it took a few more years of struggle until I finally accepted and began living as a lesbian woman. Struggle is a necessary part of life, but shame is not. When we decide to enter the arena without our armour, we connect with others, *challenge* the status quo and *change* perceptions.

OUT AT WORK

The first person I told was a colleague at work. New in recovery and attending Alcoholics Anonymous, I was learning that living in lies could lead to slips. My biggest secret was that I was a lesbian and this secret was also one of the reasons I drank for so long. I did not want to drink any longer and needed to be honest about my sexual orientation, even if it came at a cost. It was frightening saying the words: 'I am gay.' Upon reflection, no one I have ever come out to has been particularly shocked or surprised. Many have said; 'Of course you are. I knew that', or 'Yes, I was just waiting for you to tell me'. Coming out in rural Alberta, Canada, well anywhere really, but in a conservative area, being different almost always comes with a cost and I had heard terrible stories of other gay people being victimised, harassed and assaulted for living openly. I was not yet brave enough to live fully and openly in this rural setting so I made a move to Calgary.

CONFIDENCE

My identity is largely wrapped up in my role as an educator and thus it became increasingly important to be out at the different schools at which I worked. This is no easy undertaking and leads directly into my first piece of advice: no one can dictate or direct anyone else's coming out. There is indeed great pressure to be out and to this day I don't always disclose my orientation.

Every summer whilst on holiday there is someone who inevitably remarks that I could find a man to travel with or find my 'knight in shining armour' whilst strolling through European castles. I have never corrected nor educated these people, perhaps because of a lingering fear of being 'not good enough' or because I am still not certain, nor perhaps believe it my responsibility to disrupt their personal narratives about gender or sexuality. This realisation leads to my second piece of advice: you do not need to tell everyone your sexual orientation. This identity belongs to you and you alone. There is a difference between keeping a secret and being private. One of the values or 8 Cs of #WomenEd is *confidence*. Coming out has consequences and every person thinking of coming out must think through all the possibilities. *Confidence* does not come all at once. If 10% braver seems like 100%, scale it back. Start with 1%!

ADVOCATING IN SCHOOL

I do believe that in my work life, particularly with students and other staff, people need to see a range of personalities, even amongst LGBTQ+ people. My third piece of advice: we get to advocate for equality in our own way. Parades aren't for everyone. I live a quiet existence and my sexual orientation is simply one part of who I am. At every school I have worked since coming out, I have become braver in each location, coming out to more and more staff and students and living fully as a lesbian woman.

Sometimes we are the closest example of a gay person people meet and we can disarm the perceptions they have formulated about gay people. In many instances, coming out at school has made me the safe place to land for people who have questions, who need to ask for help in navigating the ever-evolving language within the gender and sexually diverse *community*. Another value of #WomenEd is *challenge* and, by being out at work and being a safe harbour for others, I can contribute in a small way to building a foundation for inclusivity. An act as simple as putting a rainbow sticker on my office door sends a loud message, particularly when my colleagues also apply stickers to their doors.

CLARITY

Here is the thing about coming out: we come out all the time, with every new job and potentially every new person we meet. There was that pivotal first time of acknowledging for myself that I was a lesbian and that angst-ridden first time of telling that first person, but, for me, to continue living truthfully, if the situation calls for it, I let people know that I am a lesbian. I need to keep challenging those around me to be inclusive. A result of always having to tell our story is that we face our truth constantly. For me, just as secrets beget secrets, truths beget truths. Telling my truth about my alcoholism led to my truth about my orientation. Being brave each time I tell someone that I am a lesbian builds emotional capital and resolve. I grow stronger each time I tap into being vulnerable.

To quote Oprah: ‘What I know for sure is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we have’ (Female Lead, accessed from Twitter, 28 September 2019).

This clarity around my identity and living my truth has impacted my leadership, making me more vulnerable, approachable and open to learning. Brene Brown, in *Dare to Lead* (2018: 43), writes: ‘Vulnerability is the cornerstone of courage-building’ and ‘without courage there is no creativity or innovation’. Innovation, creativity, risk taking and *collaboration* are all qualities of a great leader and all require us to be vulnerable. There are increasing complexities in every school and teams need to take on more than ever before. Teams need to devise new strategies and manage teaching and learning in ways that they didn’t before; they need to lean in and be vulnerable with one another to build success in their schools.

CONNECTION

Always a thinker and always outspoken, I had been ruminating on my truths and determining who I was as a leader when I attended a conference where several #WomenEd *change* makers were presenting and where @WomenEdCanada was conceived. It was at this conference that I started weaving together the power of being out and the power of narrative and truth telling and the impact this awareness had on my leadership. It was at this conference and in the time that has elapsed since that I have realised fully what I had always known on some level, but had never tapped into: being braver, even 10% braver, and living intentionally makes me a better leader. When we are brave about who we are, we take risks in our development as leaders, we feel more confident to reach out and network with others who desire to do likewise.

COMMUNITY

The messages I give myself are often still rooted in ‘not good enough’. I tell myself, and joke frequently, that I am not a people person, that I don’t care for, nor am good at, networking, and that I am much better working in the background by myself. These messages are lies, cover-ups, remnants from a time when shame was the chest plate in my armour. Teamwork is personal and our personal lives intertwine with our professional lives. I live in a straight world. Even in professional conversations, people talk about their families, their kids, what they did on their summer holidays or weekends with their families and kids. Before coming out at work, these conversations were difficult, and I always found myself holding back, talking in code and avoiding pronouns when talking about anyone in my personal life. This subterfuge creates walls in teams.

Our narratives are most powerful when lived as a whole story, rather than as a chapter in a book, and we build a strong school *community* when everyone can see themselves in the work and everyone is included for where they are in their personal journey. I feel a deep sense of belonging at school and with my colleagues. The collegiality

is restorative and liberating as it is based on mutual respect and acceptance, and is where we draw upon our differences and uniqueness to forward the important work of teaching and learning.

CREATING CHANGE

I maintain that being out at work is a personal choice and that no one can dictate the how, why and when of this momentous decision. However, I have come to a slow realisation that when I stand up and live with intention and truth, others might also do the same. A popular quote on social media, 'Empowered people empower others', is only true if people are brave enough, are courageous enough to be who they are and, as in my case, are out at work. Status quo is only *challenged* when I am brave enough to create *change*.

Passing on being 10% braver

Living divided and in pieces, compartmentalising who I am, no longer works for me as a woman and as a leader. I have chosen to live 'with an unarmored heart' (Brown, 2018: 72). Living with 'wholeheartedness' means 'engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness' (2018: 72). Letting go of fear and shame has unburdened my soul and I have been able to embrace my worth as a woman and as a leader, lesbian and all. If you are thinking of coming out, my suggestions would be the following:

- Find one trusted colleague and tell them first. Practise what you are going to say with this colleague. If speaking from the heart isn't easy, write a script.
- Seek out your local Gay-Straight Alliance (some boards have these for staff). Seek out local support networks and attend an event or call for support. In the very early days of my coming out, I called a support network that connected me to events.
- Don't rush! Tell people in your own time and at your own pace.
- Ensure you have a group of friends outside of work that you can lean on. The reality is that not everyone you tell will take the news well. This is a reflection on them, not you.
- Cross your fingers and have hope in your heart that you won't need them, but learn who your union or association representative is and how to get hold of them if needed.

REFERENCES

Brown, B. (2018) *Dare to Lead*. New York: Random House.

Palmer, P. J. (1998) *Courage to Teach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.