

LETTERS OF LOVE

A Mother & Son's Conversation
on Coming Out Transgender



Queer Theology

edited by
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Letters of Love: A Conversation Between Mother and Son

Introduction:

My name is Micah. I was raised in a loving, conservative Christian family. We went to the same non-denominational church together from the time I was 5 until I went away to college, and I attended the same Independent Fundamental Baptist school where my mother taught high school English and drama during that time as well – first through twelfth grade.

I was a compliant and reserved kid – for a lot of reasons ranging from personality (I've never seen the use in being loud, and in fact being in loud environments is usually pretty overwhelming to me – I'm not quite sure why I feel at home in New York City now) to the fact that I was very unsure of how to relate to the world in the body that I had been provided.

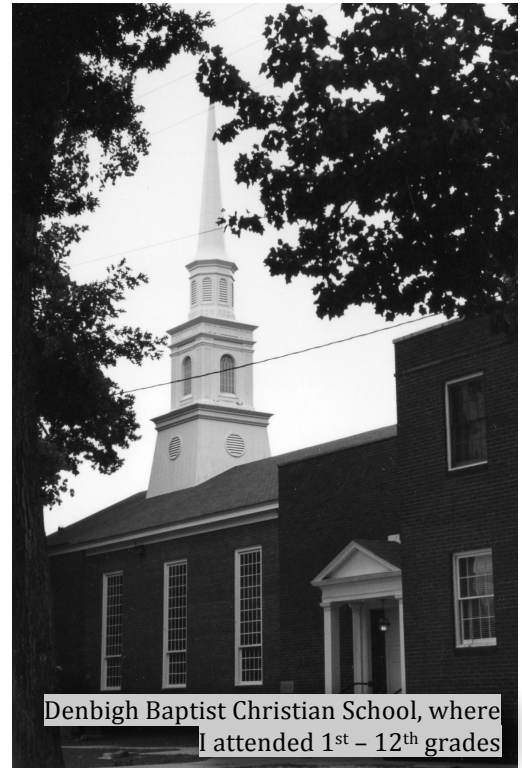
As I grew older, the communication between me and my family really dwindled. Eventually I realized that my relationship with my family could not continue to grow and develop unless I shared more about myself with them.

What follows in the rest of this document are the emails that went back and forth between my mother and I as I first told her that I am trans. This conversation continues in this way even today. These emails are shared with her permission, and the only things I've edited out of this exchange are personal details about the lives of my other family members and my birth name.

The reason I've chosen to put these together and share them with others is simple – I think they are a great example of the way this conversation can take place with a lot of genuine love, even when the people involved are coming from very different places. My parents have always served as a model for me in my faith life, and the way that they have handled themselves in this conversation is no exception.

With that, I'll let you read on for yourself. I hope these emails can help you – no matter where you are coming from.

-Micah



Setting the stage:

Mom and Dad,

I am sending this to both of you to let you know that there is something I want to tell you (not included in this email--this is the preliminary foreshadowing).

I am sure you both have noticed that in spite of efforts from both sides, conversations between us have been strained, and tend to stay on the surface level. I take partial responsibility for this, because there is something that has been going on with me that I have not yet shared with you.

Before you start to worry, I am a-okay, and still doing very well here in NYC. In fact, I have to say that I am the happiest I can ever remember being. So all is well--not sick, not in extreme debt, not in danger.

There is just something true about me and my life that I have not previously found the words to tell you.

There are many reasons for this--not wanting to disappoint you, not wanting to burden you, and fearing how you would respond.

In short, to me this is something that is good and true and very much a part of my own self-discovery. But for you, I am worried about how you will react, given your view of the world and how it works.

I believe that sums it up.

So, I am putting the ball in your court. I want to send it to you through email, and I will send it to Mom's address so you both can be together when you read it. Let me know a day and time that will be good for you both. This is not a time-sensitive thing, so take as much time as you need to respond to this initial email.

With ever so much love,
Your firstborn.



My mom and me as a newborn

Ready to listen:

Darling,

First, know that no matter what you have to say, we love you.

Second, we have known for some time that things are going on that we don't know about. And we also take some responsibility for awkward and surface conversations. Sometimes human nature causes us to run from pain. It is a natural, although not always loving, response.



Third, we want you to say whatever you have to say. Even if it hurts (and I'm sure it will), we need to know. We love you more than we love our own safety.

Please send the e-mail right away. Dad leaves tomorrow for Salt Lake City, and he'll be gone until the 18th, so if we're going to read it

together, today's the day. We'll be running some errands for a couple of hours, but then we'll be back, and I'll check for the e-mail then.

Love always and forever,
Mom (and Dad)

Coming out as trans:

Mom and Dad,

I want to tell you something I have been searching for the words to communicate for as long as I can remember.

I have desperately wanted to be the child you would have me be. I understand and acknowledge that the process of me being the person I believe I was created to be has not been an easy one for you to witness, talk about, or come to terms with.

I have waited for the perfect words to come for far too long, and have realized that there isn't going to be a magical formula to spare you the process of hearing the truth. And that as I grow up, my primary concern should be that I am living my life the way God wants me to--not for my parents and family first. And that just because a conversation is difficult, or even painful, does not mean it should be avoided.

Denying the truth has put me in deep, dark places where I can no longer dwell. Acknowledging the fact that I am emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically attracted to women let enough light back into my broken heart and spirit that for a while, I hoped that was the whole truth and the answer to the question of what has set me apart as "different than I'm supposed to be."



My mom and me, age 5, singing a duet at school

As I have educated myself and spent years in prayer and self-examination, however, I am coming to the realization that this truth, while real, is incomplete. Through getting to know myself as God has created me in mind, spirit, soul, and in body, I have to acknowledge the fact that I am not female. I do not feel that the sex I was assigned at birth accurately or completely describes my gender.

I regret that you were not a part of this process of self-discovery, and that as a result, you are hearing all of this for the first time after I have been dealing with and processing this for as long as I can remember.

My whole life I have been very ultra-aware of what has been expected of me, and throughout my childhood and adolescence, I had myself convinced that I could play the part for as long as I could handle, and when I could not longer lie, taking my own life would be less cruel and less difficult than having to tell my parents that I am not their little girl. This had been my plan for my adulthood. Live a lie until I could no

longer live. I thought I was the only person alive who was the wrong person on the outside.

Although my body is female, and I was raised to see myself that way, I am male. Since acknowledging that truth, I can look down the road and see that God does have a future for me.

As I have matured, I have educated myself and discovered that I am not alone. That there are many, many others who share the experience I am describing of their mind, spirit, and soul not connecting with the sex of their physical bodies.

The term most people with this experience use to describe themselves is transgender.

I acknowledge and respect that this is a lot of information to think and pray about. However, I want to be clear that I do not write this to you with the hopes of attaining advice, or with the intent to debate my identity. I have shared this with you simply because I wanted to tell you that I have chosen to live and to grow and to know myself rather than to take the ultimate easy way out.

It is my sincere hope that we can continue this conversation openly and respectfully through email, so that we can each have time to process the other's responses and questions.

Love. Love. Love.

Overwhelmed, but open:

M****,

You're right. This is a lot to take in. But it is better that you speak it than keep it from us. Here are my initial reactions.

First, you cannot have it both ways. Either we continue dancing around things and keeping things on the surface (which deep down I don't think any of us really wants), or you allow us to say what we feel and think. To tell us that you don't want our advice or a debate on the one hand and then express a desire for continued openness on the other seems somewhat contradictory. Even if we all understand that we are unlikely to change the other's opinion, we should all be allowed to speak whatever we wish to say. Having said that, I think I understand that you are not looking for us to try to talk you out of this or persuade you to take a different course. You are an adult, and your feelings, thoughts, and choices are your own. We understand that.

Second, while we are certainly sorry that our expectations have caused you pain for so long, we cannot apologize for having the natural expectation that a baby born with a vagina would be and should be thought of as a daughter. Frankly, I resent your implication that we should have done anything else or raised you any other way. How in the world could we be expected to do anything other than what we did?



Third, you have mentioned repeatedly that you believe that God wants you to be male. If that is true, why didn't he give you a penis? I'm not trying to be cruel; it just doesn't make any sense to me. While I can on some cognitive level understand that you have never felt feminine, that you are attracted to women, and that you see yourself as male, I cannot understand how you can make the leap to believe that God intended that for you. It seems like some crazy rationalization to me. Just being honest here, not trying to convince you otherwise or debate the issue. I'm just trying to understand.

And now for some inevitable questions. Does this mean that you intend to change your name? to legally change your gender? to have a sex change operation and/or hormone treatments? to expect us to refer to you as our son? You might as well tell it all now. Whatever else is left, please tell it.

M****, we love you no matter what, but if we are totally honest and laying everything out on the table, we must tell you that you have caused us great pain. I personally have hesitated to say that because I honestly don't wish to hurt you any

more than you've already been hurt, but we must speak what is real. Your dad and I believe that your feelings and thoughts and struggles are very, very real, and we do not dismiss them as inconsequential. Indeed, although we probably have just a smattering of understanding as to how much you have endured, we are aware that it has been horrible. And we do regret anything we have done, either consciously or unconsciously, to contribute to your pain.

So risking more frustration on your part, I'm going to tell you what you probably already know about our position on this whole thing. Every one of us has a cross to bear, a specific area of temptation, a thorn in the flesh, so to speak. Every one of us has something that we have to surrender to God and yet struggle with every moment of every day. For me, it's pride and control. Every moment of every day it comes back to me in waves, and I have to keep giving it up, learning new lessons, surrendering. I'll let Dad speak to what his area is, if and when he chooses. To me, this is yours. It's a whopper all right, but it's no worse in God's sight than mine or Dad's or anyone else's. You spoke of suicide as the easy way out. Perhaps you're right. But I also think you've taken an easier path than the one God intended for you. I truly believe that if he intended you to be male, he would have granted you the appropriate body parts. Therefore, he intends for you to be a female who struggles with wanting to be male. Maybe every moment of every day for the rest of your life. And not because it's what we as your family expect, but because it's what God expects. That's what I believe. I am not attempting to debate the issue; I realize that you've made up your mind, and I'm not giving advice either. I'm just being clear on how I see the situation. As good old Tony Campolo said at your graduation, as Christian parents we would much rather you be holy than happy.

In fact, my prayer for all three of my children every day is that your passion for GOD would outweigh your passion for absolutely everything else. More than your passion for lesbian or transgender issues or causes. More than your passion for Casey. More than your passion to help disenfranchised people in the Bronx. Even if you make the argument that all of these things are good, they are less than your relationship with God should be. And yes, I'm making an assumption that may or may not be accurate. Because of my own reluctance to know the truth and your reluctance to speak it, I don't really know what is and what isn't true in your life. Maybe your passion for God does come first to you. That is certainly my hope.

It is also my sincere hope that you will receive what I have written here as said in honest love. I do want to try to understand your position on this, even if I do not agree, and I hope that you will do the same for me. My position is not taken lightly, nor is it intended to cause you further pain. I just really believe that if we're ever going to have a genuine relationship again, we have to be able to say whatever we wish to say. And that goes for you too. So please don't crawl into a shell because of anything I've written here. Speak openly, and allow us to do the same.

Much love,
Mom

It's not easy – It's just true:

Mom and Dad,

I appreciate your desire for openness, and I don't think I contradict myself when I say I am willing to have this conversation while trying to let you know gently that I don't see myself changing my point of view. Listening to what you have to say does not equal agreeing with you, in my mind. So I don't think the two are mutually exclusive by any means. I hope this clears up the point I was trying to make.

I am not asking for your apologies, and certainly did not intend to put you on the defensive with the question of how I was raised. As I have voiced in the past, I appreciate the way you brought me up.

I understand that hearing this has been painful for you, and if I thought there was any other way I could live my life with integrity and not have this conversation, I would continue down that path. It has been the great misfortune of my life to have the overwhelming desire to take care of my family and protect them from all pain, and yet have my identity be something they can not wrestle with without being hurt.

Thank you for asking some questions that may have been difficult for you to voice. I, too, believe that this is a cross that I am intended to bear, but from a different perspective than the one you mention.

It would be easy for me to throw up my hands and curse God like Job's friends wanted him to do for having to go through this.

You mention that I am taking an easy way out, but I challenge you to sit with this for a while. It would be easy for me to continue the way I have for my whole life--praying all day every day, thinking only of my affliction and how I must avoid thinking of myself as male.

This makes me ineffective in all else but obsessing over the thing I am trying to overcome. But it would be easy.

No hard conversations with my parents. No hard conversations with my friends. No dirty looks on the subway. No fear that I will lose my housing. My job. My support network. There are currently no laws that protect someone from



being fired or kicked out of housing based on their gender identity. I could technically be homeless and unemployed just by having the wrong person overhear what I'm going through.

I don't say this to scare you, by any means. Only to let you know that I am NOT taking this path because it's easier.

I am taking it because when I look in the mirror in the morning, I want to see a person with integrity. Someone who lives their life whole-heartedly based on what they believe to be true.

I think it would be a cruel God to ask someone to live a lie for their entire life when there is medical treatment for what they are enduring. We would no longer tell a person with bipolar disorder or cerebral palsy that this is their intended cross to bear, and they should not seek treatment. Not everyone sees the experience of being transgender in this way, but I do not believe that this is what God wants for people who wish to seek medical treatment for those reasons, and I do not believe it is what God wants for me.

I can not tell you why God saw fit for me to be born into this body, any more than I could tell you why some people are born blind or deaf.

I can only tell you that I am personally and spiritually a stronger person for bearing this. I have had to examine myself on every level more than most people do in a lifetime.

You speak with the suggestion that I am not putting God first in my life. I hope I can put that fear to rest when I tell you that if my spiritual life was not high on my priority list, I would not have made it this far. In fact, it is my passion for God that makes me passionate about justice and having healthy relationships.

Finally, I am unsure what path I am going to take as far as physical transitioning goes. I knew that I did not want to pursue anything without taking the time to have this conversation. However, my friends here in New York, as well as some elsewhere, do know me by my chosen male name Micah, and use male pronouns to refer to me.

Love. Love. Love Always.

I want to know why:

So let's agree that we can all speak openly without expecting to change anyone's mind or opinion on anything. But let's also admit that deep down there is a hope on your part that we will find our way toward seeing you as our son, not our daughter. That is unlikely to happen. And on our part there is a hope that you will find a way to see yourself as our M****. Admittedly, that may be just as unlikely to happen. It's hard to imagine where we go from here when there yawns such a chasm between us, but at least we are still communicating. And willing to hear what the other one has to say. That's something at least.

I concede the point that the path you've chosen is not an easy one. I believe that I made that point without fully thinking it through. None of the options were easy, and that is, I'm sure, part of the reason for the intensity of your pain. But since this is obviously so difficult a decision, I must ask you what has led you to choose it. In the past several hours I have listed in my mind dozens of ways in which I believe you are female. But rather than list them for you and make you think I'm trying to

persuade you to believe other than what you believe, I choose for now to ask you to give me reasons why you believe you are male when your body tells you otherwise. And I am truly listening. I have read a little of some theorists' ideas of why gender identity crisis occurs, and one reason is that the child never really bonds deeply with the same gender parent. I have also read that there is often sexual abuse at a very early age, sometimes even before age 3. I don't know if you feel that either of these things are true for you, but as painful as they might be to hear, if they are, please say so. It is time to speak all of the truth. In my effort to understand how we arrived here (and it is all of us in this



place now, not just you), I really need you to explain to me how and why you have always felt male and not female.

I am still pondering what you have said in comparing your experience with that of someone with bipolar disorder or cerebral palsy. At best, I find that comparison confusing, at worst appalling. Please explain more so that I can try to wrap my mind around this.

I think that's about it for now. There is always love, even when there is pain, disagreement, and confusion.

Mom

Judging a tree by its fruits:

Mom and Dad,

I am not sure if you are asking me to list reasons such as "I like dinosaurs," or "I don't like Barbie dolls," but I am not going to do that, because I think it is entirely possible for a person to be male or female and have those things be true about them. I also feel like that "my list vs. your list" would lead to the point-counterpoint debate that I feel is ultimately unproductive and hurtful.

This isn't about gender stereotypes for me, it's about identity.

There are many, many things that I can look back at when I reflect on my life that make more sense because I'm male, but I don't think those little anecdotes are what make me male.

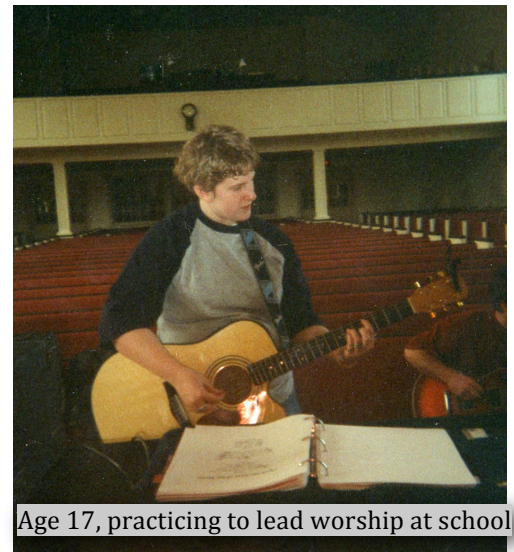
I understand your desire for concrete answers and examples A B and C, but it's more about the things that went through my head all the time--like wondering what it would be like to be a big brother when Luke was born, or hoping I'll be a man of God like my father when I grow up.

More than anything else, it's about the way my life has blossomed since I've stopped ignoring and avoiding this truth. If we should judge a person or a perspective by its fruits, then surely the picture of the confident person sitting at a computer writing this to you who has entirely healthy friendships and relationships for the first time in their life should have something to say.

Each day is a blessing to me now rather than a burden. I no longer apologize for my existence to anyone who will listen. I stand for what I believe, and I don't back away when I am confronted. As my appearance becomes more masculine, I no longer avoid mirrors and pictures at all costs. I see myself the way God sees me--as an intelligent, articulate, attractive part of his creation.

I am choosing this path not because of its ease or its difficulty, but because of its truth.

I am interested to know what theorists you have been gathering material from, as the suggestions you mentioned sound more Freudian than anything else. There is a wealth of material floating around out there from all kinds of different people--qualified and unqualified--so while I appreciate that this was a difficult subject for



you to breach, I don't want you to feel the need to point the "blame finger" at anything from my environment as I was developing. As I mentioned before, I love and appreciate the way our family raised me. When I think of our family, I think of love, and the only thing that hurts me is our differing perspectives on gender and attraction.

From my perspective, it makes sense to equate what I am going through to the experience of someone with bipolar disorder or cerebral palsy, because it is something that has medical treatment readily available to help me without taking away the experience of having gone through it.

I especially want to honor your comment that it is all of us who are in this place now. This is exactly what I mean when I say that when I think of love when I think of our family. I know that you love me, and I hope that you understand how much I love you too.

Love. Love. and Love.

The question of professional opinion:

I really wasn't meaning the dinosaurs vs. Barbie doll type of things. I also believe that those kinds of things could be true of either males or females. I am much more interested in how you perceive yourself as male and what you remember experiencing in terms of your frustration of not being what was expected. Your comments about being a big brother or growing up to be a man of God are good examples and very explanatory for me.

I am not asking you to defend your conclusions. But honestly, I do think that you should remember that while you have been living with this a long, long time, it is new for me. I don't expect you to rehash or relive every thought you've had about this your entire life. But I am asking that you share at least a little of what you wish you could have expressed to me all along. I may not have been listening then, but I am listening now.



Age 18, first day at Eastern University

I truly am glad that you are feeling much happier now. No mother in the world could feel differently. But I am not convinced that your present state is due to a decision to "be who you really are." I know that probably disappoints you, maybe even hurts you, and that is not my intention. I just believe that the truth as you see it may be just that: your truth.

And just because there are doctors who are willing to medicate or do surgery for someone doesn't equate that kind of medical treatment with that given to those suffering from other illnesses. There are doctors everywhere who are willing to do many things for patients as long as they pay for it. Therefore, if that is your primary reason, I cannot equate the two in my own mind.

Speaking of doctors, I would like to know if you have been to a professional counselor about any of this. Of course I would prefer that it would be a Christian, but I understand that this would be your choice. I am not suggesting this because I believe that a psychologist would "talk you out of this"--in fact, I have a fear that the opposite would probably happen--but I do believe that this is big enough to pursue some professional help, especially if you plan to take any further steps. I'm just wondering if you've done anything along these lines and/or have any plans to do so.

Glad we're still talking. And there is still love.

Mom

A few examples from childhood, and the spectrums of human experience:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am glad to hear you express that you are listening now, but it's somewhat difficult to find the exact words to say.

For example, it was never my intention to come across as if I am forgetting that this is a new conversation for you. I am choosing my words carefully and prayerfully, and if they were misread, I hope I can put that thought to rest.

You frame your question in a thoughtful way when you ask what I remember experiencing in terms of my frustration of not being what was expected. I can name many things--from my shock and disappointment when Jimmy from next door told me when I was four that all boys peed standing up, to my lifelong horror and discomfort dressing in female-specific clothing. My desire to ignore and deny the fact that I started my period when I was about 13--I had it two or three months before I told anyone, because I had hoped that it just wouldn't come, and that everyone would realize there had been some mistake, and that I was a boy. Loving to hear myself speak when I had a cold, because my voice sounded deeper. My ease and pride at being one of the guys in pre-calculus class. My excitement in realizing that my feet are big enough to wear a fairly typical size in guys' shoes. Referring to myself for as long as I can remember as male in my head.

I could go on, but I think you already believe me when I say that this is something I have been going through for my whole life. Our essential disagreement, if I am correct, is what we think should be done.

I have been seeing Christian therapists off and on since I was 14. That's ten years, and four therapists in total.

With the exception of the man whose sessions you were present for, I have gone over these ever-persistent thoughts with each of them. After following their suggestions and offering this up to God every day as I woke up, throughout my day as it came up again, and every night as I lay awake in bed to take away or to help me through it, the only thing I have ever received from God as a response is an overwhelming peace, rest, and comfort in knowing that I am just as he intended me to be.



Not, "try harder," or "keep laying this down," but only and ever and always, "Be still and know I am God." "Peace, child. You're focusing all your energy in the wrong direction."

For years, I thought this was a mistake--my sin nature tempting me to stop my daily process of obsessing and beating myself up over something I couldn't change. I wanted to ignore God and listen to his followers, thinking that I must be hearing him wrong. Unfortunately, church history has missed the boat in the past when it comes to affirming the humanity and the civil rights of others as well. I believe this is the case when it comes to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children of God today.

I am strong and I am certain that this is a part of God's plan for me--both in the way it has affected my life, and the lives of others as I speak this truth.

You suggest that it is only "my truth"--that this is not True to anyone but me. In some ways, that is a hard statement to wrestle with, and one of the thoughts that stopped me from speaking this for so long.

But God has fashioned a beautiful spectrum of creation, especially when it comes to humanity. People have hair colors ranging from blinding white to jet black. Skin tones ranging the same. Personalities ranging from soft-spoken to boisterous and outgoing. Our insides and our outsides are not all the way on one end of a spectrum or another. There is a range, a diversity in shades so subtle. Why do we acknowledge this in every aspect of humanity except in gender and attraction?

Finally, I do plan on speaking to someone professionally about all of this again. I have already started the intake process for a program near where I work in the Bronx.

My "reason" that you ask me about is not purely because there have been countless other similar cases recorded medically (although I think disregarding medical information simply because some doctors practice medicine irresponsibly is dangerous).

As I have mentioned, this has been a journey that has involved my mind, spirit, soul, and body. I am not simply listening to others. Nor am I simply listening to myself. Nor am I even going solely by what I believe God has been telling me all along. But with all of those things combined, tried and tested over and over again, I can not see the fact that I am male as anything other than the truth.

Love (and apologies if this was a little more ramby and less concise, as I have had quite a long day).

-Micah

Suffering, and keeping the conversation going:

My dear child,

I want to respond to you so that you know I am listening and that I hear what you are saying. But your last e-mail has given me many, many things to think about and pray about, so I hope that you will understand and forgive me if I cannot respond right now to everything you have said. That does not in any way indicate that I am shying away from the conversation. You have no idea how grateful I am that we are actually talking openly to one another. I have grieved the loss of that for a long time, maybe even in some ways as long as you have struggled with your identity.

I do want to say again how very much I love you. I know that you are not interested in pointing a blame finger, and I appreciate that a lot. But I also want you to hear



from me once and for all how fully aware I am that I have not always expressed my love for you adequately enough. I am grateful that in spite of that fact, you seem secure in the knowledge that I love you. That would be an act of blessing and grace from the God we both love. And, oh my child, I do love you so.

My love for you causes me to enter your suffering in ways I don't think you can imagine. And so the pain you

have endured has now become mine as well. Do not apologize for that or regret it. Part of the definition of motherhood is that the child is forever connected to the mother; thus, in hearing your story and trying to fully understand it, it has become my story as well. This is, in a very real way, distinct from the pain I suffer personally because our views are so different. Both are real, but one comes from empathy and the other from differing worldviews.

I cannot comment right now on all you have said about Christian counselors, the church's perspective, etc. I am still processing this, but I will revisit it later.

Always,
Mom

Epilogue:

As I said in the beginning, this conversation between us is ongoing. There is no real beginning or end, but it's great to be able to look back and see where we have progressed and where we seem stuck even now.

I feel blessed to be able to open this up to share it with you, and I hope that there was something you were able to take away from entering into the middle of that loving exchange.

I'll end with a blessing that my father said over us every night before we went upstairs to bed:

May God bless you, and keep you
May God's face shine upon you
May God be gracious unto you
And give you peace.

Amen.

***Sanctuary Collective** was a group of people committed to inspiring, empowering, and supporting young LGBTQ people and allies as they live and organize for justice in Christian Communities by training them and connecting them with a supportive collective of people - because every person can be a force for change in their own community and in the world.*

In 2015 it was relaunched as Queer Theology's online community to inspire, empower, and support LGBTQ Christians and straight, cisgender supporters all over the world.

We'd love for you to join us.

To learn more or to join in, visit queertheology.com/sanctuary-collective