

A Thread of Hurt: What Will You Weave?

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Elizabeth Bailey, Class of 2023, had a Program of Emphasis in Wildlife Conservation and won first place in the 2023 Bailey Oratorical Contest.

What does it mean to be gay? Picture it. Go on, I promise, this is not a trap. Really picture it. You are probably envisioning rainbows, glitter and glamour. If you are a Juniata College student, you may be thinking of PRISM's annual gay prom here on campus.¹ And you are not wrong. Those things are all remarkably and wonderfully gay. Unfortunately, that is not all of it. Allow me to offer you a metaphor. To be gay, trans or otherwise queer, is to spool a long thread of hurt inside of you. That thread of hurt is created from whispers, judgmental looks, and hateful legislation. It strangles your heart, and it sews your mouth shut, preventing you from speaking freely about who you are. Or, at least, that is what I thought for the first two thirds of my life, until a classmate of mine made the bravest decision I have ever seen anyone make. This classmate became a true profile in courage when she became the first person in my middle school to publicly come out as queer. In coming out, she exposed herself to harassment and danger. But she did it for the sake of authenticity, audacity, and solidarity.

Let us call her Natalie, because while she gave me permission to tell her story, she would kill me if I used her real name. When I knew her, Natalie was five foot nothing with an extra three inches in heels, and she always had something to say about everything. She had many friends, and though I was not one of them, I, along with everyone else, noticed when she came into school one day wearing a pride pin and loudly proclaiming to anyone who asked that she had just started dating her girlfriend. I was deep in the closet at the time and could not believe it. It was 2014. Same-sex marriage would not be legalized in the United States for another year. We were in the 8th grade, and, as I am sure you all can remember, middle school was vicious. Gay was a bad word. If you had a thread, you were supposed to keep it tucked under your sleeve. Natalie did not. She was ostracized for making the decision to be authentically herself. In one fell swoop, she went from popular girl to pariah, but she endured it all with a smile. Merriam-Webster Dictionary may define courage as the “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand, danger, fear, or difficulty,”² but I guarantee you neither of them ever had to scrub slurs off their locker. So Natalie and I – and I'm sure, some of you in the audience – can add an addendum to that definition. Courage is strength in the face of rejection. To be authentically herself in a school full of people who turned their backs on her because of who she loved? That was authenticity. That was courage.

Stay with me, here, because this next point gets a little dark. Natalie and I were never that close, so I think I surprised her when I asked her why she did it. “I was tired of not being me,” she said, “and I wondered if there was anyone else.” That last part shows Natalie’s true courage. She had no idea if she would have any support, no idea if anyone needed her. Her coming out was not all sparkles and rainbows; it was dangerous. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, queer youth are four times more likely to die from suicide.³ That means that by the time Natalie graduated from high school, she had to work four times as hard to still be alive. That is four times as courageous as anyone else I know. And she did it just in case it might help someone. I did not tell her at the time, but it did help. It helped me. In case you cannot tell from everything about me, I am extremely gay. I carried a thread of hurt when I was younger. Throughout middle school and the early days of high school, I was so anxious about my sexuality that I used to try and plot the angles of my death in geometry class. I would sit there wondering if a thread was enough material to hang myself with, because being dead seemed easier than being gay. I do not want to go into too much detail, though, because I don’t want you to mistake this speech for an instruction manual. Queer or not, we all have something hidden away in fear of rejection. We all spool a thread inside of us. I don’t want to be the person who teaches you how to knot your thread into a noose. But what Natalie did was weave her spool of thread into a friendship bracelet. She taught me and everyone else in our school that we could live in our own bodies. To be queer is to spool a thread in isolation until one day someone like Natalie shows you there is an entire aisle in the great craft store of life dedicated just to thread. Shows you that there are others like you who have such threads. An individual thread may be weak and hurtful, but with a group of threads, you can weave them together into something strong and beautiful. All it takes is one person to be the first to share theirs. Natalie’s dedication to being there for others even in the face of discrimination is an example of audacity. It is courage.

Can we be courageous, though, without solidarity? In 2014, we were only two generations away from the 1980s AIDs crisis, which, according to the CDC killed 100,777 people between 1981 and 1990, a significant portion of whom were queer.⁴ Gay was synonymous with dead. That same year, when Natalie came out, I found myself sitting on the floor of a church as a kind-sounding woman told me that every single one of “those” people would burn in hell. I felt the thread tightening inside of me, and I remember thinking, “an eternity in hell sounds a lot better than this conversation does right now.” But then I remembered Natalie. She showed me and all of my other closeted classmates who wouldn’t come out until years later that it was possible to be both queer and alive. She used her experiences to create solidarity within our community. Later, her courage would fuel my own. After all, if she could walk through the halls waving her thread in the air, maybe I could, too. Maybe I could write a speech for the Baily Oratorical Contest on what it means to be gay. High school ended eventually, and we all moved on,

but Natalie’s courage still motivates me to this day. In my junior year at Juniata College I made the decision to cut off all my hair and dress in a way that I would never be mistaken as straight. Juniata College is a more accepting community than my hometown ever was, largely due to all of you, but that did not completely alleviate my anxiety, and it did not make my decision 100% safe. What pushed me forward, though, was the hope that I could be to someone else what Natalie had been to me. I thought that if I could borrow some small part of Natalie’s courage, I could make someone else feel safe. And I believe that you can do this, too. Queer or not, we can all make the decision to be openly and proudly an ally. To wear our threads with pride, no matter what color they are, so that someone else knows they are safe to do so too. That is solidarity. That is courage.

So, let me ask you again. What does it mean to be gay? Well, it means a lot of things, but most of all it means to be courageous. I do not talk to Natalie much anymore. We are Facebook friends, which, to the modern college student, means exactly nothing. But it is enough to know that she is doing okay. Despite the odds, she made it. I made it. And all of you also made it. Thanks to people like Natalie, the world is much safer for queer youth now that it was back then. The fight for acceptance may be far from over, but in this moment, if we all emulate just a little bit of Natalie’s courage: if we make the brave decision to work together towards authenticity, audacity, and solidarity, we can teach future generations to weave their threads into something beautiful. To be different, in any way, is to spool a thread of hurt inside of you. But Natalie’s courage reminded me that that thread can be woven into a safer, more accepting world.

What will you weave with your spool of thread?

NOTES

1. PRISM is a student-led organization on Juniata College’s campus. According to the college’s website, “The purpose of PRISM is to serve as a social and activist student club for individuals who identify as a member of the LGBTQIA community. They work together to make Juniata a more open and safe community by increasing awareness and acceptance of LGBTQIA people and educating the campus community. They sponsor activities and programs on campus which provide opportunities for members of the LGBTQIA community and their allies to meet with each other.” Juniata Clubs and Organizations, <https://www.juniata.edu/campus-life/activities/clubs.php>.
2. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v, “courage (n.),” accessed October 12, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/courage>.
3. “LGBTQ+ Youth: Addressing Health Disparities with a School Based Approach,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Last reviewed, June 6, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>. The quoted statistic comes from the following study: Sherry Everett Jones, et. al., “Mental Health, Suicidality, and Connectedness Among High School

Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic—Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January-June 2021,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 1/3 (April 1, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/pdfs/su7103a3-H.pdf>.

4. “Current Trends Mortality Attributable to HIV Infections/AIDS—United States, 1981-1990,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 40/3 (January 25, 1991), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00001880.htm>.