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When "Straight" is the Default Setting

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When "Straight" is the Default Setting

Abstract

Coming out was never something I pictured myself having to do. Did I plan on being in the closet my entire life? Not exactly. I hardly had a clue that I was gay until I was eighteen. My friends and family sometimes struggle to understand that I am “suddenly” gay, after having dated boys since I was a freshman in high school. Their common misunderstanding is one of many that result from living in a heteronormative culture. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

college, coming out, Gettysburg College, heteronormativity, Lesbian, LGBTQ, Sexuality

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com. Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

WHEN “STRAIGHT” IS THE DEFAULT SETTING

March 7, 2018



Coming out was never something I pictured myself having to do. Did I plan on being in the closet my entire life? Not exactly. I hardly had a clue that I was gay until I was eighteen. My friends and family sometimes struggle to understand that I am “suddenly” gay, after having dated boys since I was a freshman in high school. Their common misunderstanding is one of many that result from living in a heteronormative culture.

During the first seventeen years of my life, I struggled to acknowledge my sexuality. A few girls in particular left me feeling confused, nervous, and very sweaty, but at the time my best guess was that my butterflies were the result of admiration. I had myself convinced that I looked up to these girls so much that I wanted to be them. Butterflies just came with new friendships, right? Not so much.

I succeeded in suppressing my feelings by dating boys throughout high school, but—surprise—there were no butterflies, no nerves, no random sweating. I stubbornly refused to believe that these relationships failed due to lack of attraction until I left for college.

A conversation with my new friends at Gettysburg revealed that no, not everyone is “a little gay.” I was the only person in the room who had experienced same-sex attraction. This was my first glimpse into the complexities of sexual attraction, and I was clearly not straight. Out of fairness to myself, I decided to dedicate energy to learning about, and eventually embracing, my sexuality.

Stories like mine are common in heteronormative cultures. I grew up denying my sexuality because being lesbian just wasn’t an option; I would rather think that there was something wrong with me than admit that I was gay. How

many more kids will have to grow up forcing themselves to conform to heteronormativity before our culture changes?

Coming out was beautiful and freeing, among many other clichés, but what really struck me was that I shouldn't *have* to come out. And yet, because I'm told I don't "look" gay, I've had to come out every day since. Why is it that the pressure is on LGBT youth to come out? My straight friends don't have to come out, because in a heteronormative culture, *straight is the default setting*.

LGBT kids need more than supportive friends and family; they need to be exposed to normalized examples of queer people in the world around them. There were only a handful of gay characters on the television shows that I grew up watching, but they portrayed controversial, and often offensive, tropes. Emily on *Pretty Little Liars* is the lost soul whose parents are disgusted by her sexuality; Damien in *Mean Girls* is the flamboyant theater fanatic who only exists as comic relief.

These limited and inaccurate representations of queer characters were almost all I had to base my own sexuality on. The queer kids who were out at my high school formed a colorful community of purple hair and rainbow suspenders, and while their experiences as queer individuals are valid, they did not model anything that I could identify with. I was desperate for someone to validate my identity; I just didn't know it.

LGBT people are more than just dramatic backstories, comic relief, and supporting roles. We are protagonists: main characters with goals and dreams and lives who deserve validation and representation not for being gay, but for being human. Increasing representation of LGBT people in television and movies won't turn straight kids gay, but it will help people like me find themselves much earlier.

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