Waiting for the Call

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During spring break, I visited my parents for the first time since I had come out to them. Mother and Daddy were once again living in Louisville. After twenty-three years as the pastor of First Baptist Church in Somerset, Daddy had accepted a position as Executive Director of Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children. We celebrated Mother’s sixty-third birthday. We felt happy to see each other and yet somewhat wary.

Near the end of the visit, we tried to talk about what had happened. Mother said very little. But Daddy returned again and again to his struggle to understand how he had failed as a parent. He catalogued mistakes. He and I had always had difficulty communicating, he thought, and he was trying to figure out why. It wasn’t, I thought, so much that we had difficulty communicating as that we often didn’t agree. He wondered if it had been a mistake to end so many of our discussions in my childhood with the words, “Don’t talk back,” or if he had failed me by working such long hours and being absent so often. He believed he had been too rigid in his beliefs. Yet, he insisted, he had tried his best to set a good example.

He kept sifting through our relationship, trying to figure out how his good intentions and devotion could have failed so utterly. He always
knew what he believed, he said, and that he was called of God. Somehow he suspected that this assurance seemed to bother Jeannie and me. But he didn’t know why. He told me he had given up offering advice and counsel; it did no good unless people wanted to hear it. Then he launched into a long testimony about his faith and how it sustained him.

He wanted me to talk about what I believed. I parried; my spiritual life was important to me but was not a subject I wanted to discuss. I wasn’t going to church. I believed there was “something more,” something transcendent. I believed we all needed to find ways to care for one another and the world. I believed in talking to Jesus and saying thank you when I did so. I suspected this was much too watered down to reassure him about my spiritual life. He talked about the values he and Mother tried to instill that had taken root—honesty and integrity, concern for social justice, interest in women’s rights. He couldn’t figure out how it was that they had taught us some of their beliefs but not managed to transfer the whole package. Tears filled his eyes.

Perhaps without meaning to, he circled back to the familiar role of counselor. When he moved to my side, put his arm around me, and began to offer advice, I stopped him.

“Daddy, I need to say something to you. If you want to give me advice, go over there and sit in that chair and fire away. If you want to hug me, come over here and let’s hug. But don’t do both together. Because when you do I can’t figure out whether you’re trying to love me or control me.”

He was shocked. He had been hugging people and counseling them throughout his whole ministry. He thought giving advice was one of the best gifts he had to bring to a relationship. He would stand at the front of the church and present new members or converts with his arm tight around their shoulders while he told us why they had come forward. People liked the way he loved folks into the church. Church members seemed not to mind an arm around the shoulder while he told them how they should live their lives. But for me it was miserable, and he hadn’t even known. For years, I had flinched and said nothing; my objection came out of the blue. My heart was pounding. I loved him so much, and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. But he listened to me (and he never did it again).
After he left the room, I told Mother I wished he would not blame himself and take it all so hard.

“I’ve learned not to do that anymore,” she said quietly. “I just enjoy what we have in common and leave the rest.”

“That’s it exactly,” I said, and we continued on comfortably without trying to figure out where or why I had gone astray. As he drove me back to the train station, Daddy spoke again about his sorrow over having failed me.

“I don’t think you failed me at all,” I told him. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. There aren’t any perfect fathers out there. You did the best you could. I think it all turned out pretty well.” But that, of course, was a point on which we could not really agree.

At Chicago’s Union Station, Carol met me, and our life together began.

We had been dating for several months when we traveled to Kentucky for another visit to my parents. On the drive down Carol had asked if there was anything she should know about them.

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” I advised.

“I’ll do my best,” she said gamely.

I seemed to have a knack for finding girlfriends who exclaimed, “Jesus Christ!” within the first half hour of meeting Mother and Daddy. In Carol’s case, the ill-fated oath burst from her mouth when my mother asked her to raise the blinds in the kitchen. At her first tug, the blinds crashed to the floor. She stood sheepishly in the bright yellow, sun-filled kitchen. But my parents kindly pretended not to notice that she had broken one of the Ten Commandments.

They couldn’t help but like my kind, smart, funny, engaging girlfriend. Carol so clearly matched me in interests and background. By the time I knew her, she neither drank nor smoked, which must have gone some way toward consoling them for the occasional expletive, and if she wasn’t raised Baptist she was at least Protestant. Her parents were nominal Methodists. In our family, Methodists were considered about the nearest thing to Baptists, so she got definite points for that affiliation. Mother and Daddy carefully ushered us into separate bedrooms when we visited, but in many ways they seemed to accept us as a couple.

In May of 1985, Carol and I moved in together. Today gay wedding
ceremonies have become so common that mainline Protestant churches
debate their acceptability. Canada and the state of Massachusetts have
legalized gay marriage, and gay weddings have shown up on prime-time
television. In 1985, however, gay weddings were almost unheard of. Yet
the decision to move in together marked a deeper level of commitment in
the life we shared, and we wanted, in some way, to mark that for ourselves
and our friends.

We planned a party that mimicked a wedding reception. Our wed-
ninglike invitations announced the “marriage of our addresses” and
invited the recipients to a celebration of this union. I remember the look
of disapproval on the face of the woman from whom we bought those
invitations when we told her how they should read. I remember feeling
hurt by her response and how Carol and I forged ahead, determined that
she would not dampen our happiness.

Our marriage of addresses party was both a thoroughly camp send-up
of wedding receptions and an honest and deeply felt public declaration of
commitment. The structure of the party allowed us to make explicit con-
nections to heterosexual ceremonies while its tongue-in-cheek tone dis-
tanced us from the very ritual we were invoking. It seemed barely possi-
b le to us to mark the occasion with a wonderful party. It did not seem
possible to do so without offering any friends who wished it some space
for ironic distance. I warned a woman I worked with that she would be
getting an invitation from me and should remember that it had been
issued with tongue planted firmly in cheek. I felt I had to give her permis-
sion not to take us seriously at the same time that Carol and I were in
absolute earnest about the life we were creating together.

My tastes had gone uptown since the basement wedding receptions of
my childhood. We followed the Baptist traditions of my youth by having
a three-tiered cake, pastel mints, salted nuts, and a guest register, but we
also served a catered buffet. Our mimicking of tradition included a cake
topped with the figures of two brides.

The question of what to wear occupied a good deal of our attention.
The choices we made signaled our connections to traditional wedding
celebrations and our lesbian community and the playful approach we
took to the whole event. We wore tuxedo shirts, bow ties, and casual
pants (one pair black, the other pink). Shoes for Carol were high-top sneakers; I wore black flats and lace socks.

On the appointed day, our friend Diane arrived early, wearing an aqua chiffon mother of the bride number she had found at Goodwill. Her accessories included white tennis shoes and crew socks and white gloves with the fingers cut out. She played piano for the event, including a lush rendition of “Feelings” that had Carol and me whirling around the living room in our best version of the happy couple’s first dance. Lesbian friends joined with work friends. This motley company ate and drank and celebrated for hours.

Even as we made our plans, we felt uncertain about the response our heterosexual friends, families, and coworkers would have to our celebration. Neither of us invited our parents. We did not think they would come and did not want the pain of a refusal.

Although my parents were not there, we were not without family. My sister came to help us celebrate, as did a sister of Carol’s. Jeannie stayed the weekend, helping us get ready; enjoying the fun, friends, and good food; and helping us clean up.

In the wedding ceremonies of my youth, showers of rice symbolized the fertility wished upon these unions. In the celebration Carol and I created, nothing foretold the children that would transform us publicly and irrevocably into a family. When we joined our lives together in 1985, the social and legal definitions of family had sufficiently influenced my dreams that I assumed we would not have children. There were no little satin packets of rice.

A few months after that party, Carol’s sister gave birth to a daughter with whom Carol fell hopelessly in love. We had great fun being doting aunts. Carol had never really pictured herself as a mother, but her love of Ardyce caused her to begin to think of a child of her own. But I’m getting ahead of my story. It took several years for Ardyce to work her magic. During that time, Carol and I settled into our life together.

My work flourished. For the first time since I had begun teaching at DePaul, my home life was a source of peace and support. I entered a period of scholarly productivity that earned me tenure and a promotion to associate professor. I began writing on the short stories of Grace Paley,
stories that had drawn me in with their innovative use of language and narrative structure and their insistent belief that mundane moments in the lives of women and children matter. I loved Paley’s voice, at once wise and wisecracking, and her passion for social justice. I loved her invention of narrative worlds that shone a light on ordinary women’s lives. I took on a growing leadership role in the university, moving into the position of director of women’s studies, a program I had helped create. I was surprised and pleased to discover that DePaul, a Catholic university, had become a place where you could be out without sabotaging your career.

When I first came out, I was not certain that this would be possible. Although I knew other gay faculty members, most were extremely closeted. I soon realized that I would not be comfortable in the closet and made a decision to act as if there was nothing remarkable about my lesbian life. I talked about my partner as casually and comfortably as my heterosexual colleagues talked about their spouses. When university parties or functions included spouses, I brought Carol. Of course, this matter-of-fact approach was a bluff. I didn’t feel that casual and comfortable. But I hoped that if I behaved naturally about my choice of a partner others would take their cue from me, and for the most part they did.

By this time, Carol was working as a writer and editor for Lands’ End. Whenever we could both get away from work, we traveled. For three or four summers in a row, we spent a week in Maine. Carol loved to return to see her old friends and breathe in the clear and salty air of this state she called home. I had never been to Maine and delighted in being brought into her special world—the rocky coast, beautiful clear lakes, and snake-free northern woods (an especially important point to Carol, who had a terror of snakes), the boiled lobsters and blueberry pancakes. Sometimes we rented a cabin on Pemaquid Point. We would read, hike, canoe around the bay, cook lobster, and entertain friends who would roll in from nearby towns.

In 1988, we traveled with several hundred thousand other gay men, lesbians, and their friends and family to a Gay Rights March on Washington. A few weeks earlier, my parents had visited us. They saw a postcard announcing the march on our refrigerator door and asked if we were planning to go. We told them that we were. “What do you want that you don’t have?” my mother wondered.
I mentioned job and housing discrimination, harassment and in some cases assault on the streets, parents denied custody of their own children or turned down for adoption, unrecognized and unprotected relationships, and the lack of funding for AIDS research. Mother began to worry out loud about our safety. I assured her we would be fine.

My father, who, no matter what the topic, always sounds like a preacher, said, “Here’s what I can’t understand. I can’t understand how you could think that this is normal, not against nature.”

“Daddy, that’s because it’s not normal for you; it doesn’t fit with your nature. But for me it is completely normal. I think you know that I gave heterosexuality a thorough try. As much as I tried to make it work, it always felt like an effort to me. This feels like the most normal thing in the world.”

“I can’t understand it,” he said. “I guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree.”

“I guess we will,” I said with a sigh. Both of them looked tight-lipped and uncomfortable. I searched for words that could help us find common ground. “Listen,” I said after a moment, “I want you all to know how much I appreciate the loving way you treat me and Carol. You really have accepted us and made both of us feel so welcome with you. That means so much to me. I want you to know that I don’t assume your fundamental objections to homosexuality have changed.”

As I said those words, both Mother and Daddy visibly relaxed. I had sensed over the past several months that they felt I might not understand this. As if I were pressuring them to be not just accepting of but in agreement with us. Their reaction told me I had been right. Now they could be just as warm and loving as they wanted without worrying that I would think they had abandoned their convictions about the sinful state I had elected. Of course, I would have dearly loved for them to agree with me that Carol’s and my relationship was as valid and life affirming as their own. On some level, perhaps, they had been right to be on their guard. I’m sure I had been pushing for exactly such full and complete acceptance. But I knew that if I wanted them to accept me as I was I had to accept them as they were. Somehow we all had to love one another in spite of, rather than because of, some of our most deeply held beliefs.

Not long afterward, Carol accompanied me on a visit to Kentucky for
the first time in about two years. It was not easy for us to visit my parents all day, with little or no private time, and then spend our nights in separate bedrooms. Carol liked my parents, but she felt in some sense like she was still, despite nearly five years together, the outsider—a good friend, perhaps, but not quite family. We left on Friday after work, and by the time we made the six-hour drive it was almost midnight. Yet when we got there the lights were on, and Mother and Daddy were waiting happily to greet us. They had fixed a substantial snack, more of a supper really. Cornbread sticks and greens and navy beans cooked with bits of ham—a good Kentucky meal. Mother didn’t think I ate properly up north. After we’d visited for a bit and eaten more than we could really hold, Mother said, “Well, I expect you all want to get some rest. We should let you get to your room.”

They walked us down the hall toward the two rooms they had always given us. But instead of showing us into separate rooms they walked us into one. The lamps were on; the fresh, clean sheets were turned down. There was a little vase on the dresser with two rosebuds from the garden. Two sets of fresh towels were stacked on the chest of drawers. I almost expected to see tiny chocolates on the pillows. The family room with the foldout couch was dark, the couch not made up for sleeping. “Here you go,” Mother said. “Everything is all ready for you.”

“Thank you,” we said. Flabbergasted, we feigned nonchalance. “This looks really inviting. Goodnight, I love you, we’ll see you all in the morning.” We kissed goodnight. They walked to their room and shut the door. We turned to each other, jaws dropping, grins of amazement and delight on our faces. At last, they had decided to treat us as a couple.

The next morning, when I came into the kitchen, I noticed something I had missed the night before. On the kitchen wall, Mother had always had two small, intricately carved ivory frames brought to her from China by a missionary. One held a picture of Jeannie and her husband. The other had contained a picture of me. Now my picture had been replaced with one of Carol, me, and our cat. I said something pleasant but low key, maybe, “Oh, look, a picture of Carol and me and Louise.” But I felt such love.

We never spoke directly about the changed sleeping arrangements. Later I learned how Mother put it when she talked to my sister: “Well,
they’ll be more comfortable, and we’ll be more comfortable, and anyway, why pretend?”

Mother, by this time, had begun to share news with me of gay-related events in Louisville. When the daughter of a wealthy newspaper family in Louisville planned a commitment ceremony with her partner, a local female judge, Mother told me about it. When gay-related hate crimes were reported in the local press, she filled me in. When a particularly interesting gay-related television program was aired on the *Phil Donahue Show*, I heard all about it.

I’ll never know exactly how these changes came about, although I suspect my mother led the way. Perhaps it helped when I reassured them that I would not interpret loving treatment of Carol and me as agreement. Of course, I hoped that they had become less certain over time of how God regarded gay relationships, that they had perhaps begun to harbor a sliver of doubt over the absolute rectitude of their earlier judgment, but I had to content myself with the amazing distance they had already traveled. Whatever their beliefs, they welcomed us with open hearts and arms.