“I am”

Jef Caers

Coming out means becoming human, to share common struggles, to become vulnerable. In this space, fear of rejection about sexual identity dissipates into “I am” but human, and it can start as simply as with a conversation with someone you like and trust, states Jef Caers.

Credit: Image courtesy of Oscar Wong

I am a gay man, I am bipolar, I am HIV positive, I am a crystal meth addict. There you have it, today, after a decades-long process, I can write this without shame. Without holding back who I am at work or in my personal life. I am out. In fact, today I simply am.

I knew I was gay when I was nine years old. I grew up in a loving family in a rural town in Belgium, where, despite being the second country in the world to approve gay marriage, the overbearing cultural heritage of the catholic church kept most of us in the closet. At that time, the name used for ‘gay’ in Flanders was ‘verkeerd’, meaning ‘wrong’, like a spelling error. The internalized fear of feeling there was something wrong with me led to the construction of a fortress of secrets: hiding my sexual identity turned into hiding my complete self, causing the inevitable loneliness to set in. Fear and loneliness are some of our most primal emotions. They work slowly, consuming the heart, eating at the soul. Naturally, I sought escapes, drug use being one of them, which wreaked havoc on my life. A slow but steady downward spiral ensued in my thirties. I have stood at the Golden Gate bridge, looking to jump into my dark abyss.

As the spiral downward is slow, so too is the spiral upward, but it is one of the most rewarding experiences a person can ever have. My solution to the fear and loneliness was in finding and doing “community”. The community of the twelve-step program. The community of performing music together. The community of Aidslifecycle, a yearly trip with 2500 cyclist of all colors of the rainbow from San Francisco to Los Angeles, raising funds for those living with HIV/AIDS and not privileged to afford the medication I take daily. The community of Project Open Hand, a volunteering organization for the homeless in San Francisco where I work every week. My life grew more diverse; diversity saved my life.

I therefore faced the daily commute from a diverse world of friends of all forms to the white suburban geosciences. Indeed, starting as Professor of Petroleum Engineering in 1998 did not bring any incentive to open up about my identity: most of my colleagues were white straight men over fifty, and some also had strange views on homosexuality which they were more than happy to express. A lot of progress has been made but, at the time, meandering the world of geosciences as a gay person was

challenging. I went to conferences in countries where gay people were and still are stoned to death. I often lied about being married, even imagined having children, just to be able to fit in the conversation; there was little being discussed besides science and kids.

I really only dared to come out after tenure and have been doing it ever since, first with individuals, then in small groups, now standing in front of larger audiences. A hunger exists for people to hear these stories. I learned that the process can be gradual, that “it gets better” over time, but that it was important to be ‘out’ in the workplace for my mental and physical health. My own rule to coming out initially was very simple: do I like that person? My experience is that people I liked are also kind and compassionate. I have made unexpected friendships with colleagues by simply reaching out and asking: “I am struggling, can we talk?”. Professors are not supposed to struggle, I felt the pressure to be the shining example, perfect advisor and teacher, all the time, without flaws. Excellence without visible vulnerability felt like distant and hollow elitism.

While coming out is challenging, the rewards take on vast and unexpected forms. For example, as the closet imposes limitations, they perpetuated in the safe scope of research problems I was daring to address. Dismantling the closet therefore encouraged me to also leave my comfort zone from a research perspective. I now work on problems that I could never have imagined earlier in my career, even after becoming full Professor. Moreover, being vulnerable and talking to students about my identity and struggles therein has made me appear more human, perhaps touching them in ways that I could not with science.

Despite the now lesser direct aggression against those that are LGBTQIA+, the more creeping problem in my career was the obstruction to diversity from the white moderate. Obstruction to radical increase in diversity in the geosciences; obstruction to people feeling at home at work; using the mantle of unanimity and consensus to stall progress. The geosciences field is moderately conservative; its internal world still needs a radical overhaul, today, not in the next 5-10 years.

COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd have changed a lot. Former

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and current students of Stanford Earth came out, as gay, as bipolar, as Asian being angry about Asian hate, and feeling “second” to white. Initiatives, such as seminars and courses, on diversity in the geosciences are mushrooming all over the US. The cohort of new students in my department, Geological Sciences, is the most diverse I have ever seen. More has changed in the last year than the last 20 years. The [IDEAL program](#) at Stanford and the DEI efforts finally include accountability for leadership. For too long many of us have dealt with the minority tax, the concept where every diversity initiative committee has the one gay, trans, black, [insert identity] person addressing the lack of diversity. Today, finally, the white straight moderate has started to actively partake in that process.

Coming out means to become human, for gay and straight alike, to share our common struggles, whether it is addiction, mental health, hidden disabilities or fear of rejection because of identity. Visibility has increased but remains much needed; vulnerability in all forms

remains too invisible. I encourage you to open up to a person you like. Share with that person you are struggling and they will likely share their own struggle. Such actions in elite institutions are rare, yet I call on colleagues and students to provide a space and time where being vulnerable is celebrated, not shunned. To share not just about your failures, but about the feeling arising from them. Identity dissipates when everyone becomes vulnerable. With new incoming students, I have a heart-to-heart conversation about “values”. Often we don’t know each other, yet in the sharing of values, I get to know what is important in my students’ life; it’s a great conversation starter about identity. What values do you identify with?

Now, I am ok being out at work. Today, “I am”, because “if you start a sentence with “I am”, you should just stop there” (Eckhart Tolle). Today, “I am” because the rest is already taken (Oscar Wilde).

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.