

Witness to Reconciliation

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Hello everyone, my name is Jon Jerow, and for those of you who don't know me, I'm the son of Joyce Teusink and Bob Jerow. I grew up on that carpet over there, listening to wise words and terrible puns every week, and have returned today to give a witness to reconciliation. I tend towards the verbose, so I'll jump right in and tell you that this is going to be a story of a difficult time in my life. It starts when I was a sophomore at Kalamazoo College, and an active member of the college's circus troupe. It was in this troupe I met someone named Michaela, who now goes by Mick. I was in the middle of discovering, as most folks in their early 20's do, that relationships are hard! I mean, it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to grow a healthy relationship, and even with that it occasionally falters for outside reasons. Despite all that, I was confident that Mick and I would absolutely make things work, we were bonafide. And for a year, we did work! We had a wonderful relationship, with give and take, we made a point of communicating with one another, and sharing our lives together as partners. I wouldn't hesitate to say we were both very much in love.

Now, having grown up on a farm, in a smaller town in West Michigan, I have certain parts of myself that I cannot help. I like to focus on the positive ones, like the work ethic that I got from baling hay for full, 90 degree summer days. Or the commitment to welcoming others into any and all spaces, that I attribute to my time here at Hope Church and as the son of my wonderful mother. There are however certainly

negative parts, for instance having grown up in Lake Michigan, I find I have trouble swimming in the ocean, for all that salt. It just seems wrong!

With that said, there came a time during my relationship with Mick, where they decided to start telling people something they had learned about themselves. It was that Mick no longer felt they could conform to either gender, and so opted to be considered Gender-Nonconforming. They were understandably nervous to tell me, but when they did, I wasn't ready for my own reaction. I felt things I really wasn't prepared to deal with. It ran the gauntlet from concern, to excitement, to curiosity, sadness, and even anger. I paused a lot of what was happening in my life, and spent a long time journaling at every opportunity, secluding from people, trying to understand the storm going on in my head. I let a few friendships fall by the wayside during this time, I was irritable much more frequently, and I was frustrated that it was taking so long to understand myself.

As it turns out, I had a lot of things present in my heart that I hadn't come to terms with. I always considered myself to be a forward thinking, progressive person. I considered myself a feminist, and only in a cursory manner did I ever think I might be part of the problem. Oh no, those are the other people, the hateful ones, they cause all the problems. I'm supportive of everyone discovering and being themselves, I'm one of the loving people! As it turns out, having never looked deeply into myself about it, I had missed a few things, glossed over a few things over.

I loved this person. This person no longer considered themselves to be strictly a

woman, but I definitely still loved them. Of course I did. So does that mean I'm attracted to people who aren't women? Am I perhaps not a straight person? That shook me, because I had always identified myself as straight, yet here was something telling me otherwise. I felt a sadness, because I thought perhaps this meant we wouldn't be able to have the family I'd always envisioned. Of course we could have a family, but I wasn't sure if Mick would want to have our children. Thinking about the future of my relationship, I let my mind run forward to see where I'd end up. It turns out that the future I had imagined for myself was pretty gendered. It involved myself, and a female wife, and our kids that we made ourselves, and the two of us supporting each other's careers as we raised our children in a small town on the west coast, maybe northern California.

That future I longed for wasn't viable anymore, because the truth of the matter was that I loved Mick. Nothing had changed between us. They had not changed. I had not changed, they had simply discovered something about themselves! I was torn, between this vision of a future I thought I needed to pursue, and my very real, immediate love for a person who didn't fit into that future. For a time, I simply wallowed in these feelings, torn between two sides. As I kept writing, however, I slowly began to bridge that gap, by exposing parts of myself in my journaling. I worked hard to genuinely entertain the notion of futures that were not the one I had tunnel vision for, realities in which I didn't have children, realities in which I and a partner pursued passion careers, or spent our time traveling, or adopted children to help ease the world's burden in that

way.

Being raised here in West Michigan had a lot of perks, but it turns out that it had also seeded some expectations about reality, about gender, about myself, that were unfounded. Looking back, those assumptions affected how I had conversations with both genders, making comments that I thought were voicing love, but were oftentimes robbing others of their agency. I never thought of myself as part of the problem, but pieces of me that I held dear were based on outdated ideas about gender. I hadn't done the hard work of rooting out those prejudices from the core of my identity. The trouble with shuffling things around at the core of your identity, is that your idea of self shifts, in a huge way. A scary way. It's not easy work. But I kept writing.

Eventually, I found myself nearly patched up, after being torn in two over my want to be with Mick, and my want for the future I had always dreamed of. I found that what was important was loving the people around me to the best of my ability, regardless of what that might mean for my future. Holding that love for others at the core of my being is what brought me back to myself, with a new understanding of life, and those around me. That God is Love is truest expression to me of the power of reconciliation, and I've found that if we open ourselves to that love, it can heal the wounds we find festering within ourselves. Thank you for listening to my story, and may God's love be with you and in you.