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Father's Blessing: Ethnographic Drama, Poetry, and Prose¹

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Cast:

Ray Wise: the son

Steven Wise: the father

Lisa Tillmann: the friend/researcher

Staging: three chairs surround a table with drawer facing center stage chair; black boxes sit behind chairs at stage right and left.

Props: tape recorder, note pad, pen, scrapbook, yearbook, necktie

RAY sits at table in stage right chair. STEVEN sits on black box, stage left. LISA stands stage right of RAY.

LISA: [*to audience*] I met Ray Wise in 1995. The softball team on which he played, a largely gay male group in a mainly gay male league, became the focus of my Ph.D. dissertation² and first book, *Between Gay and Straight*,³ a narrative ethnography⁴ of

¹ The most updated version of this piece appears in the book *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* (Routledge 2015). An earlier version of "Father's Blessing" was published in *Symbolic Interaction* (Tillmann 2008; used with permission, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/si.2008.31.4.376/abstract>). For other ethnographic dramas centered on relationships, see, e.g., Ellis and Bochner (1992), Foster (2002), and Pelias (2002). For additional performance works that reflect both the interpretive and the critical paradigm, see, e.g., Bornstein (1995), Lockford (2004), Moreira and Diversi (2011), Spry (2011), and chapter 6.

² See Tillmann-Healy (1998).

³ See Tillmann-Healy (2001).

communication and relationships across sexual orientation. In 2003, I began a follow-up project called *Going Home*. This involved collaborating with four gay men (including Ray); conducting life history interviews; and traveling to the men's hometowns and/or other key sites to conduct fieldwork, shoot photographs and video, and interview family members.

This three-character ethnographic play evokes the process of my work with Ray and his father Steven. I composed this from interview transcripts (four sessions with Ray, two with Steven), field notes from a four-day visit to Buck Hill, California in May 2004, and follow-up conversations, correspondence, and workshop sessions (three with Ray, one with Steven and Ray).

LISA crosses to middle chair, sits, and takes tape recorder, note pad, and pen from drawer.

LISA: [to RAY] Do you want your father to be part of this project?

RAY: My real father? Um ... sure.

LISA: Would he agree to participate?

RAY: Possibly. Our relationship has been complicated, but that has little to do with my being gay.

LISA: He lives in California?

RAY: Outside Sacramento, Buck Hill.

LISA: When was your last visit?

RAY: Never been there.

LISA: Really? Has he lived in Buck Hill long?

RAY: Since maybe ... '93.

⁴ See Tedlock (1991).

LISA: Wow. When did you last see him?

RAY: Four years ago, at my brother's wedding.

LISA: Describe your father.

RAY: Type-A American male: workaholic, competitive. I remember him wanting to compare test scores, track times.

LISA: Characterize your relationship.

RAY: Tense, distant. Maybe a card around my birthday. Even that has been hit or miss. There's always some excuse: "I didn't have your new address." Then again, my dad has a lot of kids to keep track of: four sons from his marriage to my mom; two sons, a daughter, and a stepdaughter from his second marriage; and two stepsons from his third.

LISA: Tell me about his family of origin.

RAY: My father descends from one of the Mormon Church's founding families. Solomon Wise served as a bodyguard to Joseph Smith.

Dad's family endured illnesses and early deaths. Two of his siblings developed a rare disease. His oldest sister spent years on dialysis before dying. The oldest brother, who himself had polio as a child, donated a kidney to the youngest brother. In high school, my dad contracted encephalitis. His heart stopped; he slipped into a coma and almost died. I know their mother died young ... cancer or something.

LISA: [*to audience*] May 15, 2004: our final interview before the journey to Buck Hill.

[*to RAY*] How are you feeling?

RAY: Nervous. This won't be just hanging out. You'll ask questions, and my dad and I will have to address issues we normally wouldn't. I know my dad loves me, and I love

my dad, but we just never talk. It's almost like visiting a stranger.

LISA: When did you last have a deep conversation?

RAY: Um ... well ... we chatted when I told him our travel plans. Looking back, I don't know if we've *ever* had deep conversation. I think my dad and I both want our relationship to be closer, but we need to move from wanting to making it happen.

LISA: [*to audience*] My mind returns to Ray's description of their relationship as "tense, distant." How might this project alleviate tension and draw them closer? How might it open old wounds and pull father and son further apart? The work feels thick with both opportunity and risk. As an author, I know that a text can be produced regardless of what transpires, and conflict drives narrative. But as a narrative ethnographer, I am committed to collaborative, just, and non-exploitive fieldwork. As Ray's friend and ally, I vow to privilege my relationship with Ray and his with his father over any other goal. If the research, writing, or publication of this work threatens to undermine their communication or relationship, I will offer to abandon it, allowing the Wise men to decide its fate.

LISA returns recorder, note pad, and pen to drawer. She stands, crosses to stage left of table.

LISA: [*to audience*] May 19, 2004: Ray and I fly to Sacramento. He sleeps most of the flight while I look over notes and transcripts. As we descend, I take in the tree-covered mountains, patchwork quilt of farmland, and mirrored irrigation ponds reflecting the spring sky.

I met Steven Wise once before, at Ray's college graduation in 1997. Beyond a brief introduction, I'm not sure we spoke. I have a photograph from that day: Ray in cap and gown, Steven in a grey suit. Their embrace appears more obligatory than exuberant.

At the airport, Ray and I retrieve our bags, rent a Ford Focus, and make our way to the southern suburbs. Five-thirty p.m., we pull up to the family's cottage-style house.

RAY stands, crosses to stage left of Lisa.

LISA: [*to audience*] I take a deep breath. The front door opens before we knock.

STEVEN rises from stage left black box, crosses to greet RAY and LISA.

STEVEN: Welcome! [*embraces RAY*]

RAY: Dad, this is Lisa.

LISA: [*shaking STEVEN's hand*] Pleasure to see you again, sir.

STEVEN: Let me help with your bags.

RAY and STEVEN cross to table; STEVEN stands behind stage left chair, RAY behind stage right chair.

LISA: [*to audience*] The living room has a marble topped vanity, washed oak armoire with painted floral design, curved sectional sofa, and upright piano. As we tour, I note the warm décor: family photographs, prints and paintings of Jesus, and travel mementos: German beer stein, Egyptian tapestry, and Asian furniture. Shelves house computer books, several copies of the Bible and Book of Mormon, as well as tomes on leadership and motivation, including Bill O'Reilly's *Who's Looking Out for You?*

STEVEN: [*to audience*] Hundreds of books, and she singles out that one!

LISA: [*to STEVEN*] Selective, I admit, but also reflective of one genre I saw.

RAY: [*to STEVEN*] She's trying to set the scene, establish your character.

STEVEN: [*to LISA*] Why politicize? I thought the project focused on Ray's and my relationship.

LISA: [*to audience*] In January 2006, Ray, Steven, and I meet to workshop a draft of this play. We use several strategies to address material that provokes discomfort or disagreement. If an excerpt is deemed inessential to the narrative and/or harmful to others in the family, it is removed. Other material, particularly that written from field notes, is clarified and expanded based on Ray's and Steven's recollections. Each of us also takes opportunities to address you, the audience, and therefore each other, answering questions as well as offering further thoughts and feelings. Textual politics consume much of our five-hour workshop. While agreeing that relational dynamics should remain center stage, I find it important to show several character dimensions, including faith, personality, and politics, and to express how each seems to inform the way Steven and Ray interact. Ray's approach to the multiple workshops in which he participated communicates commitment to his father, to the future of their relationship, and to the goals of the project, which include promoting introspection, understanding, and dialogue as well as personal, relational, and social change. The resultant text reflects a balance, achieved mainly through consensus but also through conflict and compromise between Ray's, Steven's, and my often-overlapping but sometimes-differing interpretations of relational and project goals.

LISA crosses to center stage chair; all sit.

LISA: [*to audience*] Our host leads us to the patio. Ray and I admire the garden's apricot trees and foxtail fern. We sit beneath a grey stained arbor, the air perfumed by star

jasmine. My gaze shifts between father and son: father's eyes: olive, son's: moss.

Father's hair: more salt than pepper, son's: chocolate streaked with caramel. If combed straight back rather than to the side, Steven's receding hair would follow the same contours as Ray's. I note the similar shape of their ears, brow lines, and upper lips.

We talk about many subjects that first night: marriage, conflict, loss.

STEVEN: It was supposed to be a routine hysterectomy.

RAY: I thought Grandma died of cancer.

STEVEN: Cardiac arrest. Before Mom went in for surgery, my brother and I prayed over her. Later, we realized that we asked God for her *comfort*, not recovery. My mother also may have had a premonition, because she wrote letters "to be opened after my death" to each of her children.

RAY: Had I been born?

STEVEN: I hadn't even met your mother. I was fresh out of the Air Force Academy and in pilot training.

RAY: Did you see combat?

LISA: [*to audience*] I am struck that Ray doesn't know the answers to these questions.

STEVEN: A tour in Vietnam as Forward Air Controller. FACs fly ahead of attack aircraft and direct strikes against enemy targets.

RAY: Did friends of yours die?

STEVEN: Oh yes.

RAY: Did you kill anyone?

STEVEN: Many enemy soldiers died in the strikes I directed.

LISA removes scrapbook from drawer.

LISA: [*to audience*] Later that night, we sit at his kitchen table while Steven narrates from a scrapbook. Woven wood encases pages of yellowed newspaper clippings. One reads: “Baptism in Vietnam.”

STEVEN: Mormon missionaries teach Christianity across the globe, even in countries at war. I used to help deliver medicine and food to orphans.

LISA: [*to audience*] The album also contains black and white photographs, some with concise yet compelling captions:

RAY: [*reading*] “Bodies.” “Dead.”

STEVEN: 1968, General Westmoreland ordered air strikes against operations near Khe Sanh. Vietcong soldiers forced civilians to carry ammunition and supplies, using even women and children as human shields.

LISA: [*to audience*] At our workshop session, Steven offers further detail:

STEVEN: I understood our mission. Had the enemy captured Khe Sanh, it could have altered the war’s course, but when I saw bombs strike those civilians, I teared up so much I hardly could see out of the aircraft.

RAY: [*reading from scrapbook*] “C-130 Crash: 9 MEN KILLED.”

STEVEN: American soldiers. Minutes after, I had to land on a debris-strewn runway.

Those pools that look like water are melted aluminum from the burning aircraft.

[*pointing*] And look at this: I nearly had my tail shot off! That strip of metal saved my life. [*to RAY*] Yours too, I guess.

I’m concerned about what’s going on now in Iraq. The U.S. public is losing

resolve, just as it did with Vietnam.

[*to LISA*] Do you come from a military family?

LISA: My grandfather served in World War II. I have career military uncles. In 1970, my father was the last man drafted from his county. He was in basic training when I was born. Our family relocated to Salinas, waiting for his unit to be called. I also fear parallels between Iraq and Vietnam—

[*to audience*] I stop myself there.

Throughout the weekend, Steven initiates spirited exchanges about international policy. Ray seldom enters our current-event crossfire. Steven proves an enthusiastic conversationalist, and I remind myself not to allow the project to become *Stevie and Me*. When I step back from these interactions, I also wonder if each of us unconsciously conspires to avoid talking about the central reason for our visit: Ray and Steven's relationship.

RAY: [*to STEVEN*] You met Mom before or after Vietnam?

STEVEN: Before, in Okinawa. I flew many combat missions while we dated—one with her father, who also was stationed in Japan.

Your mother wanted to marry immediately. I'm not sure I was ready to be a husband, but I did very much want to become a father.

LISA: [*to RAY*] You were born in Florida, Eglin Air Force base?

RAY: Right. Second of four boys.

STEVEN: Ray was a sensitive, tender child. [*fondly*] Didn't always take direction, though. "Ray, don't put your finger in that outlet!" [*mimics RAY doing just that*]

[*to RAY*] What do you remember most about childhood?

RAY: Hmm ... camping trips. I definitely recall one 20-degree adventure. The bottom of my boots melted as I warmed my feet by the fire!

STEVEN: [*laughs*] I'm honored to be a father. I loved zooming the kids around on the riding mower, raking piles of leaves and jumping in them. Every night, I would tell the kids a story, and they always liked ones about me, you know? My glory years, I guess.

[*to RAY*] What do you remember about our home life?

LISA: [*to audience*] Steven seems to be searching for what Charles Cooley might have termed his "looking glass self-as-father."

STEVEN: [*to audience*] Through Ray's eyes, yes. I want to know how I, in the final analysis, will measure up as a father to Ray, despite the trials stemming from the divorce. If all they put on my gravestone is "A Good Father," I will have lived a good life.

RAY: [*to STEVEN*] Home life ... gosh, my early memory is pretty vague.

LISA: [*to audience*] Having heard stories of Ray's childhood for many years, I wonder to what extent he feels pulled in this moment between the dialectical tensions of expression and protection, vulnerability and cruelty.⁵

STEVEN rises, crosses to stage left black box and sits. LISA returns scrapbook to drawer, takes out recorder, note pad, and pen.

RAY: I was nine when my parents divorced. I can't remember feeling sad; we hardly saw my dad anyway.

STEVEN: [*to audience*] I was serving a remote tour in Korea just prior to the divorce.

LISA: What led to the dissolution?

RAY: At the time, I had no idea.

⁵ See Henry (1973) and Rawlins (1992, 2009).

STEVEN rises, crosses to table, and sits on stage left chair; LISA returns recorder, notepad, and pen to drawer.

STEVEN: I returned from Korea, and your mom surprised me with divorce papers.

RAY: How do you make sense of what happened?

STEVEN: A relationship is a three-legged stool: physical, social, and spiritual compatibility. Your mother, a reverent woman who deeply loves God and her children, offered a solid spiritual leg. Physically and socially, a mismatch. On our first date, we had the most ridiculous fight—about flamenco dancers!

LISA: [*to audience*] I wonder how Ray's mother will feel about this assessment.

Relations in their blended families have been tenuous at times. I want my account of Steven's account to honor his truths and invite response. These renderings may provoke discomfort and will induce change in the family system. What will be the nature and direction of that change?

STEVEN rises, crosses to stage left black box and sits; LISA and RAY stand and cross to stage right of table.

LISA: [*to audience*] Thursday morning, Ray and I wander the development's tree-lined pathways and discuss the first day of our trip.

[*to RAY*] What have you learned?

RAY: Lots, actually. The cause of and details surrounding my grandmother's death.

Dad's Vietnam experience. I knew *nothing* about my parents' courtship: where they met, the fight on their first date. My dad's three-legged stool philosophy, that's new to me, and

I've never heard his perspective on my parents' marriage and divorce.

LISA: I've observed a conversational dynamic: you've done far more listening than talking.

RAY: [*smiles*] You've done your share of listening as well.

LISA: Perhaps, but I seem to be interacting with your dad more than you are. He hasn't seen you in four years. I thought he'd be full of questions.

RAY: I think answers come more easily to him.

LISA: What has most surprised you?

RAY: Dad was gone a lot for the military; I *never* imagined he would say his primary motivation for marriage was fatherhood.

LISA and RAY cross to table and sit, LISA on center stage chair, RAY on stage right chair; LISA removes scrapbook and yearbook from drawer.

LISA: [*to audience*] Friday morning, Ray and I sit at the kitchen table with photo albums, genealogy books, and the 1959 *El Diablo's Diary*, his dad's senior yearbook. Fourteen track ribbons are tucked inside. The entry for Steven Darien Wise, "Dare," recognizes him for academic achievement, service as class VP and President, and success in gymnastics and all-state football. Inscriptions deem Dare a "real swell egg" and praise his high moral standards.

Ray and I also find a yearly timeline his dad composed of key events. Knowing the year of Ray's birth, I comment, "1970 was big!" Ray reads the entry aloud. It lists events at Steven's church but makes no mention of Ray's arrival.

RAY: [*flatly*] So much for the primacy of fatherhood.

LISA: [*to audience*] Later that day, Ray teases his dad about the missing information. Steven immediately pencils in: “2nd child (Gay) born: Raymond Wise, 8/20/70.”

STEVEN: [*to audience*] At our workshop session, I tell Ray for the first time about a journal I kept after Vietnam. I destroyed it during an argument with his mother, which I deeply regret. I used to write extensively about my children. I am certain I wrote about Ray’s birth in that journal.

STEVEN rises from stage left black box, crosses to table, and sits on stage left chair; LISA returns items to drawer.

LISA: How did you meet your current wife?

STEVEN: [*smiles*] My oldest brother teaches dance lessons for our local Strauss Festival.

LISA: [*to audience*] Around their home hang photographs of Vivian Wise wearing ruffled waltz gowns in white, blue, and pink and Steven in tuxedos with coordinating ties and cummerbunds.

STEVEN: [*warmly*] Vivian inquired about joining the dancers. My brother called, saying I *had* to meet this attractive lady. Three times, he assured me that Vivian would attend the night’s lesson. I’d drive down, but she wouldn’t show. After the third miss, I arrived home to the sound of a ringing phone. My brother: “Steven, she’s here for the late session!” Got right back in the car. The moment I saw Vivian, I *knew*: pleasant smile, great legs. I fell in love that instant—not just with the legs, mind you!

LISA: How long have you been together?

STEVEN: Since 1993.

RAY: How’s your three-legged stool?

STEVEN: [*laughs*] Balanced! We're true friends; we keep each other laughing. I also enjoy her sons, the perfect boys.

[*to RAY*] Uh ... not that you're not perfect.

STEVEN rises, walks to stage left black box, and sits; LISA takes out recorder, note pad, and pen.

RAY: Years ago, my dad began referring to Vivian's sons as "my boys." That always felt weird. Though I haven't spent much time with her, my sense of Vivian is that she's really sweet, and it wouldn't surprise me if much of the contact my brothers and I have received from my dad in the last several years has been prompted by her. With each marriage, my father seemed to wipe the slate clean: new family, new life.

LISA: I've known you since 1995 and in four significant relationships. *You* seem to wipe the slate clean: new partner, new life. Was it always like this?

RAY: To varying degrees, yes.

LISA: Tell me about your first love.

RAY: At 17, I noticed this good-looking guy in church. In retrospect, I was totally cruising Luke: 22, just back from his overseas mission.

Our youth group went on a ski trip. Each room at the lodge slept two. Luke immediately piped up, "Ray and I will take this room." Turned out to have only one bed. As we got ready for sleep, Luke undressed down to his Mormon garments. I thought, *Oh my gosh!* I don't recall seeing my *parents* wearing only their garments. Luke asked, "Ever had a back massage?" When he laid his hands on me, adrenalin flooded my body. After several minutes, Luke said, "Why don't you give me one?" I sat atop him, totally

turned on.

[*leans in*] Trust me, Lisa, I'm not gonna talk about sex too in-depth.

LISA: [*playfully*] You don't scare me.

RAY: You won't be the only reader.

Luke and I got under the covers. He reached over and touched me, sexually this time. I was nervous, shaking, but I did the same thing back.

Didn't sleep the entire night. Finally at some point, I said, "Luke, we have to promise that we'll never, ever do that again. We could go to hell!" I think I even said we had to repent.

On the ride home, Luke fell asleep on my shoulder. People started to wonder about us. They all went to my church and school, so I became very secretive about Luke.

Two weeks later, I let it progress further—no turning back. This continued for nine months. Luke always gave me handmade cards with messages like: "If you were a woman, I'd marry you."

Around graduation, I shut him out. Wouldn't take his calls. He came to the ceremony anyway, sat in the front row, bought me, like, 15 presents. Later, I felt horrible for rejecting him.

Determined to prove I was straight, I entered a relationship with my friend Nancy, the first girl with whom I had sex. All my life, I'd done everything according to the Church. Didn't smoke, didn't drink. When I'd done what I thought was the worst of all—had sex with a guy—I reasoned that having sex with a girl would make it better. How? I don't know, but it made sense to me at the time. Nancy became the first person in whom I confided about being gay. I'd given her a promise ring. We were engaged; she was

planning the wedding, picking the colors. Uh, poor girl! She joined the Mormon Church for me; I baptized her myself—actually dunked her head under the water!

The day after I told Nancy, I sat down with my mom: “I think I’m gay.” She said, “I love you. To be honest, I’ve wondered since you were 16.” So my mom knew before *I* did, before anything happened with Luke. At 16, I’d come home flipped out because my swim teammate put his arm around me. This overreaction prompted my mom to send me to a Mormon counselor. After a few visits, the counselor said to her, “Don’t worry. There’s *no way* that he’s gay.” It sounds strange, but at the time, *I* didn’t know that I was gay. I just thought I liked being around cool guys. It wasn’t sexual. I hardly knew what sexuality was; I hadn’t even masturbated!

I remember Mom asking, “Were you ever molested as a boy?” I lied. Knowing the betrayals and suffering she had withstood, I wanted to shield her from further grief.

LISA: [*to audience*] I imagine Ray’s mom reading these pages. What happens when the shield lifts?

RAY: When I was in primary school, a man exposed himself and touched me sexually—inappropriate, of course, but nothing like the abuse others have suffered. Several important people in my life have been violated horrifically.

LISA: [*to audience*] He asks that I not share details, but Ray talks at length about abuse, in his life and in the lives of those close to him. At the time of our interview, Ray didn’t know about his father’s experience.

RAY rises, walks to stage right black box, and sits; STEVEN rises from stage left black box, crosses to table, and sits at stage left chair.

STEVEN: This never has been recorded anywhere: as a child, I was abused by a person I trusted.

LISA: [*to audience*] Where do I keep these secrets I learn but do not own?

STEVEN: It was a man, an adult—obviously gay.

LISA: [*to audience*] No, a pedophile, I think but do not say. I also don't say, *Your son was abused by a person he trusted, a man, an adult, a person he too described as "gay."*

STEVEN rises, walks to stage left black box, and sits; RAY rises from stage right black box, crosses to table, and sits on stage right chair.

LISA: I don't understand that attribution. A pedophile is an adult with sexual predilections toward children. A pedophile-child relationship is predicated on inequality and the inability to consent. I think it dangerous to conflate that with emotional, spiritual, community, and intimate relationships between consenting adults. Why label your abuser gay rather than a pedophile?

RAY: Though these encounters scared me, I also was intrigued, curious that this man had sexual interest in another male. Maybe I sensed that was my interest as well.

LISA: Sensed, but didn't act on for many years.

RAY: Right. Around the time I came out to my mom, her second husband transferred to Germany. I decided to move with them, in part to free myself from my fiancée.

RAY rises, crosses to stage right black box, and sits; STEVEN rises from stage left black box, crosses to table, and sits in stage left chair.

STEVEN: His mother took the boys to Germany without consulting me. [*painfully*] For

years, I felt cut off from my kids. [*brightens*] I did make one trip, and I got to see Ray working for the ... what was it? He was a salesman at ... um ...

LISA: The Polo Store?

STEVEN: That's it. In fact, I got a tie—still one of my favorites. [*goes backstage to retrieve; returns*] Ray recommended it to me.

STEVEN rises, crosses to stage left black box, and sits; RAY rises from stage right black box, crosses to table, and sits on stage right chair.

RAY: I had an easier time coming out in Germany than I likely would have had in the States. Europeans aren't as hung up on Rambo masculinity.

I met Markus at a club in Munich. At the time, I knew enough German to ask where the bathroom was. Markus spoke no English. His female companion had to translate the whole night. Soon after, we went on a dinner date—sans translator. My German vocabulary was still, like, 15 words. I would try speaking German but had to throw in English words to complete a sentence. I left with the worst headache, but somehow Markus thought all this was cute. When we moved in together, I asked all his associates to speak only German in my presence. Three months later, I was nearly fluent.

Traveling in Hungary, I contracted a parasite. Twenty-five pounds poured off. I thought I was dying of AIDS. Missionaries came, anointed my head with oil, and packed my clothes. The Church placed me with a Mormon couple, keeping me cut off from Markus for weeks. I eventually concocted a story and returned to Markus.

Throughout our relationship, I continued going to services, attending counseling with the bishop, and planning my mission. All this time, Markus believed our relationship

would end. He'd begun detaching himself, moving on, dating, and having sex, which wracked my nerves when I found out. I told Markus I'd left the church and bailed on my mission—just two weeks before I was to leave. He took me back, but things were never the same.

I had one other significant relationship in Germany. Christian had agoraphobia stemming from an abusive father, who used to lock him in a closet. Christian would get intensely close, then disappear into meaningless encounters with other men. Eventually I decided to move back to the States. Christian and I fought the night before my departure. We didn't even say goodbye.

Settled in Florida, I entered a relationship with a male couple, one of the more unconventional things I've ever done. Lasted nine months. All these years later, they're still together, and we're still friends.

Started dating Andrew. It was during our relationship that I came out to my dad. Andrew's mom died of cancer, and he got me thinking that none of us has unlimited time. I made the call and simply said, "Dad, I'm gay." He mentioned a yellow bonnet and green bellbottom pants I used to wear. Funny how people make sense of things.

RAY rises, crosses to stage right black box, and sits; STEVEN rises from stage left black box, crosses to table, and sits on stage left chair.

STEVEN: Didn't surprise me. As a child, Ray ran around in a little yellow doll hat.

RAY: *[to audience]* A decade after disclosure, he *still* recalls that damn hat!

STEVEN: Ray always seemed more drawn to the arts than sports. When I visited the boys in Colorado, his mother let me sleep downstairs, where Ray had his room. He had a

young man over. They would go into the bedroom, close the door, and stay a long time.

RAY: [*to audience*] *Homework*, I promise you.

STEVEN: I did feel sad, knowing this would challenge him. One of Ray's brothers totally rejects the fact that he's gay.

RAY: [*to audience*] Relationships with all my brothers *improved* after I came out.

STEVEN: His mom's been a wonderful spirit. We both love Ray just as we do the other boys. Personally, I don't view gay-ism as wrong unless it's an ill-conceived choice.

LISA: [*to audience*] I write "gay-ism" and "ill-conceived choice" in my interview notes.

RAY: [*to audience*] "Ill-conceived choice"?

STEVEN: [*to audience*] At our workshop session, I clarify: when it's not physiological.

LISA: [*to audience*] Steven's explanation moves me to reflect on how seldom each of us has the opportunity to revisit, reconsider, and rearticulate our constructions of ourselves, each other, and the social world. The transcript of my interview with Steven allowed Ray to confront "gay-ism" and "ill-conceived choice" (terms he never had heard his father use). An early draft of the play provided space for Ray to question these constructions. The workshop opened a space for clarification, though perhaps not resolution. Steven's explanation still affirms the hegemonic biology-choice binary, biology associated with "natural" and "immutable" (and therefore more acceptable), choice associated with "arbitrary" and "contingent" (and therefore less acceptable).

STEVEN: [*to LISA*] God created everything about us and about the world. Therefore, God consciously created the circumstances that produced gay-ism, like any other disease.

RAY/LISA: [*together, to audience*] "Disease."

STEVEN: Or malady, deformity, birth defect.

LISA: [*to audience*] Those words also sting, but I say nothing.

RAY: [*to audience*] I read his descriptions and thought: *where do I begin?*

LISA: [*to audience*] During our interview, Steven immediately reconsidered his language.

STEVEN: Maybe those are the wrong words. Differences, I guess.

Last month, I drove home from San Francisco listening to a talk show. Parents spoke of rejecting their gay children. I pulled over and called the station, saying, “I’ve got a gay son. I totally accept him, and he’s welcome in our home.”

LISA: Has having a gay son enhanced your life?

STEVEN: It’s encouraged me to reach out, to make sure he knew that I didn’t reject him. I treat his partner as a real partner. I hope that has helped validate Ray.

LISA: What do you think others could learn from your family’s experience?

STEVEN: How does that saying go? “Just get over it.” Most of us, because of our Christian training, think homosexuality is bad. I think fundamentally it’s ... I’m not going to call it “normal,” but what *is* normal? *I’m* not normal. Neither is an autistic person or someone who has his legs blown off in war. I think those who have extra burdens to carry become stronger. My role is to love and accept Ray, and I’m hoping God will do the same for me.

STEVEN rises, crosses to stage left black box, and sits; RAY rises from stage right black box, crosses to table, and sits on stage right chair.

RAY: Coming out to my dad was the lasting positive result of my relationship with Andrew, which turned into another disaster. Even after Markus and Christian, I

automatically trusted. Andrew put an end to that. People said, “He cheats on you.” I didn’t believe it, even though it was *right there*. After we broke up, I became inherently suspicious. Philip was the first target of my mistrust. Determined not to be a victim again, I became the perpetrator of infidelity. I know I’ve skirted this issue with you before.

LISA: And then ... Brian, whom we both met in 1996.

RAY: [*sighs*] So honest, committed, giving. What I put him through! I graduated from college and took my first accounting job on the other coast of Florida. We moved but hated living there. I quit my job, took another. We moved again. I quit, took another job. Making good money but so miserable! You used to say, “It’s more important to be fulfilled than wealthy.” I’ve always wanted to write. Having to bartend again is a compromise, but it pays the bills and gives me space for artistic pursuits. Brian was there through it all.

LISA: What did you learn from that relationship?

RAY: [*long pause*] I’m not sure this should be in the text.

LISA: That will be your call. Brian will read this material, as will your current partners.

RAY: I’ll always have strong feelings for Brian. During our five years together, he was my *life* partner. I wasn’t sure I’d find that again, but I definitely feel that way about Morgan now. From the start of our relationship in 2002, we created a safe space in which to express our deepest feelings.

LISA: [*smiles*] We’ve covered a lot of ground, my friend. What hopes do you have for our work?

RAY: Mmm ... to rekindle the relationship with my dad. If it turns out to be a good experience, my brothers might better understand him as well. Maybe my dad, my

siblings, and I will talk more often and more deeply.

In a larger sense, the project could support readers in their coming out journeys; I certainly would like to see more of us avoid depression and suicide. The work also might help our families understand our struggles.

LISA: [*to audience*] To accomplish Ray's goals, I offer "Father's Blessing" as a counter-narrative, as discourse in opposition to the homophobia and heterosexism that foster depression and suicide as well as prejudice, discrimination, and violence targeted at persons whose identities and relationships challenge dominant ideas and practices. I imagine this work finding a home on syllabi for courses centered on identity, dialogue, relationships, gender and sexualities, and/or qualitative methodologies. I hope that others will stage this work, giving audience members the opportunity to collaborate in making sense of and meaning from the ways that the actors and director make sense of and make meaning from the ways that Ray, Steven, and I make sense of and make meaning from our experiences, a full hermeneutic—and counter-hegemonic—circle!

[*to RAY*] Do you have any fears or concerns about the project?

RAY: I want to represent and serve my community well. More personally, I have decisions to make about what will go in the text. We've talked about secrets, both mine and my family's.

RAY rises, crosses to stage right black box, and sits; STEVEN rises from stage left black box, crosses to table, and sits on stage left chair.

LISA: Any fears or concerns?

STEVEN: People have misrepresented me. Frankly, when I first met you, I sized you up,

trying to figure out if you're one of those wacko activists.

LISA: I'll say this: I *am* surprised, given the solidity of your faith, that you have this view of Ray and of same-sex orientation.

STEVEN: Let me explain. If you were to ask our leaders if the Church supported homosexual sex, they would say, "No." I understand that. I also understand that God has given strict instructions about lying, stealing, cheating, murdering, and adultery.

All stand.

LISA: [*to audience*] Hearing "homosexuality" alongside "murdering," I think of two episodes from the day before. Thursday afternoon, Steven's stepson appeared, dressed for a school function. When his stepson pointed out the white socks between his black pants and shoes, Steven said:

STEVEN: In my day, that meant you were a fairy.

LISA: I waited for Ray to respond. When he didn't, I said to the stepson but *for* Steven, "Depending on your goal, that might be a useful signifier."

STEVEN: [*to audience*] That's how we spoke in those days. I relayed this story to let them know I was *not* hung up, not afraid to be open about the truth—all of it.

LISA: [*to audience*] Thursday evening, Steven talked about seeing a film with Ray's mother.

STEVEN: In the first 10 minutes, we saw murder, rape, homosexuality.

LISA: [*to audience*] Neither Ray nor I questioned Steven's inclusion of homosexuality on this list. Later, I asked [*to RAY*], Why do you think we let that pass?

RAY: Just being here is a big step. One at a time, I guess.

STEVEN: [*to audience*] In 1971, all those activities were considered vices. I didn't mean to equate homosexuality with murder.

All sit, STEVEN and LISA at table, RAY on stage right black box.

STEVEN: Are you a Christian?

LISA: [*to audience*] Not sure I want to go down this path, I say, [*to STEVEN*] I was raised Catholic. I believe that we are here for a purpose, that we should live in service to others, and that there is something beyond this world.

STEVEN: What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?

LISA: Jesus is love.

STEVEN: Good. Now, what was the first word Jesus spoke after starting his ministry?

LISA: [*to audience*] Oh my, *Christian Jeopardy!*

[*to STEVEN*] *That* I definitely do not know.

STEVEN: "Repent."

LISA: [*to audience*] My mind flashes back to Ray's description of the initial encounter with his first love, Luke:

RAY: [*to audience, quoting himself*] I think I even said we had to repent.

STEVEN: There isn't anything we can do on this earth for which we can't repent and be forgiven. I read the Bible. I've studied the passages that have to do with gay-ism. They don't, of course, use that term. The Scriptures say, "We don't want you to have sex in the wrong way, from the rear end."

RAY: [*to audience*] "From the rear end"? I must have missed that verse.

STEVEN: [*to RAY*] Lighten up! I was paraphrasing.

[to LISA] But it's not something that forever marks a person. God understands the gay problem.

RAY: [to audience] "Problem."

STEVEN: I'm sure He's made provisions so that people will figure out, through genetic engineering, how to fix and eliminate the problem.

LISA: Have you considered that it may not be a problem?

STEVEN: It's certainly a problem in terms of how society responds. I consider many things far worse than being gay. Why am I not ostracized for my failings? [wryly] One of them is talking too much. I think lack of tolerance a far greater sin than gay-ism. If someone "normal" has been given blessings but turns around and is intolerant of those who have deformities, birth defects, issues, to me *that* person may be in far greater jeopardy in God's eyes than a gay person.

RAY and STEVEN stand; both cross to stage right of table.

LISA: [to audience] The Saturday of our visit, I overhear a conversation between Ray and his dad.

STEVEN: Tell me about your faith.

RAY: I don't want to insult your beliefs.

STEVEN: Your beliefs do not insult mine.

RAY: [hesitantly] I think ... organized religion profits some at the expense of many. I believe that when we die our energy disperses into the universe. We become part of something else—a tree—part of everything else.

STEVEN: Is that enough of a belief system for you?

RAY: Actually, it's depressing. It makes it difficult to relate to our family. I'm happy for you. Part of me wishes I still had your belief system.

RAY returns to stage right black box, STEVEN to stage left chair; both sit.

LISA: You reported wondering if I would be a "wacko activist." What conclusions have you drawn?

STEVEN: Definitely you *are* wacko. [*both laugh*] Not really. But this is hard for me to tell you: members of my family forewarned us that your agenda was to expose the ignorance and prejudice of gay people's family members. I predicted blowing your mind because you expected me to be more intolerant.

LISA: [*to audience*] I confess: as much as Steven wondered about the potential "wacko activist" coming to stay, I wondered about the possible "Jesus freak" playing host. How easily we Other each other.

As I revise, I also note places where I comment to the audience on Steven's constructions of same-sex orientation. I want to let readers—including Ray—know when I find something problematic, but I don't want to abuse my role as primary author by always "correcting" my host, allowing myself the last—and "best"—word.

[*to STEVEN*] What's it been like to have us here?

STEVEN: Very enjoyable. I figured, if nothing else, I'll get a chance to see my son.

[*quietly*] You know, he wouldn't come here otherwise.

LISA: [*to audience*] I feel the weight of Steven's assessment.

STEVEN: It's been great seeing him, rummaging around in old photos. I really love him. And we've enjoyed having you here. You're a good listener. You've been gracious, kind,

and accommodating [*smiles*], sleeping on the hard floor.

LISA: [*to audience*] Thursday morning, I awakened in a crevasse created by a slow leak in the air mattress. That evening, Steven contemplated alternate arrangements.

STEVEN and LISA stand, cross to stage left of table.

STEVEN: Well ... you could sleep on the couch portion of the sectional, next to the pullout where we have Ray.

LISA: [*to audience*] I wondered if this communicated acceptance of Ray's sexual orientation, because such an offer likely would not be extended to an unmarried *heterosexual* son and his female companion, or if it communicated hope that Ray's sexual orientation was somehow *revisable*. Until a recent back injury, Ray's partner Morgan had planned to make this trip with us. His absence may contribute to my appearance as "the girl Ray has brought home." As a guest in a conservative Christian household, I also wanted to communicate respect for my hosts' beliefs. For these reasons, I said, [*to STEVEN*] Thank you, but the floor in the office is fine.

LISA and STEVEN return to table and sit, STEVEN on stage left chair, LISA on center stage chair.

STEVEN: Um ... so ... what is your relationship with Ray like?

LISA: [*smiles*] I see a lot of myself in your son: fiery yet loyal, searching both for justice and for others' acceptance. Ray and his former partner, Brian, became my and my husband's alter egos. My graduation present was a trip to Europe, and Brian and Ray joined us. The dissolution of their relationship in 2002 devastated me. It felt like my brothers got divorced.

[*to audience*] I notice my efforts to deheterosexualize my relationship with Ray: shifting the focus toward couple relationships, referring to him as a brother.

[*to STEVEN*] I am heartened to see that Ray and Brian have moved on to loving relationships with their current partners, for whom I also care deeply. I've known Ray since 1995. We've shared many turning points: graduations, job changes, moves, deaths of those close to us, my dissertation and book projects about our network of gay male friends.

STEVEN: So if Ray were not gay, would you have considered marrying him?

LISA: [*to audience*] Deheterosexualization incomplete.

[*to STEVEN*] I can't answer that. Our playfulness and warmth always have been bounded by partnerships with others. But sure, Ray would be great marriage material for anybody, male or female.

STEVEN: Last night, I noted strong affection between you. I've often thought of Ray as a handsome, nice guy—good qualities for a heterosexual relationship. In a way, it's kind of a shame. But I suppose a gay person might look at me and say, "It's a shame he's heterosexual." I gotta tell you, I am totally 100 percent heterosexual, so non-gay that I don't even like to shake hands with another man.

RAY: [*to audience*] Come again?

STEVEN: I do, 'cause I have to, but it's weird. I don't even like to shake hands with my own brother. I don't know what it is.

LISA: [*to audience*] At the initial interview, I decide not to pursue what it might be.

STEVEN: [*to audience*] When I saw the draft, I realized that I went over the top by including my brother there. I really don't have a problem with that.

[*to LISA*] And what is your opinion about gay-ism being right or wrong, normal or

abnormal?

LISA: When I think about your son, his same-sex orientation and primary relationship feel perfectly natu—

STEVEN: Have you had lesbian feelings or desires?

LISA: [*to audience*] I'm starting to see who's really conducting this interview.

[*to STEVEN*] Growing up, I felt connected to a female friend in a deep, embodied, almost psychic way, but my narrow range of experience prevented me from defining our relationship as potentially erotic.

STEVEN: Have you changed to where now you *would* entertain that idea?

LISA: [*to audience*] I wonder what prompts this line of questioning.

[*to STEVEN*] Given all I've experienced, I can imagine myself falling in love with another woman, but in terms of your three-legged stool, the physical leg tends to be attached to men—as it does for your son.

STEVEN: Do you have a strong sexual attraction to your husband?

RAY: [*to audience*] For heaven's sake, Dad!

STEVEN: [*to audience*] Probably could have censored myself more there.

LISA: [*rises, to audience*] As if on cue, Vivian returns home from work. She, Steven, Ray, and I pack for a night in Yosemite, the spectacular conclusion to our trip.

LISA reads poem aloud.

Renewal

Yosemite:
 from the Southern Miwok "yehemite,"
 meaning "some among us are killers,"
 a reference not to White imperialists
 but to an older, closer antagonist, the Paiutes.

Our trip home ends—
and begins—
on the trails of Yosemite.

Embracing us are Sierra Nevada's cliffs and canyons,
its meadows, the Merced River, and Mariposa Grove,
home of the Giant Sequoias,
Earth's largest living beings.

Mist Trail to Vernal Fall,
a .8 mile ascent:
the final hike on the final day.

Terrain shifts from steep climbs
to soft sloping curves.
Vision strains from darkened tunnels
and glaring sun.
Dust whirs in the breezes that
both sting our faces
and nudge us gently from behind.

Low rumbling beckons.
Rested from its winter slumber,
the mountain heaves water
over ancient rocks
and under the bridge
between us and our vernal fall.

Smiling, the father and son pause
to capture this moment,
this place.

We descend,
me shuffling cautiously behind.
Their movements alternate:
brisk and purposeful,
then leisurely,
contemplative.

[Insert photo D.1 around following 3 stanzas]

Along the trail they come together,
separate,
come together again.
They allow others to pass between them.

Near the mountain's base,
late spring releases melted snow,
washing the trail clean.

Ever so slightly, the father loses his footing,
shifting away from the son.
Instinctively, the son offers his arm,
prepared to catch the father—
or to take their fall
together.

On the return flight,
I cry as I write these words.
If anyone asks,
I will say that my ears hurt from the descent.
And perhaps this is true.

Yosemite:
an etymology of mistrust,
but a history of renewal.
Even the Miwok and Paiutes
released ashes of animosity,
blending history and family.

Reception

I stayed in contact with Steven, sending a thank-you note, transcript of our interview, Christmas card, and draft of the play. A year and a half pass between our trip to Buck Hill and Ray and Steven's next meeting, when Steven travels to Florida for the wedding of Ray's half-brother on January 7, 2006. Steven invites Ray to bring his partner Morgan and me.

As we pull up to the reception site, I see Steven across the lot. We emerge from the car; he smiles and waves us over. Ray steps into Steven's open arms. This time, their embrace seems more expressive than obligatory. "Dad, this is Morgan," Ray says.

"At last," Steven replies. "I've heard so many good things. Please come inside."

Steven sweeps us around the hall, proudly making introductions and reacquainting Ray.

Immediately following each, “This is my son, Ray,” is a clear, “and this is his *partner*, Morgan.” Only one miscommunication: Steven turns his arms and body toward Morgan, but the gaze of the woman receiving us stops on me. She takes my hand. “Nice to meet you, Morgan.”

“*This* is Morgan,” corrects Steven, directing her attention across the group.

Her mouth falls open a bit as she processes. Finally: “*Oh*, I get it!” Steven grins, seeming pleased to have provided clarification—and perhaps education.

For two hours, Ray excitedly chats with his half-brothers, stepsisters, and stepmother, some of whom he hasn’t seen in a decade.

Break/through

At Steven’s suggestion, we meet him and Ray’s half-brother Chaz at a nearby Panera for a post-reception visit. Steven buys us “kids” a hot beverage and snack. We settle into a corner high-top. I sit closest to the window, Ray to my right, Morgan on the end, Steven across from me, Chaz next to him. I look over at Ray’s half-brother, a 22 year old with eyes as dark as the onyx hair inherited from his Italian mother. “I hear you live in Orlando, Chaz.”

“Near the airport,” he says, straightening his grey suede coat.

“Working and going to school?”

He nods, finishing a bite of pastry. “I manage a restaurant and go to UCF, engineering.”

I ask Steven about his annual trip to Hawaii, the 2006 Strauss Festival, and his new doctoral program. As in California, Steven proves a prolific conversationalist. He explains, for example, how Mormons came to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee. Though I know he isn’t bothered by it, I suddenly wish I’d ordered a hot chocolate instead of the decaf. Morgan, seated furthest from Steven, sits quietly. In retrospect, I should have offered to switch places,

making it easier for Morgan to interact with Steven during this—their first—meeting.

My attention diverts from conversational dynamics when Steven begins talking about the draft of the play. Politely but firmly: “I took exception to your inclusion and portrayal of our political exchanges and of my Vietnam experience.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Ray shift in his seat. I reply, “As I said in my letter, we will workshop the draft collaboratively.”

Ray assures him, “Lisa wants this to be accurate and fair and to help rather than harm.”

Steven nods, but his brow remains furled. He then talks at length about Vietnam, sharing stories Ray and I heard in California. There and here, Steven takes on the roles of teacher and mentor. His insistent tone suggests it is critically important to him that we understand his understanding of those experiences.

When Steven finishes, the group sits quietly a moment, brushing crumbs around our trays, taking last sips of beverages long gone cold. Into the silence, Steven says to Ray, “In one of your sessions with Lisa, you described our relationship as ‘tense.’ I wasn’t aware you felt that way.” Steven looks into Ray’s eyes. “After the divorce from your mother,” he then turns to Chaz, “and later from yours, I found that talking to my kids called up painful memories. In Lisa’s draft, I come off as an absent, irresponsible dad. It’s true I had two year-long tours for the military, and I can be a workaholic, but to me, the state of our relationship was not due to tension but to geographic distance and the pain associated with conflict and divorce.” He clears his throat and presses on. “When I met Vivian, I was a wreck. Twice divorced. Separated from my children. Drained, emotionally and financially. I lost my job and couldn’t find work in my field. Declared bankruptcy. I developed acid reflux so severe that my symptoms mimicked cardiac arrest. After six trips to the ER, I began having panic attacks. I was...” Steven’s voice breaks; tears fill his

now-downcast eyes. Ray reaches across the table for his arm. “I was psychologically incapable of being a father.” I struggle to catch my breath, the emotional intensity of this statement well beyond any we heard in California.

Ray responds, “I love you, Dad.”

“Me too, Pops,” says Chaz.

It takes the group a few moments to absorb what has transpired. I wonder if either Ray or Chaz will address Steven’s vulnerable disclosure. Then, Ray looks at Chaz and queries, “You call Dad ‘Pops’?” This shift strikes a note of relief. Steven smiles.

We continue chatting until 10:00 p.m., a half-hour past closing time. I confirm Monday’s workshop session as we bid our goodnights.

Ray sits in the front passenger seat for the ride back. “You okay?” I ask.

He exhales. “It’s just ... I’ve never seen him cry.”

Front Stage

The next day, I retrieve a message from Ray saying that Chaz and Steven are considering the 7:00 p.m. drag show at the resort where Ray and Morgan work. When I call for assurance that I heard correctly, Ray indicates that they already are on their way, so I hustle myself together and to the bar.

Sunday t-dance is hopping; I have to park well into the remote gravel lot. At the door, I get a wristband and make my way past the restaurant and disco, which has filled to near capacity. At the back is the adjoining pool bar where Ray tends. I greet my friend with a kiss, Steven and Chaz with hugs, and am introduced to Chaz’s girlfriend, an attractive 22 year old with dark eyes,

tan skin, and flowing amber hair. Our conversation is interrupted by Ray calling, “Dad! Chaz! You’re being summoned to the stage.”

D-Va is an Orlando institution: tall, Black, large, and in charge. The surround sound speakers boom with her theatrical drawl: “I *said*, ‘I hear we have family in th’ house!’” She gestures toward our group. “Our beloved Ray Wise has been joined by his father and brother tonight. Father and Brother, Come On Up Here!” The crowd roars.

“No way!” says Chaz. Steven smiles but makes no move.

“Go on, *go*,” I encourage. “You too, Ray.” Pool bar patrons whoop. Slowly, Chaz dismounts his barstool. He and Steven proceed through the door and into the adjoining room. Ray and I follow. When disco patrons see them emerge, wild applause breaks out.

I snap photos as the Wise men make their way to the stage. With a high-heeled quickstep, D-Va sashays toward Steven. “Mister Wise, I presume. Where are you from?”

“Sacramento,” he replies, sounding neither strained nor nervous.

“Excellent. Sir, I hear you are a . . . *Mormon*.”

Still managing a half-smile, Steven says, “Correct.”

An “ooh,” perhaps of both surprise and respect, spreads across the room. I cringe a bit, anticipating what follows. “Mister Wise, how many wives do you have?”

Rolling with it, Steven offers, “As many as I want.”

“Just teasing you, sir. We are honored to have you. Most of us make peace with our mothers—probably because our mothers *knew* when we were five! It is another matter to receive support from fathers and brothers. So thank you. Let’s hear it for Ray’s dad!” Ray in tow, a jovial Steven leaves the stage to resounding applause.

D-Va has not finished. Eyeing a doe-eyed Chaz, she says, “Little Steven Junior.”

Clearing his throat, he says, “Uh ... Chaz.”

D-Va offers a sultry, “*Chaaaaz*, I will call out numbers.”

“Oh no,” says Ray, familiar with the routine.

D-Va continues, “You will answer ‘higher’ or ‘lower.’” She glances toward his crotch.

Getting her drift, Chaz is defiant: “I’m not answering that.”

Undaunted D-Va says, “Five!”

From the crowd bellow calls of “Higher! Higher!”

Chaz rolls his eyes and squeaks, “Higher” into the mike. This is repeated for six and seven.

D-Va purposefully drops her handkerchief. “Oops, I’ll get it,” she says, bending over. D-Va begins to rise up, stops at the level of Chaz’s crotch, and queries, “Eight?” She lets him off the hook—sort of. “Chazzie, I know how you feel amid all these gay boys. I read Scriptures too. Trust me, this *woman* only lies with men.”

To the rescue, Chaz’s girlfriend ascends the steps with shots for D-Va and Chaz. D-Va asks, “Who are you to him, Missy?”

“Everything,” she banters.

D-Va playfully swings her fists in the air, then directs Chaz’s girlfriend stage left, where a group of butch women has gathered. “Those ladies have some business with you, girl.”

Our hostess gives Chaz a bicep squeeze. “You’ve been a good sport. Give it up for little Steven Junior!” Chaz descends with a good-natured grin and a wave acknowledging the thunderous response.

Back in the pool bar, I debrief with Chaz and Steven. Chaz smiles and laughs, seeming not to mind having been D-Va’s “straight man.” Steven takes it in stride. “I wanted to come here

tonight,” he explains, “to show Ray my support. In the military, we patronized all kinds of establishments, including some gay ones. Camaraderie isn’t forged only on battlefields. Some people are surprised that a Mormon who doesn’t smoke or drink can still have fun in bars.”

Re/vision

The next day, our workshop commences at 6:00 p.m. and continues past 1:45 a.m. Steven has made extensive notes on the draft. He reads both his responses and suggested rewordings aloud. I sit at my laptop, incorporating feedback into the emerging text. Steven and Ray talk through how certain excerpts may be received by the rest of their family. We strive to balance the reader’s need for a good story (engaging plot, round characters, dramatic tension) and the family’s need to heal and move forward. At several points, Ray and Steven turn to each other and say something like, “I didn’t know you felt that way,” or “Let me explain.” Steven, for the first time, shares with Ray details about the sexual abuse he experienced as a boy. Steven then lets us know, “I also figured it was time to tell my brother; we talked about it just recently.”

When we wrap, Steven asks for a few minutes alone with Ray. They retreat to the living room. I later learn that Steven performed a father’s blessing, a ritual begun by Joseph Smith in 1834:

[M]y son, I lay my hands upon thy head... Thou hast suffered much in thy youth, and the poverty and afflictions of thy father’s family have been a grief to thy soul... Thou hast stood by thy father, and... would have covered his nakedness, rather than see him exposed to shame... No weapon formed against [my son] shall prosper, and though the wicked mar him for a little season, he... shall be blessed like the fruitful olive, and his memory shall be as sweet as the choice cluster of

the first ripe grapes... Thy heart shall be enlarged... At thy word... the deaf shall hear and the blind shall see...⁶

Love, Ray

RE: Decision from *Symbolic Interaction*

Date: April 27, 2008, 7:19 p.m.

Hi, Ray:

Attached is my revised version of the article containing a few suggested changes for Lisa to consider. I will defer to her final judgment.

I am not ashamed of my life and what has been depicted, particularly if the piece can be of value to others. I am not ashamed of you as my son, nor of what you have revealed. On the contrary, I am very proud of you. We both, like so many other people, have had our struggles in this life. What matters is that I love you. If you lived closer, Vivian and I would have you and Morgan over for dinner often and be delighted to have you as a close part of our family circle.

Some say that none of us will get out of this world alive. The truth is, we all will certainly get out of this world alive. I want to look forward to having you there by my side as a son and brother, both of us having fought a good fight, kept the faith, and endured to the end, and in the favor of our God who created us.

Love,

Dad

⁶ See Patriarchal (n.d.).

Re: Decision from *Symbolic Interaction*

Date: April 28, 2008, 7:45 p.m.

Hi, Dad:

I won't lie. When I first saw the e-mail response from you, I was scared. Lisa called me because she hadn't received my forward. As I read your e-mail to her, she got to experience—not for the first time—a sobbing child, longing to feel loved. Through your words, I realized that you have never stopped loving me.

If after our earthly bodies die, I am able to be with the people I love (you, Mom, Morgan, Lisa), then I will be there, and I believe that the way to get there is to love each other, no matter our differences.

When I later called you, Dad, we cried and learned more about each other in that hour than we ever have in our entire lives. It is, to date, my favorite memory of you.

Thank you, Dad, and thank you, Lisa.

Love,

Ray

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