

Introduction

My name is Mike Roper. I'm seventy-four years of age.

Mike, what do you do for work now?

I'm a teacher.

Childhood

My early childhood especially the first five years was very good. I had a cousin Agnes who, thank God she had cameras, both motion picture cameras and still cameras because without her there would be no documentation that I ever existed. My family did not take photographs and pictures and there are, there are videos of me, well they were, eight millimeter that were made into videos of me as a spontaneous little boy up till about the age five. And then I was molested by a female babysitter multiple times – when I was in kindergarten, first grade. So after that my youth was very painful. I didn't do well in school. I couldn't read. I still can't spell. I remember the first grade teacher sending home a note and I remember giving it to my mother and father, and I remember the words, "Michael is day dreaming." I started to wet the bed. So there were all kinds of signs today that, parents are a little more sophisticated with this stuff because of talk shows and all this stuff on child rearing that my parents weren't exposed to. I'm sure they wondered what had happened to their spontaneous little boy. But I died. And through years of therapy I had to redo myself. And to get in contact with that pain, and work through it and find that child. Back in the 70's and 80's there were all kinds of books on the original child. I knew exactly what they were talking about - was to find the original me that was still within me, and to nurture him. To take care of him.

Mike's Mother

I have dual feelings about my mother. I probably worked through therapy, worked through all the anger I had. She didn't take care of me, the babysitter did. I had a sister, she could have taken care, my older brother, I was the youngest. The other person took over. So I had a lot of anger towards my mother and my father. It's not there anymore. I have taken all the negative and worked through that and have been left to trans – trans – not only transcended it, took it and changed it, made it positive. But looking back and seeing that piece of my mother's life, then my mother makes sense to me. You could never shock my mother. You could never shock Bridie Roper. No matter what you told her she would never be shocked. She was always supportive. She related excellent with me. Well she ran a bar, she and my father ran a bar. So she heard it all. So from having a mother that was kinda divorced from me as a child, but she gave me great gifts and it's only later on in life that I realized what those gifts are, tolerance of other people, understanding other people. One of her favorite phrases is don't forget your shit stinks like anybody else – so a sense of humanity.

It sounds like she was a straight shooter.

There was no equivocation my mother at all and as I grew older I began to appreciate that. We ended up very good friends.

At the end of her life in the early 80s I used to go visit her. And she was in a home and she was dying of cancer. I used to lift her out of her bed. I would wipe her rear end and took her to the toilet. My older brothers would never do that. One night I tucked her into bed and I put the bed clothes up here and all of a sudden her hands come out of the sheets and she grabbed my cheeks and pulled me towards and said "Michael I love you". She had never said that to me in all of my life. She had never, she had never said that.

And she loved all of you?

At that moment she knew I was gay. At that time.

How did she find that out?

Well I had gotten married to a woman and we lived together as man and wife for 3 months and I had a breakdown, well what you would call a nervous breakdown. I just collapsed, I mean I went to live with a friend who dragged me out of bed every morning, threw me in the shower and made sure I went to school. Don't ask me how the hell I did that every day, but I did. And then I had to go tell her. My father was dead at the time.

How old were you Mike?

I was 41. So I went with a friend of mine, Patricia, who had lived with my mother when Patricia was studying at Yale. And we were gonna have lunch with my mother. And I was sitting at her dining table with Patricia. My mother was in the kitchen and I started to sob I mean I really started to cry. And she came in and she said "Michael what is the matter?" And she put her right hand on this shoulder, on my shoulder and I noticed she had her hand on her hip with a dishtowel. And I said, "Mama I'm gay." And she said, "Michael, if that's who you are, that's who you are. Now stop trying to be what you're not and eat your lunch." And that was, that was it.

Mike's Sexuality and Faith

Sexuality and Catholicism, it's almost like they didn't go together. It wasn't talked about. I think today as I grew my attitude toward sexuality, I have no conflict at all, absolutely nothing between my God and my sex. Absolutely nothing. I do not see any contradiction at all. In fact, I can't imagine one without the other.

It's almost like I saw the Church as a safe haven from my sexuality. And I had to leave her to go out and find it. Unknowing as I look back She was always there. I used religion to avoid the risks of God in my life. I played it safe with God. I did what I thought God wanted me to do, which is to close, to turn the switch of my human sexuality as if it isn't even there.

I don't like the word Church. To me it's the, the ecclesia. It's the community. What is this community? It's a community that is seeking. It's a community that is on a journey. In our most basic need for community, for the other, the incarnation and our sexuality are one. It is through my sexual body that I seek my God. And everything about sexuality transcends to the eternal. It's almost like it's within us to seek the eternal. It's in us to

seek the ultimate lover. What seems very base and very vulgar is extremely sacred. To me that's what the incarnation is.

So why do we try to separate our sexuality from our God? That's heresy. The sin of my life is I tried to separate those two realities. You can't. They're not separate. They're integral. In my life when I tried to pull them apart and live separately then I became a god damn neurotic. Took me 25, 30 years and a psychiatrist chair and couch to try and put the damn thing back together again. It's like humpty dumpty.

How Are LGBT Gifts to the Church?

God doesn't make junk. We, we are His creation. And we might not fit into some traditional box of human relationships or marriage but our energies are real, our reality is real. And it's not just a matter of accepting us – or tolerate us – you have to encourage us to be who we are. We are God's creation. And to deny that is to deny that He knows what the hell he's doing.

Gay people have been offering their gifts to the church for centuries. We have nursed the sick. We have taught the ignorant. We have administered and healed people. I think it comes from the pain in our lives. We are very sensitive to human pain. We're very drawn to healing. Because we have found so much of it in our own lives. Henri Nouwen once said that only the wounded heal. If you don't have wounds you don't understand people's pain. You have no idea what the hell they're talking about.

Mike Today

I've taught school for 54 years and it's such an integral part of my life. It's almost me. I can't imagine myself separate from it. That's why I've never retired, didn't think of retirement. Yeah my students know I'm catholic. And they also know I'm gay.

What do you tell students when they come out to you?

I congratulate them for their courage for their candidness, just the sense of recognizing the relief that they have. And I encourage them to communicate this to their family that they'll need support. And to seek a community, not necessarily the Catholic community, but to seek a community where they can feel at home. It's all a matter of going home. We all want to go home. I've spent my whole life trying to go back home.

Do you think you've found a little bit of that boy that you talked about?

Ohh – oh I love that kid. I have a picture of him in the classroom. A copy of that picture. It's one of my favorites. It's about, I know I'm 3 years old. It's on the desk. And one kid said to me, "Ya know Ropes, that kid teaches us." "Yes he does. Yes he does. The spontaneous boy Michael Roper teaches you."

If you could go back today and speak to that kid after having had the journey you've had, what would you say to that kid?

I'd say Michael it was a great adventure wasn't it? I'm sorry for screwing it up for you. But that's ok. We're together again. It's ok. And he'd say, "Fine Ropes. I've never left you. I never went. And I'm where you live. Yeah, I'm where you live."

If I could go back and tell that little inner child, that little boy “It’s been a rough going but you’ve always been with me. You were my strength. The memories of you I know would become realities again.” It all goes back to the same thing. It all goes back to Eucharist, “remember me that I loved you.” And he loved me. And he never left me. Through all the pain and all the contradictions of my life that little boy was always there. And he is where I live. He is my home. And he shall go with me. There’s a poem, the last line I can’t remember the whole poem but the last line of the poem is, “when I die you shall remain standing. And so he shall.”