

Coming Out After Thirty Years of Marriage: A Letter to My Wife

by [James Lantz](#), October 11, 2022

How do I know if I got this right? If what I did over our thirty years together — or, rather, what I didn't do — was the right thing?

Coming out as gay after thirty years of marriage hints at a profound moral lapse. A grand deception — or worse, cowardice. Now that the war is over, I'm a draft dodger coming home to a town of whispers.

Every closet has its story and mine is no different. Starting in my early teens, I built it piece by piece from scraps of old farm wood, stumps, and gray stones. Ten thousand decisions made over a lifetime.



The author James Lantz and his father in 1975.

Of course it is not a secret between you and I.

After my clumsy coming out to you decades ago, it became an acknowledged part of our thirty year marriage — though we often danced around it, hinted at its margins, the product of a life path foreclosed upon a long time ago.

Back in my twenties, just three days shy of our first weekend together, I had finally worked up the nerve to go to a gay bar. As I sat in the snowy parking lot with the car idling waiting to go inside, a man who sort of looked like Steve Bannon walked over and motioned for me to roll down my window. When I did, he quickly reached inside and slid his hand

beneath my jacket before I smacked it away. He scared the bejeebers out of me and I spun out of there, never to return.

That first weekend at the Triangle Diner when you and I shared strawberry ice cream and talked into the night, little did we know how quickly life would push us together — hard. There was the terrible car accident, a cancer diagnosis, then the doctor telling me that after radiation treatment, I might not be able to father children. Raising a family was important to both of us. With the future in question and radiation just weeks away, we were given a month to try to conceive a child. How happy we were when from that month, our firstborn arrived.

Still, it's easy to forget what crazy-cruel times the 70's and 80's were — especially in a small Southern town.



James Lantz in the mid-seventies with a county fair project.

Coming from a Christian Conservative household — sometimes violent, often explosive, steeped in ridicule and cold — homophobia was baked into my DNA. The jokes, snide comments, the shaming. Thoughts of suicide were always near.

Once in a fit of rage, my father jammed a dirty sock in my mouth, an act that was directly tied to who I was. Another time, a close relative was found walking barefoot on an icy West Virginia road, hallucinating and in the midst of a schizophrenic breakdown. After he was arrested, screaming and restrained — my father looked at me and said, “Well, at least he’s not gay.”

In their defense, my parents justified their actions as a product of the times.

Still, lasting years until my mid-teens, it was a pattern of volcanic outbursts, cruel jokes and physical abuse that seemed intent to “break” me, to make me fearful — to create a coward.

Our town was no less harsh. There was the Halloween I dared to dress in drag. I was thirteen. Not long afterward a group of older boys assaulted me, held me down and tried to sodomize me.

The first adult I told, a youth leader, said, “You know what I would’ve done, I would’ve let them do it — then I would’ve bit them!”



“A youth leader said, ‘I would’ve let them do it...’”

Later came the time of AIDS — when fear was evoked from every corner. Public leaders preached damnation and condemnation. At the cow college I attended, you wouldn’t dare be caught by the duck pond after dark. Kids who weren’t careful were sent home with no explanation. Rumors circulated that some were being lured then beaten up.

Coming of age at this time, it was all just too much. I was scared of my thoughts, scared to be outed, and scared of AIDS.

In 1984, on the first day of a solo motorcycle trip to Alaska, I rode the curve of a rural Virginia road to be confronted on the other side with a parked tractor trailer with the word “AIDS” hand-painted on its side in huge block letters. It was probably an acronym that had nothing to do with the disease that would kill hundreds of thousands and devastate the LGBTQ community — but at the time to my religious-superstitious upbringing, it was an omen.

For ten-thousand miles, I circled the U.S. up to Alaska — but I would detour hundreds of miles to avoid San Francisco, instead riding through a California desert where my front tire melted and I almost crashed.

I prayed to a god I did not believe in, to grant me things I would not get.
“Please God, give me different feelings — and don’t let me be gay.”



“I would detour hundreds of miles to avoid San Francisco.”

Decades have passed since those days. You and I fell in love and built a beautiful life together, an artists’ life. Our family grew and sunk its roots deep in another place; there we found a life rich with warmth, comfort and love. Of course there were tough times like when the tree fell on our house, or when we sold our furniture on the streets of New York just to make rent. But as you often say, “It’s all part of the adventure.” We survived to become parents to two incredible kids, and even helped one of them navigate their own coming out. Now we’re also proud grandparents.

After we started down the path of family and kids, the price to live as an out gay man was just too high. Breaking up our family was never an option. It was anathema to the responsibilities I created with you in that old farmhouse without heat in Virginia.

A gay life would be my unlived life.

In the recent movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, unlived lives exert an extraordinary power, giving those who are attuned, energy and strength. I can attest to this. Unlived doesn’t mean unfelt. Especially in the stories I tell, my unlived life continues to make itself known.

From a number of my short stories, films and plays, the recurring theme in my writing is often of a sensitive young man or boy, thwarted, damaged and desperately trying to communicate a great hurt — usually to an intransigent institution or person on the other side.

I know that I’m not the only one who feels this loss.

When my play *The Bus* performed Off Broadway, it told the story of two boys who rendezvous in a parked church bus to explore a hidden relationship; at one performance, a middle-aged man in the front row cried so loudly and for so long that the audience couldn't hear what the actors on stage were saying.



Bryan Fitzgerald, Travis Mitchell in the NYC production of James Lantz's "The Bus."

So here I am doing what my writing muse, my psyche, my soul or whatever you want to call it, insists that I must finally do — come out as gay to our family, friends, and long ago acquaintances. As is said in the movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, “Everything has led you to this moment. Don't let anything distract you.”

Is this the right thing to do? Is there value in telling my story now, after so many years and so much progress? I think so. Even as more and more young people in our lives come out, we still see others building closets, buckling under family expectations, hiding and afraid.

For me, the time has finally come to stop being afraid. I've been in this closet for far, far too long.

However, of one thing I'm absolutely certain — my coming out does not change my deep love for you, nor my desire to grow old with you. I hope you're okay with this. Our adventure continues. I love you more than you may ever know.

James Lantz is an award-winning filmmaker and playwright in Burlington, VT. You can find out more about him at www.jameslantz.com.