

COMING OUT/#WHILEBLACK

By Reverend Lisa Dunson

When asked to share my coming out story, I thought, this is going to be pretty boring; however, after thinking about it some more, I realized the uneventful coming out stories are just as important as those that would be considered eventful. I also struggled to focus on *my* 'coming out' story as the 'coming out' stories of African-American men and women who for an incalculable number of years have had their stories hidden and confined in the closet of injustice at the hands of police who exacted brutality, violence and murder upon those black bodies that have come out. The phrase that seems to pay is that the officers felt threatened, even though it has been proven time and time again that these black men and women were not acting in an offensive or threatening way. In fact, I have yet to hear of one, just one, who could be legally and legitimately identified as 'armed and/or dangerous' at the time of their murder. As I listen to the stories from years past that are just now coming to light in mainstream media outlets, I am reminded of all of the unnamed women of the Bible who all had and continue to have a profound impact on biblical history and our lives as people of faith. I wonder, would we know her name if cell phones were available to record and tell her-story as they do now?

I came out at age 22 after moving from Kentucky to Northern Virginia. Even though I had boyfriends, I always felt more of an attraction toward women; however, I did not really understand what those feelings were until I met my first Lesbian and future girlfriend. Now in hindsight, I am sure I knew some Gay and Lesbian folk, but none of them were out, at least not to me. This person was out and proud, and I had so many questions. We started talking and she listened and helped me try to make sense of who I was, who I always had been and most importantly, who I was becoming; and after about a year, we started dating. As we had many mutual friends who felt it their duty to 'warn me' about her, I decided I needed to 'come out' so they would understand there was no wool being pulled over my eyes. I decided it would be easiest and afford me the opportunity to practice coming out if I came out to my co-workers first as by then she and I were living together and worked in the same mall where many of my friends worked. I decided to take each of my co-workers, one by one, out for a drink to tell them I was Gay (at that time, I hadn't really learned to embrace the word Lesbian, so I stuck with 'Gay' for a while). To my great surprise, all of them replied, "oh I knew that" and continued sipping on their cocktail as if nothing earth-shattering had just happened. Now their response was much more traumatic for me, so my next and the obvious question for each of them was, "how did you know?" You see, I thought I was rather

good at hiding my sexuality, but apparently my friends knew me better than I realized. I remember feeling kind of 'cheated' because I was so much more surprised and slightly traumatized by them knowing before I told them than they were by my coming out to them.

I next came out to my mother, or I should say, she opened the closet door for me so I could exit. My mom was visiting and after going through and 'De-Mom-ing' my home, as we were doing laundry she very calmly asked me, "Do you live an alternative lifestyle? Are you and (let's call her) Toni, dating?" I continued folding the piece of clothing in my hands and simply said, "Yes." Her response was the response I wish we all could get from our parents; it was, "I thought so. Well honey, know you're my daughter and I love you and will always love you; and who you love is fine with me as long as they love you back and treat you like the queen you are." At that, we looked at each other and burst out into laughter. I said, "Mom, really!! Like the QUEEN I am." We laughed, even though we both knew what she meant. After coming out to my mother, it was a done deal! I was out and ready to live my life out loud! I don't recall having any specific discussions with my father, brother or any other family members, but I feel certain my mom shared our conversation with them. I know I am extremely blessed by the fact that my family's love for me never wavered. In fact, once I finally figured out and embraced who Lisa was, I became empowered and I found a renewed sense of freedom in being able to be my authentic self. This newness, this heightened sense of freedom, drew my family and me closer, it birthed in me a new and bolder level of personal confidence and sense of self, and it opened my eyes to the intersectionality of not just my life, but the lives of those who came before me and the lives being lived along side of me.

A few years after coming out, I was introduced to Covenant Baptist Church (now Covenant Baptist UCC), the Rev. Drs. Dennis and Christine Wiley and a congregation that did not just welcome me but affirmed me just as God had created me. I had no idea how, but I knew my life trajectory was about to change and change it did. Under the Wileys, I did the soul-work needed to accept my calling into the gospel ministry, completed my MDiv and began the most rewarding work my soul has ever known and I believe will ever know: preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and doing the work God requires of me, individually and communally in helping to "build an inclusive body of biblical believers."

Closets are made for clothes and a few fabulous pairs of shoes! They are not made to hide the marginalized or 'the other'; they are not made to shield and protect those who are sworn 'to serve and protect'; and they are not made to hide the injustices and isms that permeate our world. Just as it has been an unavoidable rite of passage for so many of us in the LGBTQ community to 'come out of the closet,' the hour is now, for the

beaten, bruised, battered and murdered bodies and spirits of Black America at the hands of a systemically racist society, to swing open wide the doors of racism and injustice and bring out of the closet the hatred of and for black bodies harbored by so many.

To the Michaels, the Trayvons, the Breanas, the Dontres, the Erics, the Sandras, the Tamirs, the Ezells, the Tanishas, the Walters, the Freddie's and all the other named and unnamed yet, black men and women brutalized and murdered for no other reason than #WhileBlack, I lift up for you 1 Peter 2:9-10 (MSG) which reads, "*But you are the chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do [God's] work and speak out for [God], to tell others of the night and day difference [God] made for you, from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted.*" Your ultimate sacrifice of the loss of your life will not be forgotten and will not be in vain. The 'moment' you each created has melted and morphed into a 'movement' as the voices of the innocent and the targeted join with those who once stood silent, blinded by their privilege. Streets, buildings and schools are being renamed, long-standing monuments are being toppled, processes and policies are being reevaluated and rewritten, the voices of the oppressed are being heard loud, clear and globally, and yes, slowly and through prayer and supplication those who commit crimes against innocent black bodies are being placed at the doorway of accountability and justice to answer for their heinous, unjust, inhumane and privilege-filled crimes. God created each of us in God's image, both with and on purpose and black lives are as precious as any and every other life in God's sight.

For years we thought the closet that housed the lives of so many in the LGBTQ community was the biggest closet we as a nation would have to emerge from in our lifetime; however in light of the martyred and spilled blood of black bodies on our streets and our sidewalks, as people of faith and as members of the human race, we are called to unhinge the doors of racism and white privilege and bring into the light, that which for way too long has been hidden in the dark and dank closets of history.

As I continue to live, grow, love, and evolve, I expect that my coming outs will also continue!! My prayer is that we will all find the courage to accept one another for who we are and as we are and that we will continue to knock down the closets of injustice and inequality wherever and whenever they are found.

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