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Coming out as a gay ranger in the era of the assassination of Harvey Milk and the HIV/AIDS crisis

DAN SEALY

ABSTRACT

The essay tells the story of a gay man, working as a National Park Service ranger, coming out to himself and in his workplace. This personal story parallels the national reckoning with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Asexual + issues, including the assassination of the first openly gay elected official in San Francisco and the unfolding crisis of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The story tells how secrets can impact employee confidence and careers. It also shows how seemingly benign actions by colleagues and supervisors can have both positive and negative effects on the personal coming out process. It also suggests how supportive actions and the workplace environment can strengthen both the individual and the agency.

Sometimes you have to say goodbye to the things you know and hello to the things you don't!

— William Faulkner, *The Reivers* (1962)

A HAPPY KID

I can never know if having loving parents and a childhood of freedom gave me confidence for the life I was granted. We each have only one life of experience. Growing up, I naïvely assumed everyone had loving parents and a sense of wonder—that everyone possessed those gifts. It is part of my make-up. Pollyanna. Glass half full. Optimist. Trusting my fellow humans. I was also gifted a close connection with nature that has served as my much-needed sanctuary. Things could be tough in our home, where my folks struggled with the everyday costs and stress of survival. I found early on I could escape on the endless railroad track behind our house. That was my first great hiking trail; as straight and flat as the Oklahoma horizon. The confidence of a loving, protective family; an inexplicably happy disposition in a home of relative poverty; and an appreciation for the most subtle elements of a prairie landscape became the foundation for self-discovery. The buffalo grasses, elegant scissor-tail flycatchers, and newborn horned-toad lizards that populated my world set me on a career with the National Park Service (NPS).

Growing up naïve and optimistic might serve as a good foundation for life but when that foundation is accompanied by secrets and lies to others or yourself, the result can be wobbly. Secrets, and the fear of secrets exposed, undermine confidence, sometimes resulting in chronic or episodic fear. Happiness was surely my mental state when I graduated from Humboldt State University (now Cal Poly Humboldt) in 1975 and landed at my new job as an NPS ranger at Muir Woods National Monument. The previous summer I worked as a “park technician” (entry-level ranger) at Chickasaw National Recreation Area in Oklahoma. I had camped with my family in the park since I was a child. My father was born nearby, and his father was a member of the Chickasaw Tribe. Arriving for a seasonal job, the park should have felt like home to me, but the blatant racism by a few employees, along with the distrust some older colleagues had for us younger employees, left me disappointed. I was glad to renew my love of the national parks

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with my assignment at Muir Woods, a small but important redwood forest dedicated to the inspiring writer and conservationist, John Muir.

The first kick at my wobbly cornerstone happened when I fell for a gay man, a Navy man visiting from Maryland, right there in the park. Though it was not a personal breakthrough, it perked up my ears when I overheard a fellow seasonal ranger talk about going out with friends to dance and drink at gay bars in San Francisco. The experiences they described were new to me at 23. I had seldom been to bars, and never to gay bars. Though I had lived in Northern California for several years, I had only been to San Francisco a handful of times, typically to listen to music. Carelessness was a greater push than courage when I hopped a bus from Mill Valley to San Francisco, where I anonymously walked into Toad Hall in the Castro, Buzzby's on Polk Street, and The Stud South of Market. Somewhat terrified of what I might find and experience in these bars, I stood against the wall listening to loud music (usually disco) and lied about my name and occupation. I was excited just watching men and women dance, laugh, hug and kiss in a completely natural way. What a revelation! I was aware that my ability to enjoying watching healthy interactions among LGBTQIA+ people was not afforded earlier generations. I was grateful. This understanding of how adults found friends, love, and companionship was equivalent, I assumed, to my straight family and friends dating in their teens. The time was right. Kismet. But I was clearly compartmentalizing my life: straight except for forays to San Francisco clubs. Fate, not purpose, would also determine the next major shedding of the innocent pretensions of my sexuality.

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Continuing the anonymous peek into my new life became routine but not frequent. I recall seeing Harvey Milk in the Castro but knew him only as one of many ardent political gay leaders. I met some men who had a common interest in music (I played French horn), and I joined some gay music groups, like the Gay & Lesbian Lavender Harmony Band, and a wind quintet of gay men, the "Five Easy Pieces." The quintet became a wayfinder to maneuver the unknown territory of gay relationships. The functions of the quintet equally were to enjoy playing music and to tell our stories. These stories of the quintet brotherhood served me well, revealing the possibilities and pitfalls of gay life.

AND THEN IT ALL FELL APART

I walked into the tiny visitor information center at Muir Woods on November 27, 1978, to find a beloved volunteer and a fellow ranger shocked and crying. A portable radio blared out the news that the openly gay city supervisor, Harvey Milk, and Mayor George Moscone had been shot; assassinated. Assassinated—not "killed." It was a politically motivated attack. LGBTQIA+ people have been clear about that as soon as it was announced. I distinctly recall my reaction to hearing the voice of then-supervisor, Dianne Feinstein, as she announced both the shooting deaths and the suspect: fellow supervisor Dan White. I felt compelled to head to the Castro district of San Francisco to be with newfound friends. I had no idea what I might do or what might occur. I just knew I needed to be there. We lit candles, walked in sorrow down Market Street to City Hall where LGBTQIA+ leaders and allies were making impromptu speeches and encouraging us not to give up. I recall little from the speeches. I do recall recognizing some of the speakers and I can easily identify those overwhelming emotions of despair, of going back into a dark, closeted world. That is how I felt, how we felt, that day and night. I left my slowly shrinking candle on the small statue of President Lincoln adjacent to City Hall. My candle wax dripped with dozens of others as the night progressed to personal grief. Was this my fate? That my recent liberation should all fall apart, crushed under violence and grief, sliding back into anonymity for self-defense?

Harvey Milk pre-recorded several versions of his will, "to be read in the event of my assassination." One of his tapes contained the now-famous statement, "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door." I recall Joan Baez encouraging people not to be alone, but to go out to be with others who need support. As I walked away from City Hall, I saw a young man sobbing uncontrollably alone on the darkened sidewalk. I put my arms around him, and he held me tight, still sobbing. I felt his tears and mine dripping down my face. A middle-aged woman with a child

grasping her skirt came over to us with tears in her eyes, put her arms around both of us and said: “We are not all like Dan White. I fear this hate. I want everyone to have equal rights. I’m scared too. Please forgive us.”

I met a violin player from Scotland that evening and wound up sharing an apartment with him. Moving to a gay-owned apartment in San Francisco was a not-so-subtle part of the process of finding identity, even if only for a short-term relationship.

TELLING THE PARENTS

In my imagination, Mom and Dad would come to visit my partner, his two adolescent children, and me in our home in rural West Marin County and all would unfold smoothly. I knew in order to have a meaningful, adult relationship with my parents, I had to stop my lie and open up to them about my sexuality. Finally they made that visit. The more I plotted the best time to come out to them, the more I found reasons to procrastinate. After several days together and numerous missed opportunities to open up, I felt I was a coward. On the morning they were to drive back to Oklahoma, I dressed in my uniform to head to Muir Woods. My parents took a photo of me and my dog and got in the car. The expression on my face in that photo shows the anguish I was in. My gay brother had come out to them several years before. When I recognized I was gay too, he told me not to tell them— “It will kill them.” No pressure there. But the ball was in my court. I asked them to get out of the car and come back into the house, and I told them. Silence. They told me they loved me. Hugs. Quickly back in their car and off they drove. Dad later told me Mom cried most of the 1,600 miles back to Oklahoma. My partner and I were involved in an increasingly messy, unhealthy relationship that left little room for a timely and cautious follow-up with my dear parents. When I did, my parents were clear: they loved me unconditionally. My mom would bravely join an active chapter of the group PFLAG (Parents & Family of Lesbians and Gays), an important source for her understanding of the world we lived in and how we could make that world better through love.



BETRAYAL AND REDEMPTION

The next big truth hurdle for me was explicitly coming out to my NPS supervisor. I had moved from Muir Woods to the Marin Headlands District of Golden Gate National Recreation Area. I landed in an incredible working environment where I felt we could rely on one

another in an urban park with serious crimes and formidable search and rescue operations. My district ranger was a capable, friendly, and somewhat charismatic person. He mentored many of us to promote our careers in ways we found mutually positive. My duties were primarily interpretation, education, and natural resources management. He believed it was good for staff to be familiar with duties beyond their job description and when possible, become trained and qualified in them. For me, this would include search and rescue, technical cliff rescue, and wildland fire suppression; duties I was happy to learn and perform. As I moved up in rank on fire teams, I was in charge of a crew of 20–25 firefighters. We worked 12-hour shifts in rugged terrain and experienced frequent danger. Trust, communication, and camaraderie were essential. I found no reason to interject my personal sexual identity. We worked in remote camps of hundreds of exhausted men and women firefighters from across the nation. We stood in long lines for food, showers, and tools. People were in danger and occasionally got hurt. For a supervisor, trust and focus on the job was paramount. I decided to defer my homosexual identity in recognition of my responsibility.

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I am not proud of my decision to hide my sexuality, especially as I requested experienced women firefighters to mentor new women on the fireline. I could have provided the same support for LGBTQIA+ firefighters, but that would have assumed there was a way for me to identify who was LGBTQIA+ and safely engage with them. That was not the case in the semi-military structure of firefighting in the 1980s and much of the 1990s.

At this point in my career, having a law enforcement (LE) commission with the training and required certification was considered a career booster. The commission would also serve as much-needed tactical support for the district rangers who often put their lives in danger patrolling the Marin Headlands on the outskirts of San Francisco. The district ranger asked me if I would be willing to go to the LE academy so I could back up my fellow rangers. “Of course,” I replied. As I considered that response, however, I realized this required a new level of honesty in my work and with my supervisor. I had only been out to a few fellow employees. I could not be part of an effective LE ranger team if I withheld this piece of information about myself. I asked the district ranger if we could have lunch. I needed to discuss my nomination for LE training with him. I felt extremely uneasy about such a frank conversation with most people, much less my supervisor.

After a short lunch, I just blurted out, “I’m gay. If you feel that is a problem, I will withdraw my name from the LE academy.” I cannot forget his response. He gave me a great smile and said, to my surprise, “I already know that. I knew it before I nominated you. A lesbian ranger in another district told my friend and he told me. I was surprised and wish you had told me. But I’m really glad you trusted me and told me today.” This was one of a few “Good and Bad” moments in my career. Good, because I was surprised and happy he trusted and nominated me when I knew that would have been a deal-breaker for some supervisors. Bad, because, at the same moment, I also had a visceral feeling of betrayal by one of my own. Being outed by a fellow LGBTQIA+ ranger I did not know felt unethical, and I surely didn’t appreciate her taking control of my narrative in a way that could easily have been destructive. I do not know that ranger, though I do know her name. I have never confronted her. What is the point? Outing people is ethically pretty taboo in the LGBTQIA+ community. An exception for some is the outing of a person who is in a position of power to assist with our issues, like a member of congress or a mayor, but instead votes or acts against LGBTQIA+ civil rights behind their own closet door. Even then, I am not sure the closeted person should suffer the consequences of my decision to out them. I have never outed anyone. The take-home for me was: the redemptive action of support by my supervisor was greater than the betrayal of being outed by a colleague. This kind of unfortunate “Good and Bad” moment would recur. As things turned out, due to a backlog of rangers who needed the training for their primary LE job, versus those of us for whom it would have been a secondary responsibility, I never actually went to the LE academy.

THE PANDEMIC LABELED THE “GAY PLAGUE”

In 1984, fear and anger gripped the gay and lesbian community of the San Francisco Bay Area. With little-to-no guidance from national health agencies, San Francisco closed gay bathhouses and private clubs suspected of allowing sex. Early that year, I ran into a neighbor I had not seen in a few months. His formerly athletic body had turned gaunt, and he had purple lesions on his neck and face. “Hepatitis, the doctor says.” On August 24, 1984, he died, aged 37. Later that same year, I was at a party for an acquaintance, Jon Simms, founder of the San Francisco Gay Freedom Band. He seemed suddenly listless and unlike his typical energetic self. He died in July 1984, aged 37. This plague was haunting me. I saw young men with rapid weight loss, lesions, and pneumonia. There seemed to be no cure. Everywhere in the Castro and beyond, gay men were dying. Results from studies in San Francisco and New York City revealed that, without development of vaccines or other treatments, approximately one-third of the gay population could die, and it was unclear yet if the disease would stop there. In 1987, I attended my cousin’s funeral in Tehachapi. His former wife, current male partner, and young son were there. My cousin died of HIV/AIDS. He was 31. In 1988, a former partner of mine died at age 42. My brother, who lived in Denver, told me the same disease was stalking his community. Funerals were monthly, sometimes weekly. So many men were so young. The circle was getting so close. When I accepted my next ranger job on the opposite coast, I felt like a coward abandoning my friends.

CAPE COD: NEVER A LOCAL, ALWAYS A “WASH ASHORE”

My career took me to the North District of Cape Cod National Seashore in Massachusetts, which included the Outer Cape and Provincetown. I quickly learned that there were traditions on the Cape, including an unwritten scale of who could claim it as home. If you were not born on the Cape, and especially people like me who could claim no connections at all, you were kindly referred to as a “Wash Ashore.” The label fit. Though I had grown to love trips to Maine, I had never been to the Cape. Hard to believe, but once again, I landed in a legendary gay vacation destination: Provincetown, Massachusetts. Our ranger station was near the town and when I arrived in 1988, I found myself in yet another gay community coping with many HIV/AIDS deaths of longtime residents and beloved repeat summer visitors. The park had an uneasy relationship with the local communities for a variety of reasons: resentment of strong resource protection policies and regulations, and a decades-long struggle between park rangers and members of the LGBTQIA+ community who believed it was their right to not only embrace certain beaches as LGBTQIA+-friendly, which meant not only allowing nudity, but the right to have sex in the low sandy dunes near Herring Cove and Provincetown. Open public sex meant we could not provide interpretive programs for visitors, especially families, in a few areas. I learned this when I naïvely planned a saltwater marsh walk at a beautiful marsh near Provincetown. The look I got from my colleagues was code for “Are you nuts?” This seemed unfair to me. My new friends in the LGBTQIA+ community learned I was openly gay and they shared their perspective on their right to have sex in the park. Some chastised me for being part of a homophobic agency. Wow. Didn’t expect that.

Another natural resources manager and I joined with the Provincetown-based Center for Coastal Studies to host a public radio station show called “Trails and Tales.” Our collective goal was to shine a light on the incredible natural and cultural resources of the Cape and how to protect those resources. We also saw this as an opportunity to break out of the ongoing law enforcement struggles to focus on the inspiring place itself. I do not know exactly why, but it seemed this radio show provided a small entrée to explain to those who were open to different perspectives that regardless of who was having open sex in the park, straight or gay, it prohibited others from exploring and enjoying those same areas. Being a year-round member of the LGBTQIA+ community and active with social and non-profit organizations made some people feel free to engage in discussions they might not otherwise have with park employees. My experiences with HIV/AIDS showed that I, too, am a vulnerable human. A new superintendent who prioritized improvement of community relations was very appreciative of our radio show and informal outreach. Who could know an inherently naïve ranger might help provide some openings to engage in difficult conversations?

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WE ARE CERTAINLY OUT NOW!

In 1992, I was excited about my new job as chief of natural resources management at George Washington Memorial Parkway in the Washington, DC, metro area. A couple of months into my job, a natural resources specialist I had known in Massachusetts told me she needed to tell me something about my new supervisor. “You know, before he hired you, he found out I knew you and asked me point blank if you are gay. I was vague but told him I didn’t think it was my business to talk about a person’s private life.” “Good job,” I thought to myself. I told her I appreciated her doing the right thing and for not answering an inappropriate employment question. I explained to her that I was out. A lot of people in the Washington and regional offices knew. The fact my supervisor pursued the question, understandably, upset both of us, but I quickly developed a good working relationship with him. He defended hiring me when challenged by two upper-administration park employees. He trusted me with some difficult decisions. Once again, I had been the target of unethical personal scrutiny, but the same person made the ethical decision. I applaud such personal growth.

While working at the parkway, in the winter of 1996, my mother called from Oklahoma. My gay brother had returned to Oklahoma a few years earlier when diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Mom, now a widow, was crying, “Your brother just arrived on my doorstep with a suitcase and said he could not care for himself or his house anymore. He has come to stay with me to die. Can you come home to help me?” I went to my supervisor, the same one who had hired me, and told him I needed to do this. I was not sure when I would be back to work. My career was important, but my mom and brother had no one else to turn to. I suggested I could use the leave I had saved up but might need to go on an administrative, unpaid leave status. If he could not support that, I respected his position but would probably have to resign. Honestly, if the Park Service had refused my request I would have given it all up. Fortunately, I not only had a compassionate supervisor but also fellow park employees, from rangers to human resource managers, who understood. I loved my career, and I would return, but I had to do this critical task to help my brother face his end days, and my mother the loss of her firstborn. I received compassion from the Park Service when I needed it the most.

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Around 1999 I was at a LGBTQIA+ book event in DC and the author, Dan Woog, said he was working on a new book to explore gay men who had jobs that the person on the street might not expect to find homosexuals employed in. He said if anyone in the audience knew of anyone who might fit that category to let him know. As people socialized after the event, I met Woog and told him I was not sure if a park ranger was a job the average person would associate with a gay man, but if he was interested, we could talk. Woog did, in fact, include my story as one of his chapters (Woog 2001: 50–58) and if it helped others to feel empowered to achieve career goals, I felt it served a purpose. As I read the chapter now I am underwhelmed by my story, but having shared it lent itself to my most out-loud LGBTQIA+ experience. The book was being published by a small LGBTQIA+ press. A national magazine, *The Advocate*, approached Woog about an article inspired by his book. The magazine wanted to highlight men and women in unexpected jobs. Woog notified me of the magazine’s interest, and I agreed to be one of the people profiled. At this point, I was not representing the National Park Service, and felt the decision was my own to make. My sexual identity had never resulted in embarrassment for the agency, and the publication did not require mention of NPS. That was fine until the journalist asked if they could include a photo of me in my uniform in the article. I had never worn my uniform to any unauthorized or personal event. I did not wear it when I marched in parades or gave off-duty interpretive walks for friends or relatives. Even when attending memorial services for NPS staff, I asked permission before wearing the uniform. It was a matter of respect for my fellow NPS employees and my own ethical beliefs. My reply was “no.” The journalist reminded me that the image of an openly gay man in uniform might be as empowering to some readers as the story itself. I reconsidered and approached the superintendent to request her permission. I assured her it was a credible news magazine, not one that included nudity or pornography. She said, “Absolutely yes!” I told her I considered our work teamwork and asked if any of the rangers who worked with me wanted to be in the photo too, and could they wear their uniforms. Again, she said “yes.” Four

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natural resource managers worked for me at the time, and all wanted to be in the photo. I was so relieved—and so proud of them. We posed along the forested shore of the Potomac River. One ranger took the photo while the others smiled and pretended to be working. I was disappointed the magazine chose to use a photo that did not include my colleagues, even though all of the rangers had signed the photo release. Nevertheless, an article with my name and photo in a national magazine—that happened to have then-senatorial candidate Hillary Clinton on the cover—was part of my slow path toward coming to grips with my life. I was learning to shed the secrets that blocked my career or my relationships.

BE THANKFUL, CONSIDER THE “OTHERS”

How can we help those who feel they are treated as the “other”? The feeling as an outsider can originate because of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity), national origin, race, ethnicity, religion, economic status, marital status, or disability. Support from co-workers can be as subtle as inclusion in discussions, meetings, and work, and as overt as full mentorship, as they navigate an uncertain path. Today, civil rights seem to be slipping away amidst the current political mess. The fear is suffocating for anyone who considers themselves to be “different.” Each person and employer is called upon to be visible in their support.



Around 2000, while working at the parkway, the group Federal GLOBE: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Employees of the Federal Government invited newly elected US Representative (later, US Senator) Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin to speak at an event. In 1999, Baldwin had become the first openly LGBTQIA+ woman elected to Congress. Baldwin gave a very inspiring talk in which she included a plea that echoed the words of Harvey Milk: “If you want to live in a world where you can be proud to be Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender, you can create that world. Say who you are. Live who you are. Put your partner’s photo on your work desk just like straight people do. Each of us can make that world in our own way.” The next day I placed a framed photo of my gay partner (now husband) on my desk for anyone to see. Most of my colleagues knew my husband. but the photo raised meaningful conversations with all sorts of people and showed I had discarded my secret.

Now that I am retired, some of my best friends are former NPS employees scattered across the nation. What an amazing gift. Better than a “golden watch” or “golden parachute.”

POSTSCRIPT

One of the lesser known units of the National Park System is Touro Synagogue National Historic Site in Newport, Rhode Island—the oldest in the United States. On August 18, 1790, congregants of the synagogue welcomed George Washington to their place of worship. Washington’s letter of response to the synagogue, delivered on the same day, has become famous for reinforcing the ideal of liberty and tolerance in American life. In recognition of the rights of minorities: Washington wrote that “happily, the Government of the United States ... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance....”

REFERENCE

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On the cover of this issue

“Strength,” a Tarot illustration representing a radiation of power coupled with inner understanding and love. | [HENRY CRAWFORD ADAMS](#)