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Ozzie Mayers

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, omayers@csbsju.edu

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Coming Out Into the Hurricane

As I think about my coming out experience, for some reason I find myself connecting to the recent natural disasters down South. Having grown up in Southwest Louisiana, I am quite familiar with hurricanes and, in fact, have a nostalgic resonance with them. Hurricanes meant that everyone in my family — most especially my father — was forced to stay home for days — often a whole week. It meant having to sequester ourselves in our homes with candlelight and figuring out how to pass the time without the usual outlets of the television, the radio, or the stereo. We played games and had extended conversations. Plus, we were well fed; because electricity went out so frequently during storms, we — like many other families — always had a gas stove and enjoyed frozen food which had to be cooked and eaten before spoiling.

So, for me hurricanes have a cocooning resonance. I fully realize the horrors that can come with hurricanes; I was only 10 years old when Audrey, a category 4 hurricane, hit coastal Louisiana; it hurled a deadly, raging ocean of water — much as Rita did. Like Rita, it wiped out every movable object in its path, forever changing the lives and souls of Cameron Parish residents. Hurricane Audrey killed 425 people, 154 of whom were under the age of 9. My cousin who was one year younger than I and his family barely escaped the flooding waters and found their way to our home.

While I have these events vividly embossed on my memory, I also have an emotional response as I recall the hibernating life that hurricanes brought. Reflecting on these memories and my coming out experience, I have come to realize that coming out can be fraught with similar complexities. Both conjure up feelings of security that come from being confined, the enticement of emotional and spiritual liberation, and the trauma of stepping outside the closet into a social and psychological hurricane.

Let me explain. As I think of the salient parts of my coming out and hurricane experiences, I have come to appreciate closeted spaces as well as the space beyond. To begin with, closets have an interesting history. In 18th and 19th century England and Europe, women had closets which were actually small rooms, often with a few pieces of furniture, and a dressing table with a mirror; the latter held the woman's makeup and toiletries and whatever medications she needed. This room was a sanctuary for women and was closed off to men, even husbands and lovers. To enter this closet was to enter into a female zone, a sexualized space.

Closets, as we know them today, are a Victorian invention meant to hide disorder and to help feed the Victorian penchant for a regulated and pristine appearance. We also know that closets were often used to reprimand or punish young children or slaves in the 19th century both abroad and here in America. For example, there is the forced confinement of Linda Brent, who in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* recounts how she spent months in her grandmother's tiny vermin-infested garret, unable to see her children except through cracks in the floor boards. And those of us who study literature and feminist theory as a profession have come to appreciate the psychological phenomenon of Bertha in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Bertha, the first wife of Rochester, is the manifestation of confinement gone mad and as critics Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert suggest, the suppressed part of Jane's psyche.

Closets are cultural museums. American closets, for example, have multiplied and expanded in recent history, as have the houses that contain them. The average size of a new home constructed in 2010 was 2,392 square feet, up from 1500 square feet in 1970. Family sizes have been shrinking, but family purchases have not. We acquire more things, and so we require more house and more closet space to put our possessions in their place. Our closets store rich memories in boxes of photos, clothing too tight to wear but kept as markers of special occasions, and equipment that reminds us to keep active and healthy. There are cultures, however, that traditionally do not build closets; for example, when I was in Peace Corps and visited the West African villages of some of my students, I never saw any dwellings with a closet. I suspect that this may be true for cultures that are more communal than ours.

So when we talk about a group of people coming out a closet, we need to be aware of the rich tradition that closets have as well as their cultural implications. For those of us who have come out, the closet can be a psychic space that like my hibernating experiences during hurricanes can become a refuge and not just a prison. It can provide a sanctuary that allows one to reflect more deeply, to hear more clearly, and to discern more distinctly. It is a space where, like Elijah or Job, we can hear the voice of God in the whirlwind. It is indeed the eye of the hurricane where there is a calmness created by the swirling winds. Scott Russell Sanders in his essay “Settling Down” says, “If you stay put, your place may become a holy center, not because it gives you special access to the divine, but because in your stillness you hear what might be heard anywhere.” (115)

I remember wondering, as I weighed coming out of the closet after 17 years of marriage, whether doing so was worth losing the comforts and serenity that I had learned came with staying in the closet; I knew that stepping out of the closet meant creating turmoil in my life, the lives of my family and friends, and generally in my wider social and professional circles. As Brian McNaught states in his book, *On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith, and Love*,

People who listen to the voice almost always lose the security with which society had rewarded them for staying in line; for staying in Egypt; for staying on the plantation; for staying in the closet. When you listen to the voice within and decide to leave Egypt in the hope of finding a homeland, pharaohs chase you with their armies, voters take away your rights, college jocks mock you and people call you names, such as “militant,” “radical,” “avowed,” and “troublemaker.” (161–162)

To continue my analogy, coming out of the closet would be like stepping into a hurricane.

The particulars of the disastrous aftermath of Katrina are painful to all of us and to me especially with family and friends directly affected by this disaster. But the aftermath has also become for me an analog for the impact

of coming out, often resulting in being separated from family and friends, perhaps having to move out of one's home; it may also mean losing one's job or being ostracized and stereotyped — as many of those left devastated by Katrina have experienced.

Coming out can mean moving into new emotional territory without any maps or guides. The film version of Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* dramatizes this very movement as the two closeted cowboys explore their sexual frontiers in what film critic Colin R. Johnson says is the "openness of the landscape that signals a temporary opening in the heteronormative constraint of American masculinity." (B15) The agony of Ennis, the more reluctant of the two main characters to come out of his marriage, is palpable, especially to those of us who have been in the land between the closet and the American frontier and in my case the "hurricane." While we should celebrate coming out, it is a celebration which comes with a price for those of us who undertake it in reality.

Coming out can be a very scary act because you know for sure or suspect that you are stepping out of the comfort of the closet into a social and personal hurricane. At times, this stepping out is forced upon you and that makes coming out even more devastating. I think for example of what is happening to seminarians who are studying to become Catholic priests. I think of my niece whose parents forced her to admit she is a lesbian living in a committed relationship and in turn then distanced themselves from her. I think of the hundreds of couples whose sexual orientation deprives them of their legal and civil rights. In these cases, coming out, while liberating, has consequences that are as disastrous as the plight of many New Orleanians today.

So being closeted and coming out should not be taken lightly; in addition, I think we need to stop thinking of coming out as germane to only GLBTs. I suspect everyone has dimensions of their lives that are "closeted." I see the complexities of "closetness" in Karen Armstrong, who, in her spiritual memoir, details the physical agonies and mental anxieties that came with her leaving a Catholic convent in which she had lived for seven years. I see it in the office assistant who cannot express herself too intelligently for fear of threatening a boss, the young high school student who cannot find a constructive way to combat the bullying of his peers, the father who cannot put limits on

his work hours for fear of losing his job, the elderly woman who is too fearful to ask her husband to caress her wrinkles, the Hispanic who is too intimidated to speak in public out of fear that others will laugh at his accent, or the married man of 17 years too anxious to confront the realities of his sexual orientation.

In essence, I believe we all have closets, but I think we need ones whose doors remain open and let us take refuge from time to time from the hurricanes in our lives.

Ozzie Mayers is Professor Emeritus of English and Gender Studies. In 2012, he became the first recipient of the Alcuin and Clemens Library Information Literacy Award for advancing students' scholarly literacy and abilities.

Note

This essay was composed after the Louisiana coastal areas were struck by two devastating hurricanes in the early fall of 2005 — Katrina and Rita — and has since been modified.

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