

Linne Jensen's Story

RIC Panel: Sunday, February 2nd

Thank you for asking me to serve on this panel today. I have to admit, I am apprehensive. Actually, I am a bit scared sitting here in front of you, about to talk about vulnerable things. I have a leading to speak publicly about LGBTQIA life experiences, about my experiences as a lesbian, in spite of my discomfort. The leading is clear that I am to be here today, so I am here, as Spirit has called me. To be faithful to my leading, I will be candid with you and resist that urge to hide or soften things. I ask that you please listen with open hearts.

My story has many chapters and due to the time constraints today, I am only going to give you an abridged version of part of it. Today I am telling my story including my identity as a lesbian. Some of you may have heard parts of my story before, most likely with the lesbian references omitted. I am currently in a time of living truthfully – a “no passing” zone where I am who I am without trying to pass or to appear to be anyone else – but the part of the story I will tell today starts with a time of feeling unacceptable, goes through a time of rejection and expulsion, and ends during a time of living in the closet and passing.

I was born in Iowa, and from the beginning, I was unacceptable. I was conceived in the back of a Ford in the fall of 1951, when my mother was a sophomore in college and my father a senior. My father's father was the Lutheran pastor for the Danish immigrant community in southwest Iowa. He forced my parents to marry, even though my mother wasn't Danish. Abortion wasn't legal then, but even if it had been, the Church and my parents would have been against it.

Most of my childhood was spent in Waterloo, Iowa. My family attended St Ansgar Lutheran Church, and our family life revolved around the Church. Religious holidays were very important in my family, and we often spent them at Grandpa's church. My father was authoritarian and a strict disciplinarian. He got jobs and lost them regularly, so we moved often, and there was never enough money. My father gave my mother an allowance to manage household expenses, but he would not allow her to work outside the home. At times, we were short on the basics. I was often on the wrong side of whatever was happening and got the sense that nothing I did was right or would ever be good enough. At Church I was taught that I was sinful and that I needed to ask God for forgiveness. But somehow, whatever was wrong with me was unforgiveable and could not be fixed. I got this message at Church, where I doubted that God expected my role was setting up and cleaning up after potlucks; at home where I resisted babysitting and learning the domestic arts of cooking, sewing, and doing laundry; and at school where I wore pants under my skirts to protest the dress code that required girls to wear dresses. I joined Girl Scouts and the school band, but I still didn't seem to fit in anywhere. It seemed to be more than the fact that I liked to be outdoors rather than in the house. I did my best to fit in, and I couldn't figure out why I was so unacceptable.

My father was killed in a car accident when I was fourteen. After that, everything changed in my family. There was a wrongful death lawsuit that awarded enough money to provide for our family's needs. My mother bought a house in a nice neighborhood near the high school. She got involved in civil rights and school desegregation. She joined Planned Parenthood and worked for women's reproductive rights. My Girl Scout troop was an active one, and I spent as much time

with Girl Scouts as I could. I took on leadership roles, participated in regional and national events, and went camping whenever and wherever the opportunity arose. I met a girl in Girl Scouts from a neighboring town, and we started getting together whenever we could. We biked between our houses as well as seeing one another at Girl Scout events. We often stayed overnight at each other's houses, and she became like a family member. We planned to go to college together.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I took a job as a camp counselor at a Girl Scout camp in Michigan. There I met other young women who thought and felt as I did. One of them took a special interest in me, and on our day off from camp, she took me to a bar. I did not have words for what I experienced. I heard the words "homosexual," "lesbian," and "gay" for the first time. I discovered I was not the only person who had special feelings for people of their same sex. I came to understand that my relationship with my friend-who-was-like-family was in fact a lesbian relationship. I discovered this was exactly what was unacceptable about me and why I had been unable to fit in at Church, in my family, and at school.

When I came home from camp at the end of the summer, I told my mother I was lesbian. It didn't go well. My mother was silent for a long time. Then she told me to pack everything I wanted when I left to go to college, and that I would not be allowed to come home ever again. And she told me that I was to have no contact with my brothers and sisters after she dropped me off at college.

I arrived at Carleton in the fall of 1970 with my big blue trunk and moved into Goodhue Hall, the first and only co-ed dorm on campus. I was on the first floor, where both men and women had rooms. This had seemed like an exciting choice when I had signed up for housing the previous spring, but it soon became clear this was a disaster for me. My friend-who-was-like-family's parents were not as liberal as my mother, and my friend had been required to sign up for a women-only floor, which was on fourth Myers. She settled in well there and made friends with floor mates. I was repelled by the room swapping that was going on in Goodhue, and I found myself in that familiar but uncomfortable position of not fitting in.

The woman who had taken a special interest in me at camp over the summer came to Northfield from Michigan. I began spending much of my time with her, most of it in the Carleton arboretum. The Michigan woman got a job as the secretary in the Carleton Women's Physical Education Department, and the Dean of Women became concerned about my failure to make friends in Goodhue. I found myself being called into the Dean's office and getting warnings about my lack of relationships with other students and the unhealthiness of my relationship with the Michigan woman. I couldn't tell the Dean about my roommate's project to have sex in our room with every man on the floor. The Dean called my mother, and it was over. I was forced to drop out of Carleton. I couldn't go home, so the Michigan woman and I got a room to share in Northfield, in the house of a Girl Scout leader. I began to explore what it would mean for me to live as a lesbian.

I got a job at the 3M Dynacolor film processing factory, working nights. I came to understand that part of being lesbian meant that my hopes of becoming a teacher would be out of the question, due to prevailing attitudes that gay people were sexually predatory in general, and

pedophiles in particular. Even at the factory I worried about losing my job if someone exposed me as a lesbian. I also had to give up the idea of ever getting married. And if I couldn't get married, then I couldn't have children. That was a hard one for me, but having a child out of wedlock was just not something I thought I could do. And many lesbians who had had children when they were married were getting their children taken away from them when their marriages ended. It seemed that being a lesbian meant being considered an unfit parent.

Working nights in a film processing factory wasn't fun. One thing I decided that I knew for sure was that I didn't want to do factory work for the rest of my life. Going back to college and finishing my education was going to be necessary to find a better job. I contacted my grandmother, my mother's mother, and asked her to help me go back to Carleton. Arrangements were made for me to return to college the following fall.

That summer the Michigan woman and I both got jobs at the Girl Scout camp near Waterville. After the first session, both of us were fired, to keep the girl campers safe from us, because it was suspected that we were lesbian. I learned about "the closet" and came to the conclusion that if I was going to have a job, then I was going to have to live a double life. The Michigan woman went back to Michigan. I returned to Carleton and went into the closet.

My grandmother told me she would accept collect calls from me anytime, and I began to talk with her regularly. She told me that my mother hadn't told my brothers and sisters that she had banished me and that they missed me. In December that year, my grandmother told me that my mother had developed ovarian cancer. I came to feel that I had to find a way to bridge the gap between me and my family.

I had lesbian friends at both Carleton and St Olaf, but I also intentionally made a few men friends as part of my double life. I shared my family situation with one of these men friends, and he suggested that he could pose as my boyfriend and visit my mother with me. He suggested that perhaps by his presence we could convince my mother I had been cured of being a lesbian. I hated the lie, but I wanted to see my brothers and sisters again, and I wanted to see my mother before she died.

The plan worked, and for the last year of my mother's life, I went from Northfield to Waterloo every other weekend and spent precious time with my family. I never mentioned any of my lesbian friends around my mother, and she agreed that she would change her will to allow me to be guardian of my brothers and sisters when she was gone. I managed to keep the two parts of my double life completely separate. I was successfully "passing."

My mother died in August 1973, just after my 21st birthday, but before she had changed her will. In spite of the will, I moved my brothers and sisters to Northfield in time to enroll them in school that fall. The stakes of my double life became even higher – I had to avoid any possibility of being accused of being an unfit parent to my brothers and sisters. I petitioned the Minnesota Court for guardianship and got it. I dropped out of Carleton for a second time, devoted myself to raising my brothers and sisters, and lived in the closet in fear.

1. How would you go about choosing a church—are there any red flags that would turn you away from a church?

In the mid and late 1970's, I was not able to find a church home in Northfield for my brothers and sisters that had a message of acceptance of gay people. After my brothers and sisters were on their own, I formed a partnership with a woman and together we brought our daughter into the world in 1985. This woman was raised Episcopalian, and we were able to find a church home at All Saints for a few years when it employed a closeted gay priest.

In 1998, my grandmother died, and I began to search for a church home again. I found the Quakers. The Quakers had been in Northfield since the early 1980s, but I had not been aware of them. They were open and welcoming to me, accepting me as I am. The understanding that there is that of God within every person and that every person can have direct experiences of the divine resonated with my experience. I was relieved to abandon the ideas that humans are born sinful and that Christ died for human sins. The more I learned about Quakers, the more certain I became that I had found my spiritual home.

2. What's the most common misconception you've faced from Christians or community members about your identity as a member of the LGBTQ community?

unfit parents, sexually predatory, pedophiles

3. What's the one piece of advice you would give to a congregation that wants to be more welcoming?

Get to know a person who is LGBTQIA

Short Bio

Linne Jensen spent her early years in Iowa, came to Northfield to attend Carleton College fifty years ago, and graduated from Carleton twelve years after she arrived. Linne has worked in factories, in retail and food service situations, as the craft director at various renaissance festivals, at St Olaf College in the Academic Support Center, and is currently a realtor with Edina Realty. She is a founding member of Just Food Coop and a member of Cannon Valley Friends Meeting, Quakers. She currently lives on the east side of Northfield near her daughter, son-in-law, and two grandsons.