

The Other Team

By J.J. Stranko
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I'm not quite sure what it's supposed to feel like to be gay. History would tell me to be a reclusive writer who does exotic drugs or a repressed global czar who focuses sexual frustration on plundering small villages. Society seems to tell me to wear a lot of poor-fitting, exorbitantly-priced clothing and have an inexplicable penchant for showtunes. My Catholic background, if I were still an adherent, explains that I should bury a natural desire in secrecy and pepper that with a healthy gratiné of guilt.

As a closeted gay middle and high school student, I internalized exterior views of what others thought of my sexuality while never being able to externalize interior views. Since puberty hit I understood that luck wouldn't be a lady, and I could at least be honest with myself. But throughout my all-guys high school days, I nonetheless felt that, while employing aggressively straight tendencies, my sexuality was forbidden fruit.

My high school, across the street from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, was a Catholic enclave with a storied history of sheer masculinity. The only real gay inspiration and guidance I happened upon in my curriculum vitae came from studying Beat poets, reading Lorca and being overly inquisitive about the special friendship between Frederick the Great and Voltaire. Granted, I did dress just a little bit more stylishly than everyone else, and true, I have been known to spend half my day in Starbucks. But most of the straight mannerisms and behaviors that I exhibit are not so much a product of straight indoctrination but more of the ways I choose to conduct my life.

While I could be accused of swinging one way socially and another sexually, I cannot look at sexuality in a diametrically-opposed fashion, and I feel for those who can only look at things on so simplistic a level. Although the last few weeks of coming out to friends here and from home have been gratifying, I know that my acceptance at Columbia is due to historical campus tolerance.

As courageous as I might start to feel for finally being honest, I have ghosts that will haunt me for a long time. I have to remember six years of looking at my mother and father, unable to tell them that they'll never have that daughter-in-law. I have to replay the many times I bit my tongue in high school when classmates joked about "faggots" and "queers." In my head, these trying emotions don't come from my parents or my contemporaries but rather from my dire lack of courage to take a stand.

More than my problems, though, I am concerned for gay youth everywhere going through exactly what I experienced at my high school and who can't conceive any way they can live a normal life. They have to deal with straight kids whose families preach bigotry and with parts of the gay community that marginalize the population at large for being hopelessly discriminatory. When gay men and women assert that straight people can never understand what it feels like to be gay, they are completely right. However, just as I can never know how it feels to be of color or even to be straight, I don't feel a communication barrier that prohibits me from treating everyone the same.

This militant difference-based way of looking at sexuality is what makes it difficult to be honest. It is true that nobody would look at me for the first time and know that I play for the other team, but even if they do know right off the bat, this dissimilarity shouldn't make any difference. Familiarity with people of all sexual backgrounds breeds anything but contempt.

I don't feel that my background has repressed me to the point where I can hope to do nothing other than revolt. Lashing out at the straight world serves no other purpose than to embitter those who are supportive, and thus relegates more gay youth to years of emotional and social frustration in the closet.

The important people in my life know how daunting the coming-out process has been for me, and I am appreciative to have anyone at all who understands how I feel. I am encouraged to know that most straight and gay people are accepting and would like to understand their respective distinctions better. When I talk to friends about relationships and love problems and they help me understand my interactions, we connect on a level far above simple gay and straight labels. Not being able to talk about it for years affected me in ways I may never understand. Being open now has helped me in ways that I can't possibly begin to articulate. Nevertheless, I am gay and am still trying to sort out what being gay entails. With that in mind, it looks to me that the straight world isn't so different.

The author is a Columbia College first-year.

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