

Interview with Leonora Wassell, 04/03/20

L: Yes, it's easier talking about something like the events that I've organised, than to talk about my personal coming out. I knew I was different, when I was quite young. I would dream of girls, not boys and when I'd go see my friends at school I'd tell them my dreams but I'd change the gender, and that went on.

I met my husband at sixteen. He's not an alpha male, and he's lovely, and so, I got married very young. And I didn't have a name for it, for what I, I was. I had an uncle who was different, very flamboyant in the 60s, and that was the only thing I knew, but I didn't have a name for it, until I was at uni, and then I did. But I was already engaged and then I was married.

And I felt I was happily married, until I started my theological training in 1991. And what surfaced then was my sexuality and the questioning about it. And attraction towards women were coming back, faithful wife and I would remain the so, because I'd made a commitment, but those attractions came, so I was confused. And it wasn't often I'd do the ironing. I was terrible wife. And so we'd run out of clothes and there I am ironing to Queen, new one it'd come out, greatest hits. And I burst into tears and realised I need to do something about this. And the one I cried at is I want to break free. But all of the songs on this particular album speak to me, it's almost like my story.

And so there I was married with two children and I wanted to be who I was. And through the theological training I was talking to people, but I tried to stay married. But my husband couldn't deal with that or we couldn't deal with it together so, I wanted to be me, so we separated. And within three months I met my female partner, I was able to be me in private. But I was an ordained person in the Church of England, and so the newspapers got onto my Vicar and said, "Ah, I understand your curate's left her husband and is now living with a woman". So I had to hide who I am. And so, although I thought I'd broken free, I wasn't.

From that moment, I was always looking over my shoulder, and was becoming more and more ill. I moved, I became a Methodist. And I had some measure of healing because they were much more accepting. But it still, it was hiding who I was. And when I went full-time I was told not to tell anyone. And so, in my first appointment as a Methodist, I was called to the chair's office, "I understand you're in a lesbian relationship, is that true?". Well I wasn't going to lie, I said, "yes I am". And he said, "Where would you like to move to? I can move you anywhere in the country". I left that particular position because I was a lesbian in a relationship with another woman. And I left with my head held high because I've always been okay with being gay, because my mother taught me that we're all equal, we're all made equally by God.

But I still had to hide, and my health got worse and worse and worse. Until I couldn't work anymore. So I retired from work, but was still getting worse and worse because I had to look after my partner, who has bipolar. So I still wasn't free. And then sadly because Allison has bipolar, and trying to look after her, after twenty years I had a suspected heart attack. And so we had to split. I couldn't look after her anymore. The second hardest decision I had to make was to walk away.

And I was finally free. My health improved, to a certain degree. But I was having these headaches, nosebleeds, I couldn't eat, I couldn't talk, I couldn't think, I couldn't pray. Headaches and nosebleeds, so I was shutting down. So I went away on a nine day silent retreat. And my friends

at that time said, "Silent? Did they staple your mouth shut?", not believing I could be silent. But in that silence I heard God say, "I made you. I created you. I ordained you as you are, just go and be you."

And so I doodled a prayer, 'authentic me', which was, mom, grandma, priest, all of these, and gay. That went through all of them. So I came back and put a rainbow ribbon on my dog collar. And I went back to church, and within a week, I'm healed. So I thought I've got to do something with this freedom, with this voice. I was healed for a reason. And I wanted other people to break free from the stigma. From the hate, from all that that makes you ill because you can't be yourself. At that point I'd never suffered depression, but many do and suicidal, because you can't be you.

So Queen was very important to me and this is why I brought this artefact. 'Friends will be friends', 'The show must go on', 'one vision', 'under pressure', 'I want it all and I want it now', 'It's a hard life'. And so all those songs resonated then. But it took 20 years before I was able to be free, and be myself. And in that freedom, I have a voice and an ability to use it I hope. My surname is Wassell. But if I spell it, I have a slight lisp, so I get letters addressed to Reverend Waffle. And yes I can, and I can talk a lot, but I really want my voice to count for something. So to be part of 'Speaking Out!' has filled my heart yet again with joy that we can do that here in Harrogate.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> and Lydia Kingston