

the Classroom Closet

BY ANONYMOUS

WITHIN THE PAST year, I attended our district's screening of the Teaching Tolerance movie *Bullied: A Student, a School and a Case that Made History*. About a hundred people were there, including high-ranking district administrators, teachers, concerned parents and students. After the screening, we broke into small groups to discuss the movie and its impact. The facilitator of my group suggested that those of us who are gay talk about our experiences in the district.

The facilitator, who knows me, looked toward me to start the sharing. However, because I didn't know several people in the group and because there were no norms established or even a suggestion of confidentiality, I went silent. Several other people, mostly straight allies, spoke of their perceptions of what it was like, yet I remained mum.

It was a painful silence. On the drive home, I reflected on the reasons why I

chose not to speak up: fear of many things, including rejection, the possible impact on the successful career I've spent years creating, and even an undercurrent of internalized homophobia that I still haven't properly addressed.

I began to wonder what I would have shared at the meeting, and I began to find the words describing what it means for me to be a gay elementary school teacher.

It means I have learned how to live in and navigate two different worlds. It takes much mental energy to try to hide one world from another and to carefully keep them apart.

It means I navigate the "dance of the pronouns" when speaking, consciously watching my language all the time. It can be exhausting. Once, when talking with a parent about the house I share with my partner, I slipped and used the term *we*. She picked up on it immediately, causing a moment's panic.

It means my co-workers think I am

the most boring person in the world. I rarely talk about what I did over the weekend, or in the evening, or even over the summer, preferring to leave out large pieces of my life in fear that some detail would reveal my true nature. I have a mental list of safe subjects to discuss.

It means when I am celebrating a new relationship or mourning the end of one, I cannot show any feelings. I may be torn up inside, but I always have to be even-keeled, ignorantly happy, unconnected.

It means that in the staff room and at staff meetings, I listen to my co-workers share stories about their spouses, often to much laughter, but that privilege does not extend to me.

It means I listen to homophobic talk from staff members and internally grimace at the pain it causes.

It means I have to excel at the craft of teaching because I live in fear that I will be fired if my principal finds out about me. Although not currently, I have taught in states where teachers

can be fired just for being gay. Some of the staff members who have said homophobic things in my presence were my administrators.

It means I must navigate uncomfortable conversations when a well-intentioned teacher tries to set me up with her single daughter or, even more uncomfortably, when a female teacher asks me out herself.

It means I feel a sting every time our staff celebrates a wedding or baby shower because I know that, should I get married or have a child, the staff would not celebrate these events.

It means I show up to staff social functions alone, if I attend at all. I've learned that people disclose much about their personal lives at these types of functions, so it's best to skip them entirely to avoid any probing questions.

I do not ever fool myself in thinking that I am totally successful with this hiding. I know some of my colleagues have started to connect the dots. I have to decide if or when I will tell a colleague.

If I feel comfortable enough to invite a co-worker into my house, then he or she needs to know, because I refuse to live a closeted life at home.

I know that my decision means that I am not setting an example for my students, particularly students who are gay (and may not know it yet). Were I to come out now, maybe when it's time for them to recognize themselves, they will feel empowered because one adult who cared about them for a year in elementary school had the nerve to show them how.

On the drive home from the screening, that painful silence enveloped me, and it echoes within me today. Maybe someday I'll have the nerve to speak up. Until then, these words, written anonymously, must suffice. And perhaps the truth of my words will echo within the thousands of teachers across this country who can relate to them. ♦

