

Lia Gabrielle

“I Wasn’t Threatening Anyone’s Ideas of What a Boy Should Be.”

Interviewer: Lia Gabrielle (LG)

Interviewee: (MS)

The idea of gender equality, gender personality, and sexuality is a very controversial topic in today’s society. Starting from early ages, people can struggle with their sexual identity. Growing up, MS felt like an outsider as he was trying to figure out not only himself, but also how to be himself in a discriminatory society like ours. MS is now twenty-one years old and attending college at Brown University. He is studying psychology and art, in hopes of becoming an art therapist. In the near future, he hopes to take a year off to live in Spain, and then return to Graduate School in New York.

LG- Many people struggle with their identity at a young age. Was this the case for you? How old were you when you knew you were gay?

MS- I knew at a really young age. I must have been four or five. I could tell because I felt different from everyone else. The way that our society conflates gender presentation, gender stereotypes, and sexuality shapes our understanding of ourselves at a very young age. People were generally mean to me especially because I went to a catholic school, which made me feel like I was different.

LG- Who was the first person you told? Why?

MS- The first conversation I had was with my mother. When I told her, she was not surprised in the slightest. She said she had known that I was gay since I was a little kid. Her loving response made it easier for me to accept, but that was really the only “conversation” I had about it. When I went to college, people were more accepting and I didn’t really have to come out.

LG- Was there anyone you were most nervous about telling? Why?

MS- I would say I was most nervous about my parents, but they were very understanding. I was also nervous about telling my friends, because I had gotten into fights about it with many of them, as I ended up lashing out at the people who tried to help me.

LG- I’m sure it was difficult to tell your family and friends. What was the hardest part about doing so?

MS- The coming out narrative our society has is very skewed, because essentially you have to apologize for being different, and hope that these people still love and accept you. The fact that gay people have to identify as being gay, and then also apologize for it is not right. We, as a society, shouldn’t make people apologize about who they are. People shouldn’t be nervous about coming out, it shouldn’t be such an identifying part of who you are, but we make it that way.

LG- In today’s society, many people discriminate against homosexuals. What kind of challenges did/does this present?

MS- People are mean to me still but, to me, it's more about the conflation of gender presentation and sexuality. When I had short hair and didn't wear skinny jeans, I never had as many issues because I could pass as straight to strangers. I wasn't threatening anyone's ideas of what a boy should be. But now people yell at me on the streets based on just my gender presentation, not even based on my sexuality. Because masculinity is revered in our society, presenting myself as a female is taking a lesser and more degrading position, so people feel free to comment on it more freely. Also, in gay culture, masculinity is still seen as the ideal, which is very contradictory. Even gay society is still heteronormative in the way that we want to take part in traditions like getting married.

LG- In what ways did coming out change your lifestyle?

MS- I started publicly displaying my affection to other guys. I also started speaking up more when people would say homophobic things and started dressing more in a way that made me happy, instead of trying to take on some masculine stereotype.

LG- You have been struggling with this since a very crucial age. Were there any times you felt extremely lost?

MS- Obviously I have doubted my identity and myself. When people tell you to go kill yourself walking down the street, it's not something you just bounce back from. It makes you doubt yourself. But it's also not something that will ever completely stop.

LG- Because most of society sees being gay as an issue, in what ways have you coped with being discriminated against?

MS- One way to cope is to talk about it and try to help other people in similar situations. I have worked at Project Weber, which is a non-profit organization to help at-risk men access services in a safe environment. I have seen many people struggling. For most of these people talking about their struggles and forming it into linear narratives is not easy. Students can have all the ethical guidelines in the world, but they are not adequately prepared to help because you have to be careful to address people who feel meaningless or doubt their existence. There are other ways you can interview people without having to bring up really bad past memories that are exploitative.

LG- In what ways have you gained recovery and grown as a person?

MS- It's not just one linear story of recovery. It may have to do with other things like mental disorders that added to the trauma, which is something that people may never recover from. It's a fallacy we have to stop perpetuating because your life does not become meaningful in one day. It's not about recovering, it's about coping with the body and the identity that you have. So to make students find happy stories of recovery is a fallacy because people who experience meaninglessness may not recover and they may not even become the same person they were before. It is all about changing, adapting, and coping, not necessarily putting the pieces back together and being a fine person.

LG- Thank you for your time MS, it really opened my eyes to hear your story in full detail.

MS- No problem, I'm glad I could help.

Comments:

LG- Society is just perpetuating the fact that being gay is unusual. In fact, the idea that struggling with your sexual identity can be considered a “crisis of meaning” emphasizes the idea that their meaning doesn’t align with the normative standard, therefore resulting in a crisis. Calling attention to sexual identity as a crisis of meaning just reinforces that being gay is different from the norm.

Being labeled as gay makes it difficult for others to see MS as anything else. MS taught me that sexuality, whether it is straight, bisexual or homosexual, is more than just a sensual attraction to someone; it’s the way we experience and express ourselves as human beings. It is an integral part of our personalities, but that does not mean we should let it define who we are. In this respect, Epictetus and Pico della Mirandola touch upon the idea that we are but an appearance, not unconditionally what we appear to be. Epictetus discusses that when people judge us, they do not see us for all we have to offer. In a similar manner, Pico della Mirandola discusses how the inherent, beautiful nature of human beings comes from within and that is where we can see the true splendor of a person, which makes them who they are:

“For it is not the bark that makes the tree, but its insensitive and unresponsive nature; nor the hide which makes the beast of burden, but its brute and sensual soul; nor the orbicular form which makes the heavens, but their harmonious order. Finally, it is not freedom from a body, but its spiritual intelligence, which makes the angel” (Pico della Mirandola 3).

MS’s story also portrays the idea that individuals control their own happiness. While it is difficult for many people to accept gays in our society, MS also possesses a true strength within him to disregard what they think of him and create his own happiness. As MS became more comfortable with himself, he was able to detach himself from not only society’s image of him, but also his own self-image as well. He finally realized that he is not what society thinks he is, because he is way more than just “gay,” and he just needed to discover his own level of comfort and contentment with himself. Lao Tzu discusses the idea of gaining our own happiness through self-discovery; “When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.” When he went to college, MS was able to start over, let go of his stereotyped ideas of who he should be, and built a new identity in a foreign place at a very crucial point in his development. Through his ongoing experiences, MS is constantly growing as a person and also learning to make his own happiness in our society today.