

Finally OUT: Letting Go og Living Straight

Loren A. Olson

inGroup Press (March 2011)

Softcover \$15.95 (241pp)

978-1-935725-03-9

People who come out as gay in later life face challenges different from those who come out when they're younger—they may have families, marriages, and professional colleagues who are affected by their seemingly sudden shift. Too, they may face anger or resentment as children, spouses, and even those in the gay community question why they didn't realize or admit their homosexuality earlier.

First-time author Loren Olson knows this terrain all too well. The distinguished psychiatrist came out when he was forty, after a lifetime of "living straight." He notes that until he was that age, he didn't have any idea he was gay, he simply suffered from a sense that things weren't right: "It seemed that I had to work harder to feel like a man than other men appeared to, but I could never speak of my confused feelings to anyone."

His journey from heterosexual marriage to living as an openly out gay man to marrying his boyfriend and living on a farm in rural Iowa is a captivating tale rife with abundant introspection and analysis. Drawing on his career as a psychiatrist, Olson examines his childhood and adolescence through a fresh lens, peering gently at the components that may have left him "in the closet" for so long.

Expertly integrating his personal story with psychology research and thought, Olson creates a type of hybrid work that blends well. The use of memoir gives the more academic parts an intimate, softer edge, while the employment of psychology gives Olson's story a broader context.

For example, when describing the immense difficulties that came with feeling something was "wrong" inside him, Olson brings in work by Jonah Lehrer, who noted that minds contain two distinct systems of thought: rational thought and feeling thought. Olson writes that the need for harmony in our thinking is why men like him experience significant conflict between their rational thought, in believing men should love women, and their feeling thought, which tells them they're attracted to men.

The barricades that become erected in the mind can be formidable as a result, but if even a small crack develops, feelings can flood in that are confusing and overwhelming. Olson then weaves in his personal experiences as to how these fissures affected him, and changed how he thought about himself and his sexuality.

For those who have struggled with coming out, Olson's expert combination of private struggle and professional reflection will prove invaluable. His down-to-earth, conversational tone makes the work even more accessible, and his story will likely be embraced by anyone facing the same issues or even just intrigued by the topic.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (March 7, 2011)

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