



Following My Path: Growing up Gay in a Christian, Fundamentalist, Right-Wing, Conservative Family during the 1940's - 1960's

Bernard Martin

AuthorHouse (Dec 12, 2012)

Softcover \$14.95 (104pp)

978-1-4772-8374-5

"Things are slowly changing for gay people everywhere in America," declares Bernard Martin, adding that he is "glad to be part of that change." Martin's potentially powerful memoir, *Following My Path*, is his contribution to that change.

Martin probably could not have shared his memoir much earlier in his life due to public sentiment about gay people and his occupation as a schoolteacher. He does so now, at the age of sixty-eight, knowing that his revelations will surprise many who have known him not only as a teacher but also as a restorer of historic homes, an antiques collector, the adoptive father of an at-risk child of a different race, and a grandfather.

Martin's life has not been an easy one, yet he has persevered. He declares himself "unashamed of my struggle along this rocky path to get to the point where I am now." Martin writes clearly and convincingly about his experiences; his enthusiasm about sharing his story is evident, albeit with a few too many exclamation points.

The son of hardworking, sternly religious parents, Martin grew up in the Midwest, the fourth of six children. "The teachings I grew up with only perpetrated feelings of guilt and anxiety," admits Martin. He relates some of his childhood and adolescent experiences with such a sense of wonder and surprise that it seems as if he is describing someone else's life. His engaging tone either reveals how well he has overcome the strictures of his youth or allows him to disassociate himself from the most painful of memories.

With parents who could never accept his homosexuality, telling him he was bound for hell and forcing him to see a Christian psychiatrist who "claimed he could make gay people straight," Martin faced relentless rejection in its most basic form. "Have you decided to become straight so you can get into heaven?" his mother persistently inquired. Forced to keep his gay lifestyle hidden, Martin came to realize that "there is a big difference between being tolerated and being unconditionally accepted."

While the stories relayed in *Following My Path* are disturbing and revealing, most of what Martin has to say does not address his actual feelings about growing up gay in his particular time and place. It is easy to guess how he must have suffered, but he maintains a guardedness throughout the book. Only late in the book does he include a chapter to address how he felt at various crossroads in his life. In another late chapter, he provides additional information about some of the influential individuals mentioned earlier in the book. His story would have been more compelling had he woven the material of these two chapters into the description of his early experiences, rather than leaving readers to draw their own conclusions.

CHERYL HIBBARD (June 13, 2013)

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