

Authenticity Through Connection

by Jena Peterson | May 31, 2016 | Featured, Homosexuality, LGBTQ, Sexuality | 2 comments



Note: This blog post first appeared on Jena's personal blog, Authentic Jena. on April 23, 2016

I'm not sure what's more awkward, me wearing dangly earrings and lipstick, or me standing up here in front of all of you. Growing up I was a pretty athletic girl. You know, the neighborhood quarterback and such. I was Steve Young. I've always thought it would be cool not only to meet Steve, but also to speak with him. Well, I have a little secret to tell you, being the gay woman that I am, it's been much more exciting for me to speak with Barb and talk with her than you Steve. No offense. I feel honored and humbled to be in the presence of such amazing, honest, and loving people, whom I love so deeply. For those of you who don't know me, I'm an openly

gay Mormon married to my wonderful husband. Together we have three children. It is my prayer that my heart might touch yours in some way, and that you can feel of my love for you. I pray you can feel the authenticity and power behind my story as I express to you many experiences that have impacted who I am. My story is a story of pain, hope, healing, and happiness. Though my life might look different to many of you, we all have something in common and that is pain. As humans, we all desire healing and happiness.

I was born into a wonderful family with two loving parents, a man and a woman, I need to make note of that in this crowd. Growing up, the gospel was always the center of my life and I felt blessed and happy. When I was progressing from childhood into the adolescent stage, I could tell I was a little different from other girls my age. While attending Institute one day, a close friend gave me a hug. I experienced butterflies in my stomach, and for the first time, I felt romantic feelings towards a female. I was excited and confused. How could I have these feelings for a female? It was so innocent and came as such a shock to me. I faithfully tucked this experience away, hoping the Savior would make things right.

After serving an amazing, fulfilling mission in Auckland, New Zealand, I started dating. My dating life was fun for the most part, but always seemed a bit awkward. I really struggled to make a connection with a man. At the age of 26 I started dating a wonderful man named Todd. I felt safe with him and grew to love him deeply. But I struggled to find romantic feelings for him. Nine months after we started dating we decided to get married. Our sealing in the temple was special and powerful as the spirit witnessed and validated our eternal marriage. But, a few days later, I felt a strange disconnect that was extremely confusing and painful for me. I continued to pray that I could feel a close, romantic connection with Todd.

A couple of years into our marriage, everything came together for me and started to make perfect sense. I had a best friend whom I loved with all of my heart. She and I had everything in common and seemed to click in a very real, emotional, and romantic way. I very innocently fell in love with her, and she fell in love with me. Through many conversations and self-reflection, I came to the understanding that I'm gay. I was able to recall my experience in college, and make sense of other female relationships I had growing up. I also had some special experiences where the spirit witnessed to me of my sexual orientation. But how could I be gay? I didn't think this happened to obedient Mormons. I opened up to my husband not long after my discovery. He assured me that he still loved me and would be there for me. Over the next few years I experienced severe anxiety, depression, and shame. I also felt a completeness as I was experiencing my orientation with a woman for the first time. The paradox inside of me was just too much to bare. I wasn't quite sure how I

would continue to make my life work or how I would ever be happy.

I was terrified and desperate for help because of how much pain I was in. I felt as though I had two hearts. Living with a gay heart and a Mormon heart was excruciating for me. I couldn't figure out how to make the two hearts coexist with each other. I remained closeted and in pain for years. My mind told me I needed to choose one heart or the other, but I couldn't. Both hearts meant so much to me and I couldn't bare the thought of losing one or the other. I wanted to feel true, completely true to my orientation and honor my gay heart and live a life with Peg. (Alias name) But I loved Todd with all of my heart and wanted to live true to my covenants I made with him. I wanted to raise a family with him and experience the life I had always pictured in the church. But, something had to give. I couldn't have it all. I had exhausted myself trying to make both relationships work. I loved both Peg and Todd so deeply. I was backed into a corner and there was no way out. After becoming suicidal, I was desperate for help and checked into the hospital. I remember that first night, I was in so much pain I couldn't even bring myself to pray. In fact, I could barely breathe. My whole body felt as though it were in a dark abyss, one that would swallow me whole. I felt lost and scared. I honestly felt like I had died. If I were to choose my gay heart, I would lose Todd. If I were to choose my mormon heart, I would lose Peg, which meant to feel love and connection in a way that felt complete to me. I couldn't handle the pain of either choice. I also couldn't stay closeted any more, it was too painful to hide who I was. How on earth would I be able to come out as a Mormon mom? What about my children? I couldn't see a way out or a path that would work. I was trapped in every way. After spending a week in the hospital, the doctors told me I was ready to go home and begin my long road to recovery.

Through the love of my husband, my best friend, my therapist, close friends and family I was able to begin my long road to becoming authentic. A few months after I was released from the hospital, I knew something needed to change. A mutual decision was made, which was the hardest decision of my life. Thru certain circumstances and personal revelation, I was directed to let Peg go. Peg deserved someone who could give her everything. She deserved to be out of pain as well. We all did. I decided to let Peg go completely and put my life in God's hands. I needed to heal. I so desperately needed to begin to heal after losing my best friend and soul mate of 10 years. But how could I ever function or enjoy life again? I had dealt with significant loss in my life, but never anything this painful.

I knew I had years of healing ahead of me, and possibly off and on for the rest of my life. Through prayer and many conversations with my husband, I decided to take a leap of faith in my healing process. As a young missionary in New Zealand my mission president taught about the Atonement in great depth. It was now time for

me to put my faith and knowledge wholeheartedly into my Savior. To become whole, and to heal, I needed to do what the savior did. I needed to give my heart, love, and service to others. I needed to become a voice and share my story. I knew that to become like the Savior, I could do what he did. I put my faith in Him and became a tool in His hand. I had pure faith that if I shared my heart and my story that God would send people to me to help me heal. I needed people to sit with me, mourn with me, comfort me, and validate me. God has provided that for me as I have opened my heart to the world. I have seen miracles take place as God has placed angels in my life, which many of them are here today. I don't think it's a coincidence that the Cooks reentered my life after being in the same ward 23 years ago. In fact, I used to babysit their children. Hey, now that I think of it, maybe I'm the reason they are gay. It's not a coincidence that one of my closest friends parents are here. God has His hand in our lives. I have felt a deeper connection with people than I ever thought possible. I have experienced healing to my shredded heart by allowing people in. I think it's important to acknowledge that when I refer to healing, I'm not referring to healing my sexual orientation. It's the healing of a shredded and broken heart. I've embraced my orientation as a gift from God. I hold a sacred characteristic within myself as a gay woman, which I'm so thankful for. I think it's also important to point out that with my decision to continue life with my husband, I'm choosing to experience grief off and on for the rest of my life. I will feel grief from losing Peg, but also grief from not experiencing my orientation with a woman. I'm happily making this choice fully aware of the consequences. My husband is making a choice as well to remain married to me, fully aware of the consequences. But, our decision is personal and sacred to us, and we are happy. I love him with all of my heart and he loves me with all of his heart. For years I've prayed for the happiness I feel today. My life and my choices are specific to me, as I know my life may look different than other gay people. But, I do honor and respect the choices and paths of others, just as I hope you will do for me.

As Brene Brown so brilliantly states, "Authenticity is allowing our true selves to be seen." "We invite compassion into our lives when we act compassionately toward ourselves and others, and we feel connected in our lives when we reach out and connect." "I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship." "To practice courage, compassion, and connection is to look at life and the people around us, and say, "I'm all in." It's important for you to know that I'm all in; I'm on your team. God placed us on earth to learn to love and connect. It is my hope and prayer that you and I can work to save lives through God-like love and connection. God is our Father and He loves us unconditionally and His son Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world.

His atonement is available to us and can assist us as we heal and become authentic. I love you, I love you, and if it matters to you I love you!

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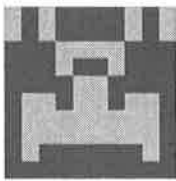
Jena Peterson is happily married to the loving and ever patient Todd Peterson and together they have three children. She is currently a stay at home mom and is enjoying her kids while they are young. In her spare time Jena owns her own practice



together they have three children. She is currently a stay at home mom and is enjoying her kids while they are young. In her spare time Jena owns her own practice as a life coach, (Authentic Life Coaching) primarily working with LGBT individuals and their families. She has a Bachelor's degree in Human services. Her past experience includes teaching high school, EFY counselor, softball coach, motivational speaker, and facilitator for empowering teen spirit programs. She also served a mission in New Zealand where she developed a deep love for the people and the New Zealand Culture. Jena loves to play. She loves to snowboard, wakeboard and water ski, play basketball and softball. She also loves spending time with family and friends. Jena finds joy in just about anything she does and loves to laugh. Through her life experiences, serving a mission, and personal studies, Jena has gained a great love for the savior and His Atonement. She exudes happiness and love in all that she does, especially in the LGBT community. She recently came out publicly in hopes that her love and story can influence and change lives. Part of her story was shared in her Voices of Hope video. Jena understands who she is in God's plan, has accepted her sexual orientation as a gift, and looks forward to a happy life as a gay member of the church.

All posts by Jena Peterson

2 Comments



Jana S on May 31, 2016 at 9:18 pm

Love you, my friend. Thank you for sharing your story!

Reply



gaymobro on June 1, 2016 at 6:52 pm

As a gay man in a mixed orientation marriage I understand a little where you are coming from. I was lucky in that I never found my "Peg" and never had to make that painful decision though in some of my more honest hours I wished I would have just to know what it was like.