

MYTH 18

COMING OUT TODAY IS
EASIER THAN EVER BEFORE

In 2012, popular media venues such as the *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, and *Entertainment Weekly* all suggested in feature articles that being gay is not a big deal anymore. The articles argued this was so manifestly true that gay celebrities no longer even needed to come out. As opposed to past years, when celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres came out with a big splash, Anderson Cooper was praised for doing so in a new, more casual way. Similarly, other celebrities, including Wanda Sykes, Chris Colfer, Zachary Quinto, and Frank Ocean, have not turned coming out into a major PR campaign. These celebrities want to be out without having to come out. That's the new normal. But does that mean that it is easier to come out today than ever before?

Mainstream media continually interpret the rise of out LGB public figures to mean that coming out and being LGB is no big deal. The message is that lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives finally fit in with a mainstream, majority culture, and that straight people are now more accepting of gay people. None of the celebrities mentioned above appears to have been professionally punished for coming out. This is a good thing. Nevertheless, their experience is hardly typical of all LGB people.

The most important thing to realize about the coming-out process is that people always come out from the closet. Even if they do

so casually, there is no neutral starting place for the formation of a public gay identity. Coming out is easier or more difficult for one person versus another because of an individual's circumstances—including such variables as class, race, region, and religion. Crucially, coming out can also be easier or more difficult for the same person depending on circumstances at a given moment. For example, is she with people she knows and trusts, or dependent on strangers, as someone might be at a hospital emergency room? The variability and uncertainty about how any coming-out scene is going to go are inherent to what it means to be in, or out, of the closet, no matter the circumstances. In an April 24, 1990, letter to the *Village Voice*, lesbian novelist Sarah Schulman wrote, "Having to hide the way you live because of fear of punishment isn't a 'right,' nor is it 'privacy.' Being in the closet . . . is maintained by force, not choice."

One function of the closet is to maintain the status quo. This is also why it can be so difficult to come out. To come out is to risk upsetting this precarious balance of what is and is not acceptable, of what people know and don't know about you. This balancing act may never end. Once you are out, people may still interpret everything you say and do through a host of stereotypes, both negative and positive, about what it means to be gay. You are out of the closet, but there is now a new status quo. The pressures that keep people in the closet also determine what it means to be gay outside of the closet. The challenge is how to manage this new reality. For celebrities seeking to preserve their professional careers, this may mean not making a big deal about coming out or their sexuality. Coming out as transgender involves different risks and complications (see myth 3, "All Transgender People Have Sex-Reassignment Surgery").

Paradoxically, the belief that out gay celebrities are positive role models and examples for how things can and do get better only grows stronger the more difficult coming out is for everyone else. This is especially true for LGB people who live at the economic margins, disproportionately young queers of color. Amber Hollibaugh, co-executive director of the activist organization Queers

for Economic Justice, says, "If you come out now and you come from poverty and you come from racism, [or] you come from the terror of . . . immigrant communities or communities where you're already a moving target because of who you are, this is not a place where it's any easier to be LGBT even if there's a community center in every single borough."¹ The lifesaving costs of hiding sometimes outweigh the life-threatening costs of coming out.

Racial, economically oppressed, and gender identities compound the difficulty of coming out, because they also require careful decisions about disclosure and the management of what sociologist Erving Goffman calls "spoiled identity."² For example, black children are still told by their mothers not to act "suspiciously" around white people. Women are still told not to dress "provocatively" for their own safety. Something similar is at stake for gay people. For many, coming out does not end the need to manage their reputation or what people know about them, worries about safety, or even the need to keep deciding when or whether to disclose their sexuality—yet again—every time they enter a new situation.

This is especially true when we look at how levels of safety and danger differ across job, school, family, religion, the Internet, and even age. Perhaps a lesbian is out to close friends at work but not to her boss, because of the real fear she could be fired just for being gay (see myth 19, "Antidiscrimination Laws in the United States Protect LGBT People"). Or a young gay man may be more out at school than at home, fearing that his parents might kick him out. These aren't idle fears. About 40 percent of homeless youths in the United States are LGBT. According to "Growing Up LGBT in America," a 2012 Human Rights Campaign (HRC) study of LGBT youth, 61 percent are out at school, 11 percent at work, and 8 percent at church. And while 56 percent are out to their immediate family, only 25 percent are out to their extended family. The promise of "safe spaces," such as classrooms or offices where youths can feel less threatened to identify as LGBT, reflects the reality that, for so many LGBT people, and especially LGBT youths, coming out still means leading a double, or triple, life.

Even gay people who have been out for most of their adult lives and believe there is no one left to tell may find themselves thrown back into the closet due to changed circumstances. For example, lesbian or gay seniors who require short- or long-term residential nursing care may face ignorance or hostile environments. They may be unable to safely disclose their sexual identity without jeopardizing their care. Nursing homes and hospitals may turn into huge late-life closets for LGB people who hoped and believed they were done with all that.

Over the past two decades, the Internet has profoundly shifted the idea and the realities of privacy. This is particularly true for LGB people managing the information other people know about them. For example, some people come out only online. According to the HRC study, "73% of LGBT youth say they are more honest about themselves online than in the real world, compared to 43% among non-LGBT youth." The ease of disclosing your real self online comes with a catch: Internet sex and dating sites involve carefully composed profiles, pictures, and chat. Freely expressing your desire online may involve new forms of information-management in order to promote the most attractive version of your real self.

The reason some people don't come out, or come out only online, is because sexuality is already everyone's business. Our culture tells us that sexual identity is one of the most important things to know about a person. This is why people try to keep information about their sexuality, especially a nonheterosexual identity, from circulating without their knowledge. In her 2012 Golden Globes speech, Jodie Foster made a very big and very public deal about not coming out in order to say that her sexual identity was no big deal because it was a private matter. Asserting a zone of privacy, some area of life others may not properly inquire into, is important for many people, not just for award-winning actresses. But as with the gay or lesbian senior who needs nursing care, not every LGB person is equally positioned to ask for or receive such privacy.

The reality is that we do not always know who else already knows or suspects something about us. This not knowing is exhausting and

can make LGB people want to close their closet doors even tighter. But what if we lack the ability to close a literal door behind us? When poor people or, especially, homeless people, don't have access to privacy in the sense of a room of their own with a door they can close, they might not even consider coming out because that information would automatically be public.

Anxieties about what other people may or may not know about homosexuality influenced the first gay and lesbian rights organizing in the United States in the 1950s. During these early years, gay male and lesbian activists believed homosexuals could be integrated into American society only if homosexuality conformed to dominant heterosexual norms. Conformity to mainstream norms meant overcoming what psychiatrists at the time called the "homosexual character" and the angry, rebellious personality driving it. The public attempts and internal struggles of gay men and lesbians to overcome such stereotypes—and soften the stigma associated with being homosexual—are deftly explained by Goffman in his now-classic studies of the management of stigma and the presentation of self in everyday life.

Goffman analyzes the severe rules governing everyday social interaction and successful "impression management." These rules parallel advice provided in contemporary coming-out guides. Goffman's theory is that people determine and assess the factors that will dictate their next "move." They make an informed anticipation of how another person might react, evaluate what is mutually known or not known, and attempt to judge other people's personal attributes and capacities.⁹ The need to stick to your part in shared social scripts about sexuality, together with the requirement that others play along, exerts enormous internal pressure on how gay people come out. It is also exhausting to have to anticipate every possible scenario, and to realize that you probably missed a few. Above all, differences in circumstance and situation demonstrate how coming out is never a one-time event. The closet is portable: coming out happens over and over again, sometimes moment by moment.

The dynamics of coming out tell us much about the way every-

one negotiates sexual desire. Although people are presumed straight unless proven otherwise, many heterosexuals nonetheless have to engage in all manner of "impression management." They edit out sexual desires, practices, and fantasies that will not be perceived as normal. Sexual reputation matters to heterosexuals, too. Worry over reputations and impressions can also exist between two gay people, especially if one person is more out than the other.

No one, gay or straight, is ever fully "out" with her or his sexuality. What's more, there are many aspects of desire that remain unknown to us all (see myth 1, "You Can Tell Who's Gay Just By Looking"). While straight people don't need to justify themselves as heterosexuals, LGB people constantly have to justify themselves. Some LGB people may find they have even more explaining to do. This is because the media's promotion of particular celebrity models of gay identity—models that take for granted being white, middle-class, focused on marriage and family, and profoundly unthreatening—end up creating a new series of exclusions. Positive role models can potentially become a straightjacket for LGB people when they decrease the room left to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual in many different ways. Acceptance and understanding, let alone meeting the acceptable cultural standard, are not automatic. They are work. Those many gay people who don't fit the new normal have more work to explain why their gay lives are not like Rachel Maddow's or Frank Ocean's.

The coming-out process today has often become a list of obligations to make other people feel comfortable about your homosexuality. These other people may include straight family members and friends, but can also extend beyond them. There are coming-out guides for the family members of gay people, such as Robert Bernstein's *Straight Parents, Gay Children: Keeping Families Together* (2003), to help them manage the work they may have to do when their child comes out. Learning that a child is gay can be difficult for a parent. Parents may find they have to confront their own feelings, often of discomfort, about homosexuality for the first time. Or the parents or family members of a gay son or daughter may find that

they are now living in a closet of their own. They are faced with deciding when or whether to "come out" to their friends, their pastor or rabbi, or extended family members about their loved one. This pressure may magnify the burden their son or daughter, brother or sister, is carrying. Gay children frequently do everything and anything to put their parents and family members at ease, making sure that their coming out is not too hard on their family. This reassurance might take the form of saying, "I'm the same person you have always known, I want the same things I have always wanted, I am just like you." This might be true for some young gay people saying these words—but it might not be.

The problem is that there is often not a lot of room for a gay person to come out and tell her parents the full truth about herself, without fear of losing parents' love and support, let alone fear of prompting their anger and violence. For the queer child who cannot go along with the idea that being gay is "just like" being straight, coming out—far from establishing conditions for truth-telling and real intimacy—can actually be a deeply estranging experience.

Coming out did not use to be such a private, almost family affair. The phrase "to come out" was first used among gay men in the 1920s, with the implicit and sometimes explicitly stated promise that you were coming out "into the life": the gay life. Coming out referred to a young gay man's formal presentation at a gay urban drag ball, a parody of a society girl "coming out" at a debutante ball. In the following decades, coming out could also mean your first homosexual experience or participation in a community of same-sex-attracted people, people like you. Coming out was a movement into a new social space, created and inhabited by many other gay people.⁴

Gay liberationists of the late 1960s and early 1970s did not downplay their sexual "rebelliousness" as 1950s gay activists did. They saw coming out as a way to change the world rather than adjust to it. In a famous 1970 manifesto, "Gay Is Good," lesbian activist Martha Shelley wrote, "The function of a homosexual is to make you [heterosexuals] uneasy."⁵ This was the beginning of coming-out guides published by both mainstream and independent gay and les-

bian presses. These early books celebrated sex and sexual cultures, such as gay male bathhouses, butch/femme roles for lesbians, and gay bars. They promoted the understanding of coming out as publicly claiming a homosexual identity.

This history is important because it helps us see that the question of whether you come out is really the question of what kind of gay person you want to be. The desire to change the world and the willingness to make heterosexuals uncomfortable are very far from what it means to come out today.

Many same-sex-attracted teenagers have dropped using labels such as gay and lesbian in order to define themselves against the haunting stereotypes of the militant, in-your-face liberationist gay.⁶ These teenagers are not disavowing their attractions but distancing themselves from labels with a stigmatized history for purposes of social acceptance by their straight peers. The *Advocate* explored this trend in two uncritical articles: "Same-sex but Not 'Gay'" (2005) and "Is Gay Over?" (2006). These stories help prop up the myth that coming out is easier today than ever before.

Coming out is a social event. It is inseparable from a longer history of stereotypes about what being gay means. In the late 1980s, the image of the gay man dying of AIDS became one of the most potent visual markers of what it meant to be gay. Since then, all LGB people have been forced to confront this stereotype and its many meanings. In the 1990s, coming-out guides minimized the sex they once celebrated because of the alleged rise of its dangers. Book after book warned that after you come out, you must reassess the very terms of family, relationships, spirituality, love, work, and community. To come out was to mature, grow up, and move away from a historically stigmatized and threatening gay group identity. This maturation often also meant a movement from the public life of bars into the privacy of nuclear families, albeit same-sex ones.

The myth about how easy it is to come out today is the result of an unavoidable bargain (see myth 17, "Positive Visibility in the Media Increases Tolerance and Acceptance of LGBT People"). You can come out as gay as long as your gay identity fits into the straight

"YOU CAN TELL JUST BY LOOKING"

world. But what of the difficulty in maintaining the impression that you are just like a gay celebrity role model? Or just a "good" LGB person, who wants what every mature person is supposed to want? And what of those many LGBT people who might not make a good first or second impression? Far from being easy, coming out into this compromised world still brings endless work for everyone.

MYTH 19

ANTIDISCRIMINATION LAWS IN THE UNITED STATES PROTECT LGBT PEOPLE

In twenty-nine US states—a majority of the country—it is perfectly legal to fire someone just because she or he is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The situation is even worse for transgender people. Only sixteen states provide legal workplace protections on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity. Five other states have laws forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, but not gender identity, in employment, housing, and public accommodations.¹ The bottom line: in thirty-four states, transgender people can lose their jobs, or never even be considered for a particular job, simply because of their gender identity or gender expression.

Workplace protections, when offered, cover a variety of discrimination: being harassed or intimidated by co-workers; being demoted or denied a promotion; being fired outright. Civil remedies vary from state to state but typically mandate that the employee first pursue an internal appeals process at the workplace. If no resolution is reached, the employee can file a complaint with state authorities. This may allow her to seek reinstatement, back pay, or restoration to membership in a union. Some states can levy penalties or fines against employers who have violated antidiscrimination statutes.

A few governors have issued executive orders offering some