

## **'WOW, YOU HAVE SO MUCH CHOICE!'- AN EXPERIENCE OF BEING BI**

By Blake Paul Kendall

I was one of the lucky ones. I was 15. One of those kids excited by the world. With each year of my young existence, I was growing with more independence, sampling the tastes of adulthood, maturity and sexual experiences. My friendship circles were arty and pretty progressive, at least by comparison to many adolescents. My school was a rare one. In the midst of our teen years, there were already a significant number of students that openly identified as gay. Sadly not the same supportive community was offered to the lesbians, or indeed other queer identities. The levels of homophobia may have been lifted in some respects, but the homophobic misogyny still showed its ugly face.

In light of the supportive community, albeit only for some, I was harnessed through my period of *Coming Out*. I remember the conversations. Each of them. Each friend. Each 'confessional'. Moments of release, sharing something that felt so fundamental to my core, exposing a secret that would change how people interacted with and treated me. "I've got something to tell you... I'm Bi."

For me, it was a discovery. In my second last year at high school I met a guy who had started in our school some months before. And from the moment we first met, I was captivated in him. I was caught off guard, but I didn't hide from my feelings. I'd never been attracted to a male. I was always appreciating men as I did women, but this was a first. I became deeply infatuated with him. I admired him. And adored him. Though he too was *Coming Out*, it was on realizing that he didn't have the same feelings for me, that we became best friends. He will always be acknowledged as the soul that made me realize that I could love men.

Before *Coming Out*, the emotional build up is similar for many. It's often the best friend that finds out first, and then slowly the word is spread amongst wider circles of friends, peers, siblings and **then** parents. But it's the response that changes the story, and sees everyone's experience as truly unique. The level of support versus

rejection. I have many friends who had support, whilst others were kicked out of their home and had to fend for themselves. A harsh reality plagues all *Coming Out* stories- Society is homophobic. Even for individuals that may support LGBTIQ rights, they often would prefer this at a distance, rather than in their immediate realm. And this hurts. It is heartbreaking when a parent shows animosity to you in the face of being true to yourself. It's painful when a friend treats you differently because of your sexuality. It scars the soul and harbors such sadness when you are not accepted for who you are.

To acknowledge a non-hetero-normative sexuality often means a life of being discriminated against on a daily basis. Even in progressive communities, this is a reality. And for some individuals more than others. In many ways, the more 'open' parents often use this as one of the excuses why they may be upset when their child tells them their sexual identity. It tops the list that most Queer individuals have been repeatedly warned about from 'those that care'- *It will be a hard life! What about kids? What will the future hold for you?* These responses hurt. In the face of being discriminated against, it is all about having support. Loved ones. Who accept you for who you are. And if the parents and support networks of Queer individuals have fear around these harsh realities faced, they should support the individual without judgment and step up and actively fight for an equal society.

But bisexuality is a little different to other Queer identities. For many reasons. For some people, they identify as bi for a period, and use it as a transition into being gay or lesbian. Others, as aptly referred to in the Queer world as 'tourists', use this sexuality to reference their experimentation. And then there are the popular notions expressed by individuals such as Dan Savage (writer and sex columnist) that in the case of men, most identifying as bi have long-term relationships with women, and have sex with men on the side. All of these forms, plus many more, are forms of bisexuality, however the result is that the identity is often misunderstood. And often it is delegitimized with people's assumptions that bi individuals are 'Fence Sitters' – not quite straight, not quite gay... Sexuality is a spectrum, whereby bisexuality holds within it a wide variety of identities and layers of sexual preferences.

For all individuals that have a Queer identity, or indeed anyone who does not fit the traditional gender binaries, there is often a sense of entitlement from others to pry and ask questions that would otherwise be deemed as invasive. And often when I tell people I am bi, the common follow up question is '*Which do you prefer?*' Not only do I regard the line of questioning as offensive in their casual blasé nature, but also they declare a huge sense of naivety. For me, and I note that this is not the case for all bi individuals, there is no preference.

I like to think of my way of relating to individuals as being one completely governed by an openness to the potential of what that relationship can be. Too often, in a world dictated by judgments and prejudice, there is a void in terms of how people relate. Predetermining the relationship by the characteristics at hand- age, race, gender etc. I explore a relationship for its unique qualities of myself and another coming together. Whether the result is sexual, a friendship, a mentor or a student, I believe in exploring that for all the potential of what it can be. My sexuality is an expression of being open. (This openness is often this is also referred to as *Pan-sexual*, referencing attraction to intersex and trans individuals too.)

However a common thread unites each of short and long-term partners I have had- they accept me, and my sexuality. Whether that has been in the form of straight-identifying men who have felt more comfortable to have a relationship with me because I was bi, or women who have only had experiences with other women and felt more comfortable to be with me, rather than a hetero-normative male. The examples are each unique and circumstances of my partner's sexuality have differed.

Often people may respond to my sexuality with an excited air claiming '*Wow, you have so much choice!*' As if by being bi equates that I have the power to pick and choose a partner amongst all genders. My first thought is always, well we all do, if society moved past the blatant homophobia into a more open and willing acceptance, I truly believe there would be a huge blur of the sexual identities and practices. However this sadly is not the case. The reality is quite the opposite, and

this goes back to the levels of prejudice that line most individuals, even the ones that would like to think of themselves as *Queer Allies*. Particularly with straight women, when talking about my sexuality, so many of them instantly say '*I could never be with a guy who was attracted to men too*'. Glad we clarified that...

These layers of response were brought to the forefront when I first started dating my current partner – a female. She herself was brought up in a Queer household (with lesbian mums) and so is a true ally, and as a result accepts and celebrates me, and my sexuality. However when we were first coming together, she had to endure a lot of questions and confusion from our network and community. '*You're going out with Blake – Gay Blake?*' From all sides of the spectrum, the Queer and straight worlds, could not understand our relationship, and more so, my sexuality. I referred to this period as my '*Second Coming Out*'. Not that she was my first female partner, not by any means, but for many people this blurred their understanding of (my) sexuality in too many ways that they could handle. At the time it was tough. More because I didn't want to put her through that, however our relationship worked through it, and we have been together for over four and a half years.

But this example does bring up a lot of realities for bisexuals, and the wider Queer communities. Sexuality and following one's heart is a beautiful thing. And though the prejudices that line society prove a true struggle to get through, step by step, and with support from loved ones, we get through it. It's strange for me, now in a long-term relationship with a woman, I see the ugly face of the hetero-normative world. I have privileges now that I can't deny. And it fills me with sadness and hurt. I have never had so many straight-male friends since having a female partner. I now have a relationship with my father, where he will actually talk to me because I have a girlfriend. I can walk down the street and show affection to her without criticism. I have straight privilege, and when I compare this to previous experiences, I am sickened by the disparity in treatment and response of others.

I have seen the true colors of so many people around me, that have made it clear, that even though I don't have a gender preference for who I am with, they do.

For all parents and support networks of someone who is bi, it is really important to ensure that there is open communication. Don't make assumptions. Don't think you have the answers about someone's sexuality because you may know about other's experience. But in the same token, don't be afraid to ask them questions in a non-judgmental way. It is a profoundly respectful experience to acknowledge the important aspects of someone's identity and not just avoid it. By keeping the unconditional support and open dialogue, you can be the support you should be.

My self-claimed fluidity and my experiences mean that I have played an active role in many *Coming Out* stories for others. Being there. Listening. Supporting individuals on their own path of being true to themselves, no matter what trials are ahead of them. And I hope I will always be able to play this role, because sadly I realize more and more, that we live in a judgmental world. But hopefully, day-by-day, more people on all sides of the spectrum will truly celebrate diversity and actively fight for equality.

I use to believe that everyone was bi, but were conditioned by hetero-norms and so condemned by fear to wear the shackles of the straight life, and never allow themselves to see past gender. There's a part of me that still believes this, but more and more, I understand diversity of preference. Some people are gay. Some are straight. Some are bi. Some are... I am just open to what might happen when I meet someone. I am one of the lucky ones.