

Pride Scholarship Essay

by Austin Mitchell

Something about *Full House* always resonated with me. Despite the fact that the sitcom had no depictions of explicitly trans, gay, or otherwise queer people, the Tanner-Katsopolis-Gladstone family has always screamed “Queer!” to me. Even if its creators may not have intended to write about the deconstruction of the nuclear family, and may not have meant their ABC program as a radical queering of traditional community structures, they inadvertently modeled the most beautiful part of queer life: chosen family.

On a study abroad in Jordan last July, I had the opportunity to conduct some informal research on queer experiences with the family closet. The project gave me a channel through which I could learn about the priorities, needs, and realities of young queer men in Amman, and contrast them with those of my own Houstonian circle of friends.

“The gay people in here [in Jordan] are very carefully [sic] about hiding themselves,” a new friend named Mohammad told me through Tinder, which was one of my primary research tools. “Don’t tell your parents [sic] about it because they will kill you or they think that you are crazy psycho something like that.” Another Jordanian friend of mine, who spells his name *Muhamad* instead, expects to be closeted to his family forever. “Here,” he says, “you’ll get beat up, thrown out, or just they don’t let u [sic] be out.”

Fear of loneliness, familial rejection, and violence are a common theme in queer life. Across geography, time, and families, queer people experience the privilege of affirmation and authenticity in varying degrees, some seemingly not at all. The condition of the closet has the potential to contribute to what Brené Brown calls a susceptibility to “perpetuate lovelessness” in reaction to isolation, shame, and collective pain.¹ But the closet is also a space with the potential for transformative growth and connection. The hunger for intimacy that, until very recently, seemed to be the only option for young queer people, isn’t without its blessings.

Chief among these is the chosen family. In a country where queer youth make up nearly half² of the homeless youth population, we can see the sober evidence of familial lovelessness, a gap that tends to form between queer people and those elders entrusted with our safety and wellbeing. But the absence of love doubles as a springboard for the creation of a new type of family, one independent of genetics and inheritance. These new queer families are supportive to the point of lifesaving, egalitarian and generous, ragtag and messy, and porous—open to inclusion, growth, and change. One member of my own chosen family says, “The lines that blur because of queer love are a forced shared experience. The self discovery and isolation make us; we all have a piece of that scared little queer kid.”

I used the above quote in a photography project of mine, which epitomizes what I have learned from carefully thinking about my own queer family. The project is entitled “Respiere,” from

¹ Brené Brown, “[Doubling Down on Love](#),” brenebrown.com, 2019.

² The Trevor Project, “[Youth Homelessness](#),” thetrevorproject.org.

the Latin root of the word “respect,” which Eric Fromm points out to be a basic component of love—*re* + *specere*, to look back at something again. A person who loves will take multiple hard looks at the reality of the people they love. Fromm says:

If I love, I care—that is, I am actively concerned ... I am not a spectator. I am responsible, that is, I respond to [their] needs, to those [they] can express and more so to those [they] cannot or [do] not express. I respect him, that is (according to the original meaning of *re-spicere*) I look at him as he is, objectively and not distorted by my wishes and fears.³

Since my research project that summer, I have taken a more intentional approach to cultivating and strengthening the bonds of my own chosen family of eleven or twelve Houstonians. We hold “unorthodox” living situations and blended families, pool resources together to support each other, and often dissolve the distinctions between different types of relationships (siblings, friends, spouses, sexual partners). We consistently do the most, bickering together as much as we laugh. Some of us enjoy the privilege of healthy relationships with our bio-families, but we all invariably turn to each other when we need a sibling or parent to lean on. If *Full House* and its *Fuller* Netflix sequel can be drawn upon for any kind of intergenerational queer wisdom, it is this: Those people we find most affirming, most faithful, most irritating, and closest to our hearts *are* our family.

³ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 1955.