

In Solidarity:

Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight

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Table of Contents

Chapter Abstracts

Preface

Introduction

Part I: Going Home: Gay Men's Identities, Families, and Communities

Chapter 1: Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Coming Out in an Alcoholic Family

Chapter 2: Father's Blessing: Ethnographic Drama, Poetry, and Prose

Chapter 3: Passings

Chapter 4: Revisiting Don/ovan

Part II: Loving Friends, Just Friends: Emotions, Ethics, and Politics of Ally-LGBTQ+ Relationships

Chapter 5: Remembering a Cool September: Pain, Prejudice, and Patriotism

Chapter 6: State of Unions: Politics and Poetics of Performance

Chapter 7: Deadline: Ethics and the Ethnographic Divorce

Chapter 8: Build a Bridge Out of Her

Chapter 9: Wedding Album: An Anti-Heterosexist Performance Text

Chapter 10: In Solidarity: Collaborations in LGBTQ+ Activism, co-authored with Kathryn L. Norsworthy

Epilogue

Appendix: Friendship as Method

Index

Chapter Abstracts

The **Preface** takes readers to June 26, 2013, the day the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). I watch coverage at the home of Deena Flamm, a dear friend, and of Kathryn Norsworthy, my closest colleague and friend. Kathryn and Deena married in Massachusetts in 2011, but neither the federal government nor the state of Florida, where we live, recognized their union. After showing us learn of DOMA's demise, I offer a history of this project, which began in 1994 when my then-fiancé and I began our integration into a network of gay male friends. The group served as participants in my Ph.D. dissertation,ⁱ my first book, *Between Gay and Straight*,ⁱⁱ and several follow-up pieces. The Preface then situates this project in the historical, legal/political, and cultural context of LGBT civil rights.

Part I: Going Home: Gay Men's Identities, Families, and Communities

In **“Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Coming Out in an Alcoholic Family,”** I travel with Matt Moretti, my friend since 1996, to his hometown of Tremaine, Massachusetts. Though Matt describes his family as “loving and caring,” he's been away for seven years. We visit Matt's old neighborhood, church, and schools, and I interview three of his siblings, one (Elisabeth) with a same-sex orientation and two (Paul and Ashley) with a different-sex orientation. The piece I write reveals that the ways the Morettis communicate—and don't—about sexual orientation reflect how they learned to interact as members of an alcoholic family. When I share a draft with Matt's siblings, the revelations so provoke them that they nearly spike the project.

“Father’s Blessing: Ethnographic Drama, Poetry, and Prose” takes readers to Buck Hill, California, where Ray Wise and I visit his estranged father Steven, a retired Air Force pilot and elder in the Mormon Church. Given his dad’s military service, his parents’ divorce, and his mother’s custody of Ray, my friend experienced long periods of separation from his father. In fact, though Steven had lived in Buck Hill for more than a decade, this trip was not only my first venture there, it was Ray’s as well. The resultant text shows Ray and Steven learning surprising and intimate details about each other’s lives.

In **“Passings,”** I accompany Gordon Bernstein, a friend and research collaborator since 1995, on a trip to Philadelphia, his hometown, and Atlantic City, where his parents live. We visit key sites, including his old neighborhood, schools, and synagogue. Gordon’s mother struggles to manage her physical decline from ALS while attempting to facilitate greater openness between her son, whose path to self-acceptance had been long and difficult, and her hegemonically-masculine husband. Prior to our trip, the Bernstein parents had avoided discussing Gordon’s same-sex orientation, especially with anyone outside the immediate family.

Upon return to my hometown of Lake City, Minnesota, chronicled in **“Revisiting Don/ovan,”** I reconnect with Donovan Marshall, an old schoolmate, for the first time in 19 years. Prose and poetry illuminate opportunities and challenges of coming out, fleeing, and returning to live as an openly gay man in a small, rural town.

Part II, Loving Friends, Just Friends: Emotions, Ethics, and Politics of Ally Relationships

In **“Remembering a Cool September: Pain, Prejudice, and Patriotism,”** I chronicle my emotional journey following September 11th, 2001. After weeks of numbness and disconnection, I encounter a display of patriotism by two gay male friends, provoking me to explore what it means to be both patriotic and gay in post-9/11 U.S. culture.

“The State of Unions: Politics and Poetics of Performance” shows me delivering a poem and slide show expressing my fear and anger in the wake of the 2004 U.S. elections. While acknowledging the many ways men like those in my research community are marginalized by sexual orientation, the performance challenges them to make fuller use of the privilege afforded them by sex, gender expression, race, class, and education—to move beyond what I call “in-activism.” Audience members offer mixed responses, some praising its provocative content, others criticizing my position and tone, which some received as alienating, even as “gay bashing.” Using Buddhist criteria for right speech (Is it true? Is it the right time? Will it be helpful?), I revisit this experience to glean ethical lessons.

In **“Deadline: Ethics and the Ethnographic Divorce,”** I receive a call from a reporter about my book, *Between Gay and Straight*. “Deadline” explores tensions between private and public as the private turmoil of divorce clashes with the public construction of my marriage and with my determination to continue advancing the social justice agenda of my work.

The poem **“Build a Bridge Out of Her”** uses the structure, aesthetics, and meanings of bridges to engage contemporary political and ethical challenges, including war, economic injustice, and sexual shaming.

In **“Wedding Album: An Anti-Heterosexist Performance Text,”** historical and personal snapshots of weddings become poetic stanzas that advocate for marriage equality and for a social safety net strong enough to protect the human rights and meet the human needs of everyone, regardless of relational—or any other—status.

“In Solidarity: Collaborations in LGBTQ+ Activism” portrays the transformative power and political potential of friendship. Set at a fictional training, this chapter offers autoethnographic and dialogic reflections on and lessons learned from campus and community initiatives undertaken in the context of an ally-lesbian friendship.

The **Epilogue** offers my deep appreciation for all the personal and academic support I have received for this project, now in its third decade. I return the reader to June 26, 2013 and the fall of DOMA, showing how this Supreme Court decision charts a path forward for millions of same-sex couples and for me.

The **Appendix, “Friendship as Method,”** overviews my approach to and philosophy of research. In this section, I define friendship, posit it as a kind of fieldwork, and lay the methodological foundations of friendship as method. After arguing that friendship as method involves researching with the practices, at the pace, and in the natural contexts of friendship, I describe this approach’s strengths and considerations for both researcher and participants.

**Preface:
Purposes, Audiences, and Classroom Applications**

Deep, committed, and loving relationships across lines such as class, nation, sex, race, religion, ideology, ability, age, gender, and sexual orientation can help light the way toward a more equitable and just society. *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* shows what being an ally requires, means, and does.

My first book, *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship across Sexual Orientation*, stemmed from my Ph.D. dissertation (1994-1998). The work chronicled my journey from small-town girl—heterosexually-identified and raised Catholic in the 1970s and 80s—to emotional, relational, and political ally to an urban network of gay male friends. The essays and website materials collected for *In Solidarity* demonstrate how I have mobilized the raised consciousness acquired along and since that journey in my continued research, campus and community advocacy and activism, teaching, and everyday life. The *Beyond Gay and Straight* in the subtitle hails my first book and suggests movement: from working with and for a community of gay men to befriending and engaging in civil rights activism with and for persons in the bigger tent of LGBTQ+;ⁱⁱⁱ from employing but insufficiently troubling categories such as “gay” and “straight” to foregrounding them as social constructions, useful for some purposes but also limited and limiting; and from a wish to explore what lies between “gay” and “straight” to envisioning a place beyond, where everyone will be treated with humanity, dignity, and equity.

I hope professors and students will be drawn to the work’s utilization of autoethnography, interviewing, and participant observation and to its contextualization in relevant literatures. *In Solidarity* reflects and contributes to fields of study such as Communication, Sociology, Cultural Studies, LGBTQ+ Studies, Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, and Psychology. The work will feel at home on syllabi for courses on for courses on qualitative methods, feminist

methodologies, gender and communication, sexualities, queer methodologies, documentary film, creative nonfiction, identity, emotions, interpersonal communication, close relationships, friendship, the family, activism, and social justice. See the film *Remembering a Cool September* on the book's website.

Through prose, poetry, performance text, film, and photographs, *In Solidarity* and its website take readers/viewers inside relationships across identity groups and serve as exemplars of collaborative^{iv} and activist scholarship.^v Through aesthetic variety and accessible, evocative composition, *In Solidarity* will resonate with academic audiences as well as with lay members of and allies to marginalized communities.

To readers who identify as LGBTQ+, I offer this work as testament to my personal and political commitments to securing full legal and social equality. To fellow allies, may *In Solidarity* provide companionship and strengthen your resolve and tenacity. To prospective allies (i.e., everyone else), consider this an invitation to solidarity.

ⁱ See Tillmann-Healy (1998).

ⁱⁱ See Tillmann-Healy (2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ I use LGBTQ+ to be inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, plus identities such as intersex, pansexual, and asexual. See the Preface for further discussion.

^{iv} See especially chapters 1-4, chapter 10 (co-authored with my friend and colleague, Kathryn Norsworthy), and the film *Remembering a Cool September* (co-produced with my friend David Dietz).

^v See especially chapter 10.