

National Coming Out Day

As we celebrate National Coming Out Day, it's important to remember that for many individuals, coming out is not a one-time event but rather a lifelong journey of self-discovery and growth. Each person's path to self-acceptance is unique, influenced by their upbringing, culture, and personal experiences. In this article, I want to share my personal journey, which highlights the long path to self-acceptance, particularly in the context of a conservative upbringing, while also emphasizing the importance of patience and empathy in the workplace and with those you love.

I grew up as the child of evangelical conservative missionaries in South Korea, existing within a small, sheltered bubble that shielded me from the broader world. In my perception, the first time I encountered someone from the LGBTQ+ community was in adulthood when a family member came out. It's important to recognize that this was a limited perspective; LGBTQ+ individuals had always existed around me, but the environment I grew up in had created a distorted image of reality in my mind.

I'd like to pause here and add that I do not blame my parents for these distortions. My parents were and are good people who spent their whole lives in the service of others. I simply blame the subculture or bubble that I was in for clouding my vision. I believe that it clouded my parents' vision as well and they did the best they could to raise me well. I also recognize that some would not view the teachings I received of the world as distorted. I believe it's important to accept everyone and who they are as valuable additions to a diverse workforce.

Back to my story, the messages I received about the LGBTQ+ community growing up were overwhelmingly negative, portraying them as selfish or morally flawed. This perception led me to believe that I could never identify with or be part of that community because I knew I wasn't a bad or selfish person. I didn't realize that these stereotypes were baseless and harmful generalizations, but they were deeply ingrained in my belief system.

However, as life unfolded and I became exposed to people outside my insular bubble, my framework began to shift. The feelings and experiences I had always had, but had previously described differently, started to be reinterpreted in new and more accurate ways. I began to question the narratives I had been raised with and embraced a more inclusive and empathetic perspective.

Despite these changes, my journey was far from over. Life presented its own challenges as I left my evangelical upbringing behind, navigated divorce as a result, and faced the

world as a culturally awkward single mom. Now, nearing the age of 50, I am still on this path of self-discovery and self-acceptance. I have sought the guidance of a therapist who specializes in helping adult LGBTQ+ individuals on their journeys.

One of the most significant challenges I face is reconciling the conflicting teachings of Asian culture, church culture, and American culture with my evolving understanding of myself. This process is ongoing, and I continue to learn and grow, slowly redefining my identity and embracing my authentic self.

It's crucial to understand that everyone's journey is different. While some individuals may have known, come out and made their transitions at a young age, others, like me, may take longer to come to terms with their true selves. We must acknowledge and respect these diverse paths to self-discovery and allow people to be comfortable in their own skin at work and at play.

I share my story not only as a testament to the transformative power of understanding and acceptance but also as a plea for openness and patience in our workplaces and communities. It's easy to jump to conclusions about people who seem to be "changing their minds." Still in reality, many of us are simply learning more about ourselves and growing as individuals.

As we celebrate National Coming Out Day, I ask that we remember that kindness, patience, and empathy go a long way in creating inclusive and supportive environments. You never know where someone started or what they have been through to arrive at their present state. By being understanding and treating everyone as a human with dignity and worth, even those we disagree with, we can make a positive impact on the lives of our colleagues and friends, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society for all.

This article was written by Michelle Wilson, on behalf of the NAPFA DEI Initiative. Learn more at www.napfa.org/DEI.

Wilson is owner and financial advisor at [Athens Impact Socially Responsible Investments](#), identifies as pansexual, polyamorous, gender non-conforming, and a little deviant. They serve on several DEI committees and spend their free time encouraging an open and accepting world.