

## **Theoretical physicist? Priest ?? Gay ???**

One might think that these identities are incompatible; yet, I integrate them every day.

I am an openly gay man, a professor of physics at UW-Madison, and an ordained Episcopal priest. These identities represent my love for my husband of 16 years; my quest to unravel the mysterious of the cosmos; and my thirst for deeper union with the One who not only created this universe (and maybe others), but also my place in it.

Yet, how can a scientist be seriously religious? How can a gay man set foot in a church, let alone as clergy, given the centuries of Christian homophobia? How can a gay priest find a home in the worlds of subatomic particles?

## **Boxes**

It is natural for us to place people into well-defined boxes. It's how we organize and make sense of the world. Indeed, without a contextual framework for our experiences, we would go crazy.

The problem is that boxes can become prisons that diminish rather than support the humanity of people who don't fit. People like you and I.

My life has about breaking out of boxes and challenging others to reach deeper levels of self-awareness. Like wave-particle duality or any other paradox, the disintegration of boxes demands that we raise not only our consciousness, but also the consciousness of others.

As I share my journey as a gay physicist priest, I want to shatter the lavender ceiling and encourage others struggling to integrate their sexual, spiritual, and scientific aspirations. I want our GLBTQ+ youth to know that a career in science, math, or engineering is as viable as a career in the arts, entertainment, or humanities. A man can love his husband and supersymmetric elementary particles. A woman can love her wife and quantum dots. Openly. Successfully. In Wisconsin.

## **Family?**

Nothing in my family prepared me for this journey. My father was an atheist-existentialist philosopher. My mother was a musician and lapsed Methodist. There was no science, but lots of music, art, and literature in my home.

Being open-minded liberals, they sent me to the Unitarian church so that I would have some exposure to religion. As an adolescent, I heard a young minister declare he was a humanist and only called on God when he needed a parking space.

I didn't buy it. I believed in God and wanted to spend my Sundays with others who shared that belief. I eventually found the Episcopal Church and fell in love with God through the sounds, smells, and visual beauty of the liturgy, and also through the communion of intellectually open-minded people. Bob Greenfield, a compassionate priest and Oxford Ph.D., baptized me at age 15.

### Science?

Perhaps, I was destined for the Church, but certainly not for science. On the first day in my eighth grade science class, we spent an hour observing a candle burn. What could be more dull ! That attitude lasted until 11<sup>th</sup> grade when I was required to take physics. After that, I would be free.

But I fell in love again, this time with the quantum theory and Einstein's theory of special relativity. I read books by Isaac Asimov and spent afternoons deriving Einstein's formula for time dilation. Physics was so mysterious, beautiful, and compelling. It was the start of a second, life-long love affair.

### Gay?

Secretly, I already had a third love: men. It was just as powerful as the other two, but scarier by far. Like countless others, I fought it and feared that I would have to abandon both God and physics. My parents suggested therapy. I tried dating women. I "acted straight" while channeling my frustrated gay identity into academic achievement.

### Boxes collapse: God's love

By the time I arrived at Princeton as a doctoral student, the tensions between my three loves were roiling. I did not fit any of the boxes. In first semester, one box collapsed during the Sunday morning Eucharist at Princeton's Trinity Church. Amidst quiet reflection on my recent experiences at a Catholic Worker soup kitchen and a view of poverty in Mexico, I experienced a vision: Jesus, amidst a broken world, healing others.

The vision pulled me in a different direction than the aspiring physicist box. As with St. Paul, scales fell from my eyes, and I knew that God wanted me to be a priest.

After an intensive process with New Jersey's bishop, a plan emerged for me to complete my master's in physics and then head to seminary. The day I was to announce that I was leaving physics, I couldn't do it. Physics was as central to my DNA as was my love for God. In the end, I completed my Ph.D. and then enrolled in divinity school and concurrently maintained a post-doc at MIT.

Soon after and during a time of prayer, another box crumbled. I realized that God created me and loved me as a gay man, budding physicist, and future priest. My identity was between God and me, not between boxes and me.

20 years later, I am married to a wonderfully compelling man, a professor of theoretical physics at UW-Madison, soon-to-be director UMass Amherst's center for theoretical physics, an assisting priest at St. Madison's Dunstan's Episcopal Church, and a part-time priest at Los Angeles' All Saints Church. There has been a lot of water under the bridge; but I've learned that by the grace of God I could follow my three loves.

### **No bed of roses**

However, my journey has not been a bed of roses. I have learned that homophobia, heterosexism, prejudice, and exclusion are still alive and well in science, the church, and the gay community.

Science does not embrace a religious perspective. Think of Stephen Hawking who relegate God to irrelevance because physics explains more and more of the cosmos. Or of my Princeton advisor, who asked me after I completed my Ph.D.: "Now I haven't raised this before because I don't like to mix oil and water, but why are you going to seminary? Can't God wait? After all...he's been around for awhile."

Over the course of my career – and most recently at UW-Madison – I have experienced that the physics community is also not fully prepared for an openly gay man in a position of power. A significant reason why I shall lead a physics center as UMASS Amherst and not Wisconsin is the continued hostility I experienced from my UW-Madison colleagues in theoretical high-energy physics and the silence of those who enabled them. Truthfully, hitting the lavender ceiling at this university has been both painful and disappointing.

I have been sustained through my friendships with other departmental colleagues, as well as allies at other institutions. I am encouraged by the vision of colleagues and administrators in Massachusetts who are not threatened by box-breaking professor. I am made hopeful by the move to greater inclusiveness within the American Physical Society where I participated in its first session on Gender and Sexual Diversity Issues in Physics.

The Episcopal Church is still on a journey toward the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons. As a whole, we've made big strides: authorizing the blessing of same-sex unions and consecrating two openly gay bishops. Yet the Diocese of Milwaukee remains many steps behind the national church, my "official" home in the Diocese of Los Angeles, and my future home in Western Massachusetts. But I see hope in the prayerful advocacy from St. Dunstan's parishioners, its rector Miranda Hassett, and other Wisconsin Episcopalians.

### **Forward and Onward: Gay, Scientist, and Priest**

Do science and faith conflict, or are they separate but equal?

For me, theoretical physics is a deeply spiritual discipline. The laws of nature that describe the universe's visible matter are a work of art. To paraphrase John

Calvin, who better to appreciate the beauty of God's handiwork than scientists? And yet so much remains to be understood: where did it all come from? Why is so much of the universe dark yet energetic? Will CERN's Large Hadron Collider reveal new laws of nature?

The hunger that drives my scientific research also inspires my quest for God's justice at All Saints Church Los Angeles.

Do Christian faith and a gay identity conflict? Only a superficial understanding of the ministry of Jesus could lead one to think so. After all, he was a man whose life ended in a horrific execution precisely because he challenged the dehumanizing boxes of his day.

To this day, Jesus' followers continue to break down boxes. The Rev. Suzanne R. Hiatt, my seminary advisor and heroine, was one of the first eleven women ordained priest in the Episcopal Church before it was "legal." She put it aptly: our vocation as followers of Christ is not so much to preserve institutions (i.e., boxes) as to "explode" them. Religious homophobia and heterosexism are an idolatrous departure from the life and ministry of Jesus. My vocation as priest is to call the church to be more true to Jesus' example -- and explode those boxes.

Can a gay person "come out" as a scientist? From what mainstream gay media chooses to portray, one might not think so. Entertainers, fashion designers, artists, and writers are the "acceptable" successful professions that the GLBT media continually reinforce. Occasionally, a politician appears. Even less frequently, a corporate businessperson, a person of color, or a religious figure.

Last year, the openly gay mathematician Alan Turing received far more coverage for the centennial of his birth from Nature than he did in OUT. Those who know about Turing might tell you that despite his tragic homophobic experience, a career in science today is as open to a sexual/gender minority person as anyone else. Yet, if you are a scientifically-inclined GLBTQ Wisconsin youth whose only access to the gay world is through the internet, would you ever know it?

### **No more boxes**

With the help of my faith; a wonderful husband; supportive friends, mentors, and allies in the church, the world of physics, and the therapist's office, I have been able to integrate the seemingly conflicting aspects of my identity despite the obstacles.

If that can happen for me, then it can happen for anyone else in our community. *Gay and a scientist?* You bet. *Gay and religious?* You bet. *All of the above?* You bet.

We define the categories, not them. It is, after all, about *our* lives.