1 17 Times a day I think about being gay

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I think about being gay from the moment I wake to the moment I go to sleep. I think about being gay hundreds of times a day, every single day. Here are 17 of my most persistent ruminations.

Some of these things happen *every* day and some don't, but they could happen *any* day.

5.45 a.m. When I wake up

Three decades on from realising something was 'wrong' with me, the novelty has still not gone away:

I am sharing a bed with a man.

I think this every morning and I am still mildly surprised by it.

Maybe straight people think this way too. Maybe those who sleep with the opposite sex are just as surprised to find someone else's arms, legs, head, and the rest of 'another person', right there beside them.

I doubt it though. I think most of them take it as a given. Princes only find princesses, or vice versa.

I was six when I realised I was gay – or at least different. One of my friends was 19 when he realised. But it's never a competition, especially when we're all on the losing team.

Whenever I try to explain to a straight person what it's like growing up gay in a heteronormative world, I tell them to remember the last time they walked through a greeting card shop. Birthdays, weddings, new arrivals, condolences ... and everything in-between, the whole panoply of life is (supposedly) right there, on those greeting cards, in binaries: baby boys (blue), baby girls (pink); male teenagers (cars and sport), female teenagers (shopping, shoes and selfies); a man and a woman on top of a cake; and then: a blue or pink crib. And the whole cycle begins all over again, until it ends ... *with sympathy*.

Only after they've gone is it acceptable to send men flowers, or an image of them at least, tastefully arranged around the words, formatted in a cursive font. And even then, most people avoid the pictures of pink flowers if they can find a card with blue ones on it instead.

I find the conventionality repugnant, the way it reinforces the idea of what a 'normal' life looks like. That my life, in business terms, is considered a 'niche market'.

The 'scare quotes' are a bad habit – like biting my fingernails – that I've never managed to break. I have to go back through anything I write and trim for the scare quotes. The original draft of this chapter had twice as many. I think they result from being scared a lot. Scared of words like 'romance', 'marriage', 'family', and 'happiness'.

I grew up being terrified of card shops. An odd phobia, I'll grant you, and not one I voiced. Instead, I silently held my mum's hand tightly as she wandered the aisles looking for the right card for the right occasion. I just kept it to myself: a vague feeling of unease. This sharpened into something more as I grew up and realised I was looking at a version of the world I could never fit into. 'Romance' was not possible for people like me, not in the way I saw it represented on the Valentine's Day cards my parents sent each other. 'Marriage' was impossible, a nonsense word just taking up space in my mental dictionary. Best to chuck it out. 'Family' was stability, of a kind, even if I could imagine replicating nothing like that in my own life. I would forever be alone, unable to share in others' definition of 'happiness'.

It sounds so silly now. Now I know I wasn't alone. There were lots of people like me, even if I never saw them on greeting cards, or films, or TV.

So much of gay life is lived in scare quotes, as if the words between the inverted commas are not really the same things enjoyed by everyone else. Similar, but different. Like two versions of the same language.

This morning – today – is a new day. Which language should I speak?

5.47 a.m. When my first waking thoughts recede and I drowsily recall that the man in my bed is my husband

'Marriage' lost its scare quotes a year to the day that same sex marriage was legalised, when we got married on 28 March 2015. Just a coincidence. We didn't plan much of anything.

Our proposal took place while we were doing the washing-up after dinner one night.

We'd just got back from visiting the new library and were wondering, aloud, if our local city council hired it out for weddings. I offered to phone them the next day to make enquiries.

And that was it.

No proposal on a gondola. No ring dropped into a glass of champagne. No sunset tête-à-tête planned with military precision. Either of us getting down on one knee just didn't seem ... necessary.

I always said I'd never get married, mostly because I couldn't picture it happening. Maybe being surrounded by those billions of words in the

library helped change my mind. I had to relearn the word ‘marriage’, modify its meaning – as we all did in England in 2014.

Love had recently won the day, and perhaps, in hindsight, we were riding high, drunk on the idea that anything was possible. This was in late July. Nine months later, as if we’d had to get married for a more Victorian reason, we said our vows. We adapted the words from the books which had shaped us, made us feel better about ourselves. We wore paper flowers made from pages of Nineteen Eighty-Four, quoted lines from X-Men in our personal declarations, threw in a Native American blessing at the last minute because the lovely registrar liked it. Why not bring more persecuted people into it?

It felt like we were making it up as we went along, because, in most ways, we were. We wrote ourselves into each other’s lives.

And then: the anniversaries of cotton, paper, leather, linen. This year, our fifth, it was wood. Funnily enough, it’s what our rings are made of. Mine is oak. His is maple. We worried they wouldn’t last like gold or platinum. But they still look like new, like they did on the day we put them on.

5.48 a.m. When I snuggle into his Nook

Still in bed, I find myself nuzzled into what we call The Nook, that delve on Antony’s right side, between his pectoralis major and his deltoid. More prosaically, his armpit.

I joke that I’ve made it my own, burrowed out a place where I can slot in, snug as a puzzle piece. He maintains it was already there but waiting for my cheekbone, without either of us knowing it.

For 20 years I couldn’t imagine this could ever be done. 1 man + 1 man = does not compute. As rational as reaching out your tongue to taste the sun.

5.59 a.m. When I finally go downstairs to make coffee and feed the cats

The coffee is on the go. Two hits of Nespresso.

The boys are eating breakfast. Our furry babies. We could navigate the surrogacy minefield. We could adopt. We spoke with a social worker once who seemed determined to put us off. Maybe it was just her. Maybe it was us. We have gay friends and family who have sprogs, and we love spending time with them.

And then we give them back.

Two cats are enough for us. At least for now. And in the meantime, I have nearly 1600 children at school to take care of.

6.08 a.m. When I reach for the shower gel

In our shower there is no LYNX shower gel.

LYNX, Africa, Aztec, Atlantis ... These were the exotic-sounding scents of 1997. In other countries, LYNX is known as AXE, which is scarcely less hyper-masculine. For me, it brings back the smell of the boys changing room after PE lessons.

On the pitch, I always made a decent show of tackling, holding my own in a scrum, like boys are supposed to. Running hell for leather at a set of posts spelling a badly drawn capital letter H, as meaningless to me as a character in a dead language, like Sanskrit or Akkadian.

Sport made me feel awkward. Aloof.

I wasn't afraid to get hurt. What I was doing to myself, at the time, could never compare with a few scrapes, a few spurts of mud.

I just didn't see the point in sport. But I played along, afraid of being found out.

When the teacher wasn't around, I skipped the showers and tried to keep my eyes down, somewhere near (but not quite at) the ground.

I tried hard not to look, but I didn't always try hard enough.

I remember one lad in particular, a bit older than me. He was, in a very literal sense, cock-of-the walk; the overconfident, supposed alpha male who strutted around like he owned the whole place – with that cocksure grin on his face but sans towel, sans shame, sans any of the concerns that played on my mind. His confidence scared me more than any of his physical attributes.

The smell of 'men's' shower gel always brings this back: a cheaply scented Proustian rush which can still make me feel guilty and unworthy.

I lather up and wash it all away.

6.19 a.m. When I question everything I wear

Are these socks too gay?

They're at least a 3 on Kinsey's famous scale, running from 1 ('exclusively heterosexual') to 6 ('exclusively homosexual'). They're probably closer to a 4: 'more than incidentally homosexual'. A French-looking sailor. I think he's supposed to be French, in a borderline-offensive kind of way. The beret gives it away. Only marginally less obvious is the arched eyebrow, a love heart tattooed on his bicep. A Pierre et Gilles fantasy, or (as I first encountered this iconography), a model in an advert for Jean Paul Gaultier. An advert I pretended not to be paying attention to. In reality, I could barely take my eyes away.

Now they sell such men in H&M, in sock form at least. For men of all persuasions (sizes 6–11).

I end up going with the socks. Why not?

It's only a pair of socks.

Except, it's not, is it?

I remember the frightened little ginger kid who professed not to care what he wore. Who, more often than not, didn't like who he was. Who, at

least once a week in his teenage years, reached the point where he didn't want to be here anymore.

And if a pair of socks can make all that seem more distant than it really was, please don't turn up your nose at my turned-up trousers. They're like that on purpose. I'm inviting you to look. Look! My socks have 'more than incidentally homosexual' sailors on them! Jealous, aren't you?

6.38 a.m. When I put on my shoes and ready myself for the kiss

My husband and I don't consciously intend to make a public demonstration on our doorstep. But every kiss comes with questions and considerations: what if someone sees? What will they think of me? Is this a political act? Is there some greater good in this, more than just what we take for ourselves?

A few years ago, in St. Mark's Square, Venice (aka, The Most Romantic Place on Earth), I thought it was obvious. All the straight couples were doing it, but he refused to kiss me. *I feel unsafe* – he said. I felt otherwise. A rare case of us misaligning. We argued in silence, not talking until the next morning, safe on the plane home.

Public displays of affection still don't always come easily to us. We've been conditioned to think *that's not right*. My dad used to recoil when he saw men kissing on the TV soap opera, Coronation Street. Even he was conditioned, and he's a liberal, an academic, with a degree in history from Cambridge University. Cambridge with its famous, gay alumni: Turing, the British war hero betrayed by his country who now appears on the £50 note; Forster, the novelist who wrote 'Maurice', one of the best gay romances of all time but didn't publish it in his lifetime because his friends told him readers would never believe in two men living together happily; McKellen the wizard, the Shakespearean, the activist, the X-Man.

My dad recoiled at men kissing because he was just doing what he'd been carefully taught to do. And, although I find this hard to believe now, seeing men kiss always disgusted me too.

When I kissed my husband in front of everyone at our wedding, I closed my eyes. I was surprised I could open them again.

8.59 a.m. When I deliver an assembly to Year 11

Today's assembly addresses exam anxiety, so I naturally share with a school hall full of 15- and 16-year-olds some of the things that have threatened my equilibrium over the years. I tell them about when I faced three challenges simultaneously when I was 20: 1. I was trying to complete my undergraduate dissertation; 2. I was dealing with the deaths of two grandparents within months of each other; 3. I was in love with someone I shouldn't have been in love with. Someone who couldn't love me back.

To my surprise, this elicits some sympathy. Around half the room goes *aww*, and not in a sarcastic, teenager way.

It's okay, I tell 263 Year 11s about to take their exams; I don't deserve sympathy. Looking back, I don't know what I was thinking. *He* was an idiot anyway.

And they fall about laughing. Some even applaud, and not in a sarcastic way.

9.12 a.m. After the assembly

The caretakers are already putting away the chairs, and I only have a minute to get to my lesson on the other side of the building.

But someone is waiting for me.

She rocks, gently, as if she's desperate to dance but unwilling to be the first one to get up on the dance floor.

Can I talk to you about something?

Of course, I tell her, trying not to look at my watch or imagine my class lining up outside the classroom, wondering where I am.

I think ...

For a moment, I don't believe she can go through with it. She can't meet my eyes. Without realising it, I've tilted my head to the side, knowing what's coming. My gay Spidey-sense is tingling. This is the moment her life changes. I want her to just say it. But I also want her to savour this. I want to say all of these things, but now is not my time to talk. This is all about her.

I'm ...

I fight the urge to help her. It is what teachers do every day, after all: coax out existing knowledge, building on it to form deeper understanding. But this is something she already knows and has been burying for some time. She doesn't need my help to excavate it. She doesn't need my permission. She just needs someone to listen.

I've not told anyone this, but I'm ... a lesbian.

'That's great', I tell her, barely pausing, but pausing just enough. I pick my words carefully, without betraying my mental effort (I hope). What I say and do now she will remember for the rest of her life. With gay power comes gay responsibility.

'That must have taken a lot of courage', I say. 'I couldn't have imagined coming out at your age. You're so brave. I'm so proud of you'.

She's a bit teary, and so am I. This is not an ordinary day for her or me.

It feels like results day has arrived several months early. But this is better than any results day.

10.17 a.m. When a pupil asks me about my badge

Where can I get one of those badges from, sir? The Year 7 girl on the front row is pointing at me. Pointing to the lapel of my jacket. Pointing to the badge with the rainbow on it.

We only sell those in July, I explain, guiltily. It is currently November. A long time to wait when you're 11.

They're to raise money for charity, I add. I intend it to sound like an apology, but it comes off more like an excuse.

Here, I say, unpinning my own. It's yours now.

She takes it in her hand and immediately pins it to her blazer.

The next day she comes to find me before she goes to registration.

I made you this, she says, handing me a small thing made from a rectangle of paper and a safety pin. The coloured stripes are wobbly, drawn by an eleven-year-old hand with a felt-tip pen, and the whole is held together with Sellotape. But it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

11.12 a.m. When I'm on playground duty and one kid says *that's so gay* as they drop their bottle of fizzy drink

Before I have a chance to jump in, one of my straight colleagues addresses it.

How would that make a gay person feel?

The child looks sheepish. I see traces of teenage bravado rising off him, evaporating.

How would that make a gay person feel, comparing them with something you've dropped on the floor?

There's no glance at me. It's unnecessary. It's impersonalised. Nothing to do with me but everything to do with being a decent human being. Instead, my colleague points to the fallen bottle of cherry-flavoured pop, guiltily spilling its bright red E-numbered innards.

That doesn't look very gay to me. Being gay doesn't make someone like a spilled fizzy drink.

The child agrees, promising to think before he speaks next time. I believe him.

12.47 p.m. When someone says *I knew he was gay all along* in relation to the latest celebrity coming out

I don't even wait to hear who 'he' is because I'm angry, and I'm not listening, and I'm talking and I'm talking and I'm talking, although I'm careful to stick to the third person, because this is not personal but it is something they need to know. And I don't stop until I've taught them something they really need to know, right now, so they never make this mistake again:

I hope you didn't say this to someone's face because it's the worst thing you can say to a gay person. At least if you call them a faggot, they can deal with it and write you off as a bigot. But when you say to someone's face that you knew they were gay before they came out to you, you rip away all those years of attempted concealment at a stroke. You steal the punchline to their joke, not that it was ever funny for them.

You make that person feel paper thin, as if everyone was watching them all along. As if they were failing all along. As if all that time, all that effort,

all the tears and blood and the ‘I-wish-I-was-deads’ should be instantly wiped clean. Their innermost secret reduced to the importance of a stain. Look: they’re brand new again! And, really important, they are. But all that shame will never quite go away.

And even though they’re now out, because they’ve been brave enough to hold themselves up to the light, you’ve reduced this important moment in their life to *your* moment, a petty victory of knowledge over courage, rather than as it should be: their triumph – over everything.

So, before you open your mouth, please think twice. Think more than twice. Think a hundred times. A thousand. A million. And then double it. Because however much you think about them being gay, you’ve got nothing on them, and it’s not your experience. They’ve been thinking about it every day. They’ve been thinking about it all along.

1.17 p.m. When a colleague tells me, *you don’t sound gay*

And then he realises what he’s said, and he immediately apologises for thinking in stereotypes. I step in before he thinks there’s even a possibility I have taken offence.

It’s okay, I reassure him; I know what you mean. I take pride in being a linguistic chameleon. I can sound ‘straight’ when I want to, or camp it up with the best of them. And yes, most people say my ‘real’ voice (if I have such a thing) is somewhere on the straighter end of the spectrum.

Maybe this is another reason why I didn’t come out sooner. I was hiding in plain sound.

From what I’ve read, no one really knows why some people sound gay. It’s unlikely to be a conscious choice. More likely unconscious. This says to me that, deep down, some gay people want you to find out they’re gay, but without having to articulate the words.

What does that mean for you then, if you don’t sound gay?

I tell him I don’t know. And then I pause, consider keeping my next thought to myself. Is it too solipsistic? I say it anyway: Maybe I was lost for so long that I couldn’t imagine ever wanting to be found.

1.42 p.m. When someone asks me a sex education question

A trainee teacher stays behind after my training session on LGBT inclusion and asks me what ‘chemsex’ is, and I confess I don’t know, and I tell her I feel like I’ve failed at being a gay because I don’t know all there is to know about sex.

This last part just falls out of me and we both laugh. She says *I will just look it up on Wikipedia*. As a matter of interest, I ask her, why is she asking *me*?

Perhaps I didn’t stress this last word enough because she only replies: *One of my form asked about it in PSHE*.

I want to tell her and state categorically (and a tad over-defensively) we (gay people) are not all sex experts. What we've learned, we've largely had to teach ourselves. School failed us. Parents were clueless. The internet was ... curious and often full-on dangerous.

Later that evening, I Google 'chemsex' myself and learn that, as a nation, we really need to update our sex education curriculum.

2.17 p.m. When I come out for the millionth time (or thereabouts)

It's potentially hostile territory. Another school. I'm here to see the head teacher, I tell the receptionist. She gives me a lanyard with the word VISITOR emblazoned on it, telling everyone I'm not from around these parts.

I have arrived ten minutes early. I have time to take in the sights, searching the walls for some sign that my kind are welcome here: a poster, a kite mark, a rainbow flag, no matter how small. I find nothing.

Children come and go, stampeding through the foyer on their way to assembly.

And then he appears. The double doors swing apart like they do in western movies of the 1950s.

The first thing he does is shake my hand, but not in a John Wayne kind of way.

As we walk to his office, we make small talk: about my journey, about the weather, about how much work we still have to do before the end of term and how we will not get it all done. *My wife says I take too much home with me.* I smile and nod, telling him my husband says the same thing.

I say it without thinking.

He doesn't react. His voice doesn't deepen to make it clear he's DEFINITELY STRAIGHT.

In other words, the world does not end because I've come out (again). For 20 years I thought there was a very real possibility it might.

Another novelty that hasn't quite worn off.

So, why is my heart still racing?

I've lost count of the number of times I've come out in the last decade. And it does get easier. It used to be accompanied with a shot of pure adrenaline. Most of the time now, it's like a hit of caffeine.

The head teacher with the firm-ish handshake asks whether I take sugar in my coffee.

'No thank you', I tell him, my pulse returning to normal, my confidence returning. 'I'm sweet enough already'.

5.57 p.m. When he and I hold hands

We're out of milk, he greets me with, instead of a kiss.

I've not even taken off my shoes yet. I'll go, I tell him.

I'll come with you. Dinner's in the oven, anyway.

By mutual, silent assent, my husband and I decide to hold hands for the short walk around the block. It's a risk, this holding-hands business.

We all get to know where it's safe and where it's not. It's not really fair that gay people have to carry around a mental map of the places where they live, like a Google Maps overlay showing them which streets they can walk down in the dark and which ones they need to avoid at all costs. But that's the way it is.

Even armed with this knowledge, places that you thought were safe turn out not to be. We've been attacked in Birmingham's Gay Village, just up the road from London's Soho, our own street.

Once, some idiot decided to shout abuse and throw chip shop curry sauce at us from their car as they drove past. This was on the main road, just around the block from our house.

A drive-by saucing. It sounded funny when I described it as this to the policeman on the phone later. But he took it seriously. He sighed: *I wish I could say I was surprised. It's the area, I'm afraid. Although it could happen anywhere.* And then, when he came around our house to take our statement, he laughed.

I love it, he said, pointing to our bedroom window, pointing to the rainbow flag hanging defiantly down, only faintly ruffled by the breeze.

9.48 p.m. When my husband kisses me goodnight

He's usually in bed before me and I'm the one to put out the light.

As tired as he might be, I don't have long to wait. In the darkness, I feel his lips searching for mine. Sometimes they graze my ear, or an eyebrow, or a nostril, before they drowsily find their home.

In these moments, the seemingly intractable 20-year problem of being gay flutters away. What remains are the thousand natural shocks of the every day. Sometimes they keep me awake. Sometimes I'm just too tired to pay them much mind.

But his kiss tells me he'll be there if I need him. His kiss tells me he won't be overjoyed by my waking him up at 4 a.m. if I need him, but he'll be there, anyway.

There is a man in my bed.

Someone who loves me.

Someone who helped me love myself.

I know the novelty will never go away.

Making sense of this experience/reflections on my writing

We're all defined by what we are not. We all compare ourselves with other people, especially if we're in a minority. But I don't think a lot of straight

people realise how many times a day gay people are reminded (or we remind ourselves) of our differences.

For this piece, I chose a typical school day. I have taught (if my calculations are correct – I teach English, not maths) over 3000 pupils. And as a senior leader in a large secondary school, I have helped to shape the lives of over 30,000. Only one has ever asked me, ‘Sir, are you gay?’

I lied.

I wasn’t even fully out to myself. I’d barely been teaching a year. I was only three years older than some students I was teaching, fresh from university. So why do I still, as I type this, feel a degree of guilt about lying to that kid?

We all remember things teachers have said to us, both the good and the bad stuff – but especially the bad stuff.

Sometimes it may appear to teachers that our words fall on deaf ears, especially if those ears belong to the most recalcitrant pupils. But just replying ‘Yes, I’m gay’ in that moment could have had a life-changing impact on everyone in that room. And I don’t just mean the queer kids. I also thought my being honest could have had a positive impact on the straight kids, most of whom had only experienced gay people on TV or the internet (I would specify ‘social media’, but this was 2005 and it wasn’t really a thing yet, unless you count Myspace, which makes me feel old, so we won’t).

There are some who argue a queer teacher’s identity is irrelevant to learning.¹ It may, they say, even be a distraction. Some² maintain that gay teachers should categorically not share details of their ‘personal lives’.³ But would they disagree with a straight male teacher referring to their wife? I doubt it. What about if a gay male teacher was to refer to their husband? These same people would be up in arms. I don’t know how anyone can summon the mental energy to teach effectively⁴ if they’re also wasting

1 I am loathe to dignify any of the keyboard warriors who express such views by referencing them (just Google ‘too young to learn about LGBT’ to find a depressing number of these stories). However, the particularly venal 2019 protests which targeted primary schools in Birmingham, 20 minutes from my house and the school I teach at, are of particular note and received plenty of mainstream media coverage and comment, e.g. Hobby (2019). The long overdue update to Sex and Relationships Education, which became mandatory in the 2020/21 academic year, provoked similar reactions.

2 My experience has taught me that this ignorance stems from three main misconceptions: 1. Sexual orientation is all about sex; 2. Gay people are sex pests 3. Gay people choose to be gay. I have explored these and the steps school leaders can take to overcome them elsewhere, e.g., Lowbridge-Ellis (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019, 2020).

3 More scare quotes. As I explore early on in my piece, I’ve long had a tendency to rely on these punctuation marks to make it clear that I don’t accept things at face value. Recently, I was delighted to find a resonance in Susan Sontag’s Notes On ‘Camp’ (1964): ‘Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a “lamp”; not a woman, but a “woman”. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role’.

4 The literature on the link between pupils trusting their teacher pupil motivation is well-established. For a succinct summary see chapter 4 of McCrea (2020).

a sizeable chunk of cognitive energy⁵ on concealing such a fundamental part of their identity.⁶

Well, that last one I do know about, because I did it. For those first four years I was a teacher until I came out at the age of 26.

I'm a much better teacher now that I don't have to refer to the man I love as 'the person I live with' or avoid saying the personal pronoun *he*.

I never conceal who I am anymore. The past decade has been by far the best of my life so far. Being openly gay is nowhere near as exhausting as being closeted. And yet, I still think about being gay many more times than would be necessary in a supposedly more inclusive society.⁷

I'm sure I'm not alone in this?

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5 Cognitive load theory has been around for over three decades but has only become common parlance in most schools quite recently. See, for instance, Muijs (2019).

6 And let's not overlook the detrimental impact on the mental health of queer teachers themselves. A recent study (Lee, 2019) showed that nearly two-thirds of LGBT teachers have experienced serious anxiety or depression linked to having to conceal their sexual or gender identity, and those in rural schools are disproportionately affected.

7 In 2019, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) declared that the UK was only 'halfway to full social acceptance', appearing at just over 5 on their 10-point scale (10 being fully socially accepting). The USA appeared slightly below the UK. Countries which were more accepting included Germany, Australia, Sweden, and Iceland.

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