

"Sensei, I Slashed My Wrists Last Night."

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The phone call came on a lazy spring night around 10 p.m. I was spacing out in front of the computer, sipping tea, and playing a game of some sort. Jarred back into the real world, I resentfully picked up the phone and mumbled "Hello?" with little enthusiasm.

"Hi, Mike. This is Kaoru¹," answered a tepid voice. I immediately turned away from the computer and abandoned my tea. Kaoru called me a lot those days, and I knew our conversation would require my full attention.

Let me start at the beginning. I coach a university debate team, and three months before, Kaoru, one of my students, had written me a letter:

I've been wondering if you are gay . . . the reason why I'm writing is because I don't know anybody who shares the same sexual orientation as mine except you. I found myself totally alone and there's nobody I can really talk to. I thought I could live by myself and I thought I didn't need anyone. But it turned out it's totally impossible. . . . Have you ever thought of committing suicide? Well, I have. I guess that's because I've got so many things to think about and so few people to talk with . . . I just feel I'm lost.

From that day on, we spent a lot of time together. We went to *Ni-Chome* (Tokyo's gay district), and I introduced Kaoru to many of my gay and lesbian friends. We ransacked my bookcase, going through a pile of gay newspapers from Toronto. Kaoru could recognize none of the names or landmarks, but read them voraciously nevertheless. For Kaoru, the newspapers opened up a new world that somehow represented a long-lost "home."

Kaoru's case was sadly typical. Discovering your true sexual orientation can turn your entire life into a waking nightmare. All of your safe zones—friends, family, faith, and identity—come under siege. You can see and feel everything you have ever held dear go up in smoke. The stakes are enormous, and the path filled with anxiety and depression. For teenagers, who already have enough issues to deal with, the despair can have tragic consequences. The fear, self-hatred, and craving for love and understanding often comes out in the most self-destructive ways. They poison themselves with drugs and alcohol, drop out of school, run away from home, and, in many cases, take their own lives.

The body count speaks for itself. In the U.S.A., gay and lesbian teens account for thirty percent of all completed teen suicides (Gibson, 1989), a rate over three times higher than that of straight youth. One shudders to think what the numbers might look like in Japan,

where conformist pressures are so much stronger, and gay and lesbian awareness next to negligible.

"Mike, I slashed my wrists last night," Kaoru announced, "But don't worry. I'm okay now. I didn't cut that hard."

Shock? Confusion? Anger? What was I supposed to feel? More importantly, what was I supposed to do? We talked long into the night, and even when my head was falling from exhaustion, I was too terrified to hang up.

This particular story, at least, has a happy ending. Over the following four months, Kaoru came out to family and friends, founded a sexuality discussion group at the university, and began volunteering for gay and lesbian cultural projects. Kaoru's struggles are far from over, of course—rebuilding a life can take years—but now the challenge is being met with optimism and confidence.

I sometimes reflect on my role seeing Kaoru through this ordeal. What a lucky turn of fate that Kaoru guessed I would offer a supportive ear, and was able to reach out to me. For several months, I was Kaoru's primary lifeline and counsellor, and together we worked through many rough spots, including the suicide attempt. It horrifies me to think what would have happened had I not made myself approachable.

Without friends and allies, gay and lesbian students can suffer bitterly in the environment of adolescent homophobia. Once again, the studies from the U.S.A. speak for themselves. The average high school student hears anti-gay comments like "dyke" and "fag-got" twenty-six times a day, and teachers who witness such incidents do nothing ninety-seven percent of the time (Carter, 1997). Two-thirds of gay and lesbian students are threatened or injured with a weapon at school (Massachusetts Dept. of Ed., 1995). They are twice as likely to get into fights (Massachusetts Dept. of Ed., 1995; Vermont Dept. of Ed., 1995), after which they are three times more likely to require medical attention (Seattle Public Schools, 1995). Twenty percent skip classes because they are afraid to come to school, a rate five times higher than that of their straight peers (MA Dept. of Ed., 1995).

Students cannot, and should not, be expected to learn in such a dangerous and intimidating environment. As teachers, we have a moral and professional responsibility to create a safe space for students to develop, both educationally and socially. We must make it clear that bigotry based on sexual orientation is completely unacceptable. We must make all students aware they have gay and lesbian classmates.

Most importantly, we must let gay and lesbian students know that they are not alone, and that they have supporters and resources available.

Realizing this, I decided then to begin my own coming out process, both at the university and to my students at Sagami Women's University High School. It was easy at the university; the students there had mostly figured it out already, and the faculty did not care in the least. I brought my boyfriend to a team party (Kaoru brought a date as well), and my life as coach continued without interruption.

Coming out to my high school students, however, was not as easy. Students and teachers have a much more formal relationship at high school than at university, making it difficult to discuss such personal issues as sexuality. Furthermore, I was very concerned about the students' parents, who could potentially put up strong opposition. I realized that coming out at high school offered considerable risks, and could even cost me my job.

However, in the end, I did not see my job seriously in danger. Fundamentally, Japanese society is not homophobic. My boyfriend and I hold hands in the streets of Tokyo without fear of harassment. Japanese society is, however, stiflingly heterosexist. Social expectations, to which the Japanese feel the suffocating need to conform, demand heterosexuality. Foreigners, however, are largely exempt from social expectations, and can get away with breaking a lot of rules. Normally, I do not like to exercise such "gaijin privilege," but coming out at school was one occasion where to do so was necessary and constructive.

I came out in three stages, each lasting about one semester. Stage one involved the Japanese faculty² and my principal. I started to tell teachers that I was gay, and added a gay-positive section to my homepage.³ Soon afterwards, my principal visited the English office holding a printout of my Web Site. Although we did not discuss my sexual orientation directly, we did talk about the many problems gay and lesbian students face, including truancy, substance abuse, and suicide, and why educators have a responsibility to become involved. Put into those terms, his reaction became sympathetic and understanding.

For stage two, my foreign colleagues and I introduced gay-positive material into our oral communication lessons. For example, during a video lesson on introductions, we included a scene from the gay love comedy *Jeffrey*, along with straight clips from *The Karate Kid* and *Sleepless in Seattle*. The students usually reacted to the gay images with uncontrollable giggling but, on the whole, the presentation took place without incident.

For stage three, I announced in class that I was gay, and brought Skip, my boyfriend, to my school's culture festival. The reaction was more positive than I could have possibly predicted. Initially, most students would feel surprised and awkward, in which case I

would simply continue with the regular lesson plan. After a short while, however, they would open up with all sorts of questions, such as "How long have you been gay?" "How long have you been with your boyfriend?" and "Do you want to adopt children?" Students afraid to speak to me directly have gone to the other foreign teachers, who have offered useful, constructive information. Together, we have generated a considerable amount of positive awareness.

Coming out has totally reinvigorated me as a teacher. I love my work, my school, and my students more than ever before. I take great joy knowing I am doing something socially worthwhile, as well as making a substantial contribution to my students' lives and to the Japanese gay and lesbian community.

The time has come for us, as teachers, to end our complacency. Even now, students like Kaoru are in our classrooms, staring at their wrists. We must not ignore them any longer.

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Notes

- ¹ Name changed and gender concealed to protect confidentiality.
- ² My two foreign colleagues, Michael Carroll and Hali Bogo, have long known I am gay and have been conspicuously supportive. I am extremely grateful to them both, on both personal and professional levels.
- ³ <<http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cj3m-lbky>>

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