



9-2022

Loving One Another

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Emma (2022) "Loving One Another," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)*: Vol. 9, Article 61.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol9/iss1/61>

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Loving One Another

I STILL REMEMBER EXACTLY WHERE I WAS WHEN I HEARD THE news. It was a chilly February afternoon in 2020. I was in my senior year of high school, half asleep in my history class with about two minutes to waste before the bell rang. Groggy from a long day of dull lessons, I tugged on my sweater and pulled out my phone, intending to mindlessly scroll until students were set loose in the halls.

A notification. I opened it to a text from my friend; she'd sent me a link to an article about BYU's honor code. I couldn't believe it—from the looks of it, the ban on "homosexual acts" had been lifted from the school. My heart picked up speed and my hands started shaking as I skimmed the article. After months of struggling to decide whether to attend, it looked like my dream school might accept me for who I was.

The bell rang. I slung on my backpack and raced out the door to the parking lot, excited to meet my best friend at her car and tell her. I couldn't stop smiling. We both knew this wouldn't change everything about the school, but it was a start. And it felt like a sign, too. After I had finally made my college decision, new doors were opening for me there.

But it really was too good to be true. Through a tweet, BYU stated that there had been some "miscommunication" with the changes of the honor code, and though they had "removed the more prescriptive language, the principles of the honor code remain the same" (@BYU). They claimed that they would work out questions "on a case by case basis" and that the Honor Code Office (HCO) would "work with students individually." I can still remember how heartbroken I was over this news. I hadn't expected BYU to transform into a haven for its queer students overnight, but this "clarification" only made everything more confusing.

I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Queer students felt cheated out of what they felt was a step in the right direction. Many had come out to their peers before realizing that it might still be unsafe for them to do so; students both for and against the honor code change were protesting (Iati). It was a mess.

Before anything could really be handled, the pandemic hit. The burning questions of queer students were brushed aside for more immediate problems, and the HCO was let off the hook. I'm now three years into my BYU education and I still couldn't tell you exactly what would happen to me if I were ever discovered showing romantic affection to another girl. It had taken me my whole life to learn to love and accept who I was; I was only bitterly wishing my school would do the same.

BYU isn't renowned for its fair treatment to the queer community. Gay students were entirely banned from enrolling in the 60s, required by school administration to undergo electroshock and vomit aversion therapies in the 70s, and were prohibited from coming out until 2007 (Brigham Young University LGBT History). We've come a long way since then, but there is still so much to be done. Even now, there is a ban from any gay-straight alliances meeting on campus, and I don't even know if I'm allowed to date girls without serious repercussions. And while the language of the honor code is out of students' hands, the general atmosphere of BYU also points to a great need for change. Just last year in the fall of 2021, my friends and I were hesitant to be on campus because of online shooting threats following the controversy of the BYU "musket-fire" devotional. This school has a long way to go before it can truthfully be considered the righteous institution BYU claims to be.

I remember in my freshman year when an innocuous flyer was taped near the Joseph Smith Building. A bit weathered by a rare rainstorm, it posed a simple question: "What does queer mean to you?" A response was scribbled underneath in crabbed writing: "Someone too selfish to accept God's plan in their life. Someone that must repent and humble themselves before Heavenly Father." The message's animosity practically bled from the ink. I wonder if the author is aware that so many queer students on campus had likely already tried repenting countless times, begging God for forgiveness for something they couldn't control. Something they were born as. Something they wished could be taken away. I know I have.

Living as a queer student on a straight campus has been an exhausting experience. There's a suffocating culture focused on heterosexual relationships, engagements, and marriages; the level that straight students are permitted to demonstrate their affection through PDA and NCMOs and what have you is truly bizarre when compared to the fact that many queer kids are too hesitant to do something so simple and human as holding hands with their partner. It's tiring having to gauge how homophobic your peers might be before revealing any information about your identity. As you carefully monitor your language in conversations so that too much isn't given away, you have to put up with

tactless remarks like, “I don’t hate gay people, I just don’t accept their lifestyle,” and “Oh, I accept everyone, just not their sins.” Before a night of college fun you are forced to warn your friends to be really, really careful in doing or wearing something that might result in harassment.

Being gay at BYU is taboo. It’s an unwelcome and uncomfortable topic. Giving a relevant queer perspective in classroom discussions is often met with averted gazes and a tangible tension. It’s high time we breach this awkward topic to take important steps forward towards a more loving school. That change can’t happen if we continue to turn a blind eye to it, pretending the problem isn’t there. It is.

A campus-wide transformation starts with an individual deciding to be more Christlike. Be willing to listen to and support queer students. So many students don’t have support systems at home—being openly supportive of the community helps others feel safe. Be knowledgeable about the history of university policies and recognize how much more needs to change. Speak out. Don’t be afraid to call people out for making rude or ignorant remarks—I can promise you there are students you are unaware of that will be so, so grateful for you. Listen to queer perspectives, especially when it comes to those uncomfortable topics. My hand still trembles as I lift it to share my experience, but I raise my shaking voice so that others know that they are not alone.

One of my most memorable experiences here as a religious queer person was an interfaith dialogue I participated in with other BYU students and visiting Evangelical Christians. It was an incredibly spiritually intimate experience to talk openly about something so personal. I felt inclined to share my experience about how growing up queer and a member of the Church shaped my own spiritual experience, and that it was hard, and that it is still difficult for me, even as I attend an LDS institution.

I was surprised to be met with so much love and encouragement from everyone around me. Others felt inclined to be vulnerable and share their own struggles with faith, another taboo topic among Latter-day Saints. We expressed support for each other and validated each other’s experiences. I had only just met these people, but having had the chance to breach this uncomfortable topic with hearts so willing to listen made me feel indescribably safe. I hope I can have more experiences like that one on campus, where students like me can feel safe to talk about their identities with other children of God.

I’ve had similar experiences in religion and sociology classes where professors and students alike were not afraid to tackle these subjects. It has completely changed my educational experience here. I have learned so much more about Christ, queer history, and my own intersecting identities as a queer and

religious person. At a university where I expected to be completely alone, I feel more loved than ever, and I owe that completely to the individuals here who have shown Christlike love to me.

I don't know where I would be without allies on campus, and I'm so grateful to the individuals who have made BYU campus feel a bit more like a loving home. I started my education here as a frightened girl who was unsure of herself and certain she would feel very alone on a hostile campus so far from home. I've since become someone who isn't afraid to speak her mind on the queer topics that are so important to her. I've become someone who has made transformative friendships with queer people and allies alike. I've become someone who loves herself so, so much and has had her eyes opened to the amount of people who love her for who she is, too. Every queer student here deserves to feel the love I have been granted.

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