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Interview #2 Abstract and Transcript, 2001

Carrie Noble Kline

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Interviewer: Carrie Kline

Transcriber: Tracy Rosencrance

#2: I teach at ... , and I grew up in ... , West Virginia. Went to school at WVU.

CK: Let me just get a level here. One more time your name.

#2: --.

CK: What's your date of birth?

#2: Turned 40 last summer. It's great--. Quite traumatic. Well ... took me to Key West so it was hard to be depressed about forty in Key West. With all the seafood.

CK: Will you just back up, and tell me about your people, and how you were raised?

#2: Sure.

CK: Where you were raised?

#2: I grew up in I was born in ... , Virginia. Which is kind of like ... , it's kind of a declining railroad town. I grew up about seven miles down the road there in ... Virginia. Which has the reputation--. It's got a Westvaco Mill so people always joke that you can smell ... before you can see it. You know, it has a certain scent. And my mother was from ... , and my father was from West Virginia.

We lived there for about 10 years, and when I was around 10, we moved to ... , West Virginia. Which was where my father's family was from. I went to high school there, and when I was 18, I escaped ... and went to Morgantown to WVU. From there, I got several degrees and then--. I've been at ... since 1989. My family background--.

... , I assume that's German somewhere way back there. My mother was a ... ; she was a descendent of Invented the reaper, so it's Scottish obviously. My father's mother's

family was Irish. Thus my interest in what I will be missing tomorrow. The Irish heritage.

CK: Tell me your parents name and--.

#2: ... is my father's name. My mother, who died a few years ago, was And I have one sister who is about four years younger than me, who is at ... school at WVU. ... we're pretty close. She's a good friend. It's nice to have a sibling, and a friend in the same body. That's my only sibling. I'm pretty attached to that town; I go back as often as I can. I am awfully busy.

Conferences and trying to see ... and so--. I don't get back as often as I used to.

CK: Tell me all about the town.

#2: Well, ...'s about 3,500 people. It was a booming town in the turn of the century. When the railroad was still a big force. And then as the railroad has slowly declined, so has So it's like a lot of Appalachian towns. A lot of store fronts that are empty, and people just sort of hanging out on the street corners with nothing to do. Lots of folk--. Lots and lots of people on unemployment, people on welfare. Not a lot, of course, is going on there. It's a very pretty town. But the town--. The county is free of what I always regarded as the curse of coal. Mining has not ruined the county, environmentally. On the other hand, you know there are very few jobs. There'--. I think there's some jobs including the railroad still. And tourism--. There's two state parks in that county. Obviously that's seasonal. Well, I don't know, ... has a lot of--. In October, there's a lot of what we call the "Leaf Peepers". And I think they have cross-country skiing. It's a town I could never live in again. Just--. Well mainly one reason is there is just now way that I could be employed there. I mean there's no university, and I've got--.

I've gotten so accustomed to academia that--. I try to imagine doing something else, and I just can't imagine it. I guess I'm spoiled. I like the summers off, and it gives me more flexibility. It's an hour and fifteen minutes from I did that commute on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I think, for three semesters. It's not something that I would really want to do again.

It would be almost impossible to have a social life there. Although that's something I feel less and less of a need for. [laughs] But I feel a real attachment to it. I'm curious as to whether my family wasn't there if I would go back. Probably not. I think it's the family, and not really so much the town. But the region--. I have a really strong, strong connection to. I don't really want to leave the region. I have--. Now, I'm rambling off into other topics so let me know if you need me to talk about something else.

CK: I want to hear about growing up.

#2: Well, I was--. I felt like a misfit fairly early on. Just because the region did not encourage academic and intellectual interest. My father and mother had brought me up to be a great reader, and to love literature and classical music. These were interests that really made me odd. So even before I realized I was gay, I was already odd in other ways. Since my father, as I mentioned to you, I think yesterday, my father brought me up on all this non-conformist literature. It helped--. I mean it's hard to not fit in obviously if you're an adolescent. I think that's when it's probably most important of all. To have been brought up the way that I was made it less painful than it would have been.

Then I had a--. This is something that I wrote about in one of my last essays. I had an interesting support group. That I sort of fell into. There was a high school teacher when I was in the 10th grade. She was a Biology teacher. A bunch of the little misfits in the

school sort of centered around her. She started this thing called the Ecology Club. I was interested in outdoors and the environment, and so my father brought me up to really like all those things as well as literature and all. After about a year, involved with that group, she started to write novels. She let me read her first novel, manuscript. And then in the second novel, two of the female characters became lovers.

This was a mild surprise to me, but I mean I had never been brought up with any of those prejudices, and so I wasn't mortified. I was a little surprised, and I assumed that this probably meant that she was gay. She came out to me, and that was fine. Then I asked somewhere within the next month or so, if she had any books about male homosexuals. I don't know whether that was just intellectual curiosity or that some kind of subconscious--. Early realization about myself but when I read the Front Runner, which was by Patricia Nell Warren. It was about a coach about forty years old who has an affair with one of his track athletes. I read that book, and I got it. I realized I was gay. By the time I realized that--. Not only had I been brought up to be a non-conformist, and not be terribly concerned with what other people had to say. But I had these friends, I had this teacher who was lesbian, and two of the other members of this group were a fairly obvious lesbian couple who had taken me under their wing, and had me figured out long before I had myself figured out.

So, it was pretty easy--. It was a lot easier for me than a lot of kids in the mountains who realized that there gay. Because I didn't ever really feel--. There was no time when I felt that incredible isolation. By the time I realized I was gay, I had these people around me. My God, what a support system. What a salvation. I would have--. It would have been a lot harder. So when I went to college, it was a little more difficult in that I had--.

I had a whole support group up there by then because this lesbian I mentioned--. Well they went to WVU the year before.

They were a year older than I. And so, when I got up there, they had been up there a year, and had already figured out where the gay bar was, and had made other friends so on and so forth. And had also broken up, and taken on new lovers, and it got quite complicated. But I had this whole slew of people up there waiting to meet. Waiting to meet me, and waiting for me to get up there and get to know them. So that was pretty easy too.

I just had to deal then with other issues about--. I had been up until that point a gay man, an honorary lesbian. Almost all of my friends were gay women, and so I hadn't had to deal with the more sort of intense and confusing--. Complex issues. How do I be a man among gay men? I have to come up with a persona, and a whole new definition of what it is to be a man, and also a gay man. And those issues were actually a lot harder to deal with than the initial coming out.

I didn't--. Those things I had to figure out on my own. Since most of my friends were lesbians, they couldn't really help directly with those questions. So that took me a few years.

CK: Almost a different persona had to emerge?

#2: Yes, well I had to figure out how much--. I think every gay person, whose thoughtful does this consciously. Consciously, you know when I--. I guess we all do it to some extent subconsciously. How much of traditional sex roles--. Sex role characteristics are viable for you as a person coming out as a gay person? Are--. If you're gay does that mean that you just kind of have to redefine yourself completely? In

relation to the society? What does it mean? For me, it meant, what is it to be a man, whatever that means. I think, masculinity is much more fragile construct than femininity in this society. Which is why gay bashers tend to be male, not female. But that's a whole other can of worms.

CK: That's an interesting point though.

#2: Well, I think that's why. For some reason or another--. And I may be incorrect about this, but the women that I have talked to have, both straight and gay, have never really said to me that they feel that their femininity is deeply compromised by some other aspect of their existence.

Masculinity seems to be much more fragile a construct. Masculinity is, I think, easily threatened. Or at least the traditional kind of masculinity. The thoughtless masculinity. The sort of masculinity that a lot of guys just sort of accept from mainstream culture hook, line, and sinker, rather than being thoughtful about it. I think that's why most violence against gay men--. Because I think there is significantly more violence gay men than lesbians. I think lesbians have to deal quite often with the double edge sword of invisibility. You know, you don't want to be invisible in some context. And in some context, it would be damned nice to be invisible. These are less likely to be punched in the face on the street. I think that probably--. I don't know, I'm guessing that gay--. Straight men who are gay bashers are, there is some fear there. I mean that violence has to be created by something, and I think it's kind of a fear that they themselves do not understand. I'm assuming, and psychologists have supported me, in saying this, that there masculinity--. Their sense of themselves is so fragile that any thing that threatens their definition of manhood is something that needs to be stomped out before--. I don't

know, the corruption spreads. I don't understand the psychology, but I think that has something to do with it.

I had to redefine masculinity for myself at this point. That was difficult because I had this whole big glob of material from mainstream culture, and I had to go through that and say, "Is this all completely crap?" A lot of gay men--. They act that--. They decide that this is all garbage, and we're going to throw it all out. So I've always thought one of the problems with contemporary America is that there isn't enough thoughtful sorting out. That instead of throwing out the baby with the bath water, you should go through any accepted past down--. Inherited that's your values, and go through it piece by piece.

That takes time and it takes effort and it takes--. It opens you up to many insecurities. But I think that's much more intelligent instead of slinging it all away. So, I had to decide how much of what my father had intimated was proper male behavior. How much of that was still viable now that I realized I was a gay man. How much of the traditional mainstream values were viable. That took years.

CK: Talk about those. Both of those. What did your father intimate and what other signal had you gotten?

#2: Well, my father, again was a really good role model in that respect. He told me very early on that neither he nor I had the killer instinct, as he put it, and that was fine, and that society would indicate to me that one had to have that to be a man. But that that was garbage. He regarded--. He always regarded athletics as--. Because he himself was an intellectual who had worked in the school system, and had seen the ways in which schools cow tow to athletes and don't give a flying rat's ass about scholars. So he made it very clear to me, since it was clear to him that I was not going to be an athlete, I was

going to be like him, someone who is interested in culture. That this attitude was ridiculous, that athletics was the tail that wagged the dog and that it was--. He held a lot of those traditional male values in contempt.

That was--. That made things so much easier for me. When, of course, one of the other traditional male values is that to be a man, you have to love women. [laughs] And so when I realized that was not the case with me, that did not automatically invalidate my whole sense of myself. It was easier to deal with that, and to realize that I was gay and yet, be able to accept and not feel that I had to--. It wasn't a radical redefinition as it could have been, I think.

I grew up in terms of just sort of the mainstream attitudes towards male emasculating and so on. I grew up around, you know Southern Appalachia, where a lot of men are very overtly masculine and --. I grew up attracted to that image of masculinity, just plain sexually. But as I grew older, what I realized, as the appearance was very sexy to me, behind that appearance, those men with the flannel shirts and the jeans and the boots and the pickup trucks that I drooled over--. Well not only were they most likely straight, but even if they weren't it was very unlikely that my values, and their values would be close enough that I could ever have any thing more with them than a one night stand.

So what I always looked for was a man who had that exterior but interior--. But his interior was more like mine. Someone who could be compassionate and interested in culture, somebody I could have something in common with. It would be a very hard combination to find, I think. One of the things that I've written about in my most recent essays is the ways in which my sexual persona, to some extent,--. I used him as role

models for at least the exterior. I learned early on that to fit in, is a survival technique among gay people.

Obviously, especially in small towns where there isn't much of a support group. And so I learned that protected camouflage, you know, was a great way to survive. If you were jeans and boots and flannel shirts, and what I call red neck caps, you know, the baseball caps--. The baseball caps the guys back home wear. That you could get along without being interfered with. So, that began to be--. That was an appearance that I very deliberately cultivated as a young adult. Because, one, I knew that I could blend in, and two, I thought it was sexy. Another men and I figured if I thought it was sexy with other men, maybe some of the men would find it sexy on me. [laughs]

So, I mean, there was this very deliberately, sort of outwardly masculine appearance but, of course I also learned from the gay community, there's also a kind of androgyny of skills. I've never been much attracted to androgyny, in looks, but in terms of skills, that is men and women who are self-reliant and confident in a wide range of skills. Some of which are considered male and some of which are considered female. I learned from my lesbian friends that it's more important to be self-reliant than to be concerned with what your learning is male or female.

I don't know if that makes sense? My father brought me up to--. I never had any--. I never had the attitude that cooking was necessarily a feminine occupation, because my father was the cook in the family. You know, my lesbian friend Laura was incredibly handy under the hood of her car. And so when I began to learn not only from my father, but also from all my gay friends, was to not really pay attention in that respect, although I was very concerned with the outward masculine appearance.

In terms of the interior behavior, interior qualities, I--. Very early on, I didn't take seriously the ways in which mainstream society says that's a male quality, and that's a female quality. Now, I don't--. I never really bought the, well if you're emotional, you must be feminine. Because, hell I'm a poet, how can I not be emotional? I am one of the most emotional people I know, but that--. That never really became a point of conflict for me. Well, I'm must be more rational, that's more male because very early on, I stopped defining those qualities as male or female.

But just human qualities. And so I suppose a lot of the qualities that I've come to admire in people, of either sex--. Well, now--. I mean I admire courage and that, some people would classify as a male quality. That's absurd. I've known such courageous women. I admire compassion. Some people would regard that as a female quality. That's absurd. I know compassionate men. So what I'm attracted to in people in terms of their interiors is that androgyny, that ability to have courage and compassion. It would be considered androgyny by the outside world. But I think of it as just human traits. I don't know if this is making any sense?

CK: Oh that's great.

#2: Ok. I'm just sort of going on and on. So, let's see. What else, I don't know what other?

CK: Tell me about your father. Did he grow up in ... too?

#2: My father grew up in ... West Virginia. His family--. His parents were both from ... County, which is our home county. They divorced, I think probably in the '20's. He was very young. '30's more likely. He spent a lot of time on the family farm, though his father's families farm because he wanted to get away from the strife of this marriage.

Here was this child, and his parents are having these problems. So he spent a lot of time with his fraternal, his paternal grandparents in ... County. He got a real taste for the countryside and farm life and so on.

He went to World War II. Was a radioman in the Sahara, and came back and went to . . . on the GI Bill and got a degree in English. And then went on to . . . and got a degree in Education and then went back to . . . and became a lawyer. He's been a lawyer since I was probably about 10 years old. He--. Intellectually I can't imagine a better role model. He brought me up to love all these things, and to make me feel --.

Now I've seen essays about Appalachia in which education is regarded as effeminate. That book learning is something that is for girls. I mean this is an attitude that is diminishing rapidly. But, I know Jack Wheller, who wrote, Yesterday's People, I believe there's a chapter in there about this attitude that education is considered female and so on. I, of course, was completely freed of that sort of attitude. I mean, the culture around me might have suggested that. The fact that I was a--. The valedictorian, and was quiet, and polite, and shy, you know, marked me out as feminine to some people. But, to my father, he brought me up to love that stuff. So there's no way that I would be concerned--. That I wouldn't be manly enough for him because, he brought me up to believe that those qualities were something with any taste was going to appreciate. Again, that was a real blessing. What else about my father?

CK: Was he sort of unique in his own culture and community?

#2: Yes, I think so. He--. In fact, his--. He's much more remarkable than I could ever be in one respect. I am absolutely logical product of my family environment. I can look at every aspect of my personality and trace it to my mother or father. There's no mystery

about me in that respect. He, its like Athena coming out of Zeus's ... or whatever part of the body she popped out. He had, I don't recall. He was the first member of his family to get a college degree, and he just developed all these interest in culture. I don't know where they came from. I mean the guy grew up, you know, on a farm in ... County, working his ass off for his grandparents.

He spent some time in [the city], but I don't know where he got his taste in classical--. I mean the man, before he went to WW II, he was very devoted to classical piano. He came back from WW II, and that was gone. I don't know what sorts of things he went through, but I don't know that he ever saw action you know violence. I don't think he ever touched a piano when he got back from WW II. He sold his baby grand.

But, he has always loved classical music and always-loved literature and where those things came from--. I know where they came from in me, obviously, you know--. But, he's just a mystery. He's like a mutant, in good ways. I don't see anything in his background that logically explains how he came to be the way that he is. So, there's really no explanation for that.

My mother, I think she was more of a logical product of her environment. She loved music. She started out, she was a church singer, and so she encouraged me to also--. Also, encouraged me to appreciate music and voice. Though I never was a singer. She was a reader too. So between the two of them there was just no way that I could have been anything other than what I am. [laughs] Which is all right. I am pretty pleased with what I am. What else?

CK: Yes, so you had these role models, and somehow you made it into high school and tripped your way into the ecology club. Which is maybe a pseudonym, I don't know.

#2: No, I mean, there were all sorts of straight kids involved. There was, I guess this little inner circle of the ecology club. All of us, we called ourselves "the colony", after this book that the teacher, ... , had written. There was this inner circle who were, some of us were gay, some of us were just--. Some of them were straight. But they were obviously very cool, and felt protective towards us.

I always admired that because, while we as gay kids, hadn't chosen that--. And so, we're outcast without having chosen it. These straight kids, that took our side and supported us, I mean, that was a choice that they made. And I always admired that, you know, that they had the courage to say to the rest of the high school, "These are friends of ours and you can just kiss our ass".

Don't you--. You leave these people alone. This one guy, in particular that I wrote about in one of the more recent essays. I had a terrible crush on him; he was an incredibly sexy guy. He was a football player, I mean, a good-looking man. All kinds of women were after him; he was a football player. He could have been just another of one of those popular kids that laughed at us and he was a member of our group. He protected us. I admired that because it was something he chose. Because of some innate sense of right or justice, or I don't know. He had a streak of the rebel in him anyway.

That was a gift to have people to support us in that way. One thing that the conference puts me in mind of in terms of my background is the ways in which, sort of two streams of Southern Culture came together in my family's marriage. So have created this strange amalgam in me. My mother, even though she really spent almost all her life in Appalachia, in the mountains of Virginia, still, became sort of a conduit of Tidewater,

and sort of Old South values and flat land south values. My father, of course, was pure mountain and albeit, he had all these cultural interest. So, to this day, I really refuse to choose the two states. I consider myself to be a Virginian and a West Virginian. I've spent about half of my life in one state and half of my life in the other.

People really want me to choose and I just--. I won't. I sometimes get a--. I have a running joke with Phyllis Wilson Moore, who is the literary historian--. She gave a talk at ... at the writers workshop down in ... , Kentucky in the mid 90's. And she's talking about West Virginians and preconceptions about West Virginians. She described West Virginians as those Yankees south of the Mason-Dixon line, and I marched up to her after her talk and said, with mock outrage, because we are very fond of one another, and said, "Ms...., I'm not a Yankee, I am a Southern boy, an old reconstructed Confederate". And she said,--. I call her Yankee woman, and she calls me Rebel boy, or some such thing. So I had this very strong sense of--. As I gotten older, along with having to deal with all these gay issues, which is something I really sort of put to rest, I came to terms with that along time ago.

More recently, in the last 10 years, I've had to come to terms with myself as an Appalachian. Before that, I think I had come to terms with myself as a Southerner, but Southerners are not as denigrated as Appalachians. Appalachia is a sub group within--. To some extent--. Overlap. Appalachians, of course, that identity is denigrated in a lot of circles and it's only been in the last 10 years that I've realized the ways in which I'm Appalachian. That a lot of what I am, I am due to that culture. So it's been odd to retain hold of all those identities in refuse for the sake of simplicity to sort of shuck one. A lot of gay people, I think that they shuck their--. They slough off their regional identity,

I didn't want to give up that regional culture. I wanted to keep--. I wanted to have it all. I wanted to be part of gay culture, and part of Southern culture, and part of Appalachian culture. I've managed it. I'm glad that I have because again, simplicity is--. It's like amputating parts of yourself for the sake of ease in living. It reminds me of the Cinderella sisters, you know. In the original Grimm Brothers story where one of them cuts off her toe to try to fit her foot into the slipper, and the other one cuts off her heel to try to fit her foot into the slipper. Amputation is not something I want to do, to myself.

CK: So when you think about Southern culture, and Appalachian culture, can you give me some of the images that--. That floods your mind?

#2: Sure. Well part of it is an attachment to the landscape and nature. Which is something you pretty much have to give up if your going to rush off to the urban gay ghetto. There's going to be trees occasionally on the streets in D.C. or New York or wherever. But, I don't want to live--. I want to stay in this area for many reasons. One of which is that I like many of the values of Appalachia in the same way that I don't like the homophobia of small towns needless to say. But, I like the friendliness; I like the closeness to the natural world.

As I get older, I get less and less patient with humanity. [laughs] It seems to be--. It would seem to be to be madness to somebody as impatient as I've gotten with the human race to move to a city. Which is a concentration of people [laughs]. I grew up in a town where I was not accustomed to crowds, and traffic, and noise, and to this day, that's not something that I really--. I'm not willing to tolerate large doses of any of that in my life. So part of being an Appalachian and a Southerner for me is to retain some sort of connection to rural living. I mean, I've never lived on a farm. I've always lived in either

because it's easier. It's easier to have just one nice pigeonhole rather than sort of juggle all these different identities.

I've never been interested in what's easy, and I've never been interested in what's simple. I like complexity, complexity in myself, and the world, and other people. That excites me. Helen Lewis says something in one of her essays about how Appalachians are bi-cultural. That they can be part of mainstream culture, and also, part of an Appalachian subculture. So, I say in that essay, that--. Coming out in the Journal of Appalachian Studies next month, I'm just tri-cultural.

I mean gay, and Appalachian, and mainstream culture too. It's a juggling act. But, it - -. I think that's a lot better than just sort of truncating your identity for the sake of simplicity, which, again, is what I think a lot of gay people do. They grow up in some region of the country, and they feel out of place in that region because they're gay, and it's just easier to turn your back on the region and run off to the city, which is what so many gay people do, if they have that option. Just forget about that little town. You know, they live in the city, and they embrace themselves in gay --. Urban gay culture, and they make jokes about that little piss ant town they came from back in Nebraska, or West Virginia, or Florida, wherever. They just slough off those qualities and then--. There's not regional pride there because they connect the region and I understand that because I have. They connect their home region with all those shits that bothered them in high school, and the preachers that intimidated them and so on and so forth. Somewhere--. Actually it was in the mid '80s, it had been awhile, about 15 years ago, I went to D.C. and lived for a semester. That's when I really, really realized how much I was an Appalachian.

small towns--. Blacksburg is probably the largest town that I've lived in other than my semester in D.C.

I want to be able to remain close to that landscape. That landscape--. There's something inside of me that just resonates to that land in a way that it's really beyond words. I couldn't stand to be without it. That's part of it, I suppose. Being Southern and being Appalachian, I'm interested in history, and I feel history the way a lot of Southern-- . Southerners are often accused of being nostalgic. Constantly thinking about the past, and tradition, and so on. Of course, the suggestion being that they're so obsessed with the past that they have no sense of the future, or can't deal with the present.

I think America--. It's part of that baby bath water thing, I said earlier. Folk--. One of the tendencies, I think, in many cultures, not just gay culture is--. In a world that's gotten to be so fast paced and technological. It's so easy to just concentrate on all of the busyness you have to deal with today, and think about all of what's going to be happening tomorrow. The past is just not something many people think about. As a Southerner and an Appalachian, I feel just absolutely ... the past. I mean the regional past, and my family past, and my own personal past. I mean not to the point to where I'm paralyzed, and I can't operate in the present but, the past is just a well of all kinds of images and the source of all source of realizations. I think one of the problems with this culture is that it's so busy, and so focused on the present that all of the things that can be learned from an intelligent study of the past--. The baby bath water things being that people just kind of just throw the past out. It's no longer relevant, lets just fling it, and all of those values that have been handed down. My attitude again is, no, let's go through this. Let's go through these qualities, this legacy. I mean you really want to just throw it

all out without going through it? It's like taking a--. One of those old boxes--. One of those old cedar boxes--. Like when my grandmother died, she left this cedar box. What? You're just going to take it out to the junk heap. Well no, you get over your grief as best you can, and then you grow through it. And you see what's in there and a lot of it, you're going to want to keep. And a lot of it is irrelevant, and why keep it?

That kind of intelligent sorting through of things and threshing things out. People don't do it much anymore. And so as a Southerner and an Appalachian, that's something I really want to do, and I wish other people would do. Which is to think intelligently about what the past has given us, and keep it in mind rather than just sort of shucking it. Because, it's easier to throw it all away. It takes more effort and emotional strength to go through all that piece by piece.

In the same way that I say you go through all of that which has been received about sex roles. And choose some qualities that are I think of as traditionally masculine, I say yes, absolutely those are fine qualities and I would like to keep those.

CK: Tell me about that?

#2: Again, I say traditionally, and I use the little finger things, because these are qualities that I see--. You know, "traditionally," as if I'm being ironic. Because I myself don't really think of these as masculine qualities, but society would. Well, the whole bit again about courage and about protecting one's loved ones and that's something that I see in men and women. It's just traditional cultures in American culture so many of these attitudes--. So many of these characteristics are considered to be more appropriate to men than women. Again, early on, I knew all these amazing gay women. You couldn't really push any of these women into those stereotypical boxes. They were much too

complicated. So we're back to complexity, which is something that delights me, rather than the simplicity of stereotypes, which of course is their great charm. Because simplicity is so much easier to deal with than complexity.

I talked the other day about courage. About not wanting to be a coward and that's something again that is one of those qualities that I grew up on: all these tales of the Greek and Roman Warriors, and then the Confederate Warriors. And so there's this whole kind of warrior mentality. Then I think about all my Amazons, all these wonderful women that I've known, and I see these very same qualities in them. So those are some of the qualities that some people would consider masculine, that I admire. That I hope to have, that I have parts of I suppose and I wish--. Hope to be able to retain, and I hope to develop further. Because I think that courage is something that you develop over a lifetime.

You have to have it obviously to be openly gay. Courage, I guess, that's the main quality that would be considered male that I've seen in both men and women in which, I admire. That's the reason that I've tried to be as open as possible as a gay person in this society, because, you also think about being a role model. I don't know that I'm a role model because, I'm not--. It's not like I'm famous in--. And you know gay kids in the hollows of Lincoln County, or wherever are going to be, "Oh, well yes, I've heard of him." But I guess just in the circle--. My circle of friends, and my students, and so on. Sometimes I come out to my students, and sometimes I don't. It depends really on the context and whether it's relevant. Sometimes I would feel awkward saying to a classroom of students, "By the way, I'm gay." Because, it's just--. It's like a throwaway comment in some context. It has nothing what so ever to do with what were discussing.

And so when I do come out to students it has to be sort of an organic appropriate part of the class. Except for one semester when Matthew Shepard was murdered. And then I came out to all my classes very deliberately. Just to-- I want to discuss that topic, and sometimes I will discuss some contemporary topic that I think needs to be discussed.

And that semester I did that. And in that respect, I like to think that if I'm not a role model, to gay students, I am least able to convince perhaps straight students, who might not have really thought about the issue much, and who now like me pretty well. Because I'm a pretty likable teacher, and if they realize I'm gay, then maybe there's a little consciousness raising there, I don't know. I mean you never know the effect that you have on people, really.

CK: Oh, this is great.

#2: Well good, I'm just--.

[Problem with tape]

#2: It was last semester, and I had a freshman comp class, which is a course that I'm so tired of. In order to kind of keep myself awake, I have chosen this very odd topic. We're supposed to choose a body of discourse, a topic for the second half of freshman composition. So I do the vampire in literature and film. Just because I think it's interesting and it tends to keep them awake. It keeps me awake. And there were these two very bright young men, again, I think they were straight boys. Whatever people say about gaydar, mine is very fallible. I just don't make assumptions. But they were very bright, they were nice kids and very responsive. They were really positive presence in the class. I admired them and I think that they admired me. You know, that's important to me. Like I said, as a teacher, you just don't know whether you have any effect on

anybody at all. Rationally, you think that you must, but emotionally sometimes you get no feedback at all. You think, Christ [laughs] I'm not having any affect.

I knew that these--. One of these guys knew that I was gay because on my office door, I have, a little vanity, pinned up this nice review of my first book by this guy in the Charleston Gazette. And it says something about me--.... could be pigeonholed as a gay writer. And so I just put that on my door, and if kids want to see it that's fine. Generally, they don't [laughs] look at that kind of thing. But I knew one day that this kid was standing there reading it, because I came by the office and said, "May I help you?" And he said, "Oh no, I'm just reading." I said, "Okay." So I knew that he knew I was gay.

We were talking about, in class, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which is the show on television that I occasionally watch. One of the kids made this joking comment about how he figured I was pretty fond of Buffy, assuming--. The clear assumption was that I thought she was hot, the actress. I laughed, and I didn't say anything, and then I thought about it. I thought well, if I am a role model, maybe, --. I know this one young man knows that I'm gay, and I don't want to be thought a hypocrite by someone. This is a kid whose opinion matters to me because--. You know, if he was some little piss ant in the back who never said anything, was unresponsive and not at all helpful, that would be one thing. But this was a young man that I admired. He was intelligent, he had provided a great deal to class discussion. So the next day in class, I went in because I didn't want him--. I didn't want my silence on that point to make him think less of me as a teacher. And I said unfortunately the kid who accused me of having the hots for Buffy was not there that day, but I guess that he might have been told about it. I just told them that Mr. So and so has pointed out my admiration for Sarah Michelle Ghellar, and I should tell

you that as a teacher, I'm concerned about teaching you about many topics, not just freshman composition. And I should tell you that I'm gay because I don't want you to make these assumptions and think that I'm deliberately omitting information.

There we go--. And I said, I'm not telling you this because I am hoping to get a higher grade on the teacher evaluation, which is just what they were about to do. I don't know how well times this admission was but--. So, you know nobody said anything, and I still haven't gotten the teaching scores back, and I'm curious if they were higher in one class or if they were so horrified that I had come out, and in the next five minutes I gave them the teacher evaluations and left the room. I mean I don't really care about that. I was more concerned about this young man having a role model of somebody's who's honest. So, I very deliberately brought up the topic there for that very purpose. Again, sometimes, it just doesn't come up.

How much--. I don't know whether that's a good thing or not. I don't--. I don't know whether I should bring it up in every class for the sake of political consciousness raising, or whether it would be just inappropriate to dwell on my personal concerns, which of course is not about me, but of other topics. I don't know, I just sort of play it by ear every semester.

Though I did teach a gay and lesbian-lit class down there the first time that it had ever been offered on campus in the fall of '98. I mean that went well. But, it's such a huge campus, that the fact that I taught this course in the fall of 1998 has necessarily nothing to do with my reputation in semesters to come. Because, it's such a huge campus, students don't know one another. The fact that I taught it two years ago does not at all mean that

students would know now that I'm gay. Because there's 25,000 students coming in and out, graduating. I would offer it again, but we'll see.

It's a course that--. We ran it again a year later, and hardly anyone signed up for it, and I was very angry with the student gay community, because there's a large student gay community. I had gone out on a limb to offer this class and it had been successful the first time and then no one signed up for it the second time. So, I've been very pouty about that for a couple of years, and I might offer it again, or I might not. I probably will though.

Tape 1, Side B.

#2: So what about ... ?

CK: Yes, I want to go back to--. Will you paint me a picture of this inner circle in the Ecology Club and the broader group and the coming out years?

#2: Yes, I'll try. Before I got into that group and I imagine I always--. I already had a reputation as a potential queer. Because, in that town, which is I think true probably of many little towns, if your now overtly masculine in traditional way, people are going to talk about you. I was quiet and very polite; my mother had brought me up to be a Southern Gentleman. I was obviously intellectual, and I was not interested in athletics. I was not a joiner, this was before the ecology club, and I was pretty much of a loner.

Anybody like that in a town, like that, is going to be regarded with suspicion whether you're straight or gay. Though I was too young to know at that point. So when I realized that I was gay, I pretty much had a reputation for being gay. Part of it was because I ran

around with these two women, Bill and Brenda, who were so much of the stereotype of the butch-fem lesbian couple that you associate with known ducks, that whole expression.

CK: What expression?

#2: The bit about if you look like a duck, associate with known ducks, you must be a duck. So, you know just change the word duck. They were so obvious that someone carved on their locker they shared, "She loves her," which I thought was a tribute, but obviously it wasn't; it was an insult. But it seemed like an inadvertent tribute to me. Because it's true, she did love her. So, I was already a bit of a misfit before I got into the ecology club. Well the inner circle who there was ... , who was this amazingly Butch woman. Her real name was But she was so masculine that her first girlfriend once came to her and said, "... , you won't believe what they're saying about you in school. They're saying you're a girl." This was a woman who was dating a woman, and didn't know she was dating a woman, because the woman she was dating was so masculine. This was very early on I would imagine. They were both very young, and hadn't actually gotten physical. So the little thing had--. Not discovered that there was no penis there because they hadn't gotten intimate. So there was ... , and she was very strident, and blustery, and sort of gruff and a lot of fun, really. Her girlfriend was a lot like me. She was quiet, and she was polite, and she was a loner, and she was an intellectual. Her name was

She and I would be reading Plato while everybody else would be doing their book reports on how to be a stewardess, and you know, books like that. I just gravitated to them, even before I knew that I was gay. I don't know why except that it was clear to me that they were misfits of a sort, and I was a misfit of a sort. I didn't know exactly what

essay to see what she thought of it, and to see if I could use her real name. I figured that I could, but I hadn't talked to her for years and years and years and years. So, I found her in cyberspace [laughs].

I found her web page and I emailed her and she said that certainly I could, but she would like to see the essays and I said, "Certainly". So, I sent them to her, and she wrote me, a handwritten letter because she apparently doesn't have time to write in the office during the day and she doesn't have a computer at home so she has to write by hand. She talked about--. She said, "Certainly yes, you can use my name. I've been out for years, and years, and I don't intend to go back in the closet," which is what I thought she'd say. She talked about those years a little bit, and why she was open, and she said that she remembered what it had been like for her a generation or two before me, and how hard it was. And that she wanted to try to make things a little easier for the next generation of gay kids coming up in small towns, because she realized--. She remembered what it had been like for her. That none of that had been planned --. It just happened, and she just tried to create some kind of safe space, and she did.

I can't began to imagine what my life would have been like as a gay kid growing up in Appalachia if I had not had the kind of background I had gotten from my family, especially my father with his whole attitude of, "Who gives a shit of what other people think?" My mother was much more concerned with social appearances and that--. That's part of the Tidewater South verses Mountain South, I think. She brought me up with all these social skills and these concerns about being a gentleman and proper behavior and so on. My father really didn't care much about that so there is this weird

kind yet. Then there were all sorts of straight folk who, as I said, who decided--. Like I said, who liked us, and were protective of us. There was ... who took classes with us who's just a good old boy who was into the Grateful Dead, and then the incredibly sexy football player and a couple of his girlfriends. We all,--. I just don't know, I guess they had a natural rebelliousness about them.

We were all terribly fond of this teacher. Who eventually came out to all of us. Jo ..., she was a splendid teacher. As a teacher now, it amazes me to look back and think how much of her time she gave to students, because I'm just not willing to give that much of myself to students. I mean, I'm--. I do a lot for students. I mean this was a woman who would spend time on the weekends with the Ecology Club. My weekends, I don't want to be spending with students. Right? [laughs]

She would be taking the Ecology Club out to state parks and so on. But part of it was just the power of her personality. She was very charismatic, and we all just adored her. That created this circle about her. Within that circle, we were all able in some kind of state of comfort be able to discover of what we were. I wrote an essay about all of this, which is why it's a little easier to talk about because this stuff has been on my mind recently, since I wrote this essay.

I wrote two essays for these anthologies that I had heard were asking for submissions about--. One book was about coming out stories of gay men in the South, and another one was about being attracted to Southern men. So, I've been wanting to write more essays. So, I used this as an excuse to write them. I talked a lot about--. One of the essays is called, "Raised by Lesbians." I talked a lot about ... , and the colony, you know, this group of friends. I thought that it would be discrete to send her, ... , a copy of the

sort of neurotic dichotomy, and now is in my personality. I think I've managed to balance it pretty well.

My father, between his attitudes of being a nonconformist, to hell with what society thinks and her--. .. , the safe space that she created. If I hadn't had those two things, I can't imagine how neurotic, and miserable, and isolated--. I call it in one of my essays I mean that's sort of--. Sense of aloneness that causes so many gay kids to grow up neurotic as hell and self-destructive, with attempts of suicide, and all that. I was spared all of that.

That's probably why I feel--. I feel really much at peace with myself in those realms of my life at this age. I have had a long time to deal with it; I'm forty years old. A lot of folk my age who did not have those breaks would probably still be messes. People say that 1 in 3 in gays and lesbian folk have drug or alcohol problems. Which is, I think, an absolutely staggering percentage. I think part of it has to do with gay bars, you know, the culture encourages you to drink and smoke because you're in bars. It's the only option you have for social connections with other gay people. Part of it is just the pressures of living in a society in where you are made to feel monstrous. You can feel monstrous--. Sometimes--. I mean starting with my fathers attitudes towards nonconformity and then 's little circle, and then going to college and then already having that little circle of gay friends up there. I've been so surrounded by many years with support groups that I forget how hostile the rest of the world can be.

I will be told a story by somebody who does not have this kind of insulation, and I'll kind of shake my head and go, "Oh yes, that's the way the rest of the world is for the most part." Well--.

CK: So, does this football player, and the other outer circle, what were they protecting you from? What was that?

#2: Oh well, oh sure, all that. Well, I mean if you live in a small town, and you're obviously a misfit--. These people are cowards, and they travel in packs. The abusive types. There're going to be hanging around on the street corner at lunch when you walk past. They're going to yell, "Queer!" and this sort of thing. One evening, I was ironically walking a straight woman friend home and a carload of guys drove by and yelled, "Queer!" and one of them came out of the truck and punched me in the face. I was probably 17 years old. If that had happened now, I would have killed him--. I would have tried to kill him, because I've gotten to be a lot more capable of protecting myself, a lot angrier. Then I was so young and I was so without defenses that it was such a shock that I think I probably just stood there. Now, after all these years of seeing the world, and seeing the world's injustices, I would have--. I would have tried to kill him.

I was just so young, and I had never really encountered violence of any sort. It's the same sort of shock I feel when someone is blatantly rude of any context. I am so shocked that they are rude, that by the time I realized that I haven't hallucinated, they really did say what they said that moment of tearing them up. Coming back with some viscous retort is gone, because I'm so shocked. That was what was going on there; I was shocked.

So there was the name-calling, and there was that one little incidence of violence. I've been pretty lucky when it comes to physical violence. The closest I've gotten, other than that, is entering various gay bars in various towns and people driving by and yelling.

It's clear to you that if you don't enter the bar soon, that they'll come up and try to hurt you. These are people that don't even know you.

CK: Enter the bar?

#2: Yes, I mean, they are driving by, and they see you entering a gay bar and they yell, "Queers!" Of course my tendencies, since I've gotten to be again a rather an irascible person, "Is to say Fuck You!" But if you're one person, and there is five of them, as much as I want to be--. I don't want to be thought of as a coward. There is cowardice, and there is self-destructive bravado that--. So there's a couple times--. I remember one time in Morgantown, I entered a gay bar with a bunch of lesbian friends, and these guys were standing outside, and I guess because we didn't look gay to them, they said, "You don't want to go in there, that's a gay bar." And I looked at them and said, "We know." And he starts--. We were like two cats, you know, kind of snarling at one another. He started to back up kind of mumbling, "Fucking Queer." When I backed up mumbling, "You Goddamn Son of a Bitch." There was this little stand off, and then we sort of skirted them, and they went off, and we went on down to the bar. I asked my lesbian friends later, if we had gotten into a free for all, which one of you would have helped me try to kick some ass, and one of them said, "Hell Yes!". And the other ones were going, "Hell No, we would have been out of there." I'm glad it didn't get to that [laughs].

There's--. Having come from a small town--. I'm beginning to realize just the at the age of ..., what kind of--. I have a siege mentality really. In that I--. I'm always--. There's always a little paranoia in me in some gay context. I'm so--. I still remember that small town, and I remember the potential for violence. There is always that little part of me --. Maybe it's that warrior stuff? I want to protect myself and my people.

I'm a lot bigger and a lot angrier than a lot of gay men that I know. When I'm in a public--. A context--. A public context in which straight people might realize that we are gay people, there's always this briskly paranoia about me. I'm always wondering if one of those boys from high school is going to appear in some new guise, and I'm going to have to defend myself or my friends. Part of that is just a personal quirk. I've always just assumed on some strange level that I'm stronger than anyone I know. I mean, not necessarily physically, but emotionally. I would be the one to protect the community [laughs] sort of a thing, which would be probably not a great deal of fun since I really know nothing about defending myself physically. I'm just very angry, and I'm 190 pounds [laughs].

I glad it's never come to that. But I realize as a guy who's 40 years old, the ways in which I have this little streak of caution. That has to do with I think, partially being a small town boy and so when ever you leave a small town or a rural area, you're brought up to be a little paranoid. If you leave that town, boy things are dangerous out there in the big world. So the combination of that, and the paranoia of gay people who know that they might be attacked combines to make me feel paranoid in urban situations, especially.

CK: So you were given those signals kind of growing up? Is that something people would say? Leave that town--.

#2: Oh yes, sure yes. I think that's very common with a lot of Appalachian folk. You have given two major maxims. One is, if you leave you'll be back, and as a young person, it's always to hell with this place, god I've got to get out of there. And you don't realize until you get away, how much of what you are has been shaped by that town. You begin to see once you've left, you begin to see things about the town that are good.

Because until you leave, all you can see is the bad stuff, especially if you're a gay kid. Because there is this whole myth of the big city, and the gay world waiting for you if you can just get out of this piss ant little town.

If you're like me, you get to the city, and you go, "Well, Hell, this is obnoxious, all these people and cars." You begin to think about that little town or Appalachia, or the south and you begin to say--. Then your family--. You begin to think, "Well Hell, it wasn't that bad." So, part of it is--. Part of the big maxim, is if you leave, you'll be back. That's quite often true. In that so many Appalachians have that yearning for home, and that sense of place. Even when you leave, you know, there is that tug back to the mountains. My grandmother used to say that the worst pain of all is homesickness. I didn't feel that until--. Because when I went to WVU, it was still the mountains, it was still West Virginia. It wasn't until I moved to [the city] in 1985, that I realized how much I disliked the city, despite all of the gay options. I realized how much I was a mountain person. I felt that homesickness. I remember the weekend before I started to teach that fall, at A thoroughly unpleasant experience, nasty colleagues, not at all welcoming. The students were very bright, but in the English department people were swine.

I remember sitting up on the roof of a building in which--. An apartment building--. A friend of mine had put me up for a few weeks until I found a place to stay. I was going over this textbook to get ready for the first day of class, and I remember reading some little segment of pros given as an example of something or another. I think it was about someone in a nursing home. It was a little poignant piece, and I started to cry. I was up there on top of the roof, all by myself, and since I was alone I kind of let myself. That's

part of that male--. Some of those male qualities that I haven't--. I've retained that whole men don't cry. Well, I cry, but only in private.

That is something that I will simply not do in front of people. I wasn't crying over the textbook, I was homesick. It was very painful. Well the other maxim is that if you leave, the world is a big dangerous place. You better watch your back out there. That's the other big writing on the wall that you get. So when I got--. It's still true. I go to [the city] and went to [the city] last weekend, and I'm just--. I mean that's not a complete sort of hysterical neurosis. I'm actually able to function and enjoy myself. But there is kind of a caution there which as I said is partially small town boy and partially gay person.

He remembers being hooted at and--. Even though I've gotten to be pretty good with the whole protective coloration thing, it started as protective coloration. The whole boots and jeans, and it sort of became really my look. It started out as s0li of a facade and then it just sort of became who I am. I guess I still think--. It's hard to get rid of those high school insecurities. You know, it's odd. You're an adult, and even all those years later some of that remnant is still there in you. I guess I still sometimes still think of myself as that little person in high school everyone knew was queer, and whose ass might get kicked if he wasn't careful. I walk down the street, and it's not as if I have a T-shirt on that says, "Kick me I'm Queer." But that paranoia from high school is still there.

That's a little something that I have to fight against. When I say, oh I've got to be courageous here and be open because it might help other people. Part of it is that it's just easier to be honest. Because lies take a great deal of energy to construct, but I really am concerned with how--. I'm concerned with the new generation of gay kids in the same

way that teacher was concerned with my generation. What little I can do to be honest. Again, I don't know as an academic how much of an effect anything I do has. I know that very few people have read my book and have heard of me. It's not like I'm likely to be a huge role model for gay kids in Appalachia who will cluster about my book signings or something. I don't think that's likely to happen, because I'm a poet and an academic. Even if you get to be well known as a poet and an academic, most of the rest of the world still hasn't heard of you.

I do what I can to be honest. I do that mainly because I think it's going to be easier for gay people if more gay people are honest. Straight folk who are not familiar with gay people will say, "Well hell, I like him. He's gay. OK." That can't be all that bad then. Gay kids are going to have somebody to look to as a role model. That's about my only unselfish streak. I'm otherwise really self-absorbed. [laughs]

CK: I'm wondering about this concept of "our queers"? You know, and I think in that last session did somebody say, well in fact there's an area in which it is getting more difficult for local people to accept because now we're naming names or using the word gay or lesbian. And so now that the names are named and there's a movement, people feel like they have to do something about people who or outsiders or--.

#2: I don't know how articulately I can tease all that out but--. Certainly it's easier for straight people who might naturally be prejudiced, and just kind of stay in a state of denial and just kind of not name the "thing". And it's going to be easier for gay people who really don't want to be out to live in a society full of denial. Because what they do will be unnoticed. When and I think this is happening because of media and so on, when people can turn on the television, and Will and Grace is on that's going to make it, I

kissed and--. These media is giving them images of gay people that they would not have run across 10 years ago. So when you live in a society that presents that as an option, on something as easily seen by millions of people as a sitcom on NBC people are going to be less likely to deny and more likely to say, "Oh, I wonder if they're like this Will and Grace character." That's going to make it, I think ... said [in a recent conference presentation], very difficult for gay people who want to stay in the closet. Because they are going to be instead of being ignored, people are going to be suspicious. If they want to stay in the closet then it's going to be terrifying to them. If you're open, who cares? Suspicion suggests that we don't really know for sure. But if you're open, people know there is no suspicion. This fact --. But if you were trying to hide that would be very, very scary to live in a society that is sensitized to the issue by mass media. Fifteen years ago when I was in high school, there wasn't any of that. College, graduate school, none of that was on television. There were occasional mentions of the gay community here and there, but on the whole nothing.

So at a time when I was developing my protective camouflage, I was in forestry. And got a degree in English, and got a degree Forestry at WVU. All of the guys in forestry were these really macho guys with that look that I really liked. You know, the boots and the beard and that whole--. And I was able to blend in quite nicely. I was a young man and I was not ready to come out. My ego was not solid enough to deal with the shock of that kind of rejection. So I just didn't say anything about any kind of love life I might have had. I was never they type who lied, and made up girlfriends who dated women. I think that would be an awful manipulation of the woman, to use a woman as a cover. I mean, that's just not the way you should--. That's a bad thing to do.

think, more difficult for straight folk to ignore. They are going to be suspicious of things that they otherwise--. Situations that they might otherwise just have been able to ignore.

CK: I'm not familiar with that program.

#2: It's a television show that is on--. It's a sitcom--. It's pretty popular and it's about a gay man and a straight woman who and their friendship. Quite a few of the plot lines have to do with gay culture and gay jokes and the friend--. The close friend of this main character is very flamboyant gay guy, and it's terribly funny. But it's become a part of mainstream culture and--. Secretaries in my department who are from the region who are as Appalachian as I am and who love me because they got to know me before they knew I was gay, and I think I really made a difference in the way they look at gay people.

I pulled this little routine I mentioned in my essay. You get them to like you first, and then--. Once they like you, its part of this, "Well he's ours, He's our Queer." They get to know you first. Then you come out to them and these secretaries who probably when they were younger had no contact with gay people at all. Not only did they deal with me every day, which is not exactly a trauma. But I'm very open. I'm not one of those gay people who mentions it once and then probably never mentions it again. I talk about some student I think is sexy, but I would never lay my hands on a student just because of the ethical concerns. But you know, one notices.

I will be with some new instructor and I'll--. We'll be comparing notes on how sexy his muscles are. So it's something I'm very open about. Not in a crude way. Just constantly--. It's lighthearted humor. They come in and they're talking about Will and Grace, and how they've seen Will and Grace, and what a funny--. And these two guys

But I was able to be perfectly camouflaged, because these guys were not going to piece it together. Not only did I have my boots and beards--. All the guys looked like that, so I was able to blend in. And also, it wasn't something they ever would have looked for. Because it wasn't a topic that people really discussed. That's less true now. For those little 's who are still trying to hide in forestry school somewhere, they are going to have a little trickier time of it than I did, I think. So--. Anyway--.

CK: This is so great. I just kind of wonder about your grandma's comment to you. Did she know anything about homesickness?

#2: Oh, my grandmother.

CK: That's the worst thing, she said, to be homesick.

#2: Well, she had left the farm in ... County, and had moved to [the city]. Which is not that far away, but it was a city. And it wasn't the home place, and it wasn't farm life. I think that she lived for a while in [the city] during WWII. I think that's probably what she was talking about. She never specified. But, she--. I never came out to her. There were two members of my family that I never came out to, because I was afraid of their reaction, and she was one of them. And the other one was my Aunt ... who's very devout Baptist. They're both dead now, and it's easier for me to be out, because I don't have to worry about their reactions, though I would rather be in the closet and still have them around.

My grandmother, I think probably would have dealt with it pretty well. She--.
[laughs] One time--. God I could show you the very spot on the highway where the car was passing when she said this to me. She was--. I was so young, but I think even at that

point I might have already realized I was gay. She said something about Cher and how Cher had gotten this reputation in the '60s for showing her belly button. You know, her little sexy outfits. That had caused such a ruckus, but my grandmother had said something--. It was the closest she ever got to sort of giving her imprimatur, you know, her approval had she known I was gay, and I don't think that she did. She said something about how she admired Cher about doing what she pleased and not worrying--. Being who she was, and not worrying about what other people thought. I must have realized by then that I was gay because I must have made a little mental note of well that's probably as close to--. Well, you know--. You're ok the way you are kind of comment. Though again I think it was inadvertent, I don't think she knew I was gay.

CK: But it carried over.

#2: Yes, I remembered that so when I think sometimes about what she would have said or done if I had ever come out to her. I like to think that that statement might have helped soften her response [laughs]. Her--. My parents--. In terms of coming out, that was fairly easy. My mother--. Is this topic of interest to you?

CK: Yes.

#2: I was probably a sophomore in college so I was--. Hadn't been out but a few years to myself. Because coming out, there are all kinds of layers--. Levels. You come out to yourself, and then if your lucky; you come out to your friends. Then if your family is the right kind, you might come out to them. Then there are co-workers, and so it's just a constant kind of [laughs] unfolding of the rose.

My mother found some newsletters. Luckily it wasn't pornography. That would have been very embarrassing. Like most gay men, I--. Well most men, I have a little bit of a taste for that, or used to. I'm not so into it anymore; I've got better things to do. She found some newsletters from a gay bar I had gone to in Columbus, Ohio, actually. My biology had since left the community, and lived in Columbus where she had grown up and so we went up to visit her which was kind of cool. We went to this gay bar and drag queens were took to my sort of forestry guy look, and were sitting on my lap, and I was thinking, "I want other forestry guys, not drag queens." But I was very polite; I was brought up to be polite. "Yes, Ms. Charlotte, you may sit on my lap."

My mother finds this material that I had picked up there, you know, gay newsletters about the gay community in Columbus. But when I went home for Christmas, my sister, to whom I had come out probably within weeks of realizing the truth myself, warned me, "You need to not be alone with mommy. I think she's found something, and she's lying there waiting to have a talk with you." But of course I couldn't put this off forever, and so she finally confronted me with the literature. She cried, and I thought briefly about denying it. I always thought that she would just absolutely have a screaming fit. I always dreaded that moment.

I said, "Oh hell, yes that's-." And I came out, and she said--. She cried and she blamed herself, and then she blamed my father, and then she blamed my biology teacher, because she had kind of figured out she was a lesbian. Then asked me if I could go to a psychiatrist, and I laughed and she said, "I was afraid that's what you would say." So that was a little painful for a while, but she got used to it pretty fast. In fact, one of the things I'm most thankful for is the--. Before she died, she--. I finally found a good man.

I had very bad taste in men. I fell in love with many, many, many wrong men for about 20 years.

Just about the time that I was going to be the one person who would be perpetually single, I discovered I could actually get involved with somebody that was good for me. She really, really liked . . . and was very, very pleased that I was with somebody who was obviously kind and well brought up and so on. I am very thankful that he was in my life before she died.

My father, I think that she told him--. My suspicion is that she told him in a moment of anger to short of shake him up. She never admitted that to me, and I never asked, and I never asked him. But I think that they had some big problems in their marriage in the '80s, and I think that she probably pulled one of these, "Well you don't even know your own children" routines, and laid that out on the line. She told me that he was shocked out of his mind, he was completely surprised by this and--. It wasn't something that we discussed for a long, long, long, long time. I figured he wouldn't have a screaming fit because my God, the man had brought me up to be a nonconformist.

He was certainly not going to be absolutely disgusted because I wasn't living up to mainstream ideals of masculinity because he hadn't brought me up to take seriously mainstream ideals of masculinity. But, we --. Our relationship is still such that we really don't discuss emotional issues. Intellectually we have all kinds of give and take but, emotionally the--. We don't really discuss those things. But, just in the last few years, he had been doing little things to make me clear--. To make it clear to me that this is fine by him.

First it began with him giving me little--. He would have my mother or [my sister] give me little Xerox's of articles he had found about the topic. So it was this kind of little indirect--. You know how men sometimes communicate through women rather than directly. Women have this odd little conduit service because men can't seem to do it face to face. So many men are emotional cowards. So he did that for a while, and I kind of got the message that he was saying that this was all right, and we can discuss this --. This is a topic that can be brought up, at least in his funny little indirect way. [laughs] He would save me these articles and then--. I would be publishing in these gay magazines and I would say, "Well, you know, I got a poem published in this--. It's the most prestigious gay literally gay magazine in the nation." And he would go, "Oh, well great, I'll have to read it." And then my first book came out which is all these love poems about one of the big mistakes before ... and he read it. He didn't say much about it, but he read it.

Then, the most amazing break through was just within the last few months. It truly was a complete surprise. My sister called me and said, "Did you see the Charleston Gazette last Friday?" I said, "No ... I didn't see it." She said, "Oh God. Well Daddy published this essay about you." I said, "What!". [laughs] She said, "You need to call him; he'll fax you a copy." So, he faxes me a copy of this essay that he had written--. He does a lot of newspaper writing. He writes this column for an old friend of his that owns the newspaper in He loves to bate the conservatives and the right wings. He just hates them. NRA, and the coal operators, and the fundamentalist. He just takes evil pleasure in jabbing at those hornets' nests.

I rather enjoy it myself. So, he had written this essay in response to this Baptist Minister's tirade about how lesbians, gays and pedophiles--. That tired old lumping were not welcome in West Virginia. His name is ... and he is a Baptist Minister down in ... West Virginia, Kanawha Valley. Well, I guess daddy just decided it was time to talk about that too. He wrote this essay that the Gazette published. It stalis out, "My son is gay." And he talks about me being a little boy and how I was never normal. He uses normal as yet to say, "What is it to be normal?"

There it was, and I guess he figured I was open enough with my poetry that he really didn't' bother to ask me if this was all right. I guess that probably would have been the polite thing to do. But, I mean, I didn't give a damn. Christ, you know, I mean he brought me up to not care, and I didn't. I was delighted to get some attention. [laughs] I'm a poet: Attention please! Pay attention to me! There it was, and I was really moved. He just--. Again, it's this sort of indirect sort of thing. He doesn't say to me, "Son, you know--." He publishes something in the paper, and I go, "Oh good. My father approves of me."

Then, a teacher I had had an undergraduate at WVU. A teacher I had really admired, and to him I had sent a note years and years later that I just wanted to thank you for being such a good teacher and introducing me to these writers. He wrote a letter to the editor, they published about yes, I read 's essay, and I remember this young man, and he's a young poet and has contributed much more to society than any flame breathing--. I don't know, it was preachers. And so it was very nice to have this kind of public support, especially from my father, but I mean two men that I have really admired intellectually

and had been influential on my development, intellectual development. I guess that's about as out as you can get [laughs]. Which again, is fine. What else?

End of tape 1.