

1 'If you ask me  
what I came  
into this life to  
do, I will tell you:  
I came to live  
out loud'<sup>1</sup>

*Gary Bailey*

I was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, an African American child and young person, and it was here that I learned about, and was first affected by, the US Civil Rights, Gay Rights and Women's movements. The 1970s was the period during which I came to terms with my sexual orientation and began to develop into the person I am today. I have lived my life as an openly gay African American male since 'coming out' (though that was not a term we used then) while in my senior year at high

school. I was 17 years old. My parents had always told my brother and me that there was nothing they could not deal with, as long as we told them the truth. If we were 'rough housing', as kids will do, and despite being told not to, and we (let's say) broke a window or one of my mother's favourite ornaments, as long as we were honest about what we had done, then we were not punished. So when I realised that I was gay, all I could think back in 1973 was that I had to let my parents know; to tell them the truth as I now knew it.

In my mind, it was really more of a test for them than it was for me; would they be the people whom I had known them to be when I had told them truths in the past? If not, better that I learned it now rather than later, because I knew well enough that my independent streak, my tendency towards being mischievous (nothing serious, but I was always one to push the rules and boundaries) meant that this would not be the greatest challenge I would present to my parents and my family during my lifetime. Remember: this was the 1970s and my parents were in their early fifties, having had me and my brother later in life than was traditional at the time. My parents, understandably, were not happy with the news, but continued to stay focused on the fact that I was their child and that our home was always my home, and that I should never turn away from them or my family. So, over time, we worked through whatever discomfort they had and moved on to have an even more wonderful relationship, one in which I could be open, honest and present with them, or as much as any young person really is with their parents. I was able to involve them with the people whom I loved and whom they came to love too, and not to exclude my family from areas of my life for fear that they would 'discover' and disapprove, as I have known others who remained closeted or distant from their families, fearful of their families' rejection or abandonment.

I realise now that I learned early on what it meant to live 'doubly' within the margins of society, to be a living example of what the great educator, sociologist and civil rights leader W.E.B. DuBois referred to in his historic book (1903) as 'double consciousness'. I experienced first hand both the opportunities and oppressions in America. When I attended Cleveland's University School, one of the leading private schools in the northeast, the American Psychiatric Association was still debating whether or not to remove 'homosexuality' from the ranks of pathology in the definitive *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.

I am proud to say that I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and am proud to identify myself as a 'Buckeye', an affectionate nickname for residents of Ohio, the 'buckeye state'. Cleveland is located on the shores of Lake Erie, and when I was a child it had a strong and vibrant African American community; it also had a vibrant arts' community, including a world-class symphony orchestra, the legendary Karamu Theatre and a phenomenal museum of art, built in a Palladian style and surrounded by a lagoon with swans; a veritable oasis in the middle of the city. In 1970, a statue at the front of the museum (a bronze copy of Rodin's *The Thinker*) was irreparably damaged by a pipe bomb. No one was injured in the blast, but the statue was destroyed. This reminds us that this was a time of political activism, with campaigns against the continuing military action in Vietnam and against the American government in general. The 1960s was also still a time of racial segregation across the USA. Cleveland was the first city to elect

an African American as its mayor, the late Carl Stokes, in 1967, and the following year, his brother, Louis Stokes, was elected as Ohio's first African American US Congressman.

My family, like our neighbours, owned their own home. We lived in what I remember as being a very diverse community. Our next-door neighbours included a Japanese family who had been interned in a detention camp in California during World War Two and had moved to Cleveland; on the other side, an older Polish couple who had left Poland to escape the war; and across the street, a German family, which included an elderly mother and her single adult son. We were one of three African American families on our block. I was too young to remember moving to Decker Avenue but I do recall that we had what at the time seemed like an enormous backyard full of flowers and fruit trees, as well as a grape arbour. My brother and I had lots of places to play, catching bugs and digging worms and playing with our first dog Skippy, a collie mix, as well as a rabbit named Peter and chickens, given to us at Easter time as gifts in our Easter baskets. There were county fairs and amusement parks to be enjoyed, and cherry cokes when we went bowling and foot-long hot dogs at the circus when it came to town! There was an active downtown with three major department stores, and people during that period used to get dressed up to 'go into town' to shop at the department store Higbee's, with its amazing art deco interior with beautiful chandeliers going down the length of the entire first floor. It was a wonderful place to grow up and my brother and I had a great childhood, with 'cook-outs' in the backyard and birthday parties, trips to the lake front in the summer on hot evenings, and ice-cream and walking along the breakwater with our parents. I miss my parents each day, and am grateful for the memories and the time we had together as a family, and the story of my family is one I hope to share some day in more detail.

Much of that halcyon period ended in 1968 when I was 13. The Civil Rights movement had become the Black Liberation movement, and was capturing students' imaginations, and so-called 'soul music' became the music of protest. The assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, in April 1968, resulted in our inner-city neighbourhood, like so many other major US cities, erupting in flames and riots. In the flash of an eye, our idyllic community disappeared: shops were burned and looted and most were not rebuilt; our neighbours moved away to what they considered to be 'safer' communities. My parents were committed to living in the central city so, as others left, we remained, but it was a very different experience. I don't recall it as being worse, just different from what it had been before.

Both of my parents had been born in the US South (my mother was from Georgia and my father from Alabama) and had experienced the height of 'Jim Crow' segregation, the yoke of US apartheid and discrimination. I have come to learn recently as I have worked on our family history that both were the grandchildren of slaves. They wanted the best for their children, and did all that they could to provide us with every opportunity possible that would help us to advance and succeed. My father worked at the Ford Motor Company on the assembly line and my mother went back to work outside the home after we grew older; she worked on the janitorial staff of the Cleveland public schools. Both parents were, in effect, 'community organisers', but without professional training. My mother was active in voter registration drives following the passage of the US Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, and took

part in local political action, especially as it related to education. She was often at community discussions about the quality of schools for children of colour, or hosting political events in our home, and both mum and dad spent a great deal of time advocating for our neighbourhood at Cleveland's City Hall. My dad was a great supporter, but worked long hours to make sure that we had what might be described as an upwardly mobile life; he took his role as the breadwinner and provider for his family very seriously. There was an expectation that we kids would also get involved in our community. I was often sent across the street to sit with an elderly neighbour so that her son could go out on a Friday night, and I have early memories of going to the polling place to volunteer, with my parents, on election day. Yet we had fun and always seemed to be on the go and doing something. The other family expectation was that my brother and I would go to college and pursue careers. We both attended college and graduate school without accumulating the debt that is so typical in the USA these days, thanks to the sacrifice, planning and hard work of our parents, who hoped that I would become a physician and my brother an attorney. My brother is now an attorney in Colorado, and I took some 'pre-med' courses at Tufts University, located in Medford, a town near Boston.

## **Undergrad study**

The period at college was a challenging time. For the first time in my life I found myself not part of a community. Boston was experiencing a lot of racist hostility against the much smaller numbers of African Americans; I wasn't enjoying my courses; and, over and above this, it was as if I was the only openly gay person on campus! I often ate alone and spent a lot of time alone, alone but not lonely. Eventually, I found a community of friends at Tufts, both straight and gay, Black and White, and I came to love my time there. Our little group refers affectionately to each other as our 'Tufts family' and I am a proud godfather to four amazing children from this group, who themselves have grown into phenomenal young people.

One winter during intercession, I took a course that was taught by a professional social worker, whose name is Jane Greenspan. I loved her description of what she did for a living and realised I was on the wrong course; everything I had done and experienced until then now told me that I should train as a social worker. I switched my major to Child Study and graduated from the Eliot Pearson School of Child Study in 1977.

## **From social work training to practice**

I enrolled at the Boston University School of Social Work to earn my Masters in Social Work (MSW) in 1979/80. There I made some great friends, several of whom remain great friends and have become part of my extended professional family. I was a Casework 'major' with a 'minor' in Group Work. My first field placement was at the Travelers' Aid Society,<sup>2</sup> which helped people who had travelled without a

plan for housing or employment, etc. I dealt with all types of people and learned to think quickly on my feet as I might only have a person as a client for one interview. The lessons learned have since served me well in many areas of my career, as did my second-year field placement in a suburban school system where I worked with children and families in a Montessori-modelled<sup>3</sup> open classroom elementary school in a more affluent Boston suburb. Very different populations, but in my second year I developed the ability not to be tied to an office; I also learned how to develop relationships with those who did not immediately understand the role of the social worker. Both were great experiences and have served me well.

I completed graduate school and received my Master's degree by the time I was 23 years old. I was also discovering gay life as an adult and getting involved in relationships, and I spent a lot of time in the clubs and bars which were a part of the scene at the time. Imagine my surprise when, some years later in 1995, I received the award for Outstanding Contributions to the Field of Social Work from the Boston University School of Social Work Alumni Association. This goes to prove that you can sometimes surprise yourself just by doing the work you believe in and feel good about.

I began my career at the Family Service of Greater Boston (FSGB)<sup>4</sup> in 1980. Few American social service organisations claim as rich a history as this one, which traces its roots to 1835, only thirteen years after Boston's incorporation as a city. The agency served children, youth and families and older people through the wide sweep of the American experience, during the Civil War, two world wars, the Great Depression, civil rights and women's movements, and the technology revolution. My task was to provide 'in-home counselling' and supportive services to so-called 'at-risk' elders and their families. This was the best professional accident that ever occurred for me, and I remained at the agency for fourteen years. I held a range of positions, including supervising graduate students. Eventually, I was asked to teach a course on community organising as an adjunct faculty member at Boston College (BCGSW) School of Social Work and I went on to teach a course on the Dynamics of Racism and Oppression at my alma mater Boston University (BUSSW) and to head their gerontology section, which meant that I organised speakers and mini-seminars for students and community members, again while still working full time at the FSGB.

I left the FSGB after being recruited to the position of Executive Director of Parents' and Children's Services (PCS) which was founded in 1849 and is one of Boston's oldest child welfare and child protection agencies. Originally called the Children's Mission to the Children of the Destitute of the City of Boston, PCS provided needy children with shelter, education and employment. Its mission went on to become one of promoting the well-being of children and the preservation of families through culturally competent direct service, education and advocacy. I remained at PCS until 1999, when I became a Visiting Professor at Simmons School of Social Work, Simmons College, the oldest degree-granting social work programme in the USA. I have been a permanent member of the faculty at the Simmons now for over fifteen years.

## **Balancing academic life and community action**

I am currently a Professor of Practice at the Simmons School of Social Work, Simmons College and have another appointment at the School of Nursing and Health Studies. I also hold an appointment as an adjunct Assistant Professor at the Boston University School of Public Health. I teach required introductory-level graduate courses in Social Policy, Dynamics of Racism and Oppression, and an elective in Social Action which focuses on gerontology. I am involved in a variety of college-wide activities, including the Faculty Senate, and I am a member of the Simmons President's Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council (PDIAC) which focuses on how to recruit and retain diverse students, faculty and staff at the college in all areas. In addition, I chair the Simmons College Black Administrators, Faculty and Staff Council (BAFAS) and chair the School of Social Work (SSW) Awards Committee.

I am not particularly interested in conventional research and see myself more as a practitioner. My writing has tended to focus on areas connected to my volunteer and practice areas of interest: HIV/AIDS, diversity and inclusion, social disparities and, most recently, human rights and international social work practice. I am also called upon by the media (press, radio and television) to respond to topical issues that are related to the areas mentioned. I have testified before US Congressional committees on issues impacting upon the social work profession and frequently do the same in my state. In 2009, I was delighted to be appointed by the Governor of Massachusetts to the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Educational Financing Authority (MEFA), which helps develop and provide financing for families so that students can attend college.

I was elected president of the National Association of Social Work (NASW)<sup>5</sup> in 2003. I found it interesting that while I was at my office at national headquarters in Washington, DC, near Capitol Hill, NASW staff members and others treated me with a certain degree of deference; yet when I left the confines of the building, I had difficulty catching a cab on the streets of the nation's capital. I was just another Black man, confronted by the same social disparities that exist in so many parts of the world for so many other people of colour. When my term as president ended, I chose to focus on improving the image of social workers and the profession in the United States by becoming Chairperson of the National Social Work Public Education Campaign, giving me the opportunity to travel extensively across the United States, Canada and parts of Europe promoting the profession of social work.

Currently, I am a member of the Governing Board of the Boston Teachers' Union School in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, and a member of the Board of the Fenway High School in Boston. I have also been involved for many years with the AIDS Action Committee (AAC) of Massachusetts,<sup>6</sup> one of the nation's foremost AIDS service organisations. When I was just starting my career in social work, the gay community had no idea that the AIDS crisis was around the corner, and when the AIDS epidemic struck, social workers were at the forefront of providing compassionate care, dealing with family crises and fighting hard for fair policies and equal treatment of people with AIDS. I have lost countless friends and loved ones during the course of the past thirty years of the epidemic; I was much honoured to receive the Bayard Rustin Award for Courage from the AAC in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

In 2010, I was elected President of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW),<sup>8</sup> the first person of colour to do so, and only the third North American. My objective in becoming President was to take the message forward about what our profession is, and what the world could be like, if we put more of our energy and intent into creating genuine opportunities for self-realisation and social justice.

## MY TYPICAL WEEK

Really – is there any such thing as a typical week? My parents had great sayings about the use of time: my father would always say, 'Why touch something twice?' My mother, for her part, often said, 'When you want to get something done, always ask a busy person!' A typical day for me now usually begins at around 4.30 or 5 a.m. lying in bed with both the local morning news and the BBC on the television, so that I have a sense of what is happening locally, nationally and internationally. I get up at around 6 a.m. and before I make coffee for my partner and myself, I throw in a load of washing or fold a load that I had put in the drier the night before. Our cat insists on his morning cuddles and then I check emails while the kettle is on, to see what has come in while I was asleep. And so another working day begins!

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| Monday    | Simmons College by 12; Policy Class 6–8.30 p.m. Home by 9 p.m. Quick dinner; read emails and 'snail mail', respond to texts, talk with family and friends. Bed around 12.30 a.m.   |
| Tuesday   | Medical appointment at 8 a.m.; into office/work, student meetings; prepare classes for the coming week. External meeting(s): Fenway High School Board Meeting (6 p.m.). Drinks with friends, then home.  |
| Wednesday | Faculty Senate meeting 8–10 a.m.; 10.30–noon Center for Excellence in Teaching (CET) Search Committee meeting; Policy Class and meeting with students 1–3:30 p.m.; Debrief with CET co-chair 3.30–4.30 p.m.  |
| Thursday  | Personal errands; into office by 12 noon. Massachusetts Educational Finance Authority (MEFA) meeting downtown 3–6 p.m. Meet partner at his office and dinner out.  |
| Friday    | Manicure at 8 a.m. on my way to office. Meeting with my Associate Dean; covering a colleague's class from 1–3 p.m.; meeting with director of the MSW Program; meeting Black administrators, Faculty and Staff Council vice-chair to plan African American History Month. |
| Saturday  | UUMC Men's Group Breakfast meeting at 10 a.m. to plan for Men's Day Service and Community Health Fair. Do other work (yard work, gardening, repairs, etc. at   |

the church). Either go out for dinner with partner or host dinner at home with friends.

Sunday      Attend church in the morning, followed by brunch and possibly visit to office or some shopping. Read the Sunday papers and prepare for the week – meals and lunches, etc.

## Reflecting on where I am now

For years, my interests have been in the areas of board development, international social work practice, elder and family housing programme development; issues pertaining to diversity; social justice and human rights; and working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities, so my work with IFSW provides an interesting intersection for my current areas of practice and interest. I wish I could say that racism, anti-US sentiment or shades of heterosexism or homophobia do not appear from time to time, but that would not be true, as they indeed have and do. However, I believe strongly that if you are comfortable with who you are, even though others may not agree or even be comfortable with you, they may grow to develop a greater degree of comfort and you may gain their respect. I feel that way about being gay and African American, too. What I am saying here is that I am unwilling to own other people's 'stuff' or biases or bigotry; and woe betide the people who tell me they are uncomfortable being in a room with me as an African American, or as a gay man. I have a cardinal rule: if you can't deal with me, then get out of my way, please!

My family fully accepts and loves me. I have dear friends and colleagues who respect and love me, and I have never tried to help anyone adjust to the fact that I am who I am. I continually say this: you have to set the tone. I am not asking people to agree with me about me, but I do require, no – I demand, that they treat me with respect. I do not give people the power to disapprove of me, because I approve of myself. I honestly don't care what others think of me as a man of colour or as a gay man and usually people understand this, and if they don't they soon do. In addition, my being openly gay and of colour has given me a set of skills that have helped me to navigate the world on my own terms. I understand in double digits what it means to be an outsider. There has always been a little piece of me that loves being the 'outlaw' more than being the 'inlaw'. As we LGBT folks have become more accepted, I am oddly a little less comfortable. I liked the old renegade days. We're becoming more and more mainstream. Once I was in Copenhagen, where it seemed that gay people were more readily absorbed into mainstream culture, and it felt as if it was absolutely no big deal to be gay; I missed having a more affirming and defined gay space. Because gay people are seemingly more accepted, there's no secret language, dress code, special social cues. No sense of tribe, really.

It's a different world from when I grew up. I remember when I was a kid, when a Black person appeared on the television we would all scream, 'There are Black people on TV!' and everyone in the



neighbourhood would run to see who they were, and felt a sense of pride that the person on television was where they were, and had achieved what they had. I remember when that was true about gays and lesbians on TV. Now, we have become more mainstream and have our own gay-themed TV or reality shows. But being in the mainstream doesn't necessarily raise you up. Sometimes it reduces you to the lowest common denominator, and I believe that reality television is not always the best that there is of the medium. That is not to say that there is no work for us to do – there is still rampant discrimination and there is still so much to be done to truly become an inclusive global community for all. But it does get, and has got, better. The day will come when I write more fully the story of my life and the intersection of the personal and the professional; however, this is not the time. The late Dame Elizabeth Taylor is purported to have once said, 'I am too busy living my life to write about it yet.' I, too, am still busy living my dream.

The great African American feminist poet Audre Lorde said in a speech in 1987 in Montreal:

Each of us has some power. You can use your power in the service of what you say you believe. If you do not use your power, someone will use it for you, and do it in your name.

What I want people to know is that they too can have a dream; you have to put it out there and just go for it. They, like me, can become someone who works for increased diversity, social justice and human rights for all people including LGBT communities. It's almost like being a gay Black kid from Cleveland with a dream; they too can even become president of an international organisation someday.

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## Notes

- 1 Paraphrased from a quotation by Emile Zola, cited in Winokur, J. (1989) *Writers on Writing*, London: Headline.
- 2 [www.travelersaid.org/](http://www.travelersaid.org/).
- 3 [www.montessori.org.uk](http://www.montessori.org.uk).
- 4 [www.fsgb.org/](http://www.fsgb.org/).
- 5 [www.naswdc.org/](http://www.naswdc.org/).
- 6 <http://www.aac.org/>.
- 7 Bayard Rustin was the organiser of the 1963 March on Washington, one of the largest non-violent protests ever held in the USA. Rustin was beaten, imprisoned and fired from important leadership positions, largely because he was an openly gay man in a fiercely homophobic era. See [http://rustin.org/?page\\_id=2/](http://rustin.org/?page_id=2/).
- 8 Headquartered in Berne, Switzerland, IFSW consists of ninety national organisations, is divided into five regional groups, and has over 700,000 members. Its primary goal is to promote the profession of social work

and organise professional social workers and facilitate their work through international cooperation. See [www.ifsw.org/](http://www.ifsw.org/).

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Lorde, A. (1978) 'Power', in *The Black Unicorn: Poems*, New York: Norton, pp. 108–109.