

Nothing Could Stop Me from Flying to His Side

**Sydna Freeman
Salt Lake City, Utah**

April 8, 2005. A date forever etched in our memories. Saying it aloud still sends a jolt of emotion through me.

My husband Mike had the day off of work and planned to pick me up early from my job to go to a matinee. It was a beautiful day, and my husband and I both had a feeling that everything was right in the world. Our youngest son had just left the Missionary Training Center and had arrived safely at his destination; our oldest son was entrenched in his studies back east, working on his PhD; both of our other children were busy with work and studies and doing well. I had a sense of peace about life and the future.

Mike called me at about 2:00 p.m. with that tone in his voice that is reserved for communication of a death or some other tragedy. It took him a few moments to speak, and his pain hung in the silent air between us. Finally, choking on his words, he asked, "Do you want me to read the letter to you?" I knew instinctively what the letter was and from whom. My oldest son and I have always had a soul-deep connection, and suspecting intuitively that he might be gay, I had lain awake in the dark many nights, bargaining with God, "Please . . . anything but

that." It was a shapeless, formless fear that I wrestled with. I didn't allow myself to move beyond that vague emotion to consider the implications for Max, and for all of us, if my suspicions were correct.

"Yes, read me the letter," I said.

"Dear Mom and Dad," he began, "I love you so much. You always told me that I could tell you anything, I hope that is true. As I'm sure you must already know, I am gay." And then the words, "I have left the Church, there is no place in it for me."

There, finally, a name for my fears. The Church. In all of my nighttime vigils, I had never considered how this would impact our family and our faith. It had never occurred to me that my wonderful son could be faced with a choice between his religion, which had been such an essential part of him throughout his life, and his need to express himself as a man who is, through no choice of his own, homosexual.

Mike came to pick me up at work, and we immediately fell into one another's arms and stood crying until we were able to make our way home. We called our twenty-two-year-old daughter at her apartment and asked her to come home. She responded fearfully, as there was no masking the emotion in my voice. I was able to reassure her that everyone was all right, that she just needed to come home.

I thought that because I had known on some level that Max might be gay, surely the rest of the family must have known it as well. This was not the case, and as we read the letter to our daughter, she responded as if to news of a death. Her grief filled the room; her wails frightened and pained us to the depths of our hearts. For parents, there is no anguish so great as witnessing the anguish of their child. We shared the letter with Max's younger brother as he returned home from work, and he ac-

cepted the news in a much calmer way, becoming a steadying force for all of us in those first hours of our new lives.

As we sat together in numbed pain, my husband and I knew that we must be with our son. That he lived on the other side of the country was of no consequence. We needed to put our arms around Max and tell him how much we love him, have always loved him, and that nothing could ever change that.

Mike and I called our bishop, and he agreed to meet with us immediately; our bishop was kind and gentle, although we quickly surmised that we would be left to find answers and guidance from God, which, after all, is as it should be in a family.

When we came out of the bishop's office, our daughter was waiting and told us that she had spoken with Max. She informed us that he did not want us to come to see him yet; in fact, we were absolutely not to come.

We spoke with Max repeatedly on the phone that evening and into the night. He became increasingly adamant that we not come; he wanted us to wait a few weeks, to let things settle a little bit first. We were unable to get a flight out that evening, and after a tortuous night, my husband had decided to respect Max's wishes and delay our visit.

Part of the reason that Max and I are as close as we are is because we are much alike in many ways, including our stubbornness. I announced to my husband that morning that I was going to Max. He could come with me or stay behind, but I was going. I needed to hold my son and remind him that he had a family, and that his family would never forsake him; that whatever life presented us, we would face it together. I brought him into the world and held him close as a baby. We had loved and nurtured our son through the adventures of life thus far, and it seemed

preposterous not to go immediately to him now. Nothing could stop me from flying to his side.

We secured a flight that day and arrived late that night in Boston, leaving a message for Max on his answering machine that we were coming and asking that he meet us in the lobby of our hotel the next morning. We rose early and sat at a table overlooking the bay, long before the scheduled arrival time of our son. I never doubted that he would come. Despite Max's protestations, he is and ever has been a loving and gentle son.

The cab pulled up to the curb, and out stepped our beautiful son, his usually confident gait somewhat trepid. He looked around and took a seat next to the front desk. Unseen, we watched him for a few moments. To his parents, he looked like a child once again, full of apprehension but trying to look steely and brave.

Then we stepped forward, and the moment we embraced is forever imprinted in my mind. There is a love that can only be expressed in such a way. No email, no phone call, no letter can convey the love and emotion of an embrace. In that moment, I knew that whatever lay ahead, we would be all right. He is our son. He was the same that day as he had been the week previous. All that had changed was our level of honesty.

We stayed with Max for only a day or two, and they were very difficult days. Those first trembling steps toward understanding often felt as though the ground underneath us had given way; but we were able to express our feelings and fears to one another in a way that we could never have done without being together. We said things to one another that weekend that were painful, some of which I regret, many of which stemmed from a lack of understanding and information on our part. I have come to better understand the reasons that Max felt we

should wait for emotions to calm before coming to be with him. Much of Max's resistance to our visit grew out of the difficulty he'd had in making the most critical decisions in his life, which he knew we would initially disagree with. We can only imagine how painful the years had been for him, trying to reconcile his faith, familial expectations, and his recognition that he is gay.

Despite the pain of that weekend, I believe it was the right thing to do, the only thing to do. Somehow the groundwork was laid in those first hours for the honest and open expression that leads to healing. In my mother's heart, I know that I would have regretted forever not having gone immediately to our son, to hold him and tell him that he is loved deeply, unconditionally, and always.

As we stayed in our son's apartment and slept in his bed, my husband and I felt his very being in everything around us. His bulletin board was covered completely with pictures of his family. The walls on every side were neatly stacked to the ceiling with books. His scriptures lay, well-worn and marked, at his headboard. We cried together when we found his bookmark in a heavily annotated Book of Job. We turned out the light and lay beneath the neon moon and stars on Max's ceiling, talking about our love for our beautiful son, for all of our beautiful children.

I wish I could say that we have since figured everything out, that we have found a clearly marked path for our family, but I now see the nobility of putting one foot decidedly in front of the other, day by day, and with God's help, making our way.