

## Chapter 8

# Grace

---

Grace is a forty-three-year-old teacher who was married twice: to Dan in 1994 and Luke in 2002. She and Luke are now separated, and they have a ten-year-old son. Grace has been attracted to women all her life, but she never really questioned it, because, as she said, “Of course, I was straight. Everybody was straight.” Then she met Christine, a lesbian with whom she became friends. Even after it became apparent to Grace that she was deeply attracted to Christine, it took her about eighteen months to sort things out, which included talking with Luke about her feelings for Christine. The couple separated after Luke made it clear that it was okay with him for Grace to explore her feelings for Christine. Grace was in a relationship with Christine for two and a half years. She now lives with her son, maintains a close friendship with Luke, and is in a relationship with a man.



## —Grace’s Story—

I don’t know that I ever questioned whether I was heterosexual or homosexual. I was raised Methodist, and I never thought about it too often. It just wasn’t a conversation I had with myself. Looking back now, it’s funny—because I’ve been attracted to women all my life, but I didn’t see that in the same light as I do now.

It’s not that I didn’t notice that I was attracted to women. I don’t think I called it that. I didn’t sense that it was any different than just liking someone a lot. I didn’t even know anyone could be gay, and so I saw it more as admiration than attraction. And I never really questioned it—because, of course, I was straight. Everybody was straight.

I was probably in high school before I had a coherent thought about what the word *gay* actually meant, and by then I was so conditioned that I didn’t think to consider it in terms of my own self. Now I can see that I always checked out women. I’m attracted to women. I’m attracted to men too, but it’s more like one in a hundred men versus one in five women. It’s very different. But even as recently as ten years ago, I just wasn’t conscious about it.

I’m still not submersed in gay culture in my daily life. I’ve dabbled around with it, but I’m living my life. I’m not out playing, or out in bars, or in a scene, or with a group of people who have an idea about how this is supposed to go. That’s not me. I’m not that person. I’m raising my kid. I’m starting a business. I’m working.

## —Marriage—

I’ve been married twice—the first time I was twenty-four, and the second time I was thirty-two. My first marriage—to Dan—didn’t last very long. I think we were married three years all told, but we weren’t together after about the first seven months. It was quick. My second husband was Luke, and he and I were together for twelve years. We weren’t married for twelve years, but we were a couple for that long.

Was I in love with Dan when I married him? Ah, geez, I don’t know. What does that really mean? Was I in reality and in love with him at the same time? No, I wasn’t.

I don’t mean to sound callous because of course I cared for him, but

it goes back to my upbringing. I was having sex with Dan and was afraid my traditionally minded grandparents could suspect it. I loved and respected them, and couldn't bear the possibility of their disapproval, so when Dan proposed, I convinced myself I was supposed to marry him. At the time, I wasn't aware of anything I was creating. I was trying to do what I thought would please everybody else. I didn't think to question who I was or what I wanted.

Dan and I got married, and about thirty seconds later those questions I hadn't asked became extremely loud. *What did I just do?* Before the wedding, I did have a sense I wanted to call it off, but I didn't have the nerve. I convinced myself I had normal pre-wedding jitters and would be okay once the planning hype simmered down. At that time, I simply didn't see what I see now. I was a totally different person—completely inauthentic.

Once I went through with the wedding, it was like a veil lifted. I knew I'd made a serious mistake, and my life became all about survival for a time. It took a lot of courage, but it also was liberating for me to admit the errors in my judgment and to learn to be honest and stand on my own. I definitely learned a lot about who I was and the person I would become.

With Luke, it was different. I loved hanging out with Luke. For ten years, I lived with him and his children. He raised his kids after his wife left and moved to Florida. I loved him when we met, but he was less interested in me at the time. I was much younger than him. There were a lot of intense highs and lows between us over those ten years. The pendulum swung far in both directions, and the relationship was exhilarating and ultimately exhausting. We were finally about to end it when I got pregnant.

It was an interesting twist because, in all those years, we'd tried and given up on the idea of having a baby. Then all of sudden I was pregnant. So we got married. That really wasn't my first choice, but we talked about it and came to agree that it was best for the baby. Our arrangement was then and is still diplomatic and business-like.

One Tuesday afternoon after work, Luke and I met my mother at a small-town JP and got married. Afterward, I went grocery shopping. So when you ask me if I was in love with Luke—yeah, I loved Luke and I love his kids. I always have, and there was surely a time when I was in love with him. But when we got married, was it about our love for each other? No, definitely not—it was totally because we were trying to do the right thing.

Overall, it was a tumultuous relationship. It had uniquely fine strong

points and some really awful weak points. Most of it was extreme that way. When our son Sam was born, I think I just gave up the fight. Whatever had us aggravating each other, I just didn't care about it anymore. I had this beautiful child, and he trumped everything.

Although my relationship with Luke had mostly been unhealthy, things got obviously easier between us after Sam was born, and I let go of a bunch of upset. Things loosened up, and I became free to talk to Luke about things that were important, and our relationship started to take a different turn. It shifted and became more of a friendship—a valuable alliance. Then I fell in love with someone else.

### —Christine—

I met Christine while I was married to Luke, and it was immediately clear to me that I was attracted to her. I knew that she was gay, but I didn't necessarily think it was something I needed to deal with. Yet the more time I spent with her, the more clear I was that I wanted to be with her, and what I felt wasn't just admiration.

We didn't have an affair. We had a friendship at the onset. I had a conversation with another friend about my feelings for Christine, and my friend was very compassionate about my experience of being between a rock and a hard place. I had an overwhelming desire to explore my feelings for Christine, but I also desperately needed to maintain my integrity in my marriage to Luke. She finally suggested that I talk to Luke. "Are you kidding me?" I said. That was the last thing I wanted to do. That sounded completely crazy. My friend said, "Well, consider that he already knows." I thought about it for a long time and then concluded it was actually my best option. So eventually I did talk openly and honestly with him.

Luke already knew that Christine and I were friends, but he didn't know about my feelings for her. When I told him, he said, "Ah, well, that's what's been going on with you. I had no idea what it was, but I knew it was something." So we began the process of working through an ordeal. Luke became a source of comfort, helping me sort through my self-judgment and confusion. Here I had finally just settled down. Our son was just about three years old. I really felt selfish and kind of crazy. I'm still very grateful that Luke was so accepting and reassuring and such a good friend to me.

Christine and I didn't get together right away. It took about a year

and a half for me to sort things out. During that time, Luke and I continued to talk a lot. We said everything there was to say. If anything didn't work for either of us, we'd stop and look at it until gradually a path became clear to us both that would suit and respect everyone involved. Then we made an action plan and executed it.

I moved out with an agreement that Luke and I would always honor each other and be the best friends and best parents we could be. We promised each other to have the best separation possible, and to keep truing ourselves up to our agreement, again and again.

After Luke and I separated, Christine and I stayed together for two and a half years. My relationship with Christine has been the most significant relationship in my life. I really thought she was the one, but unfortunately things didn't work out the way I thought they would.

Christine and I never lived together. We both wanted to, but when we got together, I had just moved out of the house I'd shared with Luke. I think that maybe she wanted to move the relationship along faster than I felt I could go at the time. She was in more of a hurry, and she needed to solidify and cement and validate our partnership in a way that felt inauthentic to me. I didn't feel the need to create a lot of structure and convention around our relationship. I just wanted to love her and let things evolve naturally in their own sweet time.

It was very sweet, the time I spent with Christine. I think ultimately we wanted the same things. I just didn't want it all immediately. We didn't find a way to accept and see each other through our personal differences.

I was newly separated with a young child. I had a demanding job, and there were other important things happening in my life at the time, including my dad getting sick and dying. I finally felt at home in my own skin, and just wanted to relax and bask in the glory. I just couldn't move into the stress of plans and moves and time frames and hustle bustle and more big life changes. Somehow I failed to communicate all that in a way that left Christine feeling secure about my love and commitment. Things just didn't work out, and we ended it in frustration.

About a year later, I started hanging out with an old friend who was having his own share of heartache, and as we comforted each other, we became lovers. After some time, Christine came back into my life, and we tried again. My male friend had no issue with my relationship with Christine, but wanted to remain close and befriend her as well. She was not open to a

relationship with him. She had concerns about our romantic involvement, and asked me to choose between them. I wasn't willing to lose or risk hurting either of them, so I took no action. Christine ended our relationship via text: "Don't call me. Don't text me. Don't email me. I do not wish to have any further communication with you."

I've reached out to her since then, hoping for forgiveness and a fresh start. It was after something important happened in my son's life and also after I learned she'd had a bad car accident. Christine hasn't responded. I still think about her every day. I've made peace with my sorrow by accepting that I may always love her but may never express it again in a physical relationship with her. It's almost like she's dead—only I know she's alive and choosing not to be with me. That's difficult to bear.

### —Coming Out—

During the eighteen months when I was with Luke and talking with him about my feelings for Christine, I learned how important it was for me to talk to the people whose lives would be affected by this relationship. When I started talking with Luke about this, I wasn't even sure I was going to do anything about my attraction to Christine, but I knew that I needed to talk with him.

My head was definitely not in the game with him anymore. I had already checked out. I just wasn't talking with him about what was happening inside me. So communicating with him about what was going on for me about Christine cleared up a lot between us. I felt like I was going crazy, and he assured me that I wasn't crazy. He actually became an ally for me. It was weird. It didn't go the way I would have predicted. And the only reason I ended up having a straight conversation with him was because a friend told me to.

I know a lot of people are afraid to have that kind of conversation with their partner because what they share could be used against them. I think that's especially true for people who have kids.

Once I started to sort through my feelings for Christine and to talk with Luke, the possibility of being with her started to become more real. I knew that she was going to be part of my life, so I had to let people know what the deal was. There were only three people I needed to tell immediately: my sister, my dad, and my mom. That's in addition to Luke and Sam, of course, but I was already talking with them.

My sister was just loving and very supportive. She was kind of like, “Well, of course you’re gay.” When she said that, it was like, “Okay, now I can just relax into this instead of resisting it.”

I don’t remember exactly what my dad said, but I was most fearful of his reaction. The hardest part was spilling my words out loud. Turns out, he was already distracted by something my sister had just told him, and he made a joke about how she and I were running interference for each other. That was perfect. In the end, he was welcoming and very nice to Christine.

His wife—my stepmother—had more of an issue with it. She kept telling me not to talk with people about my relationship with Christine. I think that both she and my dad were probably afraid I’d lose my job because I was with Christine. But they were also open and loving because they wanted me to be happy. And although they did love Christine, my dad also made it clear to me that public displays of affection were not going to be tolerated. I felt very little freedom to express my love for her in front of them—not that they would have said anything to embarrass me in the moment, but it would have upset them.

Then there was my mom. She was more difficult than I expected. She said all the right things—like “It’s your choice” and “I’ll love you no matter what” and “I just want you to be happy.” But then she would express another side of how she felt—things like “What did I do wrong?” and “I have to hide this.” She felt that she had to hide my relationship with Christine from her side of the family. She didn’t want her relatives to know.

I’m very close with my grandmother, and I’m pretty much of a straight shooter anyway. I had a hard time not saying anything to her. I didn’t like that. I felt like I was lying. It ended up that my uncle’s wife figured it out herself, and let me know I was safe with her. She and I have had a deep connection since I was a young girl. She’d met Christine, seen us together, and she’s not stupid. I like to think my grandmother figured it out too, but I kept quiet.

Christine came to all our family functions. It was clear that she was my partner, but then my mom was acting like we weren’t really partners. That went on for a long time. I finally told my grandmother about my love for Christine, which she accepted in the blink of an eye. By that time, Christine and I had already broken up, and she hadn’t been around my family in a while. My grandmother asked, “Well, if you love her, why aren’t you with her?”

My mom and I ... I'm still hesitant with her. I can't ask for much more really. I just wish that I didn't make her ashamed. I sense that. She'd never say that, but I've felt like she was ashamed and didn't want people to know.

My family's been very supportive of my life choices overall, but no one supports me in having a future with Christine anymore. It ended badly for me, and no one wants to see me in pain. There's some beautiful bit of my self-expression that was completely unleashed in my relationship with Christine, but there's no space for it anymore. In reality, she's no longer part of my life.

### —Grace's Life Now—

Although our marriage didn't work out, my relationship with Luke has transformed and actually works much better now. We're able to work together, be friends, and spend generous time with Sam, both individually and as a family. We're very close.

When Luke and I parted, that was probably the best, most empowering experience I've ever had in a relationship. It was really clean. That doesn't mean that it all goes smoothly all the time. Every now and then, something happens and one of us temporarily loses out, but we steer things right back on track and honor our commitment to being the best we can be for our son, for each other, and for our families. Legally, for tax and insurance purposes, Luke and I are still married.

If I had it to do over again, would I marry Dan and Luke? I don't know. I hedge. I've learned a tremendous amount about myself through these two "failures." I would not be who I am today without those experiences, and I'm pretty happy with how I've turned out so far. Also, what's smack in the middle of my marriage with Luke is our son Sam, and having him is definitely the best thing I've ever done.

Sam doesn't want us to be divorced. He's aware that we're not in love, that we have other partners, and don't want to live together. For him, none of that is bad, but if you put the word *divorce* in the mix, immediately he's panic stricken. I'm not sure what that's about. When he's a little older and more emotionally mature, we'll see if he thinks differently about it. But for now, it's working fine for us the way it is.

Also, for the past two years, I've been in a light-hearted relationship



with my male friend. It's not too serious, which is perfect, and I'm grateful for his patience and easy-going way. There's a lot he could be uptight about. My situation is messy, and I'm open and honest about all of it. I'm married, I have a son, I'm in love with someone I can't be with, but I'm still open to being in a relationship. Anyone who enters into a relationship with me has to be able to accept all that, as confounding as it may seem.

If I had it to do all over again, I don't know if I'd choose to be in a relationship with a woman rather than a man. Maybe, maybe not. It doesn't mean that much to me whether I'm gay or straight. That doesn't seem to define me—so I don't really care if I'm gay or straight.

What I'm not sure about is marriage. I almost wonder if I'm staying married to Luke to make sure that I don't marry anybody else. It keeps me safe. I guess I'd like to find my way back there. I don't have the best track record or role models to give me inspiration. I'd love to have a committed, monogamous relationship with a partner who I could share my love, happiness, and time with. In my thinking, the recognition of union by the state is irrelevant to the foundation of a relationship, except in terms of business and finance (including health care). Marriage is practical, but in my experience it is not sacred. I suppose I'm still looking for what is sacred in a relationship.

I came close to that in my relationship with Christine. For me, being with her was very different from being in a relationship with a man. That might seem obvious to some people, but I was surprised that it was so different. The things I had to work on to sustain that relationship were nothing like I'd experienced with men.

It was more difficult for me to be in a relationship with a woman, and when I say that, I'm looking at how it went. My relationship with Christine didn't go the way I wanted it to go, so of course it was—in my opinion—more difficult for me. I probably would prefer to be with a woman even though it's far easier for me to be with a man. With a man, I don't have to deal with the safety of public displays of affection. If I want to give him a kiss or hold his hand or touch him in public, I don't have to worry about whether it's safe to do that. There's no stigma attached to a man and a woman showing affection in public.

The other thing is that guys seem to me to be much more easygoing in general. Things don't bug them so much, like if my house is perfect or not. I'm just using that as an example. Men seem easier to please because they

don't have as much attention on small imperfections. And that's fine. Their attention seems to be somewhere else, and I feel less pressure to be perfect.

Before my relationship with Christine, I always wanted to be the center of a man's attention. Since I've been with Christine, I'm far less concerned with that. Guys—they don't seem to mind much what I'm up to. It just doesn't concern them. *Oh, you're going somewhere, and I won't see you for a while. Okay. Bye.* Men's easy acceptance, the way they just roll with things, used to make me feel like they don't care, but it's not an issue for me anymore. I don't exactly know why. I think I saw my suspicious, uptight self reflected back to me in my relationship with Christine, and I didn't like how that way of being left me feeling. Not that Christine actually was like me, but I saw myself clearly in her, and I realized I'd rejected a lot of love over the course of my life due to my own absurd fear of the unknown. And those experiences hadn't left me feeling very good about myself.

That was a good learning experience, although I haven't figured out how to transfer it back into a relationship with a woman. I haven't really had much of an opportunity either. Part of me is ... my heart is still in the past with Christine.

I should point out that my heart was in that relationship with Christine unlike it's been in any other. With her, I felt like I could love and give my whole heart. I felt more known and present with Christine, more alive and real. I felt more at home in my own skin. I felt more like I knew who I was and what I was about. I felt safe to feel deeply and express my love openly, even if it seemed schmaltzy, and even during sex. I feel thwarted in this level of expression with a man. This part of me has never felt safe or nurtured in my relationships with men.

These are totally unrealistic expectations for me to place on my male partner. I've tried to communicate my experience and desire, to recreate it, and he's really not sure what I'm talking about.

Where this disconnect really shows up is in the area of sex, which was very tender with Christine. Our connection was very strong. There were female sensibilities. There was conversation around sex. There were more dimensions to sex, and we were really present. It hasn't been that way for me with men. After hiding my softness for so many years, it was such a revelation that Christine wanted my sweet side to see the light of day. *Oh, my God. No, no. Let's have that sweet side.* It was really scary at first to let go and just be me, but then it was, oh, so good.

Of course, now I want to be able to express that. There's a place there that was my place. I now value my own sweetness too, because I know that it's possible for it to exist in the world without getting trampled. But I still don't feel my true self is appropriate sexually with men. I still feel that I have to stand guard and shroud my tenderness. Perhaps that's why sex is not a feature of my current relationship.

## —Advice—

### Talk with Your Spouse

I have a friend who used to do a one-man show. He would read his poetry and perform monologues and songs. One of his pieces was about a man who was married and didn't tell his wife he was having sex with another man. That was twenty years ago, but I still remember being horrified by that story.

I would hate to have a partner lie to me that way. I find it extremely disturbing. On one level, there's the betrayal of being married to someone who's cheating and lying, as well as potentially exposing you to sexually transmitted diseases you don't know to protect yourself against because you think you're in a monogamous relationship. On another level, you're shut out of your partner's true feelings and desires, and you have no chance to ever contribute to your partner being fulfilled.

I believe that in certain cultures and communities, the phenomenon of having a secret sex life is more prevalent. Men are married to women and have sex with other men. Maybe that allows them to believe that they're not gay.

My advice would be to handle things responsibly with your spouse, and be true to yourself, and be in communication with your spouse before you jump into another relationship. Don't let it get to the point where you're acting out and not dealing with what you're doing. Keep everything in service to the relationship you're currently in. I mean, you can't sit down and tell your husband or wife that you think you're gay without things getting messy. The chances are good that it's going to be messy and people may be upset.

I think it's more difficult to talk with your spouse if you've already had sex with someone else. Once that's happened—once you've cheated—it's a lot harder for your spouse to be generous in their ability to listen to you

and talk with you. If I had had sex with Christine and then came back to talk with Luke, it would not have gone as well. There would have been all this hurt and betrayal to overcome before we could have the important conversation. It would have been a hellacious mess. Some people may think my situation is a hellacious mess anyhow, but I think I'm blessed.

It's essential to communicate to people you trust who are stakeholders before you do anything. That can help sort things out too, because otherwise you just have these crazy ideas spinning around inside your head. It can help to get other points of view and feedback.

I think if you've not done anything yet that's outside the boundaries of your marriage—if you're just communicating about what you're thinking and feeling—it's a lot more likely to bring you and your spouse closer, whether the two of you stay together or not. My conversations with Luke definitely made us way closer. They put a whole new realm of reality and authenticity into our relationship that wasn't there before.

It isn't like the conversation I had with Luke was immediately all about joy. There were definitely lots of things that came up that we had to talk about to get through it, but we kept tackling it. We kept communication open—and, yeah, there were times when I didn't want to communicate because it was like my private little secret that I didn't want to share with anybody. I didn't want it to see the light of day. I was afraid of what somebody might try to do to it.

But if I hadn't been in communication with Luke, I never would have acted on my desire to be with Christine. Even though it didn't work out with her, it was one of the more beautiful experiences that I've ever had. I don't regret it at all.