

## Preface

Growing up, I was always the good boy, and I'm sick of it. Not only was I a good boy, but I also felt self-righteous about how good I was. Yet I knew that another part of me wasn't so good and wanted to be one of the bad boys. I was lonely because I felt I needed to hide those thoughts I believed to be bad.

After I wrote my first book, one of my patients came into my office and said, "Dr. Olson! I read your book. You told me a lot more than I needed to know. Why did you do that?" It was her last therapy session after my having seen her for twenty-five years. The final thing she said to me when she left my office that day was, "I've always thought I was a lesbian." Only after learning some of my secrets did she finally feel the courage to tell me her deepest, unspoken conflict.

As you read through this book you, too, may think, "You told us a lot more than we needed to know," but I have written this book to come clean. I want you to know me as I am even though some of you might prefer not to. I went through much of my life feeling like an impostor. I tried to be someone I was not because I thought I had to fit in. But nothing makes one feel lonelier than to feel like you can't show up as yourself.

I couldn't have published this book earlier in my life. The potential consequences would have been too great. But I am old now. Old age gives us the freedom to be who we are. But we can never entirely sever our concern that others will disapprove of us. As scary as writing this book feels, if I am known at all in this world, I want to be known as myself. I know there will be consequences because some people are

not going to want to let me be that person. I hope that you will accept me knowing who I am, but I no longer need that approval from you as I once did. As I wrote in the final chapter, “Old age allows us to say, ‘Fuck off!’”

The events I have written about are intensely personal, and yet variations of these stories are nearly universal whether you’re gay, straight, bisexual, or something else. These are topics we’re not supposed to talk about. But not sharing them cuts us off from others and leads us to feel isolated and disconnected. So often I hear from others, “I feel like I’m the only one who’s ever felt this way.” But I know that the only reason they feel so alone is because they’ve been too afraid to talk about the hard stuff. And we all have hard stuff.

Someone once told me that if you want to write a memoir, start with the most difficult chapter first because if you can’t write that one, you can’t write the book. I did that. I wrote that first chapter about ten years ago. For all those years, I wondered, “Will I ever have enough courage to hit Send?”

Anne Lamott, author of the book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, said, “If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should’ve behaved better.” Telling my story inevitably involves telling parts of other people’s stories, and those stories aren’t mine to tell. Sometimes I was hurt by the ways they behaved, but many times I hurt them. Loving people means setting them free to behave the way they choose. And my hope is that those I have hurt when I behaved badly will forgive me and continue to love me.

Why would I write about death and suicide, sex and infidelity, betrayal and forgiveness? I’ve written about them because we think about these topics constantly, but don’t talk about them enough. Knowing that others have felt the same way or done the same things helps relieve us of our shame and guilt.

Facts don’t change minds; our stories do. When I was a resident in psychiatry, we were told never to have anything personal in our offices. Even wearing a wedding ring disclosed more information than our supervisors wanted us to. We were to be a blank screen onto which our

patients projected their desires and conflicts. I presented to the world an image of someone with all the answers while hiding the fact that I hadn't found solutions in my own life. I hate hypocrisy, and I hadn't dealt with my own conflicts. I've always loved hearing other people's stories while being afraid to tell my own.

I agree that too much disclosure, too soon, can damage a therapeutic relationship. But sometimes—as when I'm working with an older man who has same-sex desires—if I tell him, “I'm gay. I've been married to a woman, and I have children,” I can immediately drive the therapy to a deeper level. On the other hand, disclosing that too soon could send another man into a panic, as if I were saying, “This is what I did. This is what you should do too.” My choices are not necessarily the right choices for you.

Through the years, I have found that many of you want to talk about those hidden elements of who you are with someone you know will accept you. My hope is that as you read my story, you may come to accept that some of the bad things you believed about yourself really weren't so bad after all.

I have used a conversational tone in this book because I want you to imagine that we're sitting together in a coffee shop, sharing our stories. The essays are arranged by topic rather than chronological order. Although we may disagree about certain points of discussion, deep conversations lead to connections, and all of us want connection. Those connections also allow us to work through the subjects where we disagree. Walk away from me if you feel you must; I won't walk away from you.

Brené Brown, a researcher in intimacy, says that to connect in our relationships, we must be seen, and seen deeply. I hope that this book allows you to see me in that way. But I also hope it lets you see yourself—and to see yourself deeply. My wish is for you to find someone with whom you can share your stories and have these hard conversations, and I hope that talking about the hard things will make them easier.

Although the term *gay* is preferred to *homosexual*, I have sometimes used *homosexual* because of its historical context. I have also used the

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term *queer*, which some will consider offensive or pejorative. Young people in particular use this term when the words *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* are thought to be too limiting or laden with cultural overtones they feel don't apply to them.

This book is a work of creative nonfiction. Our memories are never factually accurate. We alter them as we reconstruct them, and they are further altered each time we tell them. I have reconstructed my memories to be accurate to the true spirit of what happened rather than to the details. I have recreated dialogue as carefully as I can recall it.

I want to thank those who have trusted me with the most intimate details of their lives through emails and correspondence. I have included some of their stories in this book with their permission. In some cases, two stories have been combined. To protect them, details have been modified by changing names, ages, physical characteristics, locations, and personal details. Some people will be easily identified whether I use their names or not.

I also want to thank everyone who helped me with this book, even those who should've behaved better. You all have enriched my life.

## Illusions of My Father

All memories are but reconstructions. We believe our memories are like video recordings of our earlier lives. But they are like ambiguous inkblot images onto which we project our unconscious thoughts, motives, and desires. Here, then, are the illusions of my father.

On a sauna-like day in late August 1946, I skipped to meet our family, friends, and neighbors as they alighted from their cars. They looked filled with dread as they arrived at our small, white clapboard farmhouse in northeast Nebraska. I was three years and a few months old. My mother had carefully parted my curly blond hair, and I wore my Sunday-best bib overalls.

I was too young to understand that the party I awaited was for mourners coming to pay their last respects to my thirty-three-year-old father. He lay



Loren, at age 3, with his mother, Martha Katherine Koester, and father, Alva "Alvie" Harold Olson, about 1946 on their farm in Cedar County, Nebraska. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)



Merlin “Lefty,” age seven, Marilyn, age five, Janice “Jan,” age three, and Loren, age one, in 1944. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)

wearing his Sunday-best suit in a blue velveteen-covered coffin in the corner of our tiny dining room, as was the custom in those days.

I expected them to ask, “What’s your name, young man?” to which I had always answered, “My name is Loren Alva H. Olson.” I always emphasized the *H*. I had seized the *H* from my father, who signed his name *Alva H. Olson*. I wanted to be just like him.

But on that day, no one wanted to play our familiar game. We had played it over and over in the past, invariably leading to laughter and smiles of approval. I always needed that approval too much.

I wondered, “Where are the kids? Why is everyone so gloomy at a party?”

They arrived for the reception in their Sunday-best clothes, too hot for that stifling, humid day. They lingered as they approached the house to greet my thirty-one-year-old mother. Uncharacteristically, she stood in the doorway like a cut flower that was too wilted to be saved but still too pretty to throw away. Her eyes focused on nothing more than an unknowable future.

My father played the saxophone in the Olson Family Band. The band was composed of my Uncle Ralph, who’d purchased a violin through the Sears-Roebuck catalog and learned to fiddle by studying the book that came with it, and my aunt Vivian, who played the piano “by ear,”



The Koesters were a close-knit family and always celebrated holidays and major life events together. This photo of the cousins was from Christmas 1946. *From left:* Gary Schroeder, Loren, and Delaine “Dee” Isom Trim. (Courtesy of Norman Koester.)

meaning she had little if any formal training. My Uncle Glen was too young to join the family band.

In the early 1930s, the Olson Family Band played for house dances. These dances were held in the farm homes with furniture cleared to the side to make a dance floor. It was at one of these dances in the 1930s where my father met my mother, who had come to the dance with her sisters. Grandma Olson never approved of their relationship since my mother was German. The Olson lineage was a lot of things, but certainly not German.

My Aunt Sophie took charge of the funeral reception. My mother’s mother was undoubtedly there, but my memory of her is like faded and peeling wallpaper: always there but barely noticed. Aunt Sophie had replaced Grandma as the matriarch of the family. Aunt Sophie always wore practical black lace-up orthopedic shoes. She greeted the arrivals



Members of the Olson Family Band about 1922 before they became a band. *From left:* Loren's father, Alva; Aunt Vivian Olson Lindley; and Uncle Ralph Olson. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)

and directed them to put their hot dishes and Jell-O salads on the enameled table in the small kitchen. They had prepared their favorite recipes (almost always named something “delight”), which they heard on *The Neighbor Lady* radio broadcast from WNAX in Yankton, South Dakota.

Aunt Sophie instructed them to leave their bouquets of handpicked flowers (mostly gladiolas) beside my father's coffin. For many years after, my mother complained of the stench of gladiolas, even though hybridizers had long ago sacrificed fragrance for varieties of color. My mother always hated gladiolas after that day.

My mother extended her hand to greet everyone as if it were reserved for children or adults behind closed doors. She wore her best dress. It was her only suitable dress. The balance of her wardrobe consisted solely of “wash dresses” that farmers' wives wore every day—dresses they had scrubbed in homemade lye soap, which removed all the color as well as any stains.

The house may have been purchased from the Sears-Roebuck catalog, as some were in those days. It had four small rooms downstairs: a kitchen, dining room, living room, and the parents' bedroom. Upstairs were two bedrooms, one for boys and one for girls, no matter how many of each were in a family.



Martha Katherine Koester, age twenty, and Alva Harold Olson, age twenty-two, were married on January 23, 1935, during the Great Depression. They married in the home on the Koester “home place” in Allen, Nebraska. The \$150 in wedding gifts was used to purchase furniture, including a piano. (Courtesy of Marilyn Olson Robinder and Norman Koester.)



A few days before he died, Daddy was making hay in our meadow alone. He had introduced a new horse into his team that pulled the hay wagon. Hitching a new horse to an older, well-trained horse was a common practice to help break a new horse into working as a team. A high-spirited horse that is not well trained continually challenges the older horse and the driver’s skills. He will wait for just the right moment to attempt to break away. The older, well-trained horse acts to stabilize the team, anchoring them in place.

Since my father worked alone, no one could help reconstruct what transpired. Something spooked the horses. The strength and excitement of the young horse overpowered the more compliant one. They ran about a mile back to the security of their barn, pulling the hay wagon. When they reached the barn, the doorway, narrower than the wagon, abruptly blocked the horses from entering the barn.

My father, who was trapped in the harnesses beneath the hay wagon, died a few days later of a ruptured spleen. Ten years later, surgeons developed a procedure to remove a spleen, a procedure that could have saved his life. I never knew my father; I hope he knew me.

In small towns, people judge a man’s reputation by the size of his funeral. My mother regularly boasted of the one thousand people that attended my father’s funeral.

Some have suggested that my young father was no match for the spirited horses that killed him. When I was young and pitying myself for not having a father, I became angry and blamed him for abandoning me through his carelessness. But my Uncle Glen—who knew my father best and loved him as much as I do—set me straight. Uncle Glen insisted that my father was an excellent horseman. He and my dad acquired wild mustangs through a government agency and brought them to our farm in Nebraska. They would break the feral horses to ride, then sell them to other farm families as well-trained horses.

Fathers teach boys the code of masculinity even without knowing they're doing it. How does a boy without a father learn to become a man? Several years later, my sister Jan and I had a conversation about how we studied fathers in our friends' families to try to understand what a father's role was. I didn't know how my father looked or the sound of his voice. What made him laugh, and what was the sound of his laughter? I didn't know the feel of his touch.

My small town in Nebraska held an annual father-son banquet. I envied the boys who could go with their fathers, but I did not want to go with a proxy. When I was about nine years old, a neighbor man who had no children asked my mother if he could take me, although I'm not sure why. I don't think he wanted to go any more than I wanted to go with him. We were surrogate father and son. It only called attention to the fact that he was childless and I was fatherless.

He was older than my father would have been. He was short and squat with a potbelly, unlike my father, who had been slim and athletic. My proxy father seemed ill-suited to be the insurance salesman he was; he seemed even less suited to being a father. My lungs seized up as I got in his car from the stench of cigarette smoke. My father had never smoked. Although I hungered for the touch of my father, I resisted having this man touch me with his cigarette-stained fingers. We spoke very little, unable to find anything we could share.

Being with him as a boy without a father felt like being a plus one at a party. I imagine it felt the same for him. You weren't invited; you came only because a friend invited you. You didn't make the A list of invited

guests. You might have fun. You could even meet some interesting people. But the feeling of being slightly out of place never left me. The evening seemed much longer than it actually was. I couldn't wait to get home, where I felt like I belonged.

My Uncle Glen idolized my father, but he was only nineteen years old when my father died. He and my mother tried to manage the farm for a time, but grief undermined their success. Emotionally they had nothing left over for me.

Grandpa Olson was locked inside his body with Parkinson's disease. I actively searched for men to be surrogate fathers, but none measured up to the canonized image of my father. I had uncles we saw often, but they were all much older than my mother. Her brothers had young adult sons of their own. My cousins treated me well, but they were ten to fifteen years older. They called me Henry, but my name was Loren Alva H. Olson. I felt more like a puppy than their peer.

Several years later, when I was about thirteen, my friends and I showered and dressed after football practice. My best friend, Fred, caught his penis in the zipper of his Levi's. Fred hid his privates with his hands and walked home to wait a couple of hours for his father. Who would help me extract my penis from my zipper if I got it caught? There are some things a boy doesn't want to ask his mother to do. I wanted a father whom I could call and say, "Dad, I need some help with my penis." Once, for a high school play, I needed a man's suit. My mother said she still had an old suit of my father's in a trunk in the attic. As she dug through the chest, she found his suit under her mother's wedding veil and old pictures of relatives I didn't remember. She removed his suit from the trunk and pulled it to her chest. As she inhaled deeply, she began to cry softly. She said, "I can still smell your dad on his suit." I wanted to be able to smell my father too.

From time to time, I would ask my mother about my father. She dismissed my questions by saying only what an incredible man he was. She characterized him as flawless. She portrayed him as an idol that I knew I could never be. No matter how good I might be, I would always come up short.



Loren's mother, Martha Koester, graduated from Allen High School in Nebraska in 1932. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)



Loren's father, Alva Harold Olson, like so many farm boys of the era, only received an eighth-grade education. He died in a farm accident on August 1, 1946, at age thirty-four. The local newspaper estimated over one thousand people attended his funeral. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)

I met my wife, Lynn, in Omaha, Nebraska, during my last year of medical school. She had worked with my mother, and she had left something in the office when she went off to her first teaching job in Bellevue, Nebraska, just outside of Omaha. My mother's motives to get us together were obvious—and effective.

I was thunderstruck when I met Lynn. She won my heart immediately, but I doubted I had a chance at winning hers. We became engaged during my last year in medical school and her first year of teaching, and we got married after graduation. When we made our vows in front of family and friends, we expected to be married “till death do us part.” We didn't make our vows with our fingers crossed.

Lynn came from Laurel, Nebraska, less than thirty miles from Wakefield, where I grew up. Our backgrounds were similar. We had the same values. We were both Lutherans. In another culture, our parents would have arranged our marriage; perhaps my mother did.

Lynn and Loren on their honeymoon in the Teton Range, Wyoming, June 1968. They married a few days after he graduated from medical school at the University of Nebraska. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)



When I was in my thirties, Uncle Glen's son, Gayland, came to stay with Lynn and me. I asked Gayland to tell me about my father. Our conversation lasted well into the night. "Tell me some dirt," I said. "I need some balance, something to attach my dad to the ground." I thought my cousin might have heard something in his family that would pluck a few feathers from the angel's wings my mother had given him. I needed to remove the shroud that prevented access to his humanity.

Gayland replied, "I've got nothin'. My dad worshiped him. Dad might have said he was a bit arrogant." I felt as if he had manufactured something to satisfy me.

In 1975, when I was thirty-two years old and my mother was sixty, she married Martin Mortenson. She'd been a widow for nearly thirty years. I'm sure she never married earlier because no man could live up to my exalted father. I asked her once why she never dated anyone, and she responded, "I had a boyfriend once." She was referring to my father.

As I lay in bed on my mother's wedding night, I suddenly sat straight up and said to Lynn, "Oh, my God! Do you think Mom and Marvin are doing it?" Twenty years too late, I first thought about my parents as sexual beings.

I loved Grandpa Marvin, as we called him after welcoming him into the family. Although he was said to have been quite stern with his own children when they were young, with me and my siblings, he was always

warm and gentle. I loved him as much as I could love any man who wasn't my actual father. Grandpa Marvin had many characteristics that I imagined my father would have had. He was a warm and gentle man who had been a successful cattle farmer. He was a sports fan and particularly liked baseball, as my father had. He had a great sense of humor with an infectious laugh. A proud Swede, he was as Lutheran as my Grandpa Koester. He didn't question his faith. I remembered from my childhood that his name topped the list of contributors to Salem Lutheran Church that was printed in the back of the yearbook.

Grandpa Marvin was a somewhat simple man who read the newspaper but didn't question authority. At times, he said things that would make a bigot blush, but he would have been ashamed if he thought he had ever said anything hurtful. I loved the fact that he cried, and he wasn't humiliated like I was when tears came to my eyes. He couldn't fill the hole left by my father's death, but he plugged it rather well.

I loved Grandpa Marvin most one Christmas. After coming out as gay, I had started dating Doug, and I brought him with me to Nebraska to meet my family for the first time. We had arranged to stay in a hotel because I assumed my mother and stepfather would be uncomfortable if Doug and I slept together in their home. The temperature was twenty degrees below zero when we got up to leave.



Grandma Martha and Grandpa Marvin Mortenson in the mid-1990s. They were married twenty-four years before Loren's mother died. Each of them had four children of similar ages. All eight children had attended school and church together in Wakefield, Nebraska. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)

As we opened the front door to go, Grandpa Marvin said, "It's foolish for you to go out on a night like this. We have room, stay here." It not only assured me they liked Doug but that they also accepted that I am gay. Only years later did I learn that Grandpa Marvin had struggled with my relationship with Doug even more than my mother.

Throughout my early life, I blamed my father's death for my feeling like a flawed man. I had buried my same-sex desires until I was in my forties. My conflicts with my sexuality and a normative life were much like the power of my father's horses. My desires and my dreams were competing forces that I seemed unable to control. Now at seventy-eight years old, I feel the forces are in balance.

It is up to me to master my desires. I can balance the competing forces of my desires and dreams. I am Loren A. Olson, with an emphasis on the A for my father, Alva.

## Fitting in Is Not Belonging

The sign that welcomed visitors to Wakefield, Nebraska, said Pop. 1030. The town's size didn't vary in all the years I lived there. It was a close-knit community linked by culture, economy, religion, and blood. The people not only knew each other, they knew each other's histories. Most families had many interconnecting links. In the generation before me, four Anderson brothers had married four sisters. Most of the family names were Swedish, although a few Germans had settled there too. Five Lutheran churches were scattered over a ten-mile radius from Wakefield. Church services were held in both English and Swedish until the early twentieth century. Most people looked alike, thought alike, and believed alike.

Wakefield was pastoral, but not in the sense of its being a charming and serene small town in rural America. It was pastoral because the Lutheran pastors were leaders in the community who made clear the distinctions between right and wrong. To an outsider, Wakefield appeared normal. The people who lived in Wakefield thought it was better than normal. They believed it was definitely better than Emerson and Allen, the two closest towns.

When I was nine years old, a neighbor had made a deal with me. If he bought a power mower, I could use it to mow lawns around Wakefield to make some money for the family. The one condition of the deal was I would mow his lawn regularly too. We needed the money.

I always struggled to start the mower. One day, I called my widowed mother at her work and sobbed, "I can't get the lawnmower started again."



She responded, "Of course you can. You're a man, aren't you?"

How does one answer that question? I thought, "Men fix machines; I can't fix mine; I must not be a man." I felt as if she'd ripped off one testicle.

Men's and women's roles were dogmatic, and if people strayed too far from those roles, they paid the penalty for it. My mother knew the values of her generation and wanted to teach them to me. Had I been a girl, she might very well have said to me, "Of course you can cook. You're a woman, aren't you?" It was the way she understood the world.

My mother was a kind woman and protective of my feelings. Now, as an adult, I can see she had intended to encourage my nascent manhood. All I could think was, "If my dad were here, he would have taught me. How can I learn to be a man without a dad? I will never measure up."

The number of people in Wakefield never changed during the entire fifteen years that I lived there. The people who lived in my hometown didn't change much either. Although a few new people came to town from time to time, they usually didn't stay long. It would have been hard for them to feel welcome when the people who lived there had been there for generations and could recite everyone's history down to the most intimate details.

My wife, Lynn, and I lived in Maine for ten years, and our children were both born there. People whose families have lived for generations in Maine think of people like us who move there as "from away." As one story goes, a man who had moved to Maine and raised his children there asked an old Mainer, "I know that I will always be considered 'from away.' But since my children were born here, are they Mainers?"

The old Mainer responded, "If a cat has its kittens in an oven, you don't call them muffins." Although you may find a new life in a new place, the place you came from never entirely lets go of you.

In Wakefield, if someone asked for directions to a farm home, the directions weren't given in distance. Instead, that person more likely would be told something like, "Go down the cemetery road past the old Dahlgren place. Then take the next left. You'll pass the Anderson place

and then the Fisher's. The next lane on the right will be the one you want. Can't miss it." And no one ever did.

The people of Wakefield were taciturn. They meted out discipline through quiet shame. The citizens kept their houses painted and their lawns mowed at the same height as their neighbors' lawns. One Sunday morning, my friend Fred and I were called out by Pastor Carlson in the middle of his sermon. The congregation turned to us with disapproving looks when he said, "Loren and Fred, will you be quiet!" My mother punished me by saying, "Loren, I am so disappointed in you." That was enough.

Wakefield didn't have any bad boys. Sure, some would squeal their tires, throw eggs at Aunt Edna's house, or drink a little beer after a football game. But your parents always knew what you'd done by the time you got home. We lived by a universally subscribed moral code enforced by the fact that there were no secrets. Having everyone know your business wasn't seen as a bad thing. My mother always left her keys in the car. When I asked her about it, she responded, "You just never know when someone might need to borrow your car."

A farmer knew that if he lost his arm in a corn picker that the neighbors would harvest his crops. Those who helped out thought, "There but for the grace of God go I." When I was in Lutheran catechism class, I learned that GRACE stood for "God's riches at Christ's expense." I used to wonder—at least when I had more faith in God—"If God's grace kept you from losing your arm, why didn't that same God's mercy keep him from losing his arm? On what basis does God dispense grace? If God has so much grace to hand out, why had she skipped my family?"

Behavior was monitored through gossip. For the gossipers, accusations trumped truth. I once dressed up as a girl for Halloween. I knew almost immediately after leaving the house that I had done something wrong. No one bullied or taunted me, but I could sense the whispering of the town gossips as I walked by in the parade.

I tried to play Little League baseball because it was expected, not because I wanted to. But the coach said, "Loren, you throw like a girl."

He implied that he didn't want someone like that on his team. I never went back.

We are hard-wired to seek belonging, but acceptance in Wakefield was illusory. You were accepted, providing you played the role. Schoolteachers drove to the next town if they wanted to have a beer. People kept their indiscretions to themselves.

When I was eleven or twelve, I bought a baton and an instruction book through the Sears-Roebuck catalog with the money I saved from mowing lawns. We lived on the edge of town where there was little traffic. I put a forty-five-rpm record player in the window to broadcast Sousa's marches and practiced between the garage and the house. I ran into the garage if I heard a car coming. I was the best baton twirler in my eighth-grade class of twenty-six students. I was good at something I felt ashamed of being good at.

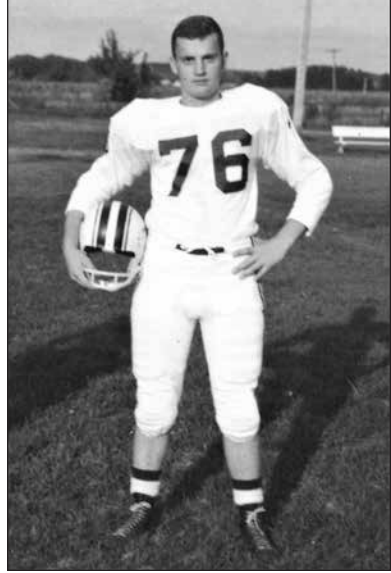
I thought no gay people lived in Wakefield. A couple of "confirmed bachelors" lived there, and two inseparable women were long-term "roommates." Years later, when I asked my mother if they were gay, she responded, "We assumed they were, but there was no reason to talk about it."

No one spoke of any possibility that these couples were in loving, committed relationships. We didn't even have the language for it. Others may have whispered and giggled about them, but if they were discreet about their sexuality and participated in the community as "normal" people, the community of Wakefield ignored it.

As I grew older, people seemed less willing to overlook my unconventional interests. Social disapproval grew stronger. I went out for football. Everyone did. I played well enough to make varsity as a sophomore. My older brother, Lefty, taught me the plays. I was big and powerful enough to play tackle and linebacker. But I never could get to a place in my head where I wanted to hurt someone.

When I was about thirteen, a handsome senior boy was the lifeguard at Wakefield's swimming pool. I wanted to be like him in every way. I even fancied dating the popular homecoming queen he dated. Now I recognize he was the one I was smitten with. A mutual desire for a

Loren's football photo from his senior year at Wakefield High School, 1960–61. (Courtesy of Loren A. Olson.)



woman triangulated my desire for him. It wasn't the only time I disguised my attractions.

I have man boobs, and I've always felt self-conscious about them. When I went swimming as a teenager, I either stood shoulder-deep in the water or lay facedown on my towel. When that wasn't possible, I always had a T-shirt handy. On my chest was physical evidence that I wasn't quite a man; it was as obvious as if I had a giant tattoo saying *SISSY* on my chest.

After football practice, my teammates and I showered together, and I faced the wall to hide my shame. I hated exposing my naked body to anyone. One night, while we showered, Coach Pappy yelled at me, "Olson, with tits like that, you should wear a bra! Ha, ha." The other guys snickered nervously; they knew they could be the next victim of Coach Pappy's verbal assaults. He hadn't singled me out for his bullying. All of us had vulnerabilities. He sought them out, and then he struck.

He may have meant to toughen us up. As young men, we heard often enough, "This will make a man out of you." Maybe he wanted to piss us off, hoping we'd transfer that anger onto our opponents. But the only person on the football field I wanted to hurt was Coach Pappy. Had I told him that, his response would likely have been, "Don't be such a fucking sissy." Real men were supposed to be able to take it and give it back.

Boobs are feminine. Women were thought to be weak, and I needed to be strong. I hated my boobs because I presumed boobs excommunicated me from the fraternity of manhood. I was ashamed of this physical evidence because I wasn't the man I wanted to be. Coach

Pappy humiliated me by shaming me in front of my friends. The worst kind of pain comes from being exposed for something you already believe is true.

My sense of being a misfit in small-town America picked up momentum during my last years in high school. I felt cramped by the small size of our school. Opportunities were limited. You were either headed toward farming or college. Boys who lived in town couldn't take shop classes. Only girls could take home economics and cooking.

Mrs. Hughes taught English, but for three years we did little beyond diagramming sentences. All twenty-five of my classmates took her classes. I'd mastered diagramming by my sophomore year, while some in my class never did. Either way, all of us were bored. In my final semester of English, Mrs. Moller taught our class, and for the first time, I was exposed to literature. I grasped at the chance to discover more about the world away from the prairie.

Mrs. Hughes also directed our senior play. In the part I played, I needed to put on an overcoat. The first time I did it, she said, "Loren, you put on the coat like a girl." I couldn't throw a ball or put on a coat like a man. I constantly surveilled my actions to correct any errors, but I wasn't always successful.

As the country grew more conservative during the Red Scare and the McCarthy era, our teachers reminded boys who excelled academically that we had a patriotic duty to study math and science. Girls were told to choose nursing or teaching until they married into financial security or to have "something to fall back on" if left alone. With the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, those cautions were accelerated. When someone asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I always answered, "I don't know for sure, but it will be something in math and science." That's what good boys answered.

I felt continuously pressured to play a role. I would have been more honest if I had said, "I'll do anything that will get me the hell out of Wakefield." It wasn't that Wakefield was such an awful place. My brother, Lefty, served as mayor for many years, and he thought there was no place on earth like Wakefield. But Lefty's attitudes fit

in; mine didn't. This town was right for others, but it just wasn't the place for me.

I hungered for the diversity of an urban environment, even though I'd had little exposure to one. I wanted to make my own choices in a place that had a wide variety of options. I had not yet thought of this desire in terms of conflicts about sexual orientation. I wanted to find my own identity apart from the constraints of the world I'd known.

During my senior year, I saw an ad from United Airlines for flight attendants that said, "Marriage is fine! But shouldn't you see the world first?" I sent for brochures from every major airline to see if any were hiring men. But the 1960s was the era of stewardesses: beautiful, elegant, single women who were hired out of high school and forced to retire either at about thirty years old or if they became pregnant. International airlines hired men as stewards, but they required that applicants be bilingual. My one year of poorly taught Spanish hadn't made me fluent. Airlines didn't actively begin recruiting men until a Supreme Court decision against Pan American Airways in 1971 forced them to. From that point on, *flight attendant* replaced the word *stewardess* in support of gender neutrality.

It might be reasonable for you to ask, "How could you not know you were gay?" For many years, I asked myself that same question. I admit I missed a few significant clues along the way. My earliest self-explanation was that my father died when I was three years old. I had no father to teach me how to be a man. Many years later, I realized that I couldn't continue to blame my father for feeling like I didn't fit in. I didn't begin to feel like a man until I accepted that I was a gay man.

When I try to explain how I didn't know I was gay, I say it was like a child's belief in Santa Claus. A young child never doubts that a fat old man flies through the air with eight reindeer plus one with a light on the end of his nose. Then Santa drops down a chimney and leaves gifts under the Christmas tree. As the child matures, things don't quite add up. But the child is reluctant to let go of this myth. He or she has a lot of good reasons not to investigate the discrepancies. Finally, the secret

is exposed. The child must accept the fact that he or she can no longer cling to a deceitful legend.

Some people in the twenty-first century would like to return to the cultural values of the 1950s. Not me. Those who are nostalgic for that idealized past are dissatisfied with the present. But they are also disillusioned about what small-town America was like for some of us. We understood complete truth was not possible. Those of us who tried to fit in but couldn't believe there was no place for us.

In Truman Capote's book, *The Grass Harp*, Judge Cool spoke to his misfit friends while they sat in their treehouse looking down at the small town they hated. "It may be that there is no place for any of us. Except we know there is, somewhere, and if we found it, but lived there only a moment, we could count ourselves blessed."

Through those years in Wakefield, I asked myself, "Do you have a place for me?" I never felt it did. The people of Wakefield would be surprised that I felt that way. Their myopic attitudes did not allow small-town Americans to see how pressures to conform suppressed our differences and excluded us. I needed a sanctuary—a place where I could misbehave and still be accepted, feel free to reveal the hidden truths about myself, and choose another life made of my own decisions.

I tried to fit in, but fitting in isn't belonging. And nothing is lonelier than pretending to be someone you're not. My escape began in 1961 when I left Wakefield to attend the University of Nebraska.