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It was time to make apple cider. As a kid and teenager, this annual event signaled the beginning of fall, my favorite time of year. Around the time we made apple cider, the world seemed ripe for change. Cool air would swoop in from somewhere beyond home. The leaves would change colors and eventually fall to the ground in colorful flurries. At about the same time, I would start to observe the edges of the ubiquitous corn fields recede day by day until they were completely harvested. These slow and subtle transitions were among the yearly reminders that change would always come; that no matter how long or harsh the summer seemed, life would get better. That hope-filled reminder always started with the apples.

This year, the apples signified big changes for me. It was a nice late-summer day and I was cutting out the bad spots in this year's apple harvest in order to make apple cider with my grandparents. I enjoyed conversing with my grandparents, both of whom are philosophers of life in their own sense. Because I had just returned from Peace Corps in Ecuador, we had a lot of catching up to do! In the slow and measured conversational style common to the rural Midwest, we talked about everything from my cousin's wedding ceremony to Islam. Often, the conversation would lull as the three of us focused intently on cutting the worms out of our apples. After one lull, my grandmother tentatively started out, "Well, Bradley, we haven't gotten a chance to talk about this yet, but we were wondering if you'd like to talk about your being homosexual?"

The question, though awkward, was not unexpected. It was months in coming and in that moment, I was glad that she had brought it up and not I. A few months before, I had sent out one of my long updates about my time in Ecuador. In those updates, I would write about my work, the food, Ecuadorean culture, and my friends. Even after nearly two years, I found enough to write a several page update every few months. Most people would read them, if they got around to it, and then let me know how they were doing. My grandparents were among my most avid readers. However, my last update threw them a bit of a curve ball. I came out.

I did more than just come out. Strike one. I wrote about my Ecuadorean boyfriend and how he got me a kitten. Strike two. Then, I wrote about how I organized with other LGBT volunteers in Peace Corps Ecuador to promote a supportive environment for LGBT PCVs in that country. Three strikes and I was officially and 100% OUT.

Prior to joining the Peace Corps, that would have been unimaginable. Though I had been out during my last 2.5 years of college, I still had not come out to my extended family beyond a few cousins and a couple of aunts. There were a number of reasons. All of them could be reduced to desire not to take on more than I could handle at the time. I wasn't ready.

So what happened in Peace Corps that made me do something so bold? After all, most PCVs spend their entire two years in the closet. How did that result in me coming out to my entire family?

During my time in Ecuador, I was exposed to a number of new challenges. The experience of being wholly responsible for my living situation and work load was entirely new to me. Sure, in college, I lived four hours from home. However, I lived with at least one roommate and never had to worry about preparing anything to eat. That's what the dining hall was for! My job was pretty much laid out for me. I dedicated myself to my studies, activities and social life.

In Ecuador, none of that was there anymore. I had to make sure I was well-fed while coordinating my work in an often unpredictable working environment (I worked in schools and with volunteer groups). I often had to take the initiative to find meaningful work within my community as a workshop presenter extraordinaire. Of course, this involved taking risks and meeting lots of new people. It also

involved developing a sense of humor about myself, especially when my participants - or my Spanish abilities - didn't show up to the workshop. That's a tall order that certainly didn't leave room for wondering what others would think about me.

Though living and working abroad gave me the confidence to be different, it was the people of Ecuador that taught me the more important lesson of being more understanding toward people who hold more conservative opinions that many of us find to be maddening. Having been a gay teenager in the rural Midwest and later a student at a conservative Catholic university, I had become somewhat bitter and jaded regarding small towns and people with conservative ideas and attitudes. I wanted nothing to do with them, that is, until I was assigned to my community in Southern Ecuador.

My community in Ecuador was a parish center of about 4,000 individuals on the outer edge of Cuenca. The life of the parish center was still very centered on its agrarian past. Though they could be characterized as "socially conservative," I noticed no hateful agenda to deprive LGBT folks of rights nor callous disregard for the poor. They were people who loved their families, their fields, and la virgen. Many were poor. They may have said many misinformed things about people both near and far, they had no intention of hurting anyone by their comments. So long as I was respectful, they were usually open to hearing my opinions whenever I disagreed.

For example, my host family occasionally relied on negative stereotypes about Afro-Ecuadoreans. However, when they met my Afro-Ecuadorean (boy) "friend," they found him to be a decent guy. They even invited him over to eat guinea pig a couple of times! Another time, my wonderful host mother said to me, "can you believe that 'los homosexuales' can adopt children in Uruguay?" I unthinkingly responded, "¡chévere!" Judging by her confused look, my response was not what she expected. So, I elaborated by explaining how I thought that LGBT folks were an oppressed minority. I even mentioned that I have a cousin who identifies as bisexual. I was happy that they were getting their rights in Uruguay. Though I know my host mother may not have understood or agreed with me 100%, I do think that I challenged some unquestioned ideas she had. You have to start somewhere.

So this brings me back to that nice late summer day making apple cider with my grandparents. When my grandmother asked me about my "being homosexual," I kept my cool and agreed to the conversation. When my grandmother continued, "you know, I do think that it's a choice," I did not become angry and defensive as I would have two years ago. I remembered my host mother and many other good people I met in Ecuador who hold similar ideas and have yet to be challenged in their assumptions. So, I calmly explained that I never had much of a choice in the kind of people I find attractive though I do have a choice between fearfully hiding behind a mask and embracing myself as God made me. I choose the latter. The conversation continued amicably as we carved out our apples. I was as pleased as I was surprised. As with my Ecuadorean host mother, I don't expect that my grandparents will understand me 100%. After all, it took me years to come to terms with my sexual identity. Change takes time and patience; whether it's an Ecuadorian parish of 4,000 or a single human heart, the principle is the same.

Looking back on that day with my grandparents, I'm very grateful for the opportunity that Peace Corps provided me to effect real change not only in my community members but also in myself. My service taught me many skills necessary to live on my own, take initiative in my work and to truly engage others in volunteering. It also helped me to make peace with my past and with myself. No longer do I need to live in fear of being outed or being otherwise "different." Nor do I harbor anger and bitterness toward those who hold typically conservative ideas regarding sexual identity. After all, the rural areas in which I was raised and where I served are home to many such individuals about whom I care deeply. Those who hold such ideas are not inherently hateful. Many simply have never been shown another way of looking at sexuality. Sometimes, all that's really needed to transform their hearts and minds is patience and an honest conversation - and lots of apples!