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Title

Rev. Sky Anderson Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

March 20, 2013

Extant

1 hour 16 minutes interview (two files) and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rev. Sky Anderson Anderson talks about his childhood, adopting a lesbian identity, long term social justice work, how he and his lesbian partner became MCC clergy, his surgical transition before 1978, and subsequent work with developmentally disabled individuals.

Biographical

Sky Anderson was born in 1939 in Lynn, Massachusetts. He was the oldest of five and as such had a great deal of responsibility. The family was a second generation of Scots in the U.S. and the old country traditions played a big part in the early years of his upbringing. His father was a sheet metal worker and a union activist. His concern for economic and social justice was an important influence for Sky. His dad, a Congregationalist, was the one who took the family to church.

Ordained on August 19, 1979 Sky recognized being “different” from an early age. He always preferred clothing, games and activities that were best “suited” for boys which caused many rifts in the Anderson household. The onset of puberty and beginning to physiologically develop as a girl proved to be very traumatic and confusing for Sky. He felt so much like a boy and did not want to accept any part of this girl thing. But after a time, he could not hide even to himself what lay ahead. One day a friend he worked with at his part time job, took him aside and began talking with him about being a lesbian and she asked him to consider seeing himself as a “butch.” In those days “femme” and “butch” roles became a way of helping people identify themselves, how they would live and act together as couples. Despite the intense inner turmoil

on every level of his life, he went on and did well in his studies and as a leader at school. Survival they call it!

Life at home was difficult, so Sky moved away after graduation—attended Middlesex Community College and graduated on the Dean's List while working at night in a machine shop to support himself. Later he moved to Boston and was invited to live with the Cenacle nuns where he helped with chores and other tasks to cover the cost of his stay there. He attended Boston College at night doing all he could to keep busy and to hide the battle raging on inside of him. In so many ways staying with the nuns was a blessing. Sky got to visit and study with the priests and other sisters staying there while they pursued their studies. The dinner table was a great place to dialogue and process ideas with all of them. He was invited to pursue becoming a nun, but that really brought him back to reality and to face the truth about himself and move on. He will always remember this time and the anointing presence of God's love shown through to him by these inspiring people.

Sky left the Cenacle and then got lost out on the streets. Not having learned enough yet, he decided to enter the Marine Corps. Sky was stationed at Parris Island South Carolina. Recruits were kept so busy there it was refreshing—brutal but safe, or so he thought. By his second year the base was investigated with the intent of purging the corps of all lesbian and gay persons. This went on for weeks and Sky and many others were subjected to lewd and harrowing investigations. Sky refused to give names of anyone and was thrown out of the service with a less than honorable discharge as suspected of being gay.

Sky later settled back in Boston and worked at MIT in cancer research. He lived on Beacon Hill and, on the side, worked with others to stop the gang abuse of LGB kids in the area. Conflict with the gangs resulted in Sky being severely beaten and raped. This trauma, along with his agony around his gender identity, led to an extended stay in a mental health center in Boston. The psychiatrist there tried to help Sky affirm his lesbian identity but refused to explore the possibility of his being transgender.

During this time friends took him to worship at MCC Boston. At first he was very confused and upset by the church's total openness to homosexuals and he wanted to run from that place forever. But remembering the positive portrayal of LGB people there and the love that flowed from the Spirit's presence there enticed him to return a few weeks later. This time he stayed—and kept coming back. Nancy Wilson, assistant pastor, helped arrange Sky's release from the hospital and provided a place for him to live. Sky became increasingly active in church life and in MCC leadership. Eventually Sky and Nancy became partners. He became licensed in MCC and later was sent to Worcester to begin a ministry there.

With MCC San Jose members the ministry began to thrive and Sky and Nancy became co-pastors of MCC Worcester. They began St. Vincent's Alcoholism Center for Gay Alcoholics. They founded the first Worcester Gay Pride March as a reaction to police brutality there and the civilian shootings of gay people in the city. During this time Sky became the District Coordinator of the Northeast District for the UFMCC. He and Nancy lectured at Yale Divinity School, The

University of Hartford, Boston University, Wellesley College and later in Michigan, where they we talked about human sexuality, human rights and social justice. Upon leaving Massachusetts they were honored for outstanding work and leadership in the area of human rights and liberation by the State House of Representatives.

They accepted the call to become co-pastors of MCC Detroit. It was not an easy ministry at first, but the people were wonderful there so they did all they could to help the church grow. But, even as Sky thrived in MCC and as co-pastor with Nancy, the underlying discomfort and questioning of his true identity was eating him away inside. Then upon learning of two gay males transitioning from male to female, everything broke open within. After extended soul-searching and conversation with Nancy, Sky came out as transgender and began transitioning to living as a man. While Nancy tried to be supportive of Sky's decision, this was not so much the case among their prominent circle of lesbian feminist colleagues in MCC. There was considerable angst and quite mixed reactions in MCC to Sky's transition. Sky went through a good deal of trauma and went off on his own to try to deal with his self-acceptance. He did not handle much of this in a healthy way at times. And he agonized over leaving the relationship with Nancy and his work at the State Prison of Southern Michigan which Rev. Joseph Gilbert stepped in to save.

Officiating at MCC San Jose Sky made some poor choices and decided the best thing to do was to leave MCC. He felt the shame he had brought down on his relationship, the church, those he served in the Fellowship was totally unforgiveable. Off he went. Beaten in life, on the street, beaten there and raped and broken again and again there was no way back (in his mind). At the point where he was ready to end it all, Rev. Jeff Pulling found him, talked with him, laid hands on him and prayed so powerfully in the Spirit over him that the love of God became manifest. No matter how Sky thought God felt about him and his wasted life, the compassionate redemptive love of our most merciful God picked him up in those loving arms, those everlasting arms and held him, wiping away every tear and saved him...for all eternity.

Sky went with Jeff to Los Angeles and took a job at the Fellowship office on the switchboard no less (not a real place to hide!!) While working there he got a call from the Rev. Stan Roberts who screamed out his name and said he had been searching all over for him. Stan said he needed Sky to come to San Jose, California, and help him and the community fight against Anita Bryant, Senator John Briggs and some radical right wing clergy who were trying to bring down the whole LGB community in San Jose. Sky had worked for social justice so much of his life and Stan wanted him to come to the church and help train people to stand and lead. Stan wouldn't be able to do this much longer because he was in the early stage of AIDS. This was in 1978.

There were over 40 evangelical preachers on the attack in San Jose. Sky helped build coalitions of LGB people and progressive religious people to resist their anti-gay activities. In 1979 Sky was ordained at the MCC General Conference in Los Angeles as the first transgender clergy to be ordained in MCC. He went on to complete his surgery in that year.

In 1981 Sky began preparations to leave his ministry in MCC San Jose. It was done in agreement with the congregation that the time had come to move on to rebuilding the church. The congregation had walked through the battles with Senator Briggs and the antigay churches that had worn them down but never defeated their spirit throughout the journey. Sky was given a special merit award from the Gay Community for outstanding work in the area of human liberation. He felt the award should be for the congregation of MCC San Jose for the bravery and commitment shown in their work to assist the larger community in its work for justice all those months.

Sky had met his wife-to-be Faye in 1978. Together they took home Jonathan in 1980 and got ready to adopt his older brother Francisco. Two sisters and another brother came later—all with developmental disabilities and all with hearts of gold and all who stole Sky and Faye's hearts away forever. The San Jose congregation threw a great baby shower for Jonathan and spoiled him to the core.

After Sky left the pastorate at MCC San Jose, the Office of Human Relations contacted him and asked him to serve the people in Tent City...all the homeless men, women and children who had paid so high a price for freedom. Later the staff of St. Paul's United Methodist Church would contact him and ask him to join their staff to work with the poor and disenfranchised for awhile. He agreed but only if he could serve as MCC clergy and as an openly transgender man. They agreed to both and so another journey began. He and his family lived in the Young Adult Minister's House. They took in 18 people from Tent City and with them wrote and opened a house for homeless single men and women where they could come to heal and grow to help others like them who were seeking justice and a home.

Sky was later hired on as Program Director for the Emergency Housing Consortium for Santa Clara, Morgan Hill and San Mateo...again to work with homeless men, women and children to find healing. Then he was called to work with the poor and undocumented Hispanics and others in a Catholic Church in East San Jose. There he helped open a medical clinic, clothes and food closets and acted as a bridge to services.

Sky in 2013 will celebrate 33 years of marriage (on the 4th of July) to Faye, a wonderful woman who loves and serves whoever is in need. She is his best friend and lover. She is a Reiki practitioner and healer and child of God.

Sky is the acting chair of Area Board 7 Board of Directors for people with developmental disabilities. That job is to see that the wellbeing and safety and needs of all the men, women and children seeking help and hope will be served by the agencies funded to meet their needs no matter what. They serve Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Benito counties working together to meet the needs of those with developmental disabilities, no matter what sexuality, race, religion or color.

Sky affirms that this is what it means to be transgender; this is how he serves God and all people.

This interview was conducted by Mark Bowman, the executive director of LGBT-RAN. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has played a key leadership role in establishing a number of religious ventures and programs.

Scope and Content

Rev. Sky Anderson was the first transgender person licensed as clergy in MCC. In this oral history, Anderson talks about his childhood, and realizing his gender identity. He discusses his education and how he became involved in the clergy, and the discrimination he faced both for his sexuality and gender. Sky is an activist for both the homeless and for the developmentally disabled.

Access

Open to all researchers.

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