



OUR ALLIES



March 2023
Volume 03 Issue 01


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Nisnis - A quarterly magazine
published by Queer Ethiopia
focusing on LBQ issues

QUEER ETHIOPIA


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“Queer Ethiopia” is an alternative space created by a group of queer Ethiopian women. It is designed to be a space for a diverse group of Ethiopian queer women whose sexual and gender identifications vary. It includes cis and trans women who may be lesbian, bisexual or asexual. This is a space where the experiences of queer people takes center stage. We hope to include personal experiences from our daily lives as queer people, various stories, interviews, original artwork and poetry. We hope it will also serve as a place where Ethiopians in Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the diaspora come as themselves to explore and create an online community.

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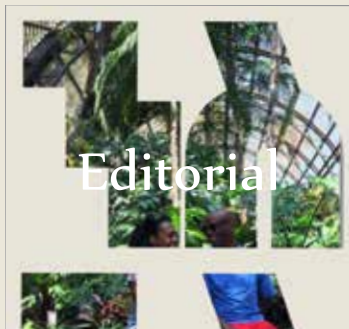
   [QueerEthiopia](https://QueerEthiopia.com)

 etqueerfamily@gmail.com

 t.me/queeret



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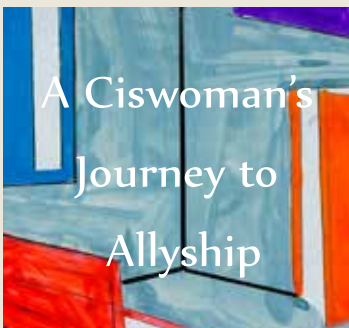
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From the Editors

Finding Ethiopians who accept us is always a reason for celebration. When that person is a 69-year-old Ethiopian father of a queer child and one who actively advocates for his daughter, it is damn near impossible not to cry.

When his daughter came out to him, Ato Alemayehu told her “I love you; you are my daughter, and you can be anything you want”.

Welcome to the seventh issue of Nisnis, where we focus on allies. Allies are people who stand up for the equal and fair treatment of people different from themselves. In this context, they are heterosexual and cisgendered people who accept and advocate for the rights of those in the LGBTQ+ community. They offer us support where and when we need it; they can speak louder than we can; and they can play a pivotal role in advancing LGBTQ+ rights, particularly in places like Ethiopia.

As queer people in Ethiopia, speaking up for our rights comes with enormous risks, including prison sentences and death by mob justice. Allies are able to speak from a relative space of safety since they will not be as violently targeted.

In this issue, we approach allyship from various angles. One of our contributors is a lesbian who reflects on her journey of becoming an ally to gender diverse people. “I found myself wanting to protect my cisgender privileges. It didn’t take me long to realize my mistakes. As articulated by many, none of us are free until all of us are free, and I needed to stop thinking of freedom as a commodity that was in short supply and thus could be sold out”. Her story offers a challenge to cisgendered individuals to step up as allies.

Another contributor, a heterosexual Ethiopian woman, warmly recalls how she became an ally to her queer cousin. The closeness she developed and the space that she was able to create for her cousin restored our faith in our fellow citizens.

A moving and powerful interview with two siblings is also part of this issue. Nahom’s simple acceptance of his queer sister is awe inspiring. He asks, “What is important at the end of the day? Are you going to lose a member of the family because of your badly held values?” It is a strong reminder that our families have the potential to have our backs. The way that Luwam feels supported and grounded underscores the value of allies in our lives.

Two of our contributors take us on their journey of going from being allies to becoming part of the LGBTQ+ community. One of them writes, “Two months into the pandemic, I had a sexuality crisis... It’s one thing to empathize with a group and fight in whatever small way to end its oppression, but it’s another to be a part of it”.

The responses from readers to the question, “Who is your biggest ally and why?” are also a reminder that, even as homophobic and transphobic as Ethiopia is, we still have phenomenal people who support and accept us as we are: Ethiopian and queer.

Thank you yet again for reading Nisnis. We also appreciate everyone who contributed to the publication of this issue. We wouldn’t be able to do this without you.

Enjoy.

Allies: Embracing us in our fullness



Ato Alemayehu Kebede, pictured here with his daughter Belaine, recalls his conversation with her, “I didn’t react negatively, even when she first told me. I told her, ‘Nothing is wrong with being who you are. If you are happy, nothing else matters’”.

Ato Alemayehu Kebede is almost 69 years old. He is the father of a child who is queer. When Nisnis reaches out to him to interview him for a story on being an ally, he is overjoyed. He says he has been looking for ways to offer more support for the LGBTQ+ community and feels this is a prime opportunity. He openly laments the lack of spaces where he can create more positive change for the LGBTQ+ Ethiopian community.

He even takes time to let the interviewer know.

“First, thank you very much for asking me to be interviewed. This has always been on my mind,” said Ato Alemayehu.

For a queer Ethiopian child, a father who is supportive is like winning the lottery. A father who actively wants to advocate is as rare as our indigenous Walia ibex.

Comments made both in person and on social media attest to how LGBTQ+ people are disparaged in Ethiopia. Even content about LGBTQ+ people that is directed at the LGBTQ+ community often leads to a barrage of insults. For instance, a recent comment on an episode of *Ethioqueer Podcast* where a sister is discussing her support of her queer sister reads, “If you were my sister, I would have shown you that your only option is death. You are a [corpse]”.

According to a 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Project, 97 percent of Ethiopians believe being an LGBTQ person should not be accepted by society. Out of the 47 nations that took part in the survey, Ethiopia’s rate of non-acceptance was behind only two countries.

While this number is from a project conducted more than 15 years ago, the attitude towards LGBTQ people somewhat remains the same. When *Queer Ethiopia* asked in a Facebook post if LGBTQ+ people would ever consider coming out to family members, almost all said they wouldn’t. One respondent even said that he would rather die than have his mom find out that he is gay. Further, conversations about gender and sexual minorities in Ethiopia often lead to expressions of homophobic and transphobic attitudes.

Given these realities, we didn't anticipate that it would be easy to find people to interview for this article. In fact, finding people to interview was surprisingly easy, even as we underscored that we were looking for allies or accepting people to interview. When asked what pseudonym she prefers, one of our interviewees even went as far as to say that she does not care if we use her real name.

What drives some Ethiopians to be allies of a community that is considered evil, rapists, and a "Western import" by most Ethiopians?

For Ato Alemayehu, who resides in the US, it is simply a case of respecting people and learning to make space for his daughter.

"To be honest, I found out about this when I arrived in the USA. Back home, we used to hear rumors about someone being intersex, a tomboy, or a sissy girl. It was used as an insult and was often rumored about people who were household helpers. I didn't understand it at all," Ato Alemayehu said.

Upon arriving in the US, he met LGBTQ people at his place of work. He also observed that the US offered people, regardless of their sexuality, the right to live freely and to express their sexuality and gender. He also saw people in the media, such as Ellen DeGeneres and others, coming out and living their lives openly.

His exposure to these images and his belief that people have an inherent right to liberty contributed to his openness. While he admired the way that the rights of LGBTQ+ people were respected in the US, he didn't anticipate that he would have a child who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

"I didn't expect it, but when she told me, I didn't feel an ounce of sadness. I told her, 'I love you; you are my daughter, and you can be anything you want; I brought you into this world, and I will support you,'" Ato Alemayehu said.

He was accepting of his daughter, but he also understood that the larger immigrant Ethiopian community could potentially have issues with her queerness. And he attributes this to the fact that most parents feel shame when their children come out to them. This shame often leads to a souring of relationships between parents and children as parents are not able to allow their children to be who they are, he said.

Ato Alemayehu's path to accepting his daughter was due to a genuine feeling of love and to an expansive understanding of sexuality. He says that sexuality is something that is unique to each individual. Rather than prescribing the homophobic attitudes of most Ethiopians, he encourages others to be accepting of the LGBTQ+ community.

"My child did not steal; she did not commit adultery; she didn't do anything that is shameful. I have no problems, and in fact, I should not have any problems accepting her sexuality. This is not a crime; it is something that comes from the way she feels," he said. "You cannot force someone to live in a way that does not reflect who they really are".

Awet is a young Ethiopian man who lives in Addis Ababa. He does not describe himself as an ally but rather as someone who simply does not understand homophobia. He believes that each person has the right to live free from prejudice, discrimination, and hate.

"I believe it's no one's business," he said. "It shouldn't matter to me what two grown adults do in their house as long as they're not hurting anyone. If it matters to me, then something is awfully wrong with me".

He cites religion – particularly the passages about Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible – and culture as being the major forces that lead many Ethiopians to be homophobic and transphobic. He credits his questioning of religious teachings and attitudes with helping him come to accept the LGBTQ+ community. When asked how he developed this attitude despite the oft-held homophobic reactions of many Ethiopians, he said, "Simple. I started using logic and

common sense”.

For Mahlet, the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Ethiopia are inherently related to human rights. She strongly believes that sexual and gender minorities are entitled to the same freedom that other people enjoy by virtue of being human.

“I don’t want anyone to be objectified in any way because of their sexual preference. It is a human right, and [human rights] are not something given to [only] some groups of people,” she said.

Mahlet remembers that her first contact with the LGBTQ+ community was through a man whose gender expression attracted the attention of her close-knit friendship circle. He presented gender in a somewhat “feminine” manner, and some in the group talked about their assumption that he was gay. She remembers the discomfort that some in the group exhibited. She also remembers how wrong it felt to her when people felt uncomfortable in his presence.

Whenever his name came up, the majority of the comments from the larger friend group were homophobic, and they constantly made disparaging comments about people they assumed were queer. During these intense conversations, religion and culture were used to argue that being an LGBTQ+ person was incompatible with Ethiopian society.

Although the friend presented gender in a manner that was not familiar with the male figures in her life, Mahlet was not uncomfortable. It rather led her to ask questions.

“I was curious, and I had to explore these questions [of difference],” she said. “My first contact with the queer community was through him, and [although] we were not that close at first, we got close through the year, and it was a very gradual exploration of those questions for me personally”.

She attributes her non-judgmental exploration to her childhood and the way being open minded and curious were encouraged in her household. For example, when a close friend came out to her as gay, she was so accepting that her friend was confused.

“He was very distressed about [telling me] and he didn’t think that it would be a very easy conversation. When he told me, I was like, ‘Oh okay, tell me more about it’ and he always mentions to this day how easy the conversation was for him,” Mahlet said.

Her interest during these conversations is in trying to figure out how to accommodate, communicate, and provide the best support. This desire to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ community sometimes comes with a price. She often finds herself as the sole accepting voice in a sea of homophobic and transphobic people.

At the heart of Mahlet’s support for the LGBTQ+ community is her understanding that humans have a fundamental need to express themselves and that homophobia and transphobia are attempts to suppress the essence of the humanity of LGBTQ+ people.

“We all have unique experiences. Expressing how we want to live is a fundamental human need and desire. I cannot be okay if you are not okay. That’s how connected we are. Oppression erodes human essence,” she said.

Hani’s journey to allyship is similar to Mahlet’s in that she has always been open minded and not afraid of hard and challenging conversations. Her father had open discussions with her about sex. She also does not remember either of her parents saying anything negative about LGBTQ+ people. However, she imagines that as open minded as they are, they would definitely not be accepting.

When she was 23, she had her first extended exposure to issues surrounding the LGBTQ+ community.

“It wasn’t really new to me, and I didn’t really oppose the idea,” Hani said. “I didn’t think that it was outrageous. It was easy for me to just accept it”.

Based on her interaction with her friends and the reaction of the overall Ethiopian

“It shouldn’t matter to me what two grown adults do in their house as long as they’re not hurting anyone.”

Awet



“Oppression erodes human essence.” Mahlet

society, Hani thinks the root of the homophobia is an overall lack of the ability to think logically and critically. People do not consider scientific evidence but rather rely on what they have heard from others about being LGBTQ. She also argues that most people also operate from a sense of pride and have an inability to change when presented with facts.

Articulating her support and advocating for the community is at times fraught with frustration. She often feels that people are not ready to even listen because they carry so much hate for LGBTQ+ people. At the same time, she openly speaks about her acceptance of LGBTQ+ people within her group of friends, even as they strongly oppose her views.

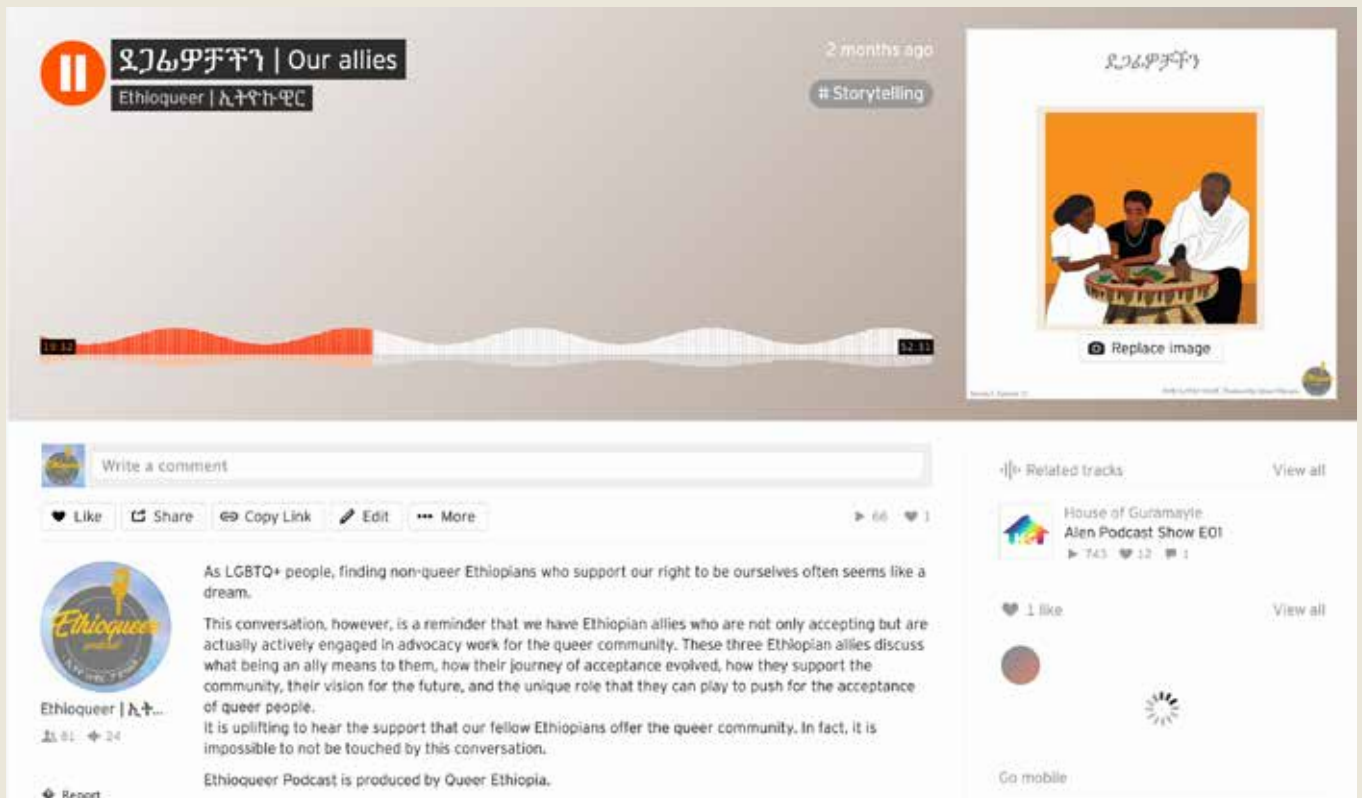
“It is a safe environment for me to have this conversation without changing their perception of me,” Hani said. I don’t think I have managed to change anything, but I do have conversations about acceptance,” Hani said.

While their journeys and levels of advocacy might differ, Ato Alemayehu, Awet, Mahlet, and Hani carry the torch of LGBTQ+ acceptance in a country that is filled with virulent homophobia and transphobia.

Are they a sign that Ethiopia is changing for the better when it comes to accepting LGBTQ+ people? Time will tell. But there is no doubt that fathers like Ato Alemayehu offer hope.

“Our children do a lot of things. Saying I am gay, I am a lesbian, or I am queer is not a sin. The larger Ethiopian community needs to create an open forum for our children so that we can enable them to choose whatever life they want,” he said. “I am ready to talk. If I can save one child’s life, it’s a big thing for me”.

In a country where people have responded that they would rather die than come out to their parents, he offers a breath of fresh air.



Ethioqueer Podcast invited three allies to participate in a conversation about why they are allies, what allyship means to them and what messages they would like to share with the Ethiopian LGBTQ+ community.

It was a podcast that garnered several discussions from the LBQ community. The comments we received are a testament to the power and significance of the conversation.

- Aida -

I don't have anything to add. I liked it, and the people who were on the podcast were entertaining. I think this is targeted at the allies, and so it's better if the larger community listens to it instead of just us because the message is for them. I think a lot of people would have access to it if clips were released on various social media platforms, and this would lead to more acceptance. It is just creating short videos, animations, and video stories that can be released on social media, and this will lead to an increase in the number of people who can see it or listen to it.

Even if they're things that I already know, the way that they discussed it made it a lot of fun. And so it would be good if work was done on providing access to as many people as possible. When [the host] listed the social media that they are on, she listed only Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, so it would be great if they started a TikTok account and started posting videos because a lot more people would see it. And this would be good not just because a lot of people can see it, but also because it will help those who are struggling to accept themselves. So they should work on expanding their visibility because the podcast is really good.



- Senayt -

It's a very nice discussion. To be honest, this is by far the best podcast from what I've heard so far. There can be a lot of people who know about me or about someone else [who is queer]. They will tolerate you because they are your friend or your neighbor, but I have never heard someone accept you and truly believe that this is your choice or your right. I have never heard of anyone being accepted due to this level of understanding.

They were a joy to listen to, and they made me feel good. They showed me that this country has hope and that we could achieve an understanding among ourselves. What they said about religion is not convincing to people who are religious. It is indeed their personal opinion, but their arguments are not convincing to both Christians and Muslims. Their opinions around religion are nice, but their arguments and the way that they addressed the holy books of each religion would not convince many. I think it is possible to convince people.

Although I don't know about the Quran, it is possible to preach about the love of people on a level that convinces those who read the Bible and those who claim to be religious.

But personally, it is very pleasing to me that I have heard the truth in their true expression, their words, and their voices, and I love that they exist. This is by far the best podcast that I have heard.

To be honest, I felt very happy. Because Ethiopia is a country that has so many homophobic people, I was very excited to hear people who support LGBTQ issues discuss their ideas. It has made me believe that there are other Ethiopians like them.

It's a very promising conversation, and it's a conversation that can be exemplary to others. I don't doubt that other Ethiopians will find this, and we will find more supporters. One of the things that stood out for me was when one of the participants talked about how he was friends with someone and didn't know that person was gay, but he still continued to be friends with him even after he found out. This is very encouraging, and it shows that allies are good supporters of us. It is also very encouraging that he was able to accept him based on who he is as a person. This is something that I have not experienced before. In a country where, if they know you are queer, they most likely will distance themselves from you and judge you, it is good to see how he took his friend's gayness as normal and continued to support him. This was special for me.

The conversation included things that I had been thinking about, and I have benefited from the discussion that covered so many aspects, such as faith. I would like these types of conversations to continue, especially those directed toward Ethiopian people. This is the first time that I have heard this type of conversation, and I didn't know that it was possible to have such conversations. And I think it was a conversation that made me think that there are supporters, and more importantly, it made me think that the more we bring out supporters, the more likely we will be able to raise the awareness of the public.



Brotherly Love: Unco

As queer people, finding allies is always cause for celebration. As queer people in Ethiopia, finding allies who are also Ethiopian makes our queer hearts dance. When those Ethiopian allies are family members, we rejoice as if our lives depended on it. Talking to Luwam and Nahom was such a moment.

They are siblings. Nahom is your average Ethiopian man, whose biggest regret in his sister's Luwam coming out journey is that she had to navigate through the process without support from him. In other words, he wishes she had come out to him sooner so that he could have provided her with support. Luwam, for her part, always knew that Nahom would be a supportive big brother and that he would always have her back.

When Nisnis interviewed them over a group phone call, the love between them was palpable. The gentle teasing, abundant laughter, and calm presence made talking to them seem like having coffee with two best friends. Nahom points us to that inherent potential in all of us: the ability to make space for others as they are and the need to continually push for acceptance. Luwam's courage to live "her truth" in a way she sees fit no matter the consequences has the potential to propel us forward.

Conditional Acceptance

“I didn’t tell anyone in my family for one whole year.”

“I have been meaning to tell you this. I am with a woman.”

“.. he said all the right things and reassured me”


QE: Thank you to both of you for agreeing to do this. Let us start with you, Luwam. What was the coming out process to Nahom like?

Luwam: I was trying to go back through my messages to refresh my memory on what happened.

I came out to him a year after I started my first relationship with a woman. I didn’t tell anyone in my family for one whole year.

The official coming out to him happened a year after I found out about myself. But, I think, during that one-year period, whenever I was having thoughts about what my family would say and how I would approach it, every time, for whatever reason, I always thought of him. And, I can’t remember if we have had any discussion about queerness or anything, but I [felt like he would be] welcoming and accepting.

Every time I thought about it and I felt really anxious—and because I used to have a lot of anxiety about that—I would always think of him and then say, “At least there’s one person in my family that I can share this with, and it’s gonna be OK”. I always had that reassurance. Even though the official telling happened a year after [I started dating a woman], I feel that the process of just thinking about coming out to



“It was a really, really, really good
coming-out experience ...”

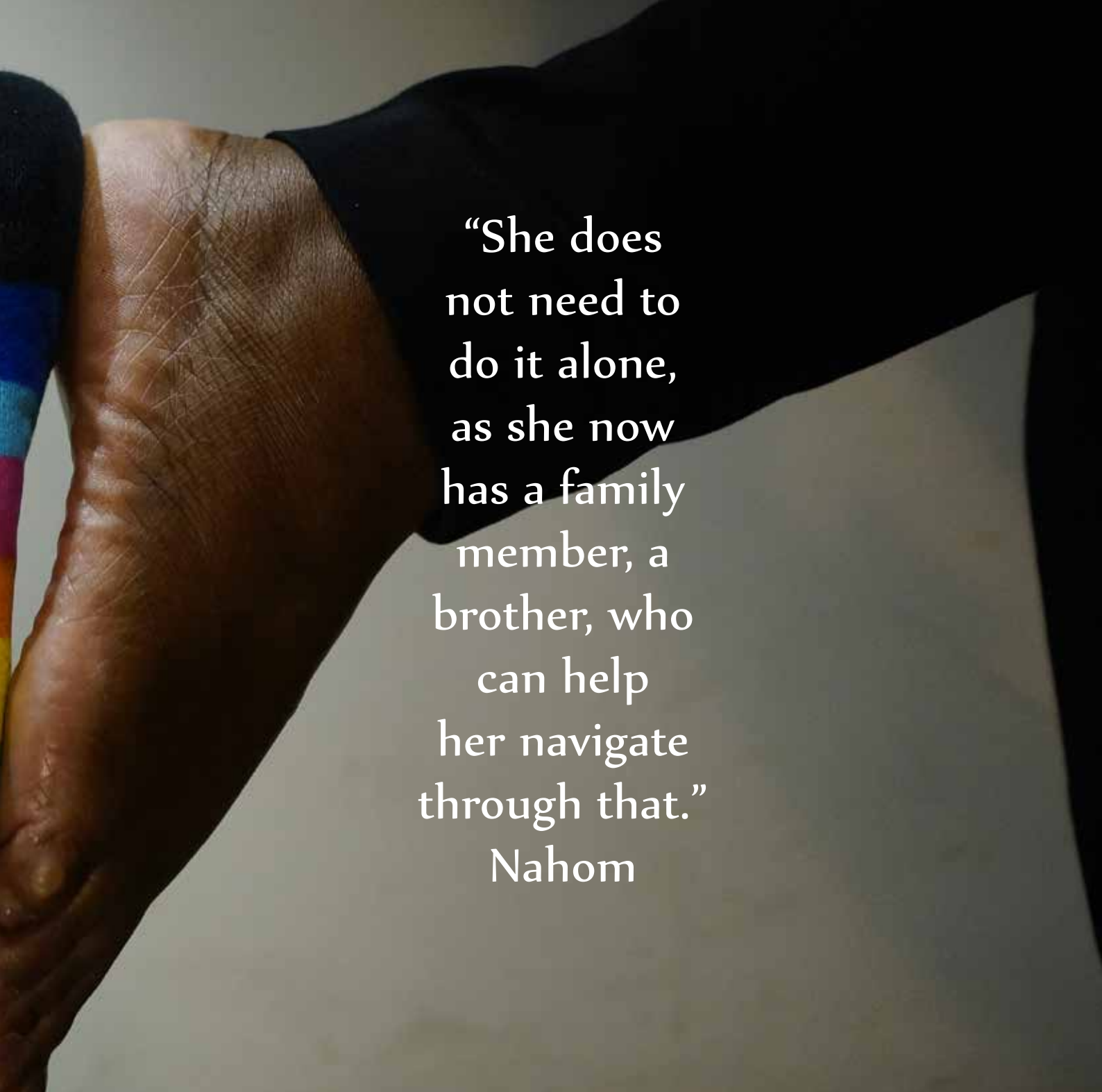
Luwam

my family members started long before then.

The day that I came out to him, I hadn't actually planned it at all. I actually remember that I was in my bedroom and we were texting on WhatsApp. I think we were talking about deal breakers and the people that we would date, and he was telling me that they would need to be accepting. We've had some other issues in our family about lack of acceptance, so we were talking about accepting partners who are from different religions and stuff, and, I think, that is how we started the conversation.

He said something like “I am a believer that wherever people find love, they should just do it, regardless of religion, gender, or anything like that”. When he said that, I felt that was the moment, even though I had not planned for that moment at all. And I just felt it was an invitation for me to continue the conversation and tell him.

I felt that if he truly believes this, then I can tell him that I am with a woman, and I can tell him about the woman that I was seeing at that time. So I just texted it to him right there. And I wrote, “OK, well, I have been meaning to tell you this. I am with a woman,” and he asked if he could call me. And then we had about an



“She does
not need to
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has a family
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brother, who
can help
her navigate
through that.”
Nahom

hour and a half-long conversation.

He asked me a bunch of questions about how I found out, and he asked empathetic questions. It was a really wholesome conversation. I was a bit overwhelmed because I hadn't planned it. Even though it's overwhelming because it's the first time that I'm saying it out loud to a family member, it feels really good and liberating, and he said all the right things and reassured me and told me he was proud of me. These were all things that I needed to hear. It was a really, really, really good coming-out experience, and I felt real lightness even though I still had worries about coming out to the rest of my family, especially to my parents.

I think just having one person know that made a really significant shift in my mental health and just my overall state of being. I knew that if anything happened or if I needed something regarding this, I didn't always have to hide. There is someone in my family that I trust, who will always have my best interests in mind, and with whom I can share these things.

This made a lot of things easier, and when I traveled with my then partner, I would always inform him where I was and who I was with, so it just made it easy in a lot of ways.

QE: What was it like having Luwam come out to you? What shaped your empathic response?

Nahom: It was honestly not something that I expected. And it's not like one of those situations where you might suspect or anticipate that that might be the case. It just happened as we were texting on a random day. So it was a surprise. Still, the main thing for me was to be happy for her that she was in love with someone that she was with at the time. It was also something that I, in general, understood was very hard to do because, in our society, we tend to be overly conservative and we are not open enough to homosexuality to even engage with it, let alone accept it.

So, I understood how difficult it was for her to navigate through it. I strongly believed, even before my conversations with Luwam, that this type of close mindedness really hurts people in a way that society doesn't even fully understand.

People also don't ask questions. They're raised a certain way, in a certain culture, and in a certain religion, and they hold these beliefs without ever questioning why they exist the way they do.

I don't know if I might have mentioned my beliefs to Luwam in passing. Honestly, I didn't say that to her to open the door for her to talk and then to make her feel comfortable sharing. I've just always held that belief. And when Luwam came out to me, it was just a validation of what I truly believed. It just so happened that it happened with my sister. So this was not just talking the talk; it was happening in my personal life with my sister, and I needed to essentially give her all the support that she needs, and that was my main message to her in all the conversations that we had.

During our conversations, I wanted her to know that this is perfectly OK. I wanted her to understand the challenges in our society and even within our family, and that it might be very difficult for her to come out to our family. I understood all of that, and I wanted to make sure that she understood that she could always talk to me.

I also wanted her to know that I am proud of her for the way that she navigated through all the challenges and that she summoned up enough courage because I imagined how difficult it must be in the context of our family.

I also felt relieved because, to me, it starts the journey of her living her truth, which is very difficult to do. It is always a struggle between what you fully are within yourself and what society

expects of you.

I felt like that journey was tough for her, where she can truly be happy, and we just need to navigate through that together. She does not need to do it alone, as she now has a family member, a brother, who can help her navigate through that. So that was my initial reaction.

QE: What made it possible for you to be accepting of your sister? What contributed to that openness and acceptance?

Nahom: I think a big part of it is personality. I am just not the type of person who just follows what society believes. I don't take certain things as just values; I ask questions about why things are the way they are, and I come up with my own conclusions even if they might not be popular beliefs in society.

I also had a previous experience that Luwam alluded to earlier. I had a relationship with a girl who was a Muslim. I knew that it was frowned upon by society and that people might not be as accepting. But I truly believe that it is about the individual that you fall in love with.

It is the same thing here. Whether it's same sex or different sex, you truly have to appreciate the connections that you have with another person. So I've gone through it in my own way in my own life; it just so happened to be religion-related. Society typically gravitates toward what is comfortable. So sometimes you have to go through those challenging times, and sometimes you have to pay the price for it, in order to push that agenda a little bit farther within society to make them see that it is OK. It was the same thing with me. We had those tough conversations when it came to religion, and I feel that our family is more accepting of that now than they used to be. It is the same thing when it comes to sexuality.

Even though certain relationships might be severed and you might lose certain people in your life, the conversation might result in you creating small changes within society. So, you may be able you to make it a little bit more comfortable, a little bit easier for the next person.

It's just how society works, in that there won't be a big transformation at once, but it is about pushing that agenda a little bit farther. But you there will be pain along the way. I think that is really the reason that I was [able to be supportive]. It is just very basic; I ask questions and do not just accept anything or everything as is.

Luwam: I would like to just validate what he's

saying. Growing up, that's something I really looked up to. Nahom just did his own thing. Even in African households, or Ethiopian households, to narrow it down, you don't really have a voice. You can have your opinions, but you always have to default to whatever your parents say because they will tell you, "You're doing this because I said so".

I think I watched Nahom just challenge things from an early age, where he would always ask why, and he didn't really buy into ["because I said so"]. And he was kind of stubborn, and he was his own person from a really young age. And that's something that I grew up watching and really admiring about him. He's always done things his own way.

I wasn't sure why I always felt comfortable, but I always knew in my heart that he was welcoming. I've always seen him just having his own opinions and distancing himself from the status quo.

I have also seen him go through the experience of being with a woman of a different religion and our parents having issues with it. All these things were lived experiences that demonstrated to me [what he stood for].

I think you learn a lot from your siblings and anyone around you, not just by what they tell you but by how they live their lives. And so I was watching how he lived his life in a way that felt very true to him, regardless of what the rest of the family thought. I think that's also something that was reassuring to me before I came out to him.

QE: Were your coming out and your queerness only a one-time conversation with him?

Luwam: No, it wasn't. He was the only one in the family that I had come out to for years, and during that time I experienced extreme anxiety from time to time, especially when I thought about my parents. There were very intense periods of anxiety, and I always turned to him during those times.

We would have phone conversations, and he would try to calm me down and tell me things to make me feel better. So it's definitely something that we talked about again and again; it was not something that we just talked about once and never mentioned again.

Those were the hard conversations. He would try to calm me down and try to walk me through whatever I was feeling at the moment, and he shared his views every time that we talked about our parents.

He was always really positive, and he would give me examples of times when our parents had changed their minds about really difficult things and how sometimes you have to go through these hard

“... the main thing for me was to just be happy for her that she was in love with someone ...”

Nahom



conversations to change people's minds.

He would also tell me that it's not because they are bad people that they're this way, but that they are a product of their time and their age and all these things. He would say that we have seen that they are actually capable of changing their minds when they really listen. He was always positive, and that really helped. That is the hard stuff.

The simple stuff would be like me mentioning when my partner and I traveled together, and I would tell him my whereabouts, and he would be the only one who knew exactly where I was and with whom. My parents would know that I'm traveling, but then they wouldn't know with whom. And I would share with him different things, such as when I broke up with my partner. So it didn't stop [at the first conversation]. It very much continued, and the thing that I really appreciated was that we talked about [my queerness] from time to time, but that wasn't the only thing we talked about.

It was really important to me that we were able to somehow maintain our relationship that existed before my [coming out]. I didn't want everything to just be reduced to that, so he was really cognizant of my well-being, and he helped me through these difficult moments.

Sometimes he would encourage me to believe my truth, but it was never just about [my sexuality]. We were still able to have our relationship as usual; I think it just added a bit more depth to it now that it was more honest on my end.

So it was nice to be able to be open about that but then not make it just about that at all times.

Nahom: It was quickly normalized. One of the things that she did after she came out to me was introduce me to her partner. So, she just didn't come out to me and then moved on.

We continued to be involved in each other's lives, and she was discussing her relationship with me and whatever else [was going on in her life]. And knowing about her partner made it more organic; knowing about their fears, and just through discussions, I could actually see their lives. I think that is important as well.

QE: What was it like watching Luwam navigate your family?

Nahom: I can clearly see Luwam's progression, both in terms of her comfort level and the sharing of herself. As she was describing it, I think it was difficult for her early on.

She came out to me a year after she was in a

relationship, and then after that, [it was just me in the family who] knew for some time before she told anyone else. But then the way she shared it with our younger brother was just casual. I didn't even know she was going to tell him. We were just sitting at the same table for dinner one day, and she just casually told him. And she has told me about how she has shared that with her friends much more casually than she would have before.

I can see that she's just becoming more and more comfortable with that. Obviously, there are certain individuals in her life with whom she would be a lot more cautious about the way she shares that information, especially within our family. But I think she's also finding out more and more that a lot of this anxiety is also in your head. Obviously, you expect that because of what you've heard your parents say or what society says, and so you always have this worry in the back of your mind.

Luwam can speak to this more, but I think her anxiety didn't play out in the way that she had it in mind when she shared that information with other members of the family.

Clearly, our younger brother is a lot more open, so that is straightforward. She told me how she shared it with our dad and it was a very emotional experience for her, but at the same time, she got the support that she needed on that call. And sometimes I think that it is really important to validate the worry that you have. You are justified in having them, but sometimes it does not play out like that in real life.

I don't think things have actually turned out negatively so far while sharing this information with certain members of our family, but there are still some ways to go with other family members.

Luwam: As he said, I've become more confident, and that is as a result of a lot of inner work, of course, and just the factor of time. But also, the presence of someone in your family that you know has got your back makes a very, very big difference. Because even if it turns out really difficult with whomever you are telling, you know that there is still one person in your family that accepts you, has your back, and will be there for you no matter what.

I used to think that if I ever pursued anything more serious like a life partner, a serious relationship, or a marriage, the thought of not having anyone from my family be there — because my family is really important to me — used to make me really sad. But knowing that there will

“Are you
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Nahom

be one person that I called my family who loves me and that always looks out for me was really important in building my confidence to face the possibly hard conversations.

And so I think there are a lot of factors that contributed to the gradual growth, confidence, self-assurance, and all these things.

QE: How did having a supportive family member like Nahom affect your experience?

Luwam: Even before I told him, in moments where I felt really anxious and unsure about family members and all these things, I had already accepted myself. Even before telling him, I knew that that was my truth. I knew that I didn't want to run away from it. I knew that I needed to just face whatever it is and find out for myself what all these things were that I was experiencing and being made aware of. The process of self-acceptance really does matter, and I already had this baseline for myself.

Having a family member who knows who you are, who knows your upbringing, and with whom you've shared a lot of common things biologically and in the environment in which you were raised, contributes to your confidence.

Even when you share this with other people, like friends, no matter how accepting they are and no matter how much they empathize with your struggles of coming out to your parents and stuff, I don't think it's quite the same because with my brother, he knows who they are. There's a certain level of knowledge that he has that no one else outside of my family has, and a lot of that is unexplained. So feeling understood and seen in that very specific way contributes a lot to getting reassured and just having the confidence that I would not be alone no matter how bad this gets with other family members. I knew I would have someone to back me up.

If Nahom had been someone who was accepting but wasn't the type of person who would confront our parents or wouldn't stand up for me, I think that would have been a different experience. There are people in families who would accept you, but they wouldn't confront other people in your family or they wouldn't necessarily stand up for you because they are themselves scared in some way. With him, I had full confidence that he would take the heat if that needed to be done, or if things got really bad, that he would not shy away from defending me.

So I think with the type of person that he is, it is not just about telling a family member, but

telling a family member that you know will share the burden with you in a way that only a sibling can. So it really shapes your experience as a queer person and how you unfold into yourself over time, as well as the confidence and courage that you need to push and even be reminded that it will be OK even if everything else goes to shit.

QE: Nahom, as an ally, what would you say to hateful and homophobic comments and people?

Nahom: We should focus on what is most important. One thing is to stand up for the truth, and then stand up for the people you love. You have to understand that the world is a very nasty place, especially in some places. The abuse that people get when they deviate from what is expected as “normal” or “good” is very tough, and I think you all know this more than anybody else.

But there is also danger in shying away from it. Transforming societies is a long journey. I mean, forget Ethiopia; even within the US, a society that is considered to be progressive and democratic, those types of debates and discussions are still happening right now around issues such as marriage equality and equal rights.

So this is a long journey, and it might be painful. You cannot wish them away, and you cannot just say our society needs to be better. And change just does not happen that way; it’s a slow, gradual, and painful experience. So, the issue really is, to what extent are [those in the LGBTQ+ community] and their allies focused on the bigger picture and going through this pain to make it a little bit easier for the next person and the next generation.

If you have that vision, it gives you thick skin, and you just have to deal with it and just move on. You should not always just focus on the detractors because there will always be those, but at the same time, there’ll always be a force of other people that are going to be positively influenced by [discussions].

Also, in terms of the work you’re doing [as Nisnis and as Queer Ethiopia] not everybody has that support system and those allies. And so in some cases, they might read these stories, and they might say “I actually don’t have anybody else who can stand up for me as an ally”.

There are a lot of people in that position, and it’s very difficult, especially when I think of what people have to go through in order to face this truth about themselves. In fact, the first thing I said to Luwam after we hung up that call was that I felt really bad person ally that she waited a year to share this with



me, because that means a year that she had to face and struggle through this on her own. So I sat there and let her know that I hope you won't wait so long to share what is on your mind with me.

So for other people who might not have that within their family or their friend circles, getting this type of community support, whether it's online or from different parts, gives them certain hope that these things are going to slowly change and that they may get the support that they need. So what you're doing is really important in that aspect.

QE: What would you say to siblings or other family members of queer people who are not supportive of their queer siblings or family members?

Nahom: The first thing is just asking why. It's very difficult to make a blanket statement, and so I would like to understand why they are not supportive. A lot of it is just hard wiring and the way you grow up and how you were raised in terms of things such as culture and religion. I think you need to have a conversation with them to make them understand that those things are actually not the case and that what society says is not set in stone. Just ask questions and try to have a better understanding.

There are certain people who hold these values, not because they're bad people, but because they're just bad at asking the questions. But if it maybe comes close to home or if they have a different perspective, then they might change their minds because they are innately not trying to cause harm or hurt, but they just don't know any better.

There are certain people who say those hurtful things so that they can just feel better about themselves. They don't have anything better to do, so you have to know who you are engaging with at the end of the day to talk to them in a language that they understand.

I would also ask, "What is important at the end of the day? Are you going to lose a member of the family because of your badly held values? Even if you say that what you hold is true, let's say for someone who is overly religious, and they don't want to change that mindset about this topic, then what? So, what's truly important to you?" I cannot answer these question individually for everybody, but I think people need to ask these questions.

And if they make [the decision to lose a family member], honestly, it is their loss, and there's not much you can do about that, so you just have to move on. Hold the flag for your truth, then fight the fight, and then move on. There's nothing you can do about

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Luwam

people who don't want to change their minds.

QE: Luwam, what would you say to any queer people who may not have siblings and family members who are as supportive as yours?

Luwam: That's hard. I would say to look within yourself for that strength to continue to live your truth, I think.

For me, it's scarier to live a lie than to live my truth and be rejected for it. And I know that there's probably a lot of privilege in that statement. I wasn't in immediate danger; I was financially independent from my family, and I am a relatively healthy person. So I have all these privileges that allow me to still make that choice of living my truth.

And so for me, it's not to shame anyone who doesn't come out or doesn't just say, "OK, well. Like, I'm gonna do me and, like, screw everybody else and all that." But if you can find it in yourself to always be true to yourself, even if your biological family doesn't support you, I am a strong believer in the chosen families that you make along the way in life.

And my hope for people who do not find support from their biological families is to continue to be true to themselves and to build lives and relationships outside of that, because there are really great people in this world who have the capacity to love you for who you are. And my hope is that these people find that type of community.

We define what family means to us personally, because I really believe that you can find family and other people that are not related to you biologically. This doesn't mean that this all of a sudden takes away the pain that you feel from being rejected by your own biological family. It would probably be quite difficult to process, and it would probably always be painful, but I think through time we learn to continue to be true to ourselves, and as we grow and find self-reassurance and all these things, we learn to manage that pain a bit better.

And I would say, find what matters to you, and ask, "What are you more scared of?" The journey might be tough, but if you find the right people, the journey will be better.

QE: Nahom? If there was one thing you could say to Luwam about living her truth and her queerness, what would it be?

Nahom: It is definitely a long journey to find acceptance and make people understand what

queerness means. But I truly feel that what you are doing and what Luwam was saying about finding and defining a family to find connections in other ways is important.

It is also always good to understand that when we think about life, we just have to think about what is in close proximity. And to reach for a different kind of support system.

The main thing is, how do you make those accessible to people? How do you find support and community that can truly understand this and support you on this journey? How do you make that accessible to people who don't have it on a day-to-day basis?

I hope that people find ways in which they can get that support and be connected to people who are going through the same journey, share stories, and really open their eyes to the fact that there is life to be had as well. The fact that the journey is tough doesn't mean you can't get there. So, I hope people don't give up on that journey and that they find support.

I truly hope that people don't question themselves and believe that there is something wrong with them.

Just know, accept, and embrace that about themselves, and try to live a meaningful life without having to go through that self-struggle and self-doubt.

From what little I understand, what you are doing as Queer Ethiopia is one way of bringing people together by sharing their stories. So I hope this is one of many ways in which it can connect people and then give them the support they need.

QE: Given the struggles that Luwam has gone through and the support you have been able to offer her, what would you say to her as your sister?

Nahom: I don't think [I would have] a different message. The journey to finding acceptance might be long. It's also really about finding and understanding that who you are is not wrong and you should embrace it. The journey is long and can be difficult in terms of getting acceptance from other people and society in general.

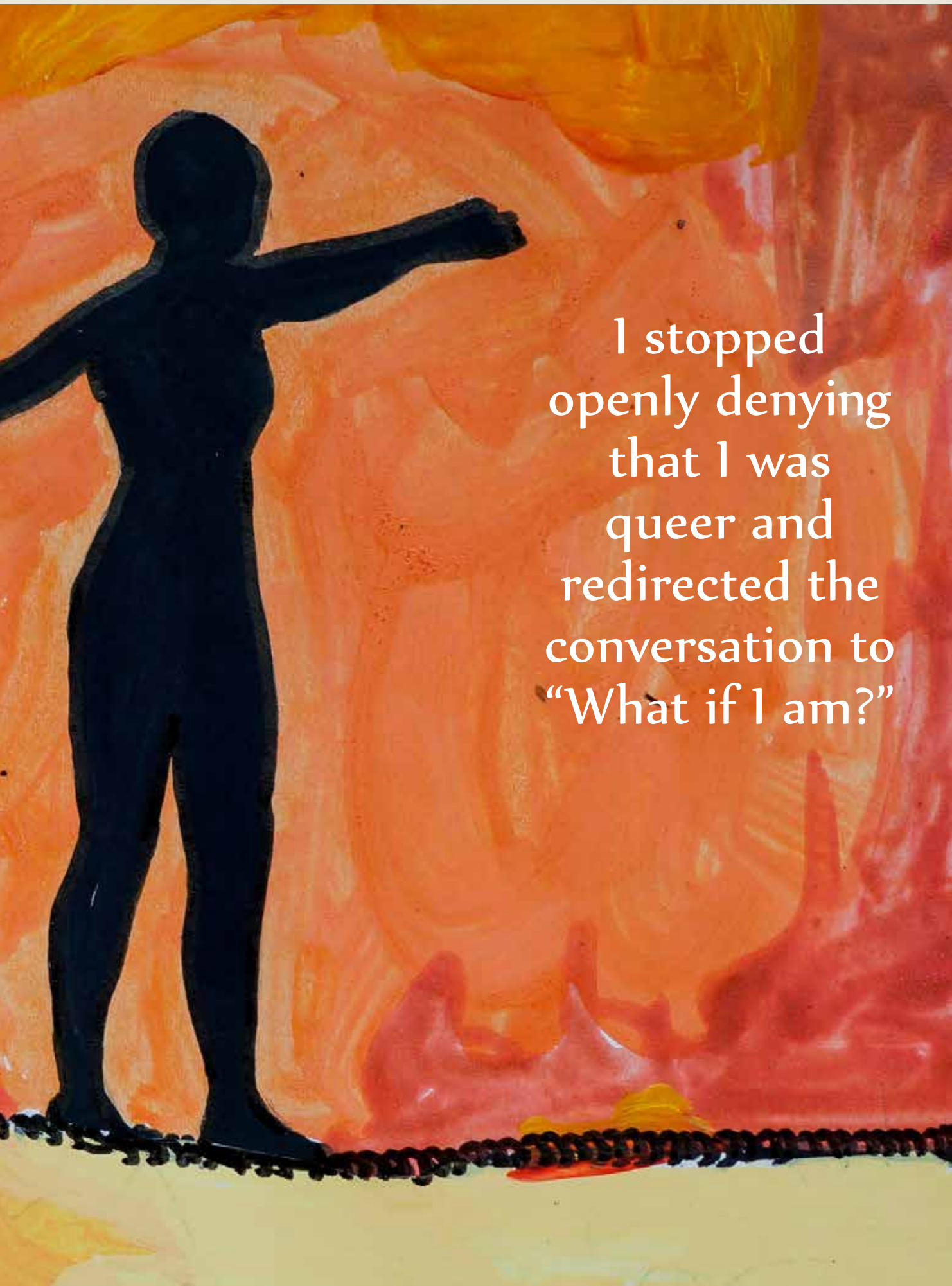
I think you need to look at the bigger picture and then understand that the path that you're on is difficult. But at the same time, find a way to get support. And keep living the truth and fighting the hard battles.

QE: Thank you both.



Navigating Fear

I was not ready to
admit it, for fear of the
ostracization that would
follow if I chose to come
out. I wondered: How
different would life be?



I stopped
openly denying
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I grew up not knowing what I was.

Not only did I lack the vocabulary to describe it, but I also could not comprehend or process my sexual feelings. So I did what I believe most people do: I decided sexuality was not central to my identity, assumed the heteronormative default, and blocked out any potential realizations of my sexuality. This was particularly difficult to maneuver as I had been a “tomboy” throughout my teens.

Although I had little to no conception of gender, I saw myself as being different from the girls I went to school with. I felt like I didn’t fit the stereotype of a girl. Hence, in an attempt to showcase that distinction, I wore “men’s” clothes and “acted like a guy” which also meant that I could not decipher whether my attraction to both genders was due to my sexual orientation or the performative gender identities I assumed throughout the years and my assumption of their roles and attractions.

My first notable encounter with a queer body happened in my late high school years, needless to say, I was terribly shocked.

As a person who grew up in an environment that vilifies and denies the existence of queer bodies (especially queer Ethiopian bodies), I was unsure what to do with this newfound truth about the existence of queer Ethiopians. Watching things unfold from the spectator’s position was equally distressing and inspiring.

Then I slowly began to associate the LGBTQ+ movement with the greater movement for equality, justice, and liberation. I began to see how members of the community struggle just to exist as themselves and the various ways in which they are disadvantaged and their bodies are criminalized as a result of legislation and public attitudes.

I made it my mission to talk about my understanding of the situation with peers and began to challenge outdated attitudes or jokes made at the expense of LGBTQ+ people. But even then, it was not any more personal to me than, say, the struggle against authoritarianism or fascism.

For a long time, I did not understand that my fight for the liberation of queer bodies was no different from a somewhat objective aspiration for justice and equality for all.

My understanding of myself as a cis het person allowed me to speak up more freely and engage in conversation on LGBTQ+ issues without having the fear of significant harm being done to me by the state or vigilantes. After all, all of my sexual and romantic experiences have been with cis men.

Those close to me, however, knew I was queer long before I admitted it. They could tell by how invested I was in the community and the different thoughts I expressed about my attractions. Though my realization of my own sexuality came very late, the subtle expressions from queerblings (queer siblings) familiarized me enough to set out for an exploration of what has come to be a non-linear and often rocky journey of self-discovery.

At first, my path to “admission” started as simply as avoiding credentializing; I stopped openly denying that I was queer and redirected the conversation to “What if I am?” Many assumed I was just playing devil’s advocate and let me be.

But I was not ready to admit it, for fear of the ostracization that would follow if I chose to come out. I wondered: How different would life be? What would my

colleagues, teachers, old friends, and relatives think of me? Would they lose respect? Will I still have the love and support of the people I considered mine? Will the people I put my trust in betray me? Would they report me? Would they send me to a mental asylum? Would they tie me up in chains and take me to t'sebel?


These were questions I was not ready to face. It was a bridge I did not want to cross, even when it was right in front of me. Nothing could prepare me for a life that would be starkly different. I also feared myself. Would I hate myself for keeping such a central aspect of my identity from the people who revealed so much to me? Do I even have a right to exist?

As a person who grew up in a relatively conservative setting, these were questions that bugged me to the point of making me hate myself. But, after a long and arduous process, I've learned not to force myself and my identity into a "socially acceptable" box.

I have come to accept myself without needing approval and support from the world. I began to grant myself the same respect and kindness I wished my queerblings had. Being open to discovering myself and accepting myself as I am, I began to realize that my sexuality exists on a spectrum. I did not tick all the boxes in the "gay" or "straight" category, and neither did I need to for my existence in (or even outside of) the community to be valid.

My peace with my pansexuality and non-monogamy (I know, I am so stereotypical!) was a very gradual process that has been unfolding over a series of years. It has passed through phases of ignorance, denial, intrigued curiosity, confusion, attempts at conversion, and finally acceptance.

Though my coming-out journey is still unfolding, the process of self-acceptance has been a very intentional and individualized cruise that I could not have braved without allies that were open-minded enough to accept and respect the existence of people and identities different from theirs.



I cannot
say that
you are
wrong ...



Affirmed

My favorite coming out story is the time that I came out to my sister.

My sister and I are close. Although she is older than me, we are very close, both because the age gap is not a lot and because we don't have a lot of siblings. We stick with each other in all that we do, whether we are getting into trouble or staying out of it. I look up to her as my older sister, and I truly respect her.

Despite our closeness, I couldn't find the courage to come out to her. I wasn't really concerned that she would not accept me, but I knew that it had taken me some time to accept myself, so I wasn't very keen on talking to her about this. To be honest, though, I think the way that I present makes it very obvious.

I think my sister already knew something was up based on what I post, my profile, my Telegram, and my other social media activity. She knows that I don't have a romantic partner, especially a man.

She often asks questions such as, "Why did you do this? What did you want to say?" She even once told our mother, "She's always posting as if she is really hurting". They were worried enough to say things such as, "What is happening to her?" When it reached a point of real concern for her, she directly asked me, "OK, what does this post mean?"

I didn't want to lie about it, so I couldn't say anything to her. But I asked her to give me time to tell her the truth. She joked that she would not be able to sleep unless I told her, but finally relented and said she would wait.

What I really respected, though, was that she was true to her word, and she didn't push me and was patient with me until I was ready to tell her. After a while, when we were alone, I would kind of mention a few things to test the waters.

Eventually, I told her that I had no feelings for men and that my feelings were for women. She's a little surprised. I reminded her that she knew a lot about me, including how my first celebrity crush was a woman. Although I had never openly told her, she knew enough about me to put two and two together.

She told me that she was shocked because she had never thought about it. I took time to tell her everything, from my initial realization that I did not sexually and romantically like men to how I accepted myself. I was honestly impressed with the speed at

which she accepted me. Even if most people assume your sexuality by watching your interactions and the way that you dress, it takes them a lot of time to accept you.

It didn't take long for my sister to accept me. She explained her acceptance by saying, "I know how much you care about your religion and your family. I know how much care you take to not offend our family, so I cannot say that you are wrong because I know you have thought about it and have reached the conclusion that this cannot be changed. I can't doubt you because I haven't, and no one can truly examine this better than you. So, I accept you as you are."

I think she was able to accept me easily because she knows me well. Someone who does not know you well will come to their own conclusions about why you are a lesbian or gay. They will start with the baseless accusations, such as calling you an "Illuminati", a "666" follower, and saying that you have been paid to identify as one. But she knows I'm not into any of these things. She also knows that I don't hang out with bad people and that I am not easily influenced by others.

Although I present in a masculine fashion, she knows that there was no one else who identified as such in the area where I was born and where we grew up, and so this is proof that I didn't just imitate someone. She knows that I am not adventurous, that I am cautious, and that I don't like disappointing my family. She also knows that I would never choose to enter into conflicts with my family or the larger society. She knows that if it were at all possible, I would have chosen to change myself because I don't want to fight with my family or society, and I don't want to make my parents sad. I am also a person of faith.

I think all these things proved to her that I accepted who I am because my sexuality is not something that I could change, even if I wanted to. All of these, I think, made it clear to her that my sexuality is not an external matter but something that is inherently who I am.

I think the other thing that made it easier for her to accept me was her own personality. My sister is very understanding. The fact that she always tries to see things from the other person's perspective has really helped. You can only understand another person when you are willing to walk in their shoes. I believe that the fact that she does not resort to insults and hatred has also made her more aware and welcoming. I think she would have found it difficult to accept me if her love for me were not so strong.

My sister, as the most important person in my life, accepted me, and the fact that I can now be free with her has given me a sense of ease. When I came out to her, we talked candidly for a long time, and I told her everything, including my first crush on a woman. But most importantly, I felt a lot of relief.

We were able to talk about my life freely. I also felt that I could stand the loss of so many friends and colleagues with whom I am no longer close due to my sexuality. I have been forced to create a distance as they kept pushing me to tell them about aspects of my life that I cannot share without coming out.

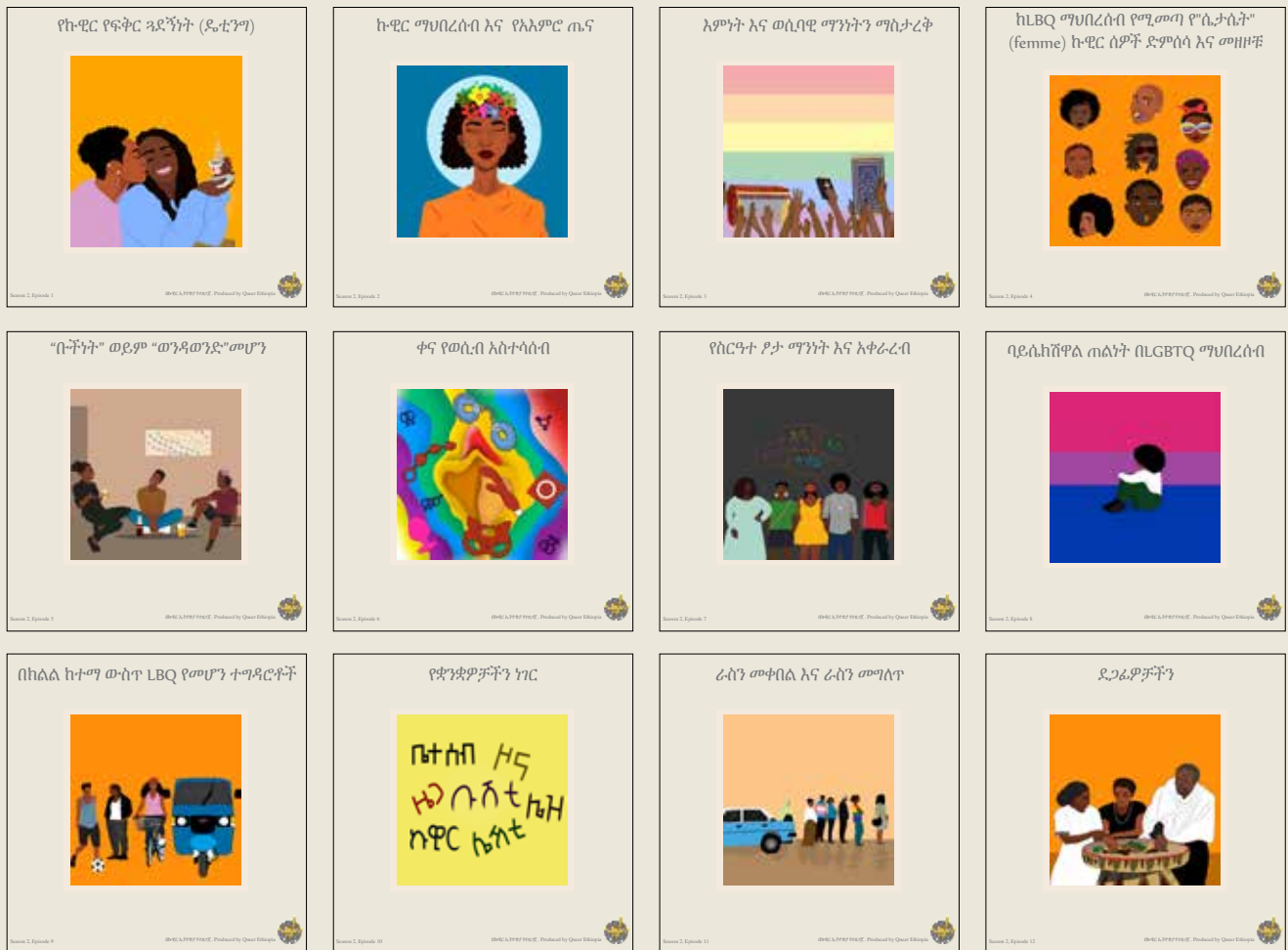
I never wanted to create a distance between my sister and me, not only because she is my sister but also because she has always been a major influence in my life. She has always provided me with a sense of direction and has been a pillar in my life.

I have found someone in my sister with whom I can freely share myself and with whom I can share my worries. She is not only my sister, but she has become my friend after I came out to her. In fact, I can tell her things that I cannot even tell my friends.

I have gained so much by coming out to my sister. Coming out to her is one of the things that has made me happy in my life.

hear yourself reflected ...

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<https://soundcloud.com/ethioqueer>

A ciswoman's journey to allyship

The use of a bathroom seemed to constantly be on her mind. She would walk to the farthest building; she would study which bathroom got the least traffic at certain times; and sometimes she would choose buildings located in “liberal” departments such as gender studies or fine arts.

While my gender expression was by no means “traditional” and I too experienced enough “this is the women’s bathroom” to seek out “friendly” bathrooms, I did not have the knowledge to fully understand it.

Shortly after hearing about and witnessing this woman’s bathroom struggles, I attended a panel discussion at which someone who openly identified as a trans man shared his experiences. The panel lasted close to two hours, and he talked about many aspects of his life. What really stuck with me was his articulation that one of his most affirming moments was taking his shirt off in public, and that even on days when the weather was nice, he still preferred to drive around with his shirt off.

So much about the discussion was a conundrum for someone like me who had always thought of gender in binary terms. I was a budding feminist. I was also fresh from Ethiopia and did not have the language to understand gender as anything beyond biology. I didn’t understand what gender diversity meant, let alone the idea of transition, but I knew that I needed to make space for this experience and identity. I attended all the sessions at the conference that covered issues and experiences related to gender diverse people, and, I admit, some of it went over my head.

I made it my mission to not only understand but to actually find a way to stand in solidarity with those that did not fit society’s expectations and definition of being the “right” gender. This decision was as political as it was personal. I understood the need for solidarity and could, maybe, map out the ways that oppressions were related, but at its most basic, I simply did not want anyone to have to suffer based on how they presented or what they felt about their bodies. Thus, it was, in part, simple empathy that drove my need to make more space.

As uninformed as I was, I think my saving grace was my understanding of feminism in its most expansive form. I wanted a world free from any domination and oppression. Figuring out the rest took time.



“I had never thought of gender as anything but as a binary proposition”


What did I do to learn? I first went to the library and picked out books that spoke about issues such as gender diversity, trans people, and those that critiqued the gender binary. I had never thought of gender as anything but a binary proposition before I had traveled outside of Ethiopia. I understood how people could act in ways that blurred, blended, and bent gender, but the idea of being able to be both and/or neither, or to feel no attachment to a gender identity, was a new concept.

I can't say that making sense of these ideas was easy. I spent days reading. I reread some materials until it made sense to me. I remember rereading Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and trying to relate what it meant to be neither male nor female. And being blown away by their courage to chart their own new way of being. While reading *Stone Butch Blues*, I read the lines, "Who was I now—woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked." I remember not fully understanding what it meant but feeling encouraged by my second reading to ask someone who was close to me.

Judith Butler was another resource. The concepts were not easy, but I kept soldiering through. Butler writes, "[g]ender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act a 'doing' rather than a 'being'". I had never thought of gender as an act. But these writers kept pushing my boundaries. I would read, and for concepts that were beyond my comprehension, I would reach out to others who were further ahead than me in their understanding of gender or were seasoned feminists.

None of it was easy. And I kept making mistakes, and sometimes I chose to remain silent to avoid making mistakes. I sometimes misgendered people. I learned to apologize and own my mistake. I initially sometimes found myself thinking that trans rights were taking up more space than women's rights. I found myself wanting to "rank oppressions". I found myself wanting to protect my cisgender privileges. It didn't take me long to realize my mistakes. As articulated by many, none of us are free until all of us are free, and I needed to stop thinking of freedom as a commodity that was in short supply and thus could be sold out.


It took me time. And I still sometimes make mistakes. But the most important lesson I learned was that being an ally to gender diverse people does not mean not making mistakes. It means supporting, standing in solidarity, speaking up, challenging others and being ready to always do better.



I needed to stop
thinking of freedom
as a commodity ...

A Realization: From Ally to Queer



An abstract background featuring bold, expressive brushstrokes. On the left side, there are vibrant red strokes. The rest of the background is composed of various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep, dark navy blue, with visible texture and layering of paint.

Like all narcissists before me, I will be talking about myself in this article, so get ready to read a lot of “I’s,” “me’s,” and “mine’s”. Because why the hell not? After all, this is my story.

I was in the 12th grade when I first entertained the thought of having a queer child. I had just started learning about queer people outside of the definition provided to me by my very conservative religious background. I had just begun to entertain the idea that queer people are normal human beings deserving of human rights.

This new revelation was mostly associated with my newfound rejection of my conservative religious upbringing and the beautiful discovery of the internet. I had recently created a Facebook account. This may be telling of my age, but Facebook was all the rage back then; it was the epitome of social media. There on Facebook is where I met my first real queer people, and they were very average and “normal,” which I admit was very disappointing since they were supposed to be the bringers of all things bad, cursed, and hated by the Lord. Weren’t these people supposed to be the thing that brought about the end of the world? I found them to be a bit underwhelming, and I found that to be a bit disappointing.

All the fear mongering that I had heard bore no fruit. The more I talked with them, the more I realized that I had hated a group of people for no good reason of my own but simply due to what I had been taught by my elders and the church. At some point, that no longer mattered. I was in a rebellious age and was questioning all the things I had been taught, including the existence of the Almighty, so why not also question my stance on gay people? Gay and lesbian, to be accurate, since that was the only form of queerness I was aware of at the time.

That question required a lot of unlearning and rejection of what I already knew, but at the end of the process, I was a full-blown ally. I knew the definitions of the LGBTQIA+ acronyms and was ready to go.

As part of an exercise to further examine, in the middle of a friend hangout, I dropped the previous question: “What would you do if your child was gay?” My friends answered the way I would expect

them to, with thoughts such as “disown “kick them and “have them committed”. I like to think my answer was my first step toward allyship. I told them, “Your kids can come to me. I will be okay with it.” My friends mumbled their opinions, objections, and so on, and then the topic changed.

However, for me, the real conversation started right there and then. It’s been going on for about 7 years. I have seen my friends and I grow into our political consciousness. I have seen us lean more to the left in our politics, even when I was an outlier and an out-and-about full-blown ally.

My being a strong ally made many of my friends question my sexuality. I was adamant about it and articulated it. “I am straight, and just because I support the LGBTQIA+ community doesn’t mean I have to be one,” but anytime the issue was raised, I was the first to voice my opinions. It just didn’t make sense to me: “So they love, live, and act differently than you; how in the hell does that affect your life in any way?” and “It’s none of your business. Why are you so concerned?”

This added to my newfound rejection of my traditional conservative upbringing. I went into full social justice warrior mode. Then 20,000 people got sick in China due to COVID. That number soon grew to five million, and we were all stuck at home with nothing to do. It was a time to reflect, and it was time well spent. Two months into the pandemic, I had a sexuality crisis. I realized I liked girls, boys, and nonbinary people. It took a lot of courage for me to admit that. It was terrifying.

It’s one thing to empathize with a group and fight in whatever small way to end its oppression, but it’s another to be a part of it. I remember the crippling fear I had with the idea of my mother finding out—the “shame” it could bring to the family, the fear of being attacked by strangers, and the fear of legal prosecution. It was a lonely and scary experience when reality came down in full force.

I believe my breaking point was a conversation with an acquaintance regarding a reality TV show with a bisexual character. The disrespect the acquaintance showed to a random person just because of who they loved was a turning point. I couldn’t process that in the detached academic way I used to handle these conversations, and it felt like a personal attack. It was a personal attack. That was a shocking realization. So just like 12th grade, this was a new life path to get used to.

I was no longer an ally but a member of the community. Thus began a journey of learning to navigate a new world and re-examining personal relationships that took years to build.

Looking at dating from a new angle has been a fun ride. It has been three years since I came out to myself, and despite all the fear, the challenges, and the daily struggle, getting to know this version of myself has been well worth it.

**It took a lot
of courage
for me
to admit
that. It was
terrifying.**



Open arms: Welcoming my cousin

I debated whether I should subtly bring it up

Midway through a four-hour phone call in 2021, my favorite cousin came out to me.

After years of estrangement, we revived our relationship at the beginning of the 2020 pandemic. We had both moved to the United States after high school and settled on opposite coasts of the country.

During these years, although we sporadically met at family get-togethers, we always went our separate ways, promising to keep in touch but only doing so for the next couple of weeks before drifting apart once more.

When my cousin called me in 2020, we were both stuck at home as the respective cities we were residing in were under complete lockdown. We talked for hours on the phone about the dysfunction in our family, our commonalities as adults despite having drifted apart, and basically everything under the sun. We talked about pop culture, politics, and the media we were consuming.

All of it provided a vehicle to truly get to know each other and build intimacy. She had grown into an even more kind, funny, and patient human, making her easy to talk to. Our conversations gave us space to bridge the gap in our relationship.

Whether it was because we had both attended liberal arts colleges, kept similar company, or lived in cities with similar collective politics, we came away on the same end of the political spectrum. This made it easier to hold conversations on contentious issues and learn from one another.

I looked forward to every phone call and cyber co-working session. We both made ourselves available for honest conversations and were intentional in wanting to build a meaningful relationship. We spoke about grief, heartbreak, love, and the general whirlwind that is our 20s. Because our friendship was being built against the backdrop of our familial relationship, it grew strong and deep quickly.

I had almost no exposure to queer people who were out.



After one of our long conversations, I came across a meme that pertained to the topic and wanted to share it with her. I realized we weren't following each other on Instagram because we had both started new accounts in the previous years. I texted her my handle and asked her to follow me. When my cousin sent me the request, her handle was decidedly queer. The social media handle, coupled with a few red herrings I picked up on during our conversations, made me think that she was probably queer. For the next couple of days, I debated whether I should subtly bring it up or bite my tongue and trust that if she is queer, she'll come out when she is ready.

While oscillating between asking my cousin this question or not, I thought about all of my interactions with and learning about what it means to be a member of the LGBTQIA+ community in my life thus far. Growing up in Addis Ababa, I had almost no exposure to queer people who were out. I attended a single-sex school. As we grew older, it was common


to hear about and, on rare occasions, even see girls making out with each other. These episodes were never labeled "queer," but "funny" or a display of "overly close female friendship". Some girls would even kiss daily under the guise of "sharing lip gloss."

Different expressions of gender were also readily observable in the manners with which some students presented themselves. It could be seen in their exercise attire, shoes, strides, the way they spoke, or the way they wore their hair. In a sea of conformity, it was always easy to pick out those who presented differently. These students were never ostracized; in fact, they were some of the most popular students among us, lauded for their versatility, and often sporting throngs of younger students who proclaimed to have "girl crushes" on them. These crushes were most visible when they played traditionally masculine roles in school plays and their fans flocked to them.

All this to say that even though we lived in a vehemently homophobic society, queerness was all around us, visible only to those who wanted to see it as such. Later in high school, only one couple came out as queer very quietly. Soon after, one party of this couple “took it back,” going back in the closet. It was also very common in our classrooms to have debates on “the morality of homosexuality”. It was during one of these debates that I was assigned the “Yes, homosexuality is moral” argument to debate. Before this debate, I had only seen gay men on American sitcoms, and I didn’t have a strong opinion on what their identity meant. But I was a dedicated student and actually did thorough research on bolstering points to support my assigned argument. This research is what opened my mind to keenly supporting the LGBTQIA+ community. When I presented my argument in earnest during class, our teacher was taken back once he found out I actually meant what I was saying. Before the class ended, the teacher told me, “Your morality is a 2 out of 10”. My teacher’s pet self took it hard, but when I went home and brought it up with my mother, she was fine with me reaching my own conclusion, so I resolved I must not be that bad.

When I moved abroad for college, the school I attended was colloquially known as a “Mecca for Lesbians” and was generally regarded as a haven for queer people. I had a lesbian roommate,





I became friends with many queer folks, and learned a lot about gender identities. Although I thought of myself as an ally before going to college, I saw many of my learned biases and internalized homophobia once I was exposed to openly queer people. I was then given the space and resources to learn about queerness. The privilege of such exposure and structured education is not lost on me.

The biggest takeaway for me has been that I need to stay committed to unlearning my biases about oppressed communities even when I'm not a part of them and to do my part to make things better. This was my mental space when I suspected that my cousin, who had come into my life in a meaningful way less than a year ago, was queer. From the books I read and other media I consumed, popular wisdom dictated that I should wait for her to come out. But, although I am working on it, patience is not something I excel at, so a few weeks later I asked her why she uses the aforementioned queer social media handle. She immediately dismissed my question and told me that it was just a fun moniker. I took what she said at face value. I even debated if she was a little homophobic for using a handle that openly evoked queerness as a self-identified straight person. In the weeks to come, I just couldn't let it be, so I kept letting her know in our many conversations where I stood. Eventually we got together in person for a weekend and talked incessantly, like people who love each other do. This time allowed us to develop trust and feel safe with one another. A long while later, we were on another long-winded phone call when we started talking about our romantic relationships. Midway through the sentence, my cousin took a pregnant pause and said, "So I'm gay". I embraced her, and we took a few minutes to acknowledge what happened and say that we loved each other before continuing to gab like we always did.

My cousin is one of my best friends, she is a beautiful human who makes me want to be a better person every day. I am in love of how good of a friend she is to the people around her and the intentionality with which she builds these relationships. She has made room for me to complain, cry, and better myself on many occasions. She holds me accountable when I need it and always has my back. More than anything, she makes me feel like I'm the easiest person to love by embracing my idiosyncrasies and constantly reassuring me that even when I fall short of my own expectations, I am worthy of love and respect. I love my cousin, and I love all the plans we make for the future, the jokes we tell, and especially our gossip.

My hope for this article is that someone who reads it comes away thinking of their queer friends and family and how much they love them.

Do you have allies? If so, who are they and how do they show their support?

These are selected responses from a questionnaire that was posted on a Facebook page ...



JuJu JuJu

I have few straight friends who know and support me and a bigger group that knows but we're on a 'don't ask, don't tell' kind of basis. Some years ago, me and my gay friends used to get so excited when we meet a straight ally and try to make them our friends.

Now I'm a firm believer these friendships are only relevant if the straight folks are willing to put in the work to understand our situation and SUPPORT us in every way they can.

Otherwise, I just don't want to be someone's 'gay friend'. No ma'am!



Smart Being

There was this friend who was suspicious about me and one day she confronted me when I was drunk 🥴 so I told her and she took it well honestly she doesn't want that for herself or anyone but she tried to be supportive and open-minded. It is kind of a relief to be yourself, especially around those who you spend a lot of time with. For me, it is very normal to the point I forget that there are people who won't blink to kill if they find out about this so I constantly remind myself that I exist with a bunch of meatheads and I should be more careful. But sometimes it offends me that people have the audacity to think they have right over what you do and it offends me even more when I think those people are just close-minded idiots who know nothing.



Chav Brook

the realization of coming out for yearsss is that Most people who know you and let you be as you are ,are not your 'go get that' ' continue doing it' and 'i love what your doing' kinda supporters.its tiring to always have to be the one who understands.ተልቅ ድጋፍ is an illusion for me ❤️

Hey am betselot

Yes i have family and friends that support me. One of my families who supports me is my older brother. he is gay.and my younger sister also supports me even tho she is straight she is always by my side.and i've got 3 friends that supports me. I was drunk when i told them about my sexuality. That day morning they told me that they are happy with my sexuality and it doesn't matter to our friendship.thank God I've got a lots of people supports me.

10:30 PM



Bossa Nova

no one 🙄



Jamzee Jam

ማንነቴን የምያቁ 4 ሰዎች አሉ። 4ቱ ለኔ ጥሩ አመለካከት አላቸው አንድዋ ግን ትልቅ ደጋፊ ናት።

Four people know about me. All four have positive attitudes toward me, but one of them is exceptionally supportive.



Be Col

ማንም የለም

የሚኖርም አይመስለኝም!!

There is no one. I don't think there will ever be anyone.



Kiru Kongo Man

Neberegn gn tetaltenal enji 😭😭😭

I used to have someone, but we had a falling out.



Verse Verse

Lemanem awrche alawik

I have never told anyone.



Jason Abel

ዜጋ ስትሆኝ ደጋግቶ ይሄ ነገር በጣም ከባድ ነው ነገር ሁሉ የሚገነው እኛ ጋር ነው



ቢያቁም የመረዳቱ እና ማገዙ የማይታሰብ ነው 🙏

It is very difficult if you are zega (gay). Everything gets exaggerated when it comes to us, and we get blamed. Even if they understand, it is impossible for them to accept it.



Whitney Sos

ማንነታችንን ቢያውቁትም በግልፅ እንዳናስረዳቸው መንገዱን በጥላቻ ግንብ ገድግደውብናል ከባድ ነው 🙄

Even when they know about us, they have built a wall of hate that makes it difficult for us to have open conversations.



Victor Geta

እኔ ብዙ ቀጥ ጓደኞቼ እና የተወሰኑ የቤተሰብ አባሎቼ ዜጋ እንደሆንኩ ያውቃሉ። መጀመሪያ አካባቢ ይከብድ ነበር መናገሩ። ግን አራሴን በደንብ እያወኩ ስሄድ ቀለል ብሎኛል። አብሮት ሊመጣ የሚችሉ አደጋዎች አሉ በእርግጥ። ነገ ሰው ቢከዳ እና ሚስጥር ቢያወጣ ከባድ ነው። የኔ እርምጃ ለሁሉም ዜጋ ይስማማል ማለት አይደለም። ስለፈለኩ እና በትንሹም ቢሆን ነፃነት ስለሚሰጠኝ ነው እንጂ ለሌሎች ደግሞ አለመናገሩ ነፃነት ሊሰጣቸው እንደሚችል አምኜ ፍላጎታቸውን አከብራለሁ።

A lot of my straight friends and some of my family members know that I am gay. Coming out was difficult at first, but it became easier as I got to know myself more. There are indeed risks associated with coming out. It can get complicated if someone outs you. I am not suggesting that my way works for every gay person. I choose to come out because it works for me and gives me a little sense of freedom; maybe not saying anything is what works for other gay people. I respect that choice as well.



Ordinary Zac

መጀመሪያ ራሴን ለመግለጥ የወሰንኩበት አጋጣሚ ለኔ በጣም ፈታኝ ወቅት ነበር። በጊዜው ጥሩ ሰሜት ውስጥ ያልነበርኩበት በመሆኑ ከጎኔ የሚሆን አንድ ሰው ያስፈልገኝ ነበር። አድለኛ ሆኜ ራሴን የገለጥኩላት የመጀመሪያ ጓደኛዬ በሙሉ ልቧ ነበር የተቀበለችኝ። አሷ ብዙ ነገር አቅላልኛለች።

አሁን ላይ የቅርብ የምላቸው ሰዎች በሙሉ በሚባል ደረጃ የተመሳሳይ ፆታ አፍቃሪነቴን ያውቃሉ። ካላወቁ እነዚህ ሰዎችን እንደቅርብ ሰው (የልብ ጓደኛ) አድርጌ መቀበል ይከብደኛል። ከቤተሰቦቼ መሃል ደሞ ሁለት አህቶቼ እንደሚያውቁ እርግጠኛ ነኝ ግን አናወራበትም።

በደጋጋሚዎች ወሃል መገኘት ህይወትን በአጅጉ የማቅለሉን ያህል ደህ ሚስጥር በማይሆን አጅ ሰው ውስጥ ከወደቀም ውጤቱ በተቃራኒው ህይወታችንን ሊያከብደው ስለሚችል፤ ምን፣ ለማን እና መቼ መናገር እንዳለብን በደንብ ማጤን አለብን። ሁሉ ነገራችንን ከመናገራችን በፊት በወራ መሃል በሚነሱ ሃሳቦች የሰዎችን አቋም መገምገም ተገቢ ነው ባይ ነኝ።

I was going through very challenging times when I first decided to come out. I was not in a very good space, so I needed someone to support me. As luck would have it, the friend I came out to received me with open arms. She made it very easy.

Currently, almost everyone I consider a friend knows that I am gay. I find it difficult to consider those who don't know about my [gayness] as close friends. When it comes to family, I am sure two of my sisters know, but we don't talk about it.

As much as being among allies makes life easier, it can be dangerous for us if this secret ends up with the wrong person. We have to be careful about who we tell, why we tell them, and when we tell them. I think we must pay attention to the views they express regarding this issue before we decide to come out to them.



Ürfii Bōñii

Namoonni naannoo kiyya jiran hiriyoonnikoo muraasni jaallataa jaalala saala walfakkaataa tahuukoo beeku. Ani calliseetuma an kana jedhee osoo hintaane jiruuf jireenya keessatti akka carraa mata duree kana kaasee darbee darbee yeroo waliin yaada waljijjiirru namoota tasa balaaleffatan ittan dhiisa. Warreen kaanimmoo suutan itti hime . Kanaafuu yoo xiqqaate hiriyoonnikoo zega hintaane waayeeekoo beekan namoonni 3 jiru. Hiriyoinnikoo nama 5 ol tahan immoo %50 akkan zega tahe beeku

See Translation

People close to me and my friends know that I am gay. They know not because I tell them but sometimes when the issue arises I calmly try to explain. I don't struggle with the ones who go against this. So, three of my friends who aren't zega know about me and five other friends know that I'm zega.



በፍቅር ደሁን

ባይዲግራፕም ተቀብለውኛል። እኔነቴ በልጦባቸዋል። ምክንያቱም በኑሮዋቸው ውስጥ አስፈላጊ ሰው ሆኛለው። በጣም ስርአት ባለው መልኩ እንወያያለን። ንቃተ ህሊና ካለው ሰው ጋር በሀሳብ ልዩነትም ቢሆን መግባባት ይቻላል።!

Befkir Yehun

They don't support me, but they have accepted me. My humanity has more meaning to them because of the value I place on their lives. We have proper discussions. We are able to have respectful discussions even as we disagree because they have a higher consciousness and are able to think critically.



Gloria Victor

My sister is my supporter and I've a friend here on fb he is straight bt still loves and support me the best



Dave Dave

እኔ ለአንድ ጎደኛዬ በግልጽ ነግረዋለሁ። እና አመለካከቴ ይገርመኛል። ምንም አልመሰለሁም አዲስ ነገር አደለም ነጩ ያለኝ

I have told one friend. I was pleasantly surprised by his stance. He didn't care at all. He said this is nothing new.



Robel Meseret Hailu

እኔ ብዙ ጓደኞቼን ማፍራት ቸያለው። እውነት ለመናገር ብዙ ጊዜ ፈጅተብኛል ከነሱ ጋር ለመቀራረብ እና በነፃነት ማውራት። አሁን ላይ ሳልጠይቅ አብረውኝ ፎቶ መነሳትም ጀምረዋል 😊

እኔ በሌለሁበት ቦታም ደሁን ባለሁበት ቦታ በኛ ጉዳይ ወገባቸው አስረው ነው የሚከራከሩት! ያንን ማየቴ በጣም አንድወዳቸው እና በነፃነት እና በግልፅ ነገሮችን አንድናውራ ረድቶናል።

I have been able to cultivate a lot of friendships. To be honest, it has taken me a long time to get close to them and to have open conversations with them. Nowadays, they even ask to take pictures with me without my asking. Regardless of my presence, they expend a lot of energy standing up for our rights! This had made me able to love them deeply and to feel free to have open discussions. I don't believe that all of us can have friends like this.

Uganda has passed a law making it a crime to identify as an LGBTQ. We hope president Yoweri Museveni will not sign it into law. We stand in solidarity with our siblings in Uganda.

