



Jack Rickards

For many of us, the thought of going to college and starting anew is both exhilarating and terrifying. The slate is wiped clean

as we abandon our high school personas in search of our true identities. However, we may be stepping out of one box and into another. Leaving high school, I was in limbo between being closeted and being openly gay. My close friends and family all knew, but I never mentioned my sexuality outside of my inner circle. Walking onto Duke’s campus, I wanted to just jump off that cliff despite my greatest inhibitions. Fortunately, Duke made that decision for me early on.

A few days after arriving on campus, I participated in one of the many diversity-centered activities of Orientation Week. This particular exercise consisted of several brightly colored poster boards with identifying labels: race, gender, socioeconomic status, politics, religion, disability, and, of course, sexuality. The challenge was to select the label that personally affected you the most. And so, I really had no other choice but to shine a ginormous gay light on myself.

As I began to navigate this new chapter of my life as an openly gay man, Dr. Nan Mullenneaux’s *Stand and Deliver* Writing 101 came as a welcome sanctuary. The final argumentative paper drew upon personal experience, allowing me to unload the pent-up observations and anecdotes bubbling inside my mind. Thanks to Dr. Nan, I learned to be comfortable stepping out of my comfort zone, giving me the courage to both reflect on and challenge the binary notion of the gay closet.

Coming back to this essay months later felt like rereading an old diary entry. In that time span, I had added new experiences to the gay facet of my identity (including the strange sense of community I found on gay Tik Tok). An essay as personal as *The Closet Revisited* was a living, breathing document, leaving me overwhelmed with the urge to completely gut and rewrite it in order to reflect my current feelings. However, after hearing the much-needed advice of Dr. Sheryl Welte Emch, I realized that there was both beauty and meaning in allowing this essay to be a time capsule of my first semester in college. I am eternally grateful to Dr. Nan, Dr. Sheryl, and the entire *Deliberations* team for giving me the opportunity to share this vulnerable side of my story.

The Closet Revisited

Jack Rickards

Writing 101: *Stand and Deliver*

Instructor: Nan Mullenneaux

My index finger has been hovering over the “return” button for half an hour. Just waiting to press send. Begging for freedom. I pace back and forth in my kitchen erratically, trying to tune out the hellish shrieks screaming louder and louder inside my mind. *No, don’t do it! Everything will change. Just keep your mouth shut. It’s not worth it.*

Three years of whispering behind people’s backs, three years of thinking, “I’ll do it soon enough,” three years of relentless dishonesty, all culminating in 250 words on my application to Duke University. One button on my keyboard, and suddenly the facade I so carefully constructed comes crashing down. One Google Doc becomes the wrecking ball that demolishes my palace of lies.

The moment I press send, I’m sharing that document with my parents. They are going to read over my essays, just like they do with every other application. Then, they will see my response to that third prompt.

Here are five reasons why some people think I’m gay:

1. I’m fashionable.
2. Almost all of my friends are girls.
3. I’m a hardcore Mariah Carey fan.
4. I use phrases like “that’s tea” and “I’m shooketh” frequently.
5. I’m pretty adorable.

These are all gross assumptions based on dated stereotypes about gay men.

But yes, I’m gay.

They will probably nod in agreement with all of those assumptions. Then I'll hear my mom call out, "Jack, honey, can you come up here?" And that will be it. I'll have opened that closet door, and before I have the chance to change my mind and return to my treasured hiding spot, it will be locked behind me.

The truth was that I wouldn't have been gay until I started saying it out loud. Of course, we all make assumptions about each other behind closed doors. But in our heteronormative society, we consider everyone to be straight until they say otherwise. Back in the closet, I had control over my labels. And that kind of power felt good—too good to just give up.

I remember my first time peeking through the keyhole, testing the doorknob. My best friend was pestering me about a girl at school.

"You have to. Everyone has a crush."

"I promise you I don't."

"You're lying!"

"I'm not!"

"I don't believe you."

Why doesn't he understand? How can I explain it to him? I don't like that girl. But why don't I like her? He's right, everyone has a crush. Shouldn't I like her? Then, it dawns on me. Without even realizing, I find my fingers typing away on my phone, spelling out the answer to his question—to my question: "I'm attracted to guys."

I stare at those words with a sense of relief. A reality that has been buried in the deepest recesses of my subconscious is finally forcing itself into the forefront of my mind. But with this answer comes a million more questions. *Yes, I'm gay. But what does that mean? Does that change who I am? Does that change what people will think of me? Do I have to act gay?*

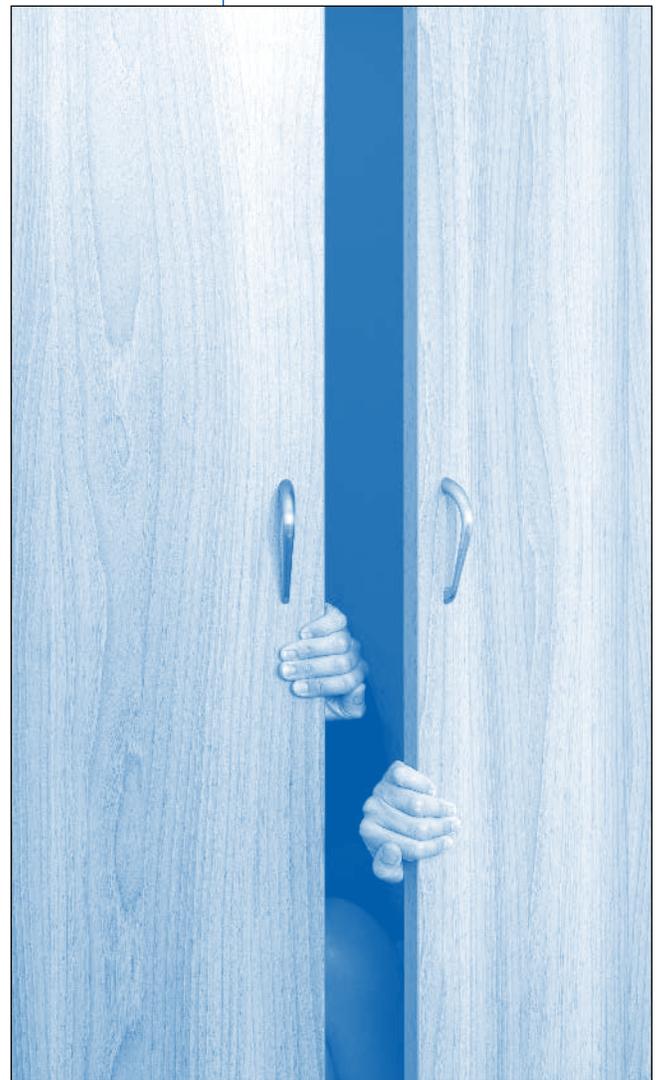
And so my three-year journey of slowly opening that closet door began. I started telling more and more friends. Some over text, some in person. Sometimes I even had the courage to type out those two words. I was getting better and better at coming out. Yet I was still very much in the closet, setting up camp in between all of my clothes and shoes as I kept an eye on the door. When I was alone with my friends, I could talk about cute boys and cute clothes as much as I wanted. But as soon as I heard footsteps or voices around the corner, I censored any discussion of sexuality.

"Shhh, quiet down, my parents are in the other room."

"We'll talk about it later. Not at school."

In those three years of keeping my lips sealed, I had adapted. I was somewhat content staying in that closet. Was it perfect? Of course not. But was it comfortable? Absolutely. Biting my tongue almost became a game. And it wasn't just about keeping my voice down. My incessant need to veil my gayness in a shroud of ambiguity manifested in strange ways.

Flashback to a typical weekday morning in high school. I'm getting ready: showering, brushing my teeth, getting dressed. Then I sit down on my bed and stare at a pair of pink shoes for what feels like hours. They have been sitting in my closet for over a year, just slowly collecting dust. I was so excited when I first ordered them. They're cute, cheap, chic. I know that the second I try them on, the world around me will transform into a pastel daydream as I frolic through the fields like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. But when it comes time to put them on, the panic sets in: to



wear or not to wear. *Just wear them! You love these shoes. They look so good on you.*

But what will people think? No, I can't do it. I want to wear them so bad, but not today. I just can't do it.

In hindsight, it seems so trivial. Why was I so scared of those shoes? Is the color pink really that gay? Even if I wasn't wearing them, people would still be making assumptions about my sexuality. It's in the tone of my voice, it's in the way my hands move, it's in the friends I have. The list goes on and on. It was never a secret, yet those shoes felt like a confession. They were the final clue that allowed others to confirm their suspicions. I might as well have wrapped a rainbow flag around my entire body and written "G-A-Y" across my forehead in permanent marker. I never wanted to be that stereotypical gay best friend screaming obnoxiously flamboyant comments from the sidelines. I'm not some walking cliché tending to the fashion needs and boy problems of my girlfriends. I don't want to be reduced to some side character in everyone else's story with just one defining personality trait. I mean, I'm not just gay. Right?

Something about that word really freaked me out. Not that I was bothered by who I was attracted to, but I was resistant to the implications of that label. Homosexual? Of course. But gay? No, I wanted to be more than that. I'm Jack, not "the gay kid." When people think of me, I want that three-letter word to be at the bottom of an entire laundry list. Otherwise, every other descriptor that follows that word will be replaced with the abundance of gay stereotypes. But I want to be known as smart, hilarious, self-deprecating, musical, sweet. Maybe even cute. But not **just** gay.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes in her famous TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete."¹ My problem was not necessarily with the connotation of these gay stereotypes, but simply their existence. Whether I fit these assumptions or not, it was demoralizing to think that the complexities of my life story could be reduced to a single word based purely on preconceived notions. I feared being seen as another common stone; I wanted to be a multi-faceted diamond. Of course, being constrained by labels hasn't been limited to my sexuality. Having been closeted throughout high school, I was primarily perceived as a book

smart nerd. But so were all of my friends. It wasn't a unique label, and any weight it carried would have dissipated once I went to a college full of overachievers. However, there were only a few gay kids at my school. And that's what they were known as: "the gay kids." That label seemed all-encompassing. In my eyes, being defined by a single story of being gay was confining, almost suffocating.

I always worried that it would be impossible to escape that label the second my parents knew. Even though I had come out to friends, it wasn't the same. All those times were like practice tests. Maybe they helped me prepare for the real exam, but they had no impact on my final grades. My parents are some of the only constants in my life, some of the only people who I know will be at my wedding one day. Telling my parents

would mean allowing my future dreams to become attainable goals. Telling them would mean breaking down those walls I had been building all that time. Telling them would mean finally allowing that label to become part of my identity.

Just as I'm about to share that college application with Mom and Dad, my finger freezes above the keyboard. A violent battle between truth and power wages in my mind. By sharing this essay, I'll be free to live an honest and genuine life. But by revealing this facet of my identity for the rest of the world to see, I'll lose control of how others label me. I'll allow myself to become "the gay kid" in everyone else's eyes. I know that truth is inevitable, but how am I supposed to let go after years of being in control?

Eventually, my finger stumbles upon the key, but the doubts in the back of my mind never cease. All there is left to do is wait. Wait for my parents to read through the entire application until they get to the very end. Then I'll be powerless. *Why did I do this to myself?*

"Jack, come up here," my mom calls. *Goodbye sweet closet, it was nice knowing you.* As I walk into my parents' room, I'm bombarded with an unexpected assault of compliments about my essays.

"Wow, the analogy in this first one was amazing!"

"The second one is *really* well written."

"Great job, honey!"

Oh my God, did they not get to the last prompt? Do I ask? What the hell do I do?



1 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED, July 2009. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger

[of a single story?tm_campaign=tedsbread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?tm_campaign=tedsbread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare)

After I endure minutes of soul-crushing anticipation, they finally manage to subtly slip in that they've read the third essay. I barely register what they're saying because my mind is lost in a panicky haze. But that's it. It's over. The bandage is ripped off. I don't even have to say those two words. Now they just know. Simple as that.

Later that night, my mom hugs me in the middle of the hallway and whispers, "I've known since you were three." And I can't help but smile. This moment I have been anticipating for years, building it up to be this giant emotional mess, turned out to be easier than I ever could have imagined.

Fast-forward a few months and everything's just peachy, right? I must be living my best life, completely secure in who I am. Maybe I even found a cute boy. I have come out of my closet, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, ready to spread its wings. But my wings are still very much forming, covered in a gooey residue that has prevented me from flying.

I had always hoped that coming out would be like flipping a light switch. You're in the closet, and then you're out. Equality advocate and TED speaker Ash Beckham describes the closet as simply a hard conversation.² By that definition, we all have closets. However, the term "conversation" creates the expectation that acceptance from others is the finish line. Of course, we cannot deny the importance of acceptance and support, especially when so many are deprived of these necessities. However, as someone who grew up in a wonderfully supportive environment, my greatest hurdle was self-acceptance. The actual conversation I needed to have, and the most difficult one, was my own inner dialogue, a battle between my conscious and subconscious thoughts. It's a process. Slowly creak that closet door open, millimeter by millimeter, until it's time to take a step out.

Despite the universality of these hard conversations, my journey has demonstrated that coming out is much more nuanced and complex than that. For me, the conversation with my parents was the easy part. I didn't even have to say anything. But after three years spent glorifying life outside of the closet, I was met with unexpected disappointment. What I had hoped to be the final unveiling of my true self was actually a rebirth. And there's a learning curve that comes with being a baby gay.

Even after telling my parents, there has been an adjustment period where I have avoided becoming "too gay." On those mornings when I finally chose to don those pink shoes, I cowered behind the kitchen island. As I heard footsteps coming from upstairs, I'd quickly wrap around the island to disguise my feet beneath the counter. When my dad finally got to the kitchen to make his morning coffee, I'd move in his same counterclockwise direction around the tabletop separating us as if we were playing musical chairs. He couldn't care less? In his eyes, I was Jack, not just his gay son. Yet I was determined to hide my shoes from him. It's hard to understand what was going through my head at the time. Perhaps it was a residual defense mechanism from all the years of secrecy. However, those worries have faded over time.

Even now, as an openly gay college student, I still have questions about my identity. I went from not talking about my sexuality at all to worrying that it's all I can talk about. I feel like I'm overcompensating: nails painted, eyebrows threaded, ears pierced, slowly falling into the trap of becoming the archetypical gay man. And yet, there's still a part of me that's hard-wired to think, "Don't let anyone know." There's a part of me that doesn't want to listen to recordings of my own voice



² Beckham, Ash. "We're All Hiding Something. Let's Find the Courage to Open Up." TED, September 2013. https://www.ted.com/talks/ash_bekham

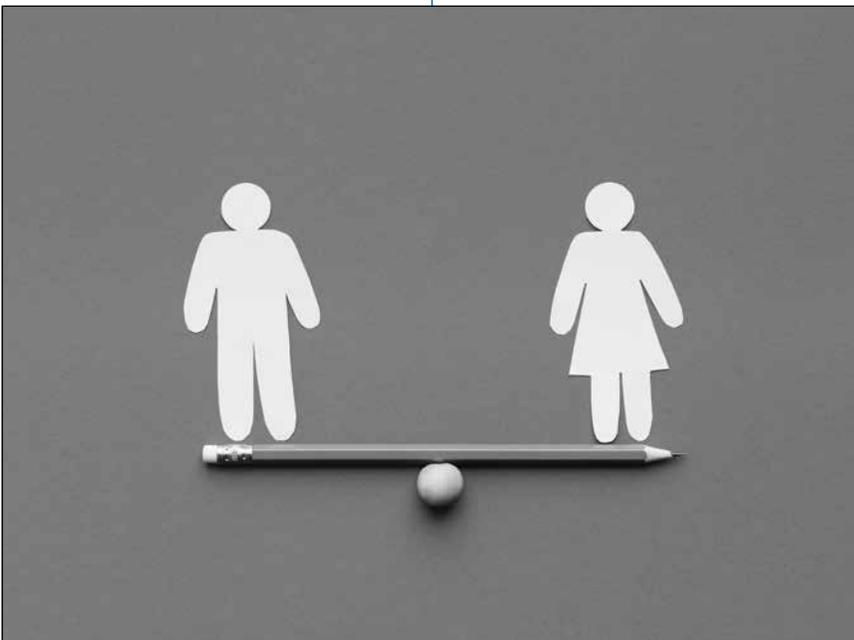
because it sounds too flamboyant. There's a part of me that remembers to cross my arms so that I don't gesticulate in a stereotypical way. There's a part of me yearning to crawl back into that closet and lock everyone else out.

Do I regret coming out? Definitely not. But back in the closet, I was free to explore my identity without anyone else knowing. Out here in the real world, I feel obligated to have an answer for everyone else.

There's a whole slew of academic terms to explain and justify my feelings of distress: homophobia (overt and internalized), toxic masculinity, gender norms, etc. And while there is comfort in knowing that I am not alone in my thoughts and experiences, that much needed relief has come with the consequence of perpetuating an inner conflict. It's an ongoing battle between identifying as a gay man, which is associated with an abundance of assumptions and stereotypes, and maintaining my unique individuality. Navigating the battle outside of the closet amplifies this confusing contradiction. For instance, if I feel uncomfortable wearing an outfit that breaks gender norms or social conventions, is it due to the pressures of a heteronormative society or simply because the clothes aren't representative of who I am or want to be? Is it even possible to discern this distinction? Beyond the basic knowledge of my queer identity, which is my sexual orientation, my understanding of what feels natural to me remains unclear.

Determining the facets of my identity has been and continues to be a mountain I must climb. Sometimes I face Everest, while other times I simply hop over a hill. But every journey I embark on is important, maybe even necessary. Regardless of the plethora of struggles I have encountered, almost every aspect of my coming out experience has been critical to my own identity development. Ash Beckham is right when she says that "a closet is no place for a person to truly live." To that point, I never want to minimize the reality that many LGBTQIA+ individuals have experienced hate and discrimination that I've never faced. I'm eternally grateful for the privilege of growing up knowing that acceptance and unconditional love were waiting for me outside those closet doors, both in my home and in my community.

With this understanding in mind, there are aspects of my experience that have cultivated my growth. I wish to cherry-pick the parts of my coming out journey that can be seen as a model of identity realization rather than a source of pity. There was value in taking a pit stop in the closet on the road to self-identification. While I was forced into the closet by a heteronormative society, discovering myself on my own was enlightening. I had the privilege of shopping around and trying on different clothes with different labels, literally and figuratively. Playing with all sorts of identities, alternate versions of the same person depending on the outfit on my body. Even now, having taken a few baby steps away from that closet door, I still turn my head back every once in a while, making sure I'm not forgetting an accessory or jacket paramount to my outfit. Maybe the closet does not have to be some dark dungeon where we cower in fear of a seemingly



bleak future. The closet can be an opportunity. It offers one the freedom to explore in the comfort of their own mind.

Learning to understand and appreciate my identity is taking time. It requires intense self-interrogation and introspection. My coming out journey may seem like the prototypical gay experience, but the questions in the back of my mind have gone far beyond the scope of sexuality and masculinity. I struggled with my own sense of individuality. I still question what truly defines me. Nevertheless, my time spent in the closet was conscious and self-aware. I understood that, in the face of our society's incessant need for labels, I had to determine and differentiate the many facets of my identity

and not just latch onto the default handed to me. Does this mean my experience in the closet was entirely pleasant? Obviously not. And sometimes it's easy to feel as though I'm behind everyone around me and to wish that I had come out sooner. But then I remember that it took a lot of courage to share that Google Doc and wear those pink shoes. Maybe it took me a little bit longer to get ready for the party, but who cares if I show up late? When I arrive, I want to look and feel fabulous. And I never would have known what to wear without spending some time in the closet.

Works Cited

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