

### **Introduction**

*Celestine:* My name is Celestine Randy Howes and I am married to Hilary and the mother of Alithea.

*Hilary:* I am Hilary Howes, married to Celestine and parent to Alithea

*Alithea:* I'm Alithea Howes and these are my parents, Celestine and Hilary.

*Celestine:* I grew up in Hawaii in Honolulu and I currently live in Greenbelt, Maryland

*Hilary:* I grew up in San Jose, California, and now live in Greenbelt, Maryland.

*Alithea:* I grew up in California and now I live in Brooklyn.

*Celestine:* I am a costume designer and an instructor, adjunct professor whenever I can get a job. And a fabric artist.

*Hilary:* I'm a Vice President and creative director for a entertainment company, in the Maryland area

*Alithea:* And I'm a performer and writer

*Celestine:* I'm a cradle Catholic, born into a good Irish Catholic family. I've always gone to church, I've always been a regular Sunday Mass goer, I think if I missed it's been a rare occasion. Hilary's a convert, and a late convert, and Alithea when she was little of course was baptized and raised Catholic.

*Hilary:* I was raised without any religious training and I assumed that I was atheist until after my transition. I've accompanied Celestine to church on Sundays. When we arrived in Greenbelt, Maryland, we discovered an intentional Eucharistic community. That really made an impression on me and after three years of attending that every week, I talked to a priest about being Baptized, at that point I wasn't really converting from anything else so it was just being Baptized and Confirmed.

*Alithea:* I was born Catholic. I went to church with my mom every week for the first seventeen years of my life. I have since left the Church but we spent a lot of time talking about the teachings of Christ and Catholicism, so I think that it's still informs my sense of morals, um, and values a lot.

*Alithea:* I never felt a particular sense of community in Catholicism, and the more I grew older sort of the dogma of the church, and especially with the last Pope, I became less and less happy with sort of the popular image of Catholicism. You tell people you're a Catholic and there's a very specific set of assumptions that go along with it and they never really applied to me. We've always been a very accepting family, we've always been very accepting of all lifestyles, and that doesn't really go with the normal image of what Catholicism is. And it became harder and harder to identify as a Catholic when it was being associated with so much hate, and so many, just ugly incidences,

*Alithea:* Growing up in a family that was so accepting of all lifestyles and having so many friends who were trans or gay or queer in any kind of way it made me feel uncomfortable being associated with a church that was considered to be not accepting of those lifestyles.

*Alithea:* Our household was very happy usually, very loving. We were sort of the weirdos in our community being the theatre people. But I never really had a problem with that. I never felt a need to rebel against that because I was always very happy with my parents.

### **Hilary and Celestine's Story**

*Celestine:* We met at San Francisco State. I was a graduate assistant in the costume shop and Hilary was taking the costume class and what actually drew me first to Hilary was her sense of humor.

*Hilary:* But it was really summer theatre where we got together. I wasn't looking and she wasn't particularly looking for anybody but we started spending a lot of dinners together and something grew. We really connected in a very deep way, spiritually. In terms of our values, and that was something that we identified

is that people can be very different in many ways. She's better at something, I'm better at others, but sharing the same values is something that we really connected deeply on and knew that was going to hold us together in the long term.

*Celestine:* I actually was the one who asked Hilary to marry me. I believe her response was sure, why not.

*Hilary:* Our marriage has lasted thirty-seven years. I think it did get off to a really good start because we took time to get to know each other, I think even though, everybody was surprised that we got married in a hurry but their way no child on the way, but it was five years before we were blessed with a child, and so we really did have time to get to know each other. We've done so many things that challenge so many marriages, we've traveled internationally together, we've remodeled houses, we have – well I changed my gender, and, and that breaks up a lot of couples. Not ours [laughs].

### **Hilary's Transition**

*Hilary:* The time of knowing when I was transsexual is kind of hard to put sometimes, because as a child I understood I was different in some way, and I actually recall, praying to a God I didn't believe in, to let me wake up a girl. And back then, back in the fifties and sixties we didn't have any terms or words to describe this kind of thing and so I didn't have any kind of understanding of what that really meant. Back then if you were born male and wanted to be a female, but wasn't attracted to a man, then you were considered a cross-dresser. A heterosexual cross-dresser. And, so for much of my life I assumed that was it because I wasn't attracted to men.

When, I got to my mid-thirties, it was really Celestine who said I think you need to deal with some gender issues. I think there's something going on here. And so I found a support group. I did a lot more reading. I got involved with a support group relating as a heterosexual cross-dresser. We would do these trainings for college students and so I would go on a panel. And that panel would include a cross-dresser, a transsexual, and sometimes a male-to-female transsexual. And sometimes someone who identified as bigendered or androgyn. And so it was through telling our stories to these classes so they could get a better understanding of the range of expression that I was listening to the transsexual's story and realizing that was really much more me than what I was portraying. That's when it started to dawn on me.

It was really our trip to Disneyland for my fortieth birthday – Disneyland had always been a treat for us. It was about five hours away so we would go down there while Alithea was growing up and for my fortieth birthday my treat was that I would get to dress as a woman for the entire time. We thought that being away from our area we wouldn't meet anybody, wouldn't risk meeting anybody that would discover me. And so over that weekend, there was a lot of trepidation going there. We were wondering well, how would people react, and I didn't have an idea that I would pass as a woman, back then and so what happened is absolutely nothing. There was no discovery at all. There was no reaction to two women with one girl and there was no reaction to me going to bathrooms or anything like that. And so it was really on the ride home where I was going to have to dress as a man again that it occurred to me that I was going to need to transition if I was going to be able to navigate life in a mode that was really more normal and natural for me. And that was kind of heartbreaking because at that point I realized that as, as important as it was for me to be a woman, it was still very important for me to be a wife to me wife, and a parent to my daughter, and I couldn't really understand how I could navigate those relationships, and, with that identity. Now you've got to remember that was the mid-nineties and so it was still unusual, I would say, to have two women parenting a daughter, and so that took some work.

*Celestine:* There were points at which I was like, ok where is this going? What is happening? And because we had a daughter I felt if there was going to be a major change it would be lovely if it could wait until she grew up and didn't have to go through that with us. But it also became more and more obvious that the drive, the need, the psychological and physical need that was happening was so intense. It was, in some ways it was like giving birth. It was so intense the force of it was so powerful that there was a time in which I suddenly realized this is going to happen no matter what. Because it has to. It has to happen. So it was, it wasn't easy. It was harder for me, I think, as personal identification of who I was, as opposed to who Hilary was. I could accept Hilary becoming Hilary. It was harder for me to accept that I was now going to be viewed as a lesbian. And it wasn't because I have a problem with lesbianism it's just that that's not me.

We spent a year in therapy, first with a therapist who said marriages never survive a transition. Never. At which point we both came out and said we need a new therapist. Luckily being, we were in San Francisco there were several and we found one who was really good and after our first session she said "it's obvious you love each other, you just need to deal. Figure out how to deal with this." And we did. It wasn't easy and I think Alithea is going to write a book about it at some point.

*Alithea:* Well I was about ten, I think when you told me that you liked to wear women's clothing. And to be honest I don't remember that moment. I do remember about a week later I woke up in the middle of the night and saw you in a night gown. I remember thinking well I'm glad she told me otherwise I would think this was weird. I guess I'd grown up with so many people who were different from normal society that I didn't really think it was weird as long as you told me about it. I knew that it was something that I shouldn't tell other people but I never really thought of it as alienating. By then I was in middle school and it was harder then because when you're at that age when you're twelve that's when people really start to enforce that idea of normalness. It's something that you, you feel like you should want, so it became more and more difficult for me. So there was, there was a day, sort of, near the end of the school year where they sat me down and said Hilary is going to be living as Hilary. So I spent a summer being twelve and being angry and how could you do this to me because when you're twelve everything is about you.

### **Celestine Staying with Hilary**

*Celestine:* My Catholic roots were very crucial to our staying together. Marriage to me was forever. And I would not have gotten married if I didn't believe, when I stood there saying I do, that this was forever. I am a very passionate person but when I say passion I mean passionate about everything. And when I say something, I mean it. And I meant it. I meant it. I meant that this was forever. I'd found the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. So when we got to that transition point, that was a major factor was that this person wasn't changing. The interior was still the same. It was an exterior change. And that didn't matter. I didn't marry the gender. I married the person. And so definitely the fact that I'd had that upbringing. And that marriage had always been put to me... it wasn't about the big wedding, it wasn't about the fancy dress, it wasn't about anything. It was about being with this person, forever.

*Hilary:* What's normal for people wasn't really important for us. What's important for us is being together the rest of our lives.

### **How Are LGBT Gifts to the Catholic Church?**

*Celestine:* It's a real challenge to the church, and it's a challenge the church needs to take up. And, and show a radical acceptance of people who are marginalized by others. I think that that's a real calling for us in the church now. And I think the LGBT people in particular bring that to us.

*Celestine:* It's important for other people to hear the stories of those who are not like them. And to understand that, in reality, we are like them. We are human. We are part of the advancement of society. We are part of everyday life. If someone else out there, and, this, part of this comes from my background. If some...one person out there watches this, and feels better, or is saved, or has a purpose and goes, oh wait, there's somebody out there like me. Then that's important. My mother, who is a very spiritual person always said that we can't change the world but we can change the person in front of us. We can help that person and from that person it spreads out. So I believe that if there's one step I can take to help even just one person understand they're not alone, they're not on the outside, they are part of this world, this church, because as "Catholic" means universal. Then that is important for me to do.

*Alithea:* It's important that people see that a family as strange as ours is still very happy and still very well adjusted, and that, you know, especially for that, for the LGBT youth who think that, you know, their life is never going to get better or they're never going to be accepted, this is showing them that that's not true. That you can have a very happy, loving family, that you can be in an accepting church I think that's very important that people know that.

*Hilary:* So for me, really the importance of being here is to put a face to these terms. I mean many people have heard about transgender people and we see images in the media and it can get pretty sensationalized, as much as we say we're different, we're also a very normal family. And in some ways that kind of normalcy I think needs to be shared. In many ways it's as hard to be Catholic in the transgender community as it is to be transgender in a Catholic community. There's a lot of suspicion and wonder and question from, sort of, both sides. And I think being here, being out about being Catholic and transgender is important so that's what really brought us here to make a difference in terms of that. To make a difference with the Church. To help it continue to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it needs to find a way to build some acceptance in.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

*Celestine:* One of the things that I think is crucial to the church and to life, period, is that there is God in each and every person and God created all of us. Anything that is created, God loves. Therefore if God loves everything He's created, that means God loves everyone and everything. He doesn't create things that are to be discarded or to be reviled. If God created you that way, God created you that way for a reason and loves you for that. To put anyone, any group of people into a "this is a group that God hates," is wrong, it's not biblical, it's not Christian, it certainly is not something Jesus did. Jesus reached out constantly to the under layers of society. To people that other people hated. He constantly went to them. Prostitutes, tax collectors who were really bad in the Israeli world, fishermen, shepherds, lepers, anyone who did not fit in this, the upper stratus of the Hebrew society he was in, he went to them. He reached out to them, he lived with them. And if we can't live that way then we're not being Christian.