

Peyton

Can They Tell?

My friends and I walked down the crowded streets of Tangier, towards Blue Pub as a treat to ourselves for the stressful week we had just endured. Our comical laughter and puns matched the speed of our fast moving legs, desperate to get off the streets -- perhaps me more than the others. Walking down the street in jeans and tshirts, I noticed parents pulling their children away from us and shoving them between their own bodies, a barrier of protection between me and the small child. *Was it all of us or just me? Could they tell I was different, breaking one of their laws each day that I opened my eyes?* I thought to myself. It surely couldn't be that. I mean come on look at me, my tattoos are all exposed, more masculine markings than most females my age, and piercings that adorn my face as well as my ears. It felt like trying to lie to a priest when the truth was already written out on my forehead.

As the call to prayer went off for the third time that day, my mind wandered back to my best friend's mom sending screenshots of laws and regulations of Morocco. Worry filled the tone of her messages as she told me to be careful, telling her daughter to watch out for me as well since we were rooming together for the semester.

"Peyton, you could be stoned." Her message flashed along my screen as an exact replica message from my mom popped up next. "Follow the rules and blend in please."¹

It seemed that they were both begging for my safety, while my fear was simultaneously eating away at my brain. I knew that I was leaving America to a Muslim country. I was essentially putting myself at risk when I left, but now that I was here I was unsure. The thought

¹ Trimel, Suzanne. *Outright Action International*, 18 June 2018.

of religion made me queasy and the fact that I was surrounded by it each and every day here filled my body with dread. I felt as though I had been thrown back into my childhood once again, hiding beneath my outer layer of skin and burrowing myself deep inside my mind. *Even though I had freed my inner turmoil last year, would I have to endure it again for the next four months?*

LGBTQ vs. Religion

How does a religious environment cause harm to your mental health when you are living your life as a lie each day? Now that is a loaded question... Those words hold an abundance of weight and may cast a dark emotion of those it is directed towards. My family, more specifically my dad, was always involved in church since he was a little boy. For him, his one goal in life was to make sure his children followed in the footsteps of God. But that life plan was never fulfilled.

We all hear the infamous words of “my house my rules” growing up in America, so when it came to church, I had no choice but to attend. I’ve been through confirmation classes, communion, bible study, taught at vacation bible school, owned three bibles, and have taken multiple classes simply to become a member of a church. This was all before the age of seventeen. I felt like I was enduring a diluted conversion therapy session each time I stepped through those glass doors and sat on that pew three rows from the front.

I first struggled with my sexual identity when I was thirteen and it only worsened every time my dad would bash the gay community. My most important years of development were filled with secretly recording *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* on the television and staying up late to watch it. It made me feel connected to the community; that I felt like I finally belonged. There was nothing more damaging to my mental health than knowing I would never be accepted by my

father. The damage only worsened one night in Bible Study classes. It was just my mom, dad, and me sitting in those uncomfortable metal chairs while the pastor's voice echoed in my head.

"Since God said that homosexuality is a sin, we don't allow people like *that* to become members in our church. They can visit for a Sunday, but they will not be welcomed. They will not have the same opportunity to take these classes and be a part of this community. Our hope is that our cold shoulder will force them to leave and think about their lifelong sin," he spoke. My dad nodded his head vigorously and seeing the joy in his eyes towards the response brought tears to my own. It felt like the ultimate betrayal.

It wasn't until after my parents divorced that I came out to my mom and my step dad. Their tears were filled with acceptance and welcomed me with open arms, but I know that this response would not be similar if I were to say the same thing to my father.

These thoughts seem to be stuck in my mind every time I walk past the barrier between campus and the real streets of Tangier. Morocco identifies so strongly with religious ties, yet so many people in the gay community walk among them. Here, it is illegal to be gay, which is something I cannot fathom.² Does the gay community here still associate themselves with religion or is there hatred for it deep in their hearts like mine? I want to know how this impacts their mental health, if at all. Do they talk about it or keep to themselves to struggle on their own each day? Is it a dirty secret that they hide under their Moroccan rug and only speak about in hushed tones with their trusted friends?

²"LGBT Rights in Morocco." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 29 Nov. 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Morocco.

I prefer not to use a label with my sexuality. I fall in love with people, not genders. If I permanently lived in Tangier, I feel like depression would be following me around like a haunted shadow. *How do people do that here?*

New Perspective

I had spent two months in Morocco without seeing an openly gay human being walking the streets. I hadn't heard any side conversations, no hushed whispers lingering in the air about the forbidden topic, and absolutely nothing remotely close to the vibrant pride flag colors adorning the streets. None of this necessarily shocked me, but it did finalize the uneasiness in my stomach. That feeling remained until I went out with some friends later that night.

Miami Bar and Lounge had become my safe haven during my stay in Morocco. In fact, I think all my friends would agree. It was a safe environment for all of us to drink without worrying about our drinks being spiked and the workers there had started to become our friends. Yes, we were all on a first name basis at this point. My back was turned from the entrance as the music videos played on the large smart TV at the front of the room. I felt a foot collide with my shin under the table and a yelp of pain flew out of my lips.

"Ow!" I exclaimed loudly over the deafening music. "What was that for?" I asked Finn, a newfound friend I made, sitting across from me. We had never met each other before coming to Morocco together, but we quickly grew a strong bond.

"I have a question, and I feel like you would know the answer," he responded. I quirked an eyebrow up, unsure where the conversation was going to lead. "What do you know about being gay in Morocco?"

My body tensed at the question and the volume of his voice to say something along those lines. I quickly looked around to ensure that there weren't ears listening in close proximity. At

the time I had yet to learn about the true acceptance of the gay community in Morocco, so I just shrugged my shoulder in response. I leaned in across the table like I was a child sharing a secret in the middle of class.

“I don’t know honestly. I know it’s considered a crime, at least I think it is, but I’m not sure about all of it. I know deep in the Middle East you can be stoned to death. My dad used to tell me horror stories from when he was stationed over there, but I don’t get that vibe here,” I answered as truthfully as I could. Sweat lined my palms and the music continued to shake the floor. I tried to keep my mind distracted with the deep bass, but I couldn’t help but ask another question.

“Why? What’s up?” I shouted. His response wasn’t a huge gesture. It was more like a silent eye flick, trying to seem unforthcoming in the middle of the rest. I followed his eyes, softly turning my head at a painfully slow rate. I could hear the creak of my bones in the back of my ears as I craned my neck behind me.

In the front, sitting right under the massive screen was a gay couple; two males holding hands, dancing, and flirting and all night long and one of their friends who I assumed was part of the community as well. They commanded the attention of the whole room, no one being able to take their eyes off of them. Their outfits were well put together, checkered pants and slim fitting black tshirts with jewelry falling around their necks. So many questions began swarming my mind, it felt like a beehive exploded. My fear only grew as they stood up and began dancing in front of the forty people that were there that night.

What was going to happen? I thought to myself. At home, I would normally begin cheering and clapping with glee, but I felt like I couldn’t do that in this foreign place. In a matter of seconds, the energy in the room shifted, but it felt light and airy. People’s voices filled the

room with joy as they mimicked my usual actions from home. The clapping drowned out the terror I was feeling, knowing that based on the judgement of the room they were in a safe place to be themselves and nothing negative could happen to them here. A smile spread across my face as I joined in. I sorted through the confusion I was feeling earlier and tried to take in the moment. *Maybe it isn't as dangerous as I thought.* I was taken over by a different type of yearning that night. It felt desperate as I wracked my brain to understand what I watched in comparison to what I was told before coming here. I had to learn more from a local, and that's just what I did.

Words of the Wise

in request of the person I interviewed, I will be altering the name for this essay

When I began my walk to the medina, there was a new attitude that seemed to resonate within me. I was full of nervous jitters but I was excited at the same time. With each step I took, those emotions only increased, especially when Tony began leading me up the stairs to Medhi's apartment. All the questions I had memorized seemed to slip my mind when he knocked on his door.

When the door opened a smile lined my face as I took in his appearance. His green sweater seemed to drown his small height, but they matched nicely with his warm colored, plaid pants. I felt like I was walking into a comfortable environment as he gave a brief tour of his apartment. There was a different aura to him and I felt as if there was a chance I had met this man in a past life. I'm not sure how else to explain it.

After the usual exchanges of meeting someone new, I pulled out my laptop to take notes, but I didn't even have to ask any questions. It seemed like he was sharing a secret with a long lost friend. He began speaking so fast that his sentences strung themselves together without a break for breaths. My mind stopped working for a minute because I felt awe struck. He used to

live in Amsterdam, which was one of the world's most famous gay cities filled with nightclubs and pride parades. He shared an abundant amount of stories before truly diving into the interview.

“You know how they do parades during pride month? Well there was a big one in August one time, and after all the festivities, crazy Dutch religious people came out the next day for their own parade. They were praying and burning sage to clean the streets. It was like they were trying to cure a sickness.” He shared his anecdote with laughter falling from his lips when he finished. “Can you imagine that? I had never seen anything like it before. It felt like a scene from a horror movie. How is that supposed to make us feel?”

I could understand the pain behind the last question even though the topic didn't seem heavy anymore. I never comprehended people that perform actions like that, people that hindered others identities to benefit themselves and their fears. My face grimaced as I thought of similar things in my hometown. There was a man who burned a pride flag in his lawn, his friends around hollering then going to church the next day. I was told numerous times that people would pray for me when others had their suspicion about my sexuality. In fact, a church tried to prevent a drag show I was in from happening in our small town. All crazy people right? Before I could ask a question, his voice filled my ears again.

“But that's the problem. People like that aren't conscious. It all comes back to logic and philosophy. We are all human, aren't we?” His wide words made my smile grow. I had never thought about anti-gay people in the term of consciousness, but I felt like it explained it so well. People like that were blind to human rights and they think selfishly. His simple words felt like the weight on my soul had been lifted.

“No, no, I separate my personal life from the public. It’s not something I go share with strangers, we keep it to ourselves, share it with our friends. You can talk about it if you keep personal things out. People pretend it doesn’t exist, they don’t talk about it, etcetera, etcetera,” he spoke before taking a deep breath. I repressed my giggle as he said etcetera for the fourth time during the visit. It shed light on his innocence and his desire to try and give all the information he possibly could in the short amount of time. “You will see that the higher and lower classes will be more accepting than the middle class because they have nothing to lose.”

I nodded my head. It’s always the people that have something to lose that are more ferocious than others. They seemed to be more judgemental than most, but when you’re stuck in the middle, you don’t have anything else to do. His stories were erratic, jumping around from topic to topic, piquing my interest each time he spoke.

“But we aren’t alone. There are organizations now that help gay men. They don’t label themselves as advocates, but focus on being labeled an aids prevention foundation,” his voice wavered a bit as he put air quotes around specific words. “The money comes from Spain, but they hold concerts, parties, fundraisers, and campaigns. They also fight bullying and harassment cases, hire lawyers, and rent apartments for victims.”

“Wow,” I whispered under my breath. That was the last thing I expected to hear. It reminded me of my speech on The Trevor Project and I was such a huge advocate for them now. I always wished I knew of them when I was young and confused with my sexuality and how that mixed with religion, but it is encouraging to hear that there are organizations like that in Morocco. Even if they aren’t specifically labeled for the gay community, it’s good to know you have support at least somewhere besides your friends.

“Well also, there’s no legal punishment for sexual interaction. There isn’t a law for punishment because homosexuality doesn’t exist to Moroccans. Why make a law for something that you are in denial about? The only time there is a problem is when you question the lack of laws protecting gay rights, that’s when they punish you. You don’t ask about marriage because you have to be conscious about religion and tradition. If you ask then you are imposing against old tradition and you have to be aware that you can’t do that.”

Medhi spoke so fast I was surprised he was still breathing. He was like a walking encyclopedia on the gay community in Morocco and was sharing things I never would have pieced together through online research.

“You know, once every couple of years you would have a case, but it was about public and social misconduct, not anything sexual. It is hard to have a sexual based case because it has to be proven and the Quran says you have to have two witnesses which is hard in cases like that.”

“Interesting... and none of this affects you mentally at all?” I asked to ensure I heard him correctly earlier.

“No, it's really about avoiding conflict. People I trust know, and I have a good life so why would it?” His voice was full of honesty and I can’t help but feel empathetic. It was like connecting on a different wavelength, a topic we both knew about so passionately and deeply.

After Tony left we hung out for about another hour or so, sharing stories and ideologies. He gained my respect when I first walked in the door, but when he told me he knew THE Ru Paul before he was famous, my jaw dropped. I felt like he gained more respect than I thought I had the capacity to give. Apparently Ru Paul used to perform in some of the nightclubs in Holland when he was starting his modeling career. How cool is that? Ru Paul was such a huge part of my past and Medhi had met him! That’s a strange connection if you ask me.

When I left Medhi's apartment, I was walking home with a new found light on my identity and Morocco's relationship with the gay community. It felt like there was a bounce in my step. It was exactly the conversation I needed to push me forward in my self discovery journey.

We Are All Human

It took me a long time to figure out who I was and sort through my parent's vision of my life in order to find my own. After everything I experienced growing up, it was my personal belief to be an atheist. I believe that all of our decisions are based on past experiences whether it was negative or positive. When I first arrived in Morocco, I was nervous and scared. It felt like I was reliving my childhood and I hated it. I never expected that this final project would give me insight on my future. I have support from at least half of my family and that was genuinely okay with me. There was just always this little nagging in the back of my head filled with dread in anticipation of telling my dad, but Medhi gave me some of the best life advice and I didn't even have to ask for it.

"Don't tell him," he said matter of factly. "If you told your mom and she still loves you then don't tell him. There's no need. He will figure it out eventually on his own, but if he lets his religion decide whether or not to keep loving you then that's not your problem. I bet he will still love you, it will just take him time."

His words have been playing on repeat since I left his house. It was a truth that I didn't know I needed to hear and one that I never considered before. It was almost like living in Morocco. You tell the ones you trust and you keep them close. You don't speak about the topic in order to avoid conflict and that's exactly what I have been doing. I may not feel strong enough or trust my father yet, but one day he will find out. It's practically inevitable and I'm okay with that.

Going through all the mental turmoil I endured beat me down brutally. It made living hard and religion didn't help me, but I don't think I'm alone in that. Not everyone needs to know my sexuality and how I define myself. All that matters is that I know who I am and I have strengthened my independence. Medhi told me that at the end of the day it's my life and it's my decision on how to live it. I never thought that a country like Morocco would give me such an impactful life lesson, let alone from a stranger.