

NINETEEN

Pastoral Care and Gay Men: The Amazing True Story of the Life and Death of One Good Man

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There were many “homes” for young Doug Carty. There was the “home” Doug came from, one he maintained by his relationship with his family. People as good and decent as Doug Carty don’t just appear out of nowhere, they come from love. Anyone who knew Doug at all knew his deep love for his family. Perhaps his own personal demons kept him from sharing parts of his life with those he loved, but in no way did that ever alter the depth and commitment of his love for his family. From his family, Doug developed his hard-working nature, integrity, strength of character, and generosity. All of these things enabled Doug to draw wonderful people around him for his entire life.

The other major home for Doug was his family of friends, especially Gene and Wolf. We gather around this amazing place today that they have built with love and friendship, the grounds and view that Doug literally helped build with his own two hands, a place that has become home, in so many ways, to many of us. All of Doug’s friends helped him, through the simple, but profound, act of friendship, to come to love and accept himself more and more.

—Excerpt from Doug’s memorial service

*Details of this story, including Doug’s name, have been changed to protect the privacy of his friends and family.

This is the amazing and ordinary true story of the life and death of one good man.

Doug Carty was fifty years old when he died unexpectedly, doing what he loved most—camping. If Doug fit any stereotype it was that of a strong, quiet man with a heart of gold who is such a popular figure in American culture. Doug kept his emotions in check, although he had a hearty laugh and a sad movie on TV would bring a tear to his eye.

Doug served his country in the military for thirty years. He loved the outdoors. He could be found camping in his tent when weather permitted, and he loved hunting and fishing.

He loved and was dedicated to his family. He was the middle child of five children. He grew up in a loving, working-class Irish Roman Catholic family in semi-rural suburbs in Maine. He was the son who always checked on his parents. Doug was the one who went to sporting events with his father and took his mother to medical appointments. Even when he lived a two-hour drive from his parents, he was the one who would drive to their house after snowstorms to be sure the driveway, roof, and walkways were clear. At the holidays he loved all the family traditions. He took great pride in helping the family cook and prepare things for Christmas, Thanksgiving, family birthdays, and many other events.

Doug was the kind of man you know you would call if you needed a ride somewhere or a favor. Every year he would help his best friends organize camping events; he would go down to the camping site days before to help clear the land and set up tents. One year, he organized a group and spent days clearing away trees on a friend's land to help them save money.

He was a very private person. Although Doug loved his family and his friends deeply, he was the kind of person who kept many of his feelings to himself. Like all of us, he had personal demons, but during his all-too-short life he believed he had to protect those he loved from the complexity of his world. Every once in a while, he seemed to drink a little more heavily than usual when he was with his friends; but he never drank in front of his family. When he did drink with his friends he seemed to drink only a little more than everyone else—and most people never noticed.

Although Doug was surrounded with love from his family and friends, he kept so many things private that even those who knew him well knew that there were things about Doug they didn't know. Doug grew up with love and faith, but he grew up in a world and a church that told him being gay was a bad thing. Doug knew he was gay and kept the world of his family and the world of his gay friends separate to protect, he thought, all of them and himself.

Besides the battle between the gay and straight worlds in which Doug lived, he also never seemed to fit comfortably in the gay world. Much of the way gay life evolved in the United States in Doug's time didn't seem to have much to do with Doug's own lifestyle. He preferred trees, lakes, and valleys over the urban gay neighborhoods of the cities. His idea of fashion was clean work clothes and casual wear. He drank beer, not cocktails. He was ruggedly handsome, with hands made strong from chopping down trees—but he didn't know much about facials and manicures. Being gay in a homophobic culture can be extremely difficult; and finding you don't fit into the subculture you are supposed to be part of can add even more pain and isolation.

In his forties, Doug discovered another man like himself who fit into a gay subculture called "the bears"—gay men who wear flannel shirts and jeans, not designer clothes, and have bellies, not washboard abs. Bears would more likely be found camping in the woods than going to after-hours clubs in the cities.

Doug made friends, good friends, among "the bears." He even dated a bit, although because he kept his worlds so separate, it was nearly impossible to have someone too special or too close in his life, someone who by his very existence might loosen the boundaries Doug had built so carefully.

The last weekend of his life was beautiful. It was late summer in the mountains; there was warm sunshine and leaves were just starting to change. Doug was on a campout with about thirty other gay friends on the land of his two closest friends, Gene and Wolf. They all attended a local country fair together, laughed, talked, drank, and played music. Doug even reconnected with an old flame, John. Life was good. On Sunday, at noon, they all ate a hearty brunch and said goodbye, making plans to see one another again soon.

That night, at midnight, doing what he loved most, camping with a friend, Doug died.

Death has a way of breaking boundaries and uncovering long-hidden truths. When Doug died, the police called his family, telling Doug's brothers that there were "items of an alternative lifestyle" found in his tent. Doug, in fact, had a flyer from a gay film festival and his collection of teddy bear pins—souvenirs that many of the gay "bears" wore or collected as namesakes. At first, both the police and Doug's brothers thought the pins had some strange sexual significance in his life and were connected, somehow, with his death. They would later come to understand that they were simply a collection, symbols important to a man who was finding a small corner of the world where he could be himself. The initial misunderstanding, however, led his brothers to decide to burn everything in Doug's tent before the rest of his family or friends could see his last possessions—

perhaps thinking they were protecting their family, perhaps not knowing how to handle finding out their brother was gay.

With Doug's death his family suddenly had information about their son that Doug had worked hard to keep from them during his lifetime. They called everyone they could think of to tell them of Doug's death, but his family didn't know how to contact people they had never met. Doug's biological family simply did not know his very real gay family. They were not even sure that Doug had gay friends. Fortunately, one of Doug's sisters knew how much Doug loved camping and also knew the areas where he usually went camping, so she made sure that the newspapers in those areas carried his obituary—hoping that somehow Doug's friends would find out about his death.

That small gesture did finally let his friends know, two days after his death, that he was gone. His gay friends from all over New England and Canada gathered back at Gene and Wolf's house as soon as they heard—the same place they had been laughing and camping with Doug just days before. His death was a mystery. They didn't know how to contact his family to offer their sympathy, and didn't know how to explain who they were to Doug. They simply didn't know what to do; so they sat together that night, the night before his funeral, and cried, held one another, and told stories of their friend. There was sadness, confusion, and isolation. Just a few miles away, Doug's biological family and family of friends grieved apart, separated from one another by a wall of ignorance.

Finally, John, who had been reunited with Doug only a few days before, felt he had to find out something. John knew that he and Doug's other friends had to find a way to say goodbye to someone who had been woven so closely into their lives and their hearts. That night he called the church where the funeral was to be held the next day to ask the priest how Doug had died. Father Paul told John that he had been meeting with the family and that the cause of death was unknown, but Doug had been found dead in his tent by the man with whom he was camping. John told the priest that Doug's friends did not know the family but they would come to the funeral and sit in the back, wanting to pay their respects but not cause any trouble. Without any explicit words, it became clear that the priest knew from the family that Doug was gay; now he was aware that Doug's gay friends had contacted him. Father Paul found a way to be pastoral and comforting to both of Doug's families, talking to both, giving information and lending a listening ear.

At the funeral, John greeted the priest and thanked him for the help he had given to Doug's friends the night before. In the course of the funeral, Father Paul made sure to mention both family and friends several times in his sermon. It was subtle, but profound, and not lost on Doug's gay friends. At the end of the liturgy the coffin was brought to the back of the church to have the pall, the

bright white sheet with a cross on it that had draped the coffin during the liturgy, replaced by the American flag that traditionally drapes the coffins of those who have served in the military, the flag that would later be presented to his mother. In a gesture that seemed so matter of fact, as though he were simply randomly asking a favor of someone who was sitting at the back of the church, Father Paul asked John (and in so doing Doug's whole gay family) to help remove the pall and place the flag on the coffin. In that moment, Father Paul brought together, for the first time ever, the two families that loved Doug Carty. The walls that had kept all of the people that loved Doug separate had begun to crumble; love and death making all boundaries melt away.

After the funeral, there was a military gun salute outside and all who had loved Doug Carty clung to one another. They watched as the family members and friends from Doug's straight life headed into the church hall. These gay men didn't know if they would be welcome, and the very idea that they might make Doug's family—whom he had loved and protected so fiercely—uncomfortable was an impossibility in their minds. They would do nothing to upset the family.

Then Ellen, one of Doug's sisters, and her female partner walked up to them, just before they got in their cars to leave. Ellen said she had figured out who they were. She was also gay, but the walls Doug built kept her and Doug from ever talking about it.

Weeks after the funeral, Gene and Wolf held their own memorial with his friends and his two sisters at their house, the last place Doug had smiled and laughed. Together they all laughed, cried, prayed, told stories, read poetry, and broke bread together. All those who loved Doug held and supported each other in a way Doug never would have thought could be possible.

A moving part of the memorial was the prose poem written and read by Doug's friend John:

The End of Summer

The end of summer approaches.

The days grow shorter, the air cooler.

The bears know the long winter is coming, and they play in the

September sun, relishing in the dwindling days of sunlight, celebrating the sheer joy of time with friends before the long winter's sleep.

*The leaves know too, they explode with their brightest and most
beautiful faces before they brown and they fall away.*

*The September clouds grow and cover more and more of the once summer,
now fall, indigo sky.*

We celebrated the last gasp of summer together, never imagining . . .

*I knew about the shorter days, the cooler air, bright falling leaves,
and the growing clouds, but I didn't know how much the fall wind
would take.*

*Winter is not yet here, yet there seems no warmth anywhere,
The nights are cold.*

*In mourning, even thickest wool blankets feel threadbare against my
skin.*

*Winter will come and be colder without you.
It is so hard to believe there will ever be spring, and yet, spring will
come.*

*As the calendar marches on and the winter clouds will thin and float
away.*

*When the spring sun melts the ice and warms the cold earth and I will
remember how you could melt my blues and grays away with a look, a
smile, a hug.*

When I feel the warm breeze I will remember your open heart.

I will feel spring again.

I will remember you.

I will smile.

But in my heart,

Even when I see the clearest spring sky,

It will never be as blue as your eyes.

In the months that followed, the sadness of grieving continued, but the legacy of love continued, too. Doug's sisters and later his mother would stay in touch, e-mailing, calling, and meeting for dinners and brunch—brought together by the simple love of one good man. At Christmas, they all gathered together, Doug's two sisters and their families, and his mother, to celebrate the holiday, remember Doug's life, and share stories the others never knew about the man they all loved.

The mystery of Doug's death took a few months for the medical examiner to report officially, and although a single cause of death will probably never be found or understood, one contributing factor in Doug's death was probably the very high level of alcohol in his blood.

In the world we live in today, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people have made great advances. This is most true in the United States and other Western countries. LGBT people are no longer labeled as "disordered" by the medical or psychiatric communities. Openly gay people are beginning to be depicted positively on television and in films. They also serve as senators and congressional representatives. Gay people have become a political presence; civil unions and legal marriages now exist in various states and countries. In the religious debate in the United States, gay people are beginning to have a voice. The debate regarding sexuality in the Anglican Communion, and the election in New Hampshire of an openly gay bishop to the episcopate, the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, make it clear that in many ways the world has changed. However, the change is, so far, relatively small and far from uniform.

As you consider Doug Carty's story, it is important to remember that Doug's deeply closeted existence existed only a short drive from the possibility of legal marriage in Massachusetts, and just a few miles from where Bishop Gene Robinson leads the diocese of New Hampshire.

The life experience of the out, urban, affluent openly gay man is only one small part of the spectrum of the LGBT community. Still, today, many working-class gay men live and die in suburban and rural areas, in the two-thirds world, in conservative religious households and societies where the closet is the only thing that protects them from loss of their families, friends, jobs, and even their physical safety. Being gay is still a criminal offense in many places around the world, with punishments ranging from prison to torture to death.

Doug had a long and honorable career in the U.S. military, which could have been taken away in an instant, depending on how the "don't ask, don't tell" policy was enforced. He lived in fear that society, his family, and his straight friends would never accept him, or would, at worst, reject him "if they knew."

Doug had never fit into even the limited roles our society has chosen to recognize for gay men. Even today, although gay men may be accepted as actors or hairdressers, many in the United States still believe in legally barring them from openly serving in the military, marrying, or adopting children. There are few openly gay men playing professional sports in this country for fear their teammates, coaches, and fans would never accept them.

This story is meant to be a kind of literary icon, a symbol or window into looking at many different issues, especially those affecting gay men. A list of questions for reflection on this story follows. They are meant to help focus and give shape to a discussion or reflection on the pastoral care of gay men. How might you answer them?

- What other questions occur to you when reflecting on Doug's story? How can you, in your setting, foster a discussion on some of the issues raised here?
- What are some of the differences in pastoral issues with "out" gay men as opposed to "closeted" gay men?
- When and how is it important to see someone as a member of a marginalized group? When is understanding someone in that light important and when is it less relevant? What things are common among marginalized groups, and what are important ways people vary within a group of which they are a part?
- What are the differences between stereotypes and legitimate differences between gay men and the general population?
- What are some of the specific things about gay men that may make them differ from the general population? Suicide rates? Alcoholism?
- How does the phenomenon of the "closer" and "coming out" make LGBT people different from the general population?
- What are some of the concrete costs for a person, in the world they live in, to coming out and to not coming out?
- When we are operating in pastoral settings, do we realize that often people may have "membership" in minorities of various kinds of which we are not aware? Are there ways to reach out to these people? How?
- How do we understand when people's identities fit multiple categories? How might such issues as race, ethnic group, educational level, social class, rural vs. suburban vs. urban culture, and sexual orientation operate together in one person?

- When thinking about how conflict may arise among families, friends, and partners on the death of a person significant to them all, what ways can you help dialogue and discussion to happen? When is it important to help foster dialogue and when is it important not to be involved?
- How familiar are you with issues around problem drinking/binge drinking/alcoholism issues in general?
- When thinking about families, how much do we take into account the different ways all people, but gay people in particular, construct families? Do we allow people to define families or do we compare all to the yardstick of biologically related, nuclear-based families of traditional white, straight American culture? What is the value of friendship? Do we allow the strength of people's relationships define who is family or do we easily allow traditional definitions to influence how we view someone's family?
- How do we handle major revelations about people that only come with their death? How can we be pastoral in those cases? How do we deal with situations where secrecy, privacy, and death are intertwined? Does someone's death change the nature of such information? Do we, or should we, protect the privacy of the dead in the same way we would protect the privacy of the living?
- How could the way in which we think about the circumstances of a person's death radically change the way they are remembered by the people who have been part of their lives?
- Are the rituals of death, such as wakes and funerals, more for the living? How do we incorporate people into those rites as part of the grieving process?