

By Carly Phillips

My second coming out

told my dad using a “rip off the Band-Aid” strategy. I took a deep breath, dialed his cellphone, and said, “Hey Dad, it’s Carly, I just, um, wanted to tell you that I’m, um, dating a woman. OK, talk to you later!” And just like that, I had both hung up on and come out to my dad. Fast forward 9 years: I’m an out and proud gay woman, accepted and loved by my family. I’m also in the depths of a Ph.D. program—and I’ve realized that I no longer want to be an academic. As I wrestled with whether and how to disclose this to my adviser, I was struck by how familiar the whole process felt, from a journey of self-discovery to a risk of rejection and loss of support. And I realized that I could learn from my queer experience to make this second coming out as smooth as possible.

When I started grad school, I was sure I would become a professor. So I focused on my research—but I also dabbled in the nonacademic realm, participating in outreach events and attending workshops about alternative careers. I convinced both my adviser and myself that this was just a phase, like the period when I wore a “Legalize Love” shirt and carefully proclaimed that I was an LGBTQ ally but certainly not queer myself.

Yet soon I was sneaking away to science communication conferences and arranging informational interviews at government organizations, reminiscent of my younger self wistfully wandering around West Hollywood, sneaking into gay bars, and watching *Ellen* whenever I could. I even quietly told other grad students and a handful of faculty members about my changing career interests, just as I had tried out my “Hi, I’m Carly and I’m a homosexual” line on friends and acquaintances before telling my family.

But keeping secrets and lying by omission ate away at me. As risky as disclosing my queerness had felt, I owed my family the chance to embrace a full version of me. My research mentor deserved the same.

As I thought about telling her, I reflected on the Band-Aid strategy I had used with my dad. My abrupt approach set up a one-way flow of information and created a tacit understanding that my gayness existed but was not to be discussed, which led me to avoid talking with my family about large aspects of my life for years. We have since reached a point where we can discuss most things freely. But if I had come out differently, we likely would have gotten here more quickly and with considerably less angst.

So, using the wisdom of my 28 years, I approached my



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second coming out with a clarity, poise, and confidence that my frantic 19-year-old self could only dream of. I reminded myself that pulling off the Band-Aid is just the first step; the discussion that follows is often more important. Despite my racing heart and clammy hands, I initiated a calm, professional face-to-face conversation with my mentor so that we could both share our thoughts. She was surprised but not disappointed, and she began helping me network and plan for a new career track. We now talk openly about training opportunities, positions I might be interested in, and whether Chaco sandals are considered professional attire outside universities.

In this process I have been reminded that, in any coming out,

the community catches you. Whether that means hosting a newly out and isolated friend for Christmas with your family or reading the eighth draft of a colleague’s blog post, queers and scientists show up for each other. Since my second coming out, I have been overwhelmed by the support I have received from the many nonacademic scientists I’ve spoken with, whether it’s offering to read cover letters, helping me rework a CV into a resume, or gently reminding me to not talk about my research too much during interviews.

Most important, I have been reminded that coming out does not change who I am at my core, as a daughter, a student, or a scientist. Even if I leave academia, I can still contribute to our understanding of the natural world, use that understanding to improve people’s lives, and—hopefully—continue wearing Chacos to work. ■

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Science

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Science **360** (6387), 458.

DOI: 10.1126/science.360.6387.458

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