

Robyn Ochs — Being Out Is Activism

By Jennie Roberson

March 24, 2020

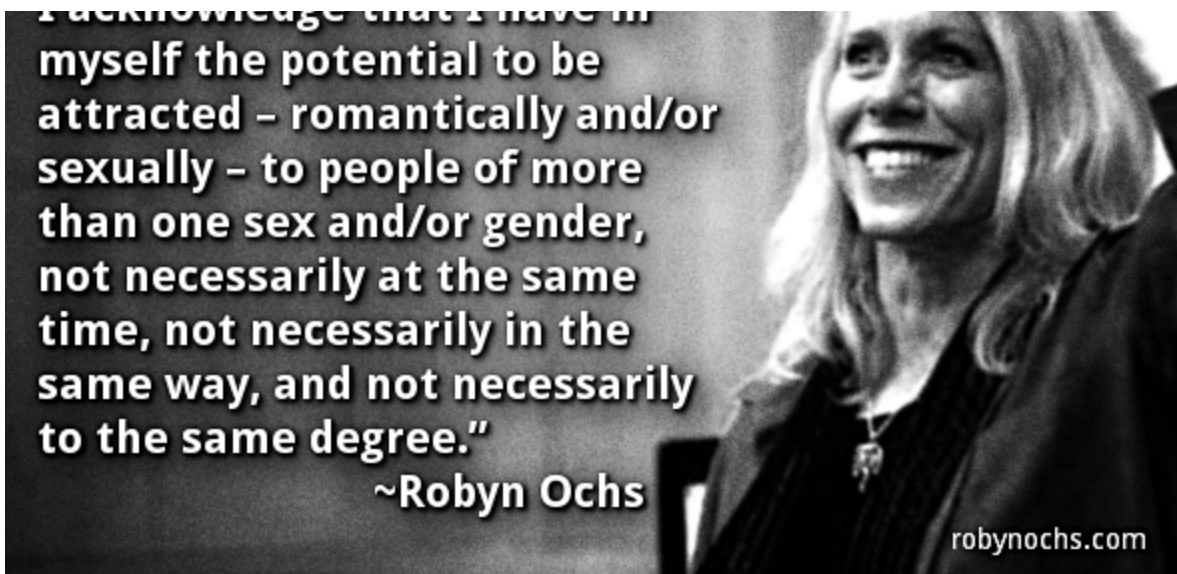
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Editor's Note: This interview was conducted on January 31st, 2020. Since then Covid-19 has changed the world for many of us and directly impacted our activism. I believe that the fundamentals about the importance of activism, burnout, and the joy to be gained by helping others remain just as true under these new circumstances, and want our readers to know that no one was ignoring a global pandemic while discussing this.

You may not recognize Robyn's name at first glance, but I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts that you've recited her words without even knowing it. Her influential definition of bisexuality is widely referenced both online and off.



On the forefront of the bi movement for nearly forty years, Ochs is perhaps the most prominent activist in the United States. An educator, speaker, grassroots activist, and editor of *Bi Women Quarterly* and two anthologies, this trailblazer was named by *Teen Vogue* as one of "9 Bisexual Women Who are Making History".

Recently I had the privilege to sit down with Robyn and talk over the phone about all things bi — from her headline-making marriage (one of the first same-sex ones in the nation) to how growing tomatoes is essential to her decades of groundbreaking work.

JENNIE ROBERSON: How did you come to identify as bi?

Robyn Ochs: So I'll start with some background.

I'm 61 years old, and I grew up in a very different moment of history, which I sometimes call B.G.



Photo/Marilyn Humphries

B.G. meaning ...?

RO: "Before Google." At the time when I was growing up, there was not a single out, bisexual character on TV. To my knowledge, there were no out, bisexual people *anywhere* in my sphere. Period. I grew up in a time of silence on the subject of bisexuality. I got all the way to college having only heard the word "bisexual" once.

My first month in college, I fell head over heels in love with a woman. It turned my life upside down, and it led me to the obvious question of what that meant for my life. Was I a lesbian? Was I straight with a blip in my radar? Was I bisexual? It took me just a couple of weeks to process that, and I came to the clear conclusion I was most definitely bisexual.

That was the easy part, because I had no idea how to operationalize my bisexuality. I had no idea how to go from the space of "knowing" to "being". I had no idea where to find support — again, B.G. I had no idea where to find information. I was absolutely terrified about what this new information could mean for my life. I knew there were a lot of negative stereotypes out there about bisexual women. I knew saying I was bisexual would subject me to all the stereotypes, and I had no idea how to deal with that. So I stayed silent for five very long years.



RO: I wasn't ready. I was terrified. And that's not a good place to start a new relationship or make yourself vulnerable. I was not ready to be vulnerable.

I was confused, but what I was confused about was not what I was, but how to be [bi] in this world. I was not in the least bit confused about my understanding I was bisexual, 'cause that was clear. I really had no idea how to exist in this world as a bisexual person; I didn't see anything that would have been good. And I had a fear everyone who loved me would no longer love me anymore if they knew this about me. I had somehow internalized the idea that this information would render me unlovable.

Fast forward five years. I was working in a group home for folks with developmental disabilities. One evening, a coworker sat me down and said: "Robyn, there's something I want to talk to you about." "Sure. What's that?" And she said to me, "I'm bisexual." And I blurted out: "So am I!"

That was the first time I ever said those words out loud. I experienced a profound sense of relief. I didn't realize what a burden of silence I was carrying around, how much that weight was weighing on me, until it started to lift. And I felt a profound sense of lightness, of relief, of finally being able to breathe deeply.

Following that evening, I began coming out to other people in my life, one at a time. With only a couple of exceptions, people responded better than I'd feared they would.

About a year after that, I moved to Boston. On my first week in Boston, I opened up the local feminist newspaper, *Equal Times*, and found a calendar listing for an event at the Women's Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was called "Women's Rap", and they had different discussion topics each week. And that very week, the topic was bisexuality. [Laughs]

How fortuitous!

RO: Oh wow, yeah. It was amazing. So I got myself to that meeting. There were twenty women in that room, including myself, and nineteen of us identified as bisexual. The twentieth was a lesbian named Madge who had come to cruise. (True story.)

I don't think I fully believed up until that moment there were nineteen bisexual people in the world. Again, in the time in which I grew up — before Google, before any kind of bi+ representation in the media — I had really, truly believed bisexual people were extremely rare.



Photo/Joel Benjamin

So at the end of the meeting, a woman named Marcia Diehl stood up and asked if anyone in the room might be interested in starting an ongoing support group. And I leapt up [laughs] and raised my hand, and eight of us became the BiVocals.

That was the beginning of my involvement in bi+ community and in bi+ activism, and I have not shut up since. After five years of silence, after that meeting, I have not shut up since.

And we're grateful for it. Trust.

How do you see yourself as an activist and teacher, and how does being bi fold into that?

RO: That's a big question. There are a lot of parts to that.

OK, here's one thing: Every time a bisexual person makes their bi identity known, that is a form of activism. And bi+ people have to repeatedly make our identities known, because we live in a binary-thinking world. Western culture is very binary in its framing, and we tend to default to stupid binaries.

We also live in a heteronormative world, where heterosexuality is the default assumption. So if I were to be partnered with a man — I need to clarify that — people



In order to be seen as a bisexual person, I would either have to have multiple partners of different genders (which I don't) — *or* I have to say it. Furthermore, I have to say it to every single new person I meet... and sometimes I have to say it to the same people over and over.

One of the other stereotypes about bisexuality is that it's an unstable identity. Some will say: "Oh, I know you identified as bisexual last year, but do you *still* identify as bisexual?"

Right. Like it changes with the seasons.

RO: Right, or: "I know you said you identified as bisexual, but you're married to your wife now. Are you *still* bisexual?" People confuse identity and behavior. They assume if you identify as bisexual, it means you must by definition be currently having sex with people of multiple genders — which may or may not be true for any given individual. But it certainly isn't a definitional characteristic of bisexuality.

So that's the personal part. The reason I'm an educator is because I am convinced the work I do is life-saving. We are starving for role models. I spoke in Mississippi last weekend and one woman told me I was the first out, bisexual adult she had ever met. She told me how affirming it felt to her to see an example of someone who identified as bisexual and had a happy, successful life. She emailed me afterward to say: "I learned so much, and I felt so safe."

I constantly get so much feedback from people telling me the work I do has made them feel affirmed, made them feel possible, made them feel validated. We need more of this. Honestly, I wish I could get my work out to everyone in this world. Last weekend, someone said, "I wish every single person I know could come to one of your programs... it would completely change the conversation and make life so much easier."

So that's why I do the work. I wish I could make a documentary of my work and make it available to every single person for free. If I could, I would do that. I haven't figured out how to yet.

I hope you do.



just wish I could get those messages out far and wide. That's my dream. When I think about my bucket list, that's my goal. I have developed some amazingly effective tools, and I know they're needed. Sometimes I jokingly call my work "a healthy dose of Vitamin B+". It is so needed, and I get frustrated sometimes because I can't reach everybody I want to reach.

That said, I've spoken in 49 U.S. states as of last week.

What's the missing one?

RO: Take a wild guess.

North Dakota?

RO: No, I've been there ten times at least.

Hmmm. Alaska?

RO: Yes! And the one before that?

Hawaii?

RO: Nope. I had to go to Hawaii for quote-unquote "work".

Poor thing. You suffer so.

All right, I give up. What is it?

RO: 46th was Montana, 47th was Nevada, 48th was Utah, 49th was ... Mississippi.



And [I've taught in] 15 countries, besides the U.S. That's my thing; I want to get my work out there. I think, honestly, to really educate people about this topic, you need to speak to their minds, but you also need to speak to their hearts. So I believe it's a combination of storytelling and providing concrete facts and data, and also helping provide people frames through which to understand our experience. I use concepts from psychology and sociology. I also use queer theory — basically anything I can find that might help, I throw in.

I also have recently been doing workplace programs and programs for healthcare providers.

Yeah, that's so needed.

RO: Uh-huh. And most recently I had a chapter come out in mid-January in an anthology called *Bodies and Barriers: Queer Activists On Health*. And my chapter is called "Without Wincing Or Clenching: Bisexual People's Experience With Health Providers".

What has your experience been like being out as a bi speaker and writer over the course of your career? Have you experienced more acceptance inside or outside academic circles as your career has progressed?

RO: Yes — over time, in the academic world.

So my identity in my academic life is in a space of liminality, being in the borderlands. I've taught as an adjunct faculty member 13 times at three different schools. I've



That is an immediate disqualifier to some people.

That said, the duration and depth of my work over time has opened a lot of doors. Many people do take me seriously; I have a lot to say, I say it well, and I say it clearly and in accessible language. I'm committed to taking complex ideas and making sure they are accessible to people who are not PhD's in those fields. I believe there are a lot of good ideas in academia, and many of them have utility value, so I want to make sure they get out to people who are not in those fields.

I *think* I am taken seriously...

Robyn, you're taken seriously, trust me.

RO: That said — this is not about me, this is about all bi+ activists. I have yet to see a single LGBTQ reader or textbook or history that has taken bi activism seriously. For the most part, we're not mentioned; if we are mentioned, we get a couple of pages in a several-hundred-page book. People are not recognizing the B in LGBT+.

Is there anything about yourself you would like people to know that maybe isn't part of your public persona?

RO: So one of my core guiding values is the idea of sustainability. The reason I have been able to be a bi+ activist for 38 years and counting is because I take care of myself.

I try to live a balanced and healthy life. For me, that means getting enough sleep, eating well, avoiding alcohol and drugs and cigarettes. It also means Zumba, *[laughs]* and a little bit of weightlifting, walking, and dancing. I also garden in the summer — tomatoes and cucumbers, parsley, basil... but mostly tomatoes. I love my Sun Gold tomatoes. I spend time with my wife, Peg. I have two cats and a lizard who bring me all kinds of joy and opportunities to clean up after them. I swing dance. I do all kinds of stuff.

So all of these things together put me on a solid base that allows me to keep doing this work year after year without burning out. I know way too many people who threw themselves into activism and did not take care of the equipment, and consequently are now *former* activists. My intent is to be doing this work for as long as I'm physically and mentally able. Because it's important.



Photo/Katie Simmons-Barth

"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." That was Emma Goldman. And I really believe that. Sacrificing yourself to the point which you totally burn out is not doing anyone any favors.

I also practice donation therapy. For example, earlier this week I read something about Mitch McConnell trying to subvert democracy, and, instead of getting an ulcer, I made a donation to his opponent. Honestly, it reduced my own stress level to do that. Instead of making me feel helpless, I *did something*. I try to do that a lot; I make a lot of donations because there's a lot to be stressed about.

Yeah, it's powerful to donate your time or money as you're able. When I get frustrated with the news, I volunteer with a cat adoption agency.

RO: Oh! Me, too! My friend has an organization she calls Animal Rescue Front - A.R.F.. She started right after Hurricane Katrina. She has now brought around 3,000 animals out of Mississippi where they had very little chance of being adopted to other parts of the country where they have a chance. On Sunday, I transported a kitten (whose name is now Fiona) from Jackson, Mississippi, to my neighbors in Boston — and they adopted her through this foster program.

That's cool! When I run transport for the kittens from shelter to their fosters, I usually call it Kitty Taxi, but that's a Kitty Taxi to the extreme.

But anyway, she's been doing this work and I've found over 100 [animal adoption] homes for her since Katrina. And we actually have a Katrina cat in our house. I think about that starfish story.

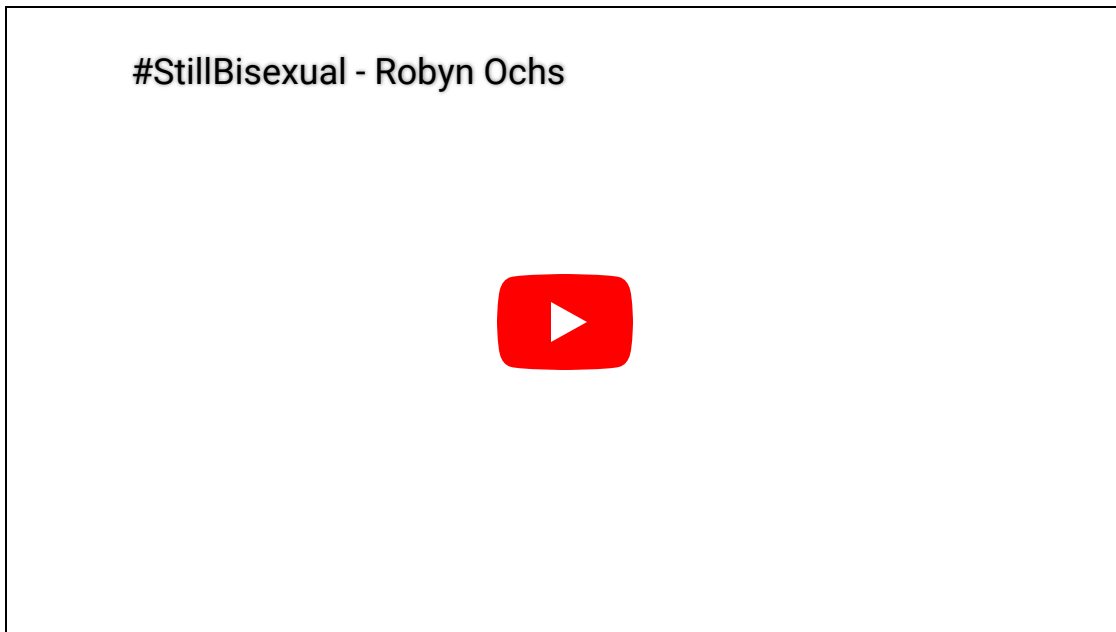
Your quote on your definition of bisexuality (and your identifying with it) is often the first and biggest quote on the orientation people find. What are your feelings about wording a definition that has gone so viral?

RO: It brings me so much joy to know that definition has been valuable to people — that it provides them with validation, comfort, and support.

It's a very good use of... [*counts*] like, forty words. It's like a forty word support group. Also that definition is obviously not one I thought of all by myself. It's a vocalization of how my community has come to understand that word over time. 'Cause we've redefined it. Our increasing understanding of the complexities of gender required us to update our definition of bisexuality, and I am proud to say we've done so.

Now it's time for the rest of the world to catch up.

You recently recorded a video with the #StillBisexual campaign. What was that experience like for you?



RO: It was a lot of fun. Nicole was really great to work with. And I like the technique of the #StillBisexual videos. Using cards forces you to tell a complex story in a very

many stories with as much diversity as possible — in terms of race, age, geography, perspective, religion, and so on. You need to have lots and lots of different voices, and that’s what she has been working toward.

You and your partner, Peg, were famously amongst the first in the nation to obtain a legal same-sex marriage. You famously fought against international media’s coverage of the event with calling it a “lesbian marriage”, spurring you to bring bi erasure into the national conversation.

Do you feel like bi erasure has been mitigated with same-sex marriage in that time, or has it merely migrated into other areas of the bi activist movement?

RO: For the most part, bi+ folks were not particularly held up as poster couples during the Marriage Equality movement. I can think of just two couples who were on the forefront with our bisexual identities showing — one of them my own, and there was one couple in San Francisco who were very visible.



Photo/Laurie Swope Peg and Robyn wedding day



heterosexual privilege and making it matter just a little bit less what gender of person you were partnered with. Because so much of the fear coming from lesbians and gay men were that the “goodies” of being in a heterosexual relationship and a mixed-gender relationship were so overwhelmingly plentiful that any person who had a *perceived* choice (‘cause I don’t think we actually choose who we fall in love with) — was that anyone who had a choice would ultimately synch to be with someone of a different gender, because the benefits were there and not in a same-gender relationship. So I think in some ways that was helpful because it reduced the inequality.

I also believe the challenges of bi erasure and bi invisibility will be with us for a long time, because we constantly need to push against binary thinking. No matter what topic you’re going to apply it to, you’re going to need to fight the same fight over and over, pointing out our existence over and over, fighting for visibility.

You’ve also put together a famous program called *Beyond Binaries* which you are available to do around the country and around the world. What is the most exciting thing for you about sharing the program with other people?

RO: The feedback. The positive feedback I get back from people who attend the *Beyond Binaries* program is phenomenal. It’s inspirational.

I’ve done this program three times in the month of January — Melbourne, Australia, in Dallas, and in Oxford, Mississippi. I do a go-around at the end and ask people to share takeaways from the program. One gay man remarked that before *Beyond Binaries*, he thought people were basically just gay or straight. He had no idea that we were a rainbow.

And a stable one, at that.

RO: A beautiful rainbow.

Someone else said, “I thought my experience of fluidity was a problem; I didn’t realize how common it was.” Someone else just said, “I felt so validated.” Another said, “I wish everyone could come to a program like this, because it would make it so much easier to change the way people think about this.” Also [there were] just people saying, “I had no idea how much diversity there is in the categories of gay, straight, lesbian,



First, we do an anonymous survey with everyone present, look at the data in a way that protects anonymity, and we see visually with ourselves as evidence just how wide-ranging and complex our identities and experiences are. There's so much power in that program. Honestly, I've now done it at least 1200 times, and I do not get bored because I see its profound effect on perception, experience, and sense of validation. I would do it every day if I could.

You've culled together two excellent anthologies on the bi experience, *Getting Bi* (a collection of bi literature and essays from around the world), and *Recognize: The Voices of Bisexual Men*.

What surprised you the most when reading others' stories as you pulled together the collections?

RO: *Getting Bi* is a 42-country anthology. What surprised me the most about [*Getting Bi*] was how similar some of the stories were across national borders. And also how different contexts can shape our experiences. Most of the essays in the book dealt with similar issues: erasure, visibility, lack of support, marginalization, self-doubt, coming out stories — different things bi+ people engage with in our own coming-out process.

But the stories from some countries were stark in their difference; if you live in a country where homosexuality is illegal, perhaps even punishable by death, that shapes your experience. If you live in a country that has a different sense of personal privacy than the United States, that also shapes your experience. In some cultures, an individual's primary responsibility is to themselves and to their own self-fulfillment. In other cultures, an individual's expected to subsume their needs to those of the family. And that means you're expected to do what your family wants you to do.

That's really what I found most noteworthy — both the profound similarities and also sometimes the profound differences.

You've been in the bi activism movement for a long time — many times at the forefront. At this juncture, what gives you hope about the future of the movement?

RO: That's a good one. One thing that gives me hope is that dramatically larger numbers of younger folks [are] coming out as bisexual, pansexual, or another non-



gender attractions. That it's more possible to hold non-binary identities of all kinds. And you can see that with the increase in people who are identifying as trans or nonbinary-gendered. People are identifying with nonbinary genders or as bi+. I think we're getting less binary in our overall frame, and this brings me some joy and some hope.

I also see positive change in bisexual representation in the media. Until just a few years ago, the only bi+ character on television who sang my song was Callie Torres, Sara Ramirez's character on *Grey's Anatomy*. That was it. She was pretty much the only bi+ character who said the word out loud, who just *was* a bisexual person; her bisexuality wasn't the point of her character, and did not need to be represented by her sleeping with every other character on the show. At least, no more or less than all the other characters on the show, 'cause that's *Grey's Anatomy*, [which] is all about possible romances.

But that was the only character for a very long time. But now there are a bunch. There's still not enough — there are so many more bi+ characters on television who just are bi. That character on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*...

Yes, Rosa Diaz! Our patron saint of bisexuality!

RO: Yeah! Rosa Diaz And the *two* characters on *Madam Secretary*, Kat and Blake. I love Kat. Kat is just unbelievably cool, and Blake is just unbelievably, adorably sweet. And both of them, they just *are* bi. It's not the plot, it just *is*, and that's what I've been hungry for.

I'll also add the number of media folks who have come out, artists, and performers and media folks — who have come out. Janelle Monae, Frank Ocean, Alan Cumming... I can probably name fifty or a hundred people. This is new and this is different.

In some way, because of the increase in people with identifying with nonbinary sexualities and other identities *and* the increase in representation of television characters and also actors and artists, I believe we have reached some sort of tipping point. I am under no illusion that we are going to reach equity here.

For about three decades, I was saying these things and doing this work, and I felt no one was listening, that nothing was changing. I don't feel that way anymore, now that things are changing. I feel we are moving forward, [and] I feel that there's more



Sadly, the bi section of the LGBTI community is one of the groups least likely to get funding, as you well know. If you had \$20 million to pour into that part of the community, where would you funnel the money and why?

RO: Oh, my God. Do you have \$20 million?

I wish!

RO: I'd probably set up an endowment so it'd be there for a long time.

We need community funding for our organizations. There is not a single bi community organization in the United States with a paid staff member. Not one of the bi advocacy organizations — not counting bi.org or AIB — has paid staffers. We need paid staff people. We're still stuck in that poverty loop where you need funding to do stuff, but you need fundraisers to write grants to get funded.

I'd also like to see some very specific resources created for bi folk.

Oh my God, there's so much we need! For example, I'm editor of Bi Women Quarterly. And our annual budget is still under \$10,000 a year. And all that money goes to printing and postage, and envelopes. *All* of it. Every drop of work done for that organization is done by volunteers. We are still unable to pay our authors — I'd really like to pay our writers. But to pay our authors, we need money to pay them. It would also take time to process the payments, so without a paid staff person, guess who would be doing it? Me. So anything we could do to build *capacity* in the movement.

Another thing I really would love to see [is] a retreat for national bi+ leaders. A strategy retreat where we could get together and actually think about that \$20 million, and how we would use it.

So again, it's hard for me to answer. But one of the first things I would do is get together a work group, get us a place for a week or two, and have us think and strategize and build some sort of capacity. I would also make sure it wouldn't cost [much] because so much of our movement is low-income. So many people in our movement are low-income, and I want them to be able to access this kind of thing.

I would also want a fund to make sure our bi+ activists could get to other events around the country. We're often unable to get out there because we don't have the



I think the fact we have so little — way less than 1% of all identity-focused funding goes to bi+ specific projects — and all of that money in that percentage comes from one or two private funders and AIB.

So I guess one *good* thing that happens [from this] is there is a perception bi+ people don't experience minority stress or stigma or oppression, and maybe if we do because we're bi, perhaps we experience fifty percent of the stress gay people experience. That is the perception. And every single study proves otherwise... it's only in the past few years we've started to disaggregate the data, looking at bi+ folks separate from lesbian and gay folks. And what that's showing us is we do in fact experience oppression, stigma, minority stress — and in some areas, we experience that at higher levels than gay or lesbian [counterparts], and higher rates of domestic abuse. Depression, and suicidality are extremely high [for bi+ people]. And for youth, the lack of connection to resources, or knowledge of that resource, is also dramatically higher.

You've been a speaker and writer for a long time. If you got a chance to host a TEDTalk, what would you like to laser-focus on for the twenty minutes you were allotted?

RO: In my bisexuality program, I address the stereotypes of bi+ people and then explain they are not caused by bisexual people, but caused by limitations in other people's brains. I have five frames I discuss. One of them is that bisexual people are really hard to see — the only time people realize they are talking to someone who's bisexual is when they see us in polyamorous relationships or being with multiple partners, and they come to think bisexuality equals having multiple partners. Some of us do [have poly relationships] and some of us don't, but that's not a definitional characteristic of bisexuality.

I'd also talk about our cultural ambivalence about sex and sexuality, which I believe plays out in very dangerous ways on LGBTQ+ people. I also talk about binary thinking, our *profound* lack of education on all LGBTQ+ issues including bisexuality. I refer to the expression "hurt people hurt people", which I believe explains much of the dynamic that happens within the LGBTQ+ community when gay or lesbian people say mean or hurtful things about bi+ people. Or the bisexual vs. pansexual debate, etc.

In the program, we make a list of stereotypes people have heard about bisexual people generated by the audience, and [then] we look at each of these frames and look to see how these frames can be used to explain the stereotypes, and basically by

are caused by problematic frames.

So I would probably do that [in the TedTalk]. I would scratch some stereotypes. It's also humorous.

Yeah. Stereotype SMASH!

RO: Yeah! It's actually really fun to do, and sometimes when we do it, at the end I usually invite a couple of the students to come up and tear up the chart paper the stereotypes are all written on, or erase the whiteboard. It feels good.

This is less of a heavy question, but it's something that kept coming up as I did my research for this interview.

You've got this beautiful necklace you've worn throughout the years, including in your photo opp with President Obama. May I ask what it is, and/or what is its significance to you?



RO: It's a highly stylized labrys. A labrys is a lesbian symbol — an Amazon double-sided hatchet.

My necklace was given to me on my 30th birthday by a very close friend who had one of her own, and I had long wanted one, too. [Laughs] I just loved it, and I wanted one, and I kept pressuring her to give me the address of the craftsperson who had made it, and she kept promising to do so. About five years later, she had found the address, ordered one, and gave it to me on my birthday. And I've been wearing it for 31 years.



What kind of call to action would you like to give to anyone who is moved by what they've read here?

RO: Sign up for [Bi Women Quarterly](#). Go get involved in [bi+] advocacy at any rate, in any way. Anything [you can do] that pushes us forward.

Finally: Do you have any advice for those newly identifying as bi or queer, and/or any advice you wish you could give the younger version of yourself before you came out?

RO: So for people who are newly identifying as bi or queer: Find people to whom you can speak your truth. There is power in saying it out loud. Find people who will validate you; find people to whom you can say this out loud. Silence is toxic, and it's suffocating. Even if it's just one person, make sure you have at least one person you can talk to.

To my younger self: I would say fear is real, but what we fear is often much worse than what actually happens. I was trapped in my fear. And I wish I had known my fear wasn't the same as reality. I wish I had known it wasn't as dangerous as I thought it was, and that people would still love me. And that some people might not understand my identity, but over time people would come around.

The other thing I would say to people is: Try to be the person you needed who may not have been there. By lifting your voice, you're making it possible for other people to live theirs. By speaking your truth, you're making it possible for other people to speak their truth.

**** This interview has been edited and truncated for brevity and clarity.*



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**Famous Bis:
Alan
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**Bi Book Club:
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**2023: Year of
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