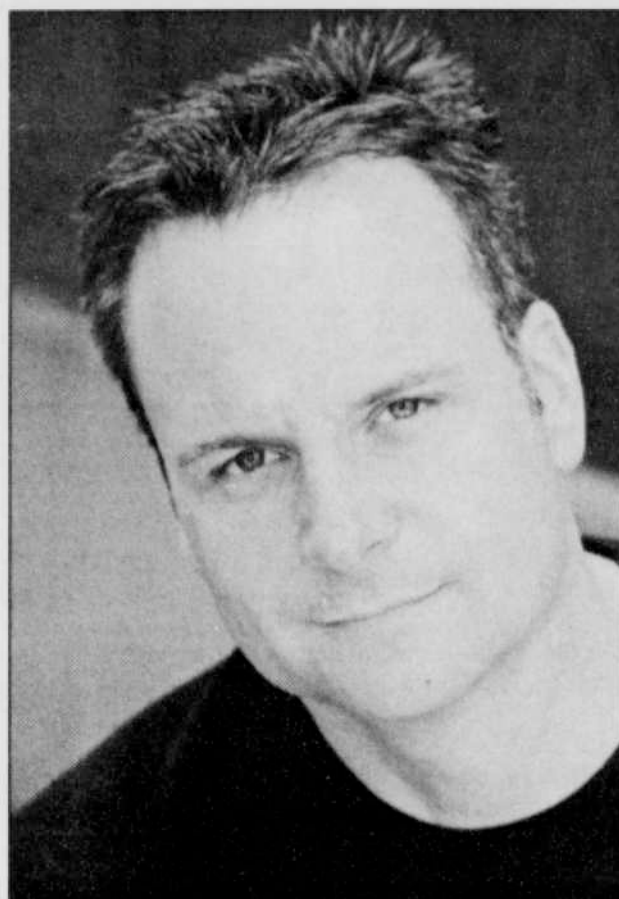


He notes, "Coaches get people from where they are today to where they want to be."

The driving force behind Paul's practice is his own history—he didn't come out as a gay man until he was 35. "I got married and I never dealt with it until I woke up on my 31st birthday and said, 'I'm not going to live like this anymore.'" Paul, who says most of his issues surrounded guilt, puts himself out there because he doesn't want others to have to wait that long.

One of the hallmarks of his practice is that he does most of his coaching over the phone. So, not only does he aim to provide a supportive, safe space for closeted queers and help them realize their potential, he affords those in small towns—or those too afraid to sit down face to face—the opportunity for growth.

In his safe space over the phone, he helps clients visualize what being out of the closet could be like for them. After building a relationship, "I take them into a deeper learning about being in the closet...we talk about their fear, their shame, the rejection." Then, they move to the future and visualization of a life out of the closet. Once there is a gap between inside and out, he can begin creating a specific design for how the client wants to come out.



Life coach Eric M. Paul focuses on people's present and future, not their past

To compound that internalized homophobia, Samuels believes our society has a lot to do with why people are in the closet. "There are a lot of things society does to make [queers] ashamed of who they are," she continues. "You've absorbed all those ideas about what society thinks of you, and you have to face those."

SHOTS IN THE DARK

Deborah Samuels, a licensed professional counselor in Portland, respects where her clients are in the coming-out process. "If they're not ready to come out to their parents, I do not push people." Likewise, she remarks, "I don't encourage people to do anything until they're ready." She equally encourages her clients, more than half of whom are queer, to not "come crashing out the closet" but to be ecological and think it through.

After getting a firm hold on self-acceptance and loving oneself unconditionally, which Samuels agrees is the first step, the next hardest part is coming out to one's own family because of the risk involved. "You just don't know" how people will react, she says. "You can surmise, but you never really know." Of her own coming out years ago, Samuels says, "Most of the people I came out to as a bisexual had pretty much reactions I expected, but I had a couple surprises."

DEEP-SEATED OBSTACLES

"We must reject not only the stereotypes that others hold of us but also the stereotypes we hold of ourselves." Shirley Chisholm's broad yet sage words hit the nail on the head when it comes to the internalized homophobia with which many in the sexual minorities community struggle.

"All of us who live in this culture, I think, have some homophobia," says clinical social worker Susan Rosenthal, who is a lesbian. "It's just impossible to get around it."

Even though some overcompensate by denying it's there, Rosenthal believes, it's still there. What's more, she says of one dam of homophobia, it's a struggle to feel good about oneself while accepting that some people out there find queer orientations abhorrent. Rosenthal says it's important to accept that being "out" is to be a part of the whole sexual minorities community, whether or not you want to be represented by that community.

"Early in my practice, coming out was often an issue clients came in to therapy to address. Now, many of my clients I see have been out for many years."

—Susan Rosenthal

upon coming out] they are not able to be as 'out' as others they see around them."

Once you've accepted yourself and have moved through the other obstacles, there's really no finish line in the coming-out race. "There's always somebody to come out to. The process never really ends," Samuels says.

Likewise, Rosenthal says that even today, she still comes out three or four times a year. "Perhaps it is to a professional colleague who I have just met or a parent in my child's classroom." Even though it's easier for her than it was 20 years ago, she concludes, "There are always people who don't know and need to be told." ■

GINA DAGGETT is a Portland free-lance writer. You can reach her at www.ginadaggett.com.

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