

## Everything is Connected

by *Peter Toscano*

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How many of you have ever seen me present something live? Raise your hand. All right! We've got some faithful folk here. So, for those who have never seen me perform, it is almost impossible for me to describe what I do. I am a comic, a storyteller, an actor, and at different points, I will become a different person. Don't let that disturb you or surprise you. I am a character actor, so I take on lots of different characters and personalities on stage. I'm also a scholar, and often in my work I'll leave in lots of scholarship around gender studies and Biblical studies, climate change, lots of different things.

The presentation I have for you today is: "Everything is Connected." And my brain works in very strange ways. Some of you may probably relate to this – I'll see connections among things that a lot of people aren't seeing as connected. So it takes a while for me to explain it to you. So, to help organize this presentation, I broke it into three acts. So it will be three distinct acts that will seem at first to have absolutely nothing to do with each other. And each act will have a title and each act will have an essential question, or query, as we like to call it. So I'm going to start and get personal with:

### **Act One: Homo NoMo**

So I am gay, which used to be very exotic to say in front of a group back in the day, and it was dangerous, there was real danger. Now, for me today as a white gay man, it is not exotic at all. It's kind of boring, and it's not dangerous for me mostly. Now there are other identities, in other bodies, that to announce them would be dangerous, but not for me so much.

As some of you know, this about my personal story. Although I am gay, I have struggled for most of my adult life with that. I did not want to be gay. I truly believed I would be more valuable to the world and to my church and to God if I were a fully functioning, fully masculine, heterosexual. I had a lot of reasons for not wanting to be gay. So at the age of seventeen, I made the executive decision that I was no longer going to be gay. It can't be that complicated, right? I mean, I'm in America, where I am told I can be anything I want, right?

I was raised in a working-class, Roman Catholic, Italian-American family, right outside of New York City. At age seventeen, I made a big decision. Now in our lives, we can do extraordinary things, I think we all can agree with that. And sometimes, we can do extraordinary stupid things. So, at age seventeen, I left the Catholic Church and became a born-again Evangelical conservative Republican Christian who believed it was wrong to be gay, and who was on this journey to try to straighten out his gay thing. And I spend seventeen years, and over \$30,000, on three continents, attempting and failing to de-gay myself. And my husband Glenn is very pleased that I am such a failure.

This is a true story; I am not making it up. I nearly spent twenty years in what is called “conversion therapy” or “ex-gay ministry.” When people hear me say that, the first question that they ask, is, “So what do they do? How do they try to fix you?” And I totally get that question because it is a bizarro world. Well, how do they attempt to make you straight? There were a bunch of processes that I went through. At the time there were a lot of various conversion therapy programs, all of them in the United States. Ten of those seventeen years, I actually spent in New York City. And let me tell you, New York is not an easy place not to be gay – even if you are not gay.

So in this ex-gay world, this conversion therapy, there was a lot of one-on-one counseling with ministers and Christian counselors. And then there was also a lot of basic Bible study and prayer. Because the thought was that these gay desires were unnatural. They came from some unholy place. And somehow these desires had lodged inside of me. So if I could jam enough God inside of me, God could push it all out. So I would meet with a pastor who would give me prescriptions of Bible verses and passages to memorize and to study. So after about a year of that, I had whole books of the Bible memorized. I still have it in my memory banks that I can call up at any moment. So, there was prayer and Bible study.

I also went to ex-gay support groups. So these were groups where people who were struggling with being gay all got together to struggle together. Doesn't this sound like a really good strategy? I was always the youngest person in these groups, so I got a lot of information that probably I did not need about all the places where people struggled with being gay, all these hotspots that I was supposed to avoid. Turns out, there is a wooded area of Central Park that is very popular with bird-watchers and is also very popular for other activities. And I suppose there are some bird watchers watching the other activities.

I endured some pretty extreme spiritual things. I actually endured three different exorcisms, because they really believed evil was inside of me and that it was something that had to violently removed. And when I say violent, I mean loud and scary. I was a young person, and it was terrifying. One of these exorcisms was held in a place in Brooklyn, and it was so loud that the neighbor actually called the police, because they thought someone was being murdered. But, when the police came to the door, the woman who was doing the exorcism said, “No, it’s just a prayer meeting.”

The most extreme thing though I did during those ten years was spending two years in a residential facility in Memphis. It was called, “Love in Action.” But, we actually called it the “Homo NoMo Halfway House.” Because we were trying to be homos no mo. I can tell you about this place, but I think it would be much more interesting if you experienced it for yourselves, if you had a kind of a bird's eye view of what it is like to be in this Homo NoMo Halfway House. So, I want you to see part of the very first play I wrote. It was called, “Doing Time in the Homo NoMo Halfway House: How I Survived the Ex-gay Movement.” So, you are going to meet these two characters: Chad and Vlad. And in this scene, you are going to learn about the rules of the program and how it operates. Everything you are about to see actually happened. It is both disturbing and strangely funny at the same time. So if you laugh and feel uncomfortable about it, that's about right. That's OK. So feel free to laugh. But, first there is consent. Your consent. Do I have your consent to go into the Homo NoMo, just for a short time?

[Audience says, "Yes!"]

**Chad:** Hi! Welcome to the Homo Nomo Halfway House! My name is Chad and I will be your tour guide. The Homo Nomo Halfway House is a Christian residential Twelve-Step program that helps men and women, too. We don't discriminate. We treat all types of homosexuality and compulsive sexual behavior. It is an amazing program, and I thank God they took me in, just in time.

So, before we start the tour formerly. I have to tell you a little about the program and how it operates. And to assist me with that is one of our newest participants, Vlad. Hey Vlad, we are ready for you. Ooooh! Vlad is from the former Soviet Republic. Azger Bazaar. I know I never say it right. But, it is so exciting what the Lord has done. How he has torn down those horrible iron curtains. Spending years under those aggressive and violent conditions, now they are free to come to our program and be a part of a program like this. So, Thank you Jesus. So, Vlad is going to tell you a little about the program and how it operates.

**Vlad:** Hello, my name is Vlad. I am been in this program for twenty-seven days. In the Homo NoMo Halfway House, we have five phases, and we do twelve steps, and there are approximately two-hundred-seventy-five rules. When we move from phase to phase, this is called a phase bump. Secondly, only the staff is allowed to bump you. In the halfway house, we have many rules. The rules are boundaries because in our former lives we were practicing homosexuals and we had no boundaries. Now all of the rules are important, of course. But, probably the most important rule: You must fuck us.

**Chad:** What are you talking about?!

**Vlad:** That is what you say: You must fuck us. You fuck us on the issues. You fuck us on the families. . .

**Chad:** No, you don't understand, we pronounce that word, "focus."

**Vlad:** That is what I said: Fuck us. You must make your bed everyday. They keep timers in the bathroom, so you can keep an appropriate account of your activities. While in the Homo NoMo halfway house you must shave everyday. And this includes women. You must shave here [points to face], and shave here [points to legs], but you must not touch the upside down triangle.

**Chad:** Eww, that is inappropriate.

But I'll say, also, when we shave, we are forbidden from using any aftershave or cologne there is a really important reason for that: the intense memory of smell. You see, somebody could be wearing the scent of a former sexual partner, and that could trigger me, SNAP, just like that. So for my safety and your safety, will you stay in the back of the tour if you are wearing Calvin Klein Obsession?

**Vlad:** At Homo NoMo, you are forbidden from watching television or listening to music. Except for contemporary Christian music. [Deadpan:] Praise the Lord.

At Homo NoMo, you are forbidden from having sexual relations with anyone, including yourself.

At Homo NoMo, you are supposed to report all "F.I." behavior. "F.I." stands for "false image." In our former life as practicing homosexuals, we often hid behind masks.

**Chad:** We would plaster our true, God-given personalities with these false image masks. You know, before I came to this program I was *so* effeminate. No seriously! They did wonders on me. I think it had to do with the weekly football clinic. They really butched me up.

So, there are more rules, and I'm sure they will pop up on the tour. But, before we go any further, Vlad, I am going to give you positive credit because during this whole presentation, you held your hands to your sides, and you made good eye contact, which is very healthy masculine behavior.

**Toscano:** So let's give them a round of applause, shall we?

Now you may have picked up, and this is not very subtle, that it is not a female friendly space. Actually, this is not a femme friendly space at all. Many of the men that were there, they really went after our gender differences. There were literally weekly gender-reassignment activities to get us to act like real men or real women, based on what they thought that would be. They have broken it in those two groups – males on this side, females on that side. Females were able to go and bake bread. They were allowed bread-baking activities. The men learned to change the oil in cars. And I was an adult at this point, it is not like I was a child. I elected to be in this program. So I called my Dad while I was there. He's from the Bronx and was a Marine most of his life. And I called him and said, "Guess what? In the program today, they taught us how to change the oil in our car." And I waited for him to give me his wonderful dad affirmation. And what he said was, "Why would you do that? I just go to jiffy lube." And I wanted to say, "Dad. That's so gay, Dad."

So, the first question people ask me about these programs is, "How do they try to fix you?" But for me, the question that's far more interesting and harder is, "Why did I do it? Why did I volunteer?" There were people in the program who were forced to attend, but mostly, people elected to do this themselves. And not only why did I choose to do it in the first place, but why did I do it for so long? I mean, of all the people who went through this mess, I was one of the people who did it the longest. So, what kept me there?

Well, what got me, what made me susceptible, was a number of factors that made up a perfect storm. I was growing up in the early 80s. In the 70's, people were super progressive, and then there was a quick shift to something more conservative in the 80s, including the rise of the Moral Majority, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher came to power, the EPA and all sorts of programs were slashed, there was this real shift. There was the rise of people like Donald Trump – he came up in the 1980's. And this whole shift came with a more prosperous, more young yuppie kind of life style. And in the middle of all that, I was hearing a lot of negative messages about being gay. And I heard them in every area of my

life – from the playground, from the pulpit, in the media, from politicians and preachers. It was kind of everywhere. So there was this negativity about being gay, and there were no recognizable positive portrayals of LGBT people in the world.

And then something else added a bit more pressure – the introduction of a disease called GRID. Has anyone of heard of GRID before? It's "gay-related immune deficiency." They also called it "gay cancer" during this time. They later renamed it HIV or AIDS, which are names that we all know now.

But, at first it was considered a gay-exclusive disease. So, I grew up in New York City, and I would see these headlines about gay cancer killing gay men. And I was a teenager trying to put it all together, and I did the math, and I'm not good at math, and I came up with the conclusion I should not be gay. It is too dangerous. Nobody likes it. You can go to hell for it. You can die from it. Let's do something different.

So those are the factors that initially got me into the de-gay programs, but why did I stay? I mean, AIDS research went on, and treatments were developed, and some of these factors were reduced. But why did I stick with the de-gay program? Well, part of it, I think, was because I felt a call on my life. I felt in my relationship with God that God was calling me to share the Good News. And the only framework I knew for doing that was as a Christian missionary. I thought I want to go. I want to serve. And I couldn't because I was disqualified because I was struggling with this gay thing.

Even when I thought I was getting a handle on the gay thing, I still was suspect because I was not seen like the other men in the church. I was seen as a feminized man. Not just because I am kind of femmy, but also because I have these desires. And I began to experience what all the women were already experiencing for hundreds of years in the churches I was a part of. I bumped up against the same glass ceiling. There were these places only certain people had access to. Only a certain type of masculinity and maleness and heterosexuality was allowed to be in those spaces.

I felt something extraordinary inside when I recognized this. I felt a sort of a panic almost, because the cabin pressure of power and privilege dropped. I mean, I am white man in America who is feminized. It was shocking to see how many men in the church tried desperately to help me get back that lost power and privilege. Teaching me how to sit – "Real men don't sit like this. And not like this. They sit like this." – These are silly things about very serious things. I recognize that I was a queer, femmy, Italian-American from immigrant parents, Roman-Catholic . . . in a world that was white, male, and Protestant. And I felt like I needed to become a mini Ronald Reagan. And I am embarrassed to admit that now. But part of what kept me in there was that question of losing power and privilege.

So the essential question was this: Was I a Christian struggling with homosexuality or was I a gay guy struggling with a kind of Christianity? Or was it something all together different? And it definitely sensitized me to seeing how the world treats women and people who are different than mainstream. It opened my eyes a little bit . . . which brings us to Act Two.

## **Act Two: Transfiguration**

So, I come to my senses, and I come out gay. And for most people, they think of this moment, this coming out experience as being about partying, banners, and cocktails or whatever. Well, not everyone has that experience. And for me, it wasn't so much a celebration, but more like receiving the news of a terminal diagnosis. You have The Gay. It is not going away. You are going to have to learn to live with it. And what made me scared was that I had been told many lies about LGBTQ people for all those years. So, finally, after being chucked out of my conservative Christian world, I needed to find a new community. And I was scared of all the LGBTQ folks because I had been told lies about them, very negative things.

But at the same time, I had also this funny ideal about the LGBTQ community that somehow it would be the most absolutely inclusive community of all the communities on the planet. That it would be the place where everybody goes who is not accepted and where everybody finds true acceptance. Right?

So I was living in Memphis, where the Homo NoMo Halfway House was, and I began to go out with a group of friends, other white gay men, and having this experience of gay life and getting to know people. And I started noticing some things in conversation – comments about women, and lesbians, and women's bodies – and this was familiar. Then I also started noticing some things about bisexuals being said. And I started hearing negative messaging towards people of color, particularly black men, and it was overt, and I was kind of taken aback. I thought, “Maybe this is a southern thing?” But, no, as soon as I moved up North, back to Connecticut, I saw the same kind of unapologetic racism among white gay men. And I thought this was strange. And then I definitely noticed a marked ugliness towards gender non-conforming transgender people, including outright negative statements. Actually at the time, the classic personal ad in the newspaper would be, “Straight-acting masculine gay man seeks the same.” And I thought, “What is a straight-acting gay man? Do they have a wife and kids at home?” But no, it had to do with gender. They wanted a certain type of masculinity – a sort of rugged masculinity. And this sounds very familiar to me

Well, I did not spend nearly twenty years in church-inspired bigotry, and finally get free of it, only to land myself in rainbow-clad version of the same damn thing. No! I was just surprised at it. And at this point, I had begun to do my playwriting, becoming a public witness about conversion therapy. So I knew I had audiences I could speak to, and they were mostly gay and lesbian folk. Well, I thought maybe if I was preaching to the choir, maybe I could get them to sing something new.

And so I thought, the only logical thing, under the circumstances, would be to do Bible study. Right?

I am a Bible scholar. So I started to look at the Bible in a fresh new way. Now back then, the big question that gay Bible scholars were asking was, “Who was gay in the Bible?” They were like so curious, like we were in high school, like who is gay in high school? And some of it was really interesting. They talked about Reuben and Naomi possibly having a gay and lesbian relationship. The Roman Centurions that got dragged into it. David and Jonathan. And there were some other compelling stories in there. But, it didn't interest me.

I was much more interested in a different question, this essential question: "Who in the Bible transgresses and transcends gender?" It was not necessarily about who is kissing who, but about the jeans they wear. It's about how they talk. It's about gender markers, and gender bullying and policing. And I thought, well, the Bible has very specific strong guidelines, commands, rules, and laws about gender, about how men and women are supposed to act and present. Well, then it can't be that difficult to see if someone is misbehaving.

So, I sat down and did a lot of research. I read. I knew nothing about the transgender experience other than what was in pop culture, which was not helpful at all. So I began a process to educate myself, to read books, and to watch documentaries.

And then I began to interview people. I interviewed the whole brains of people who identified as transgender or gender queer or gender non-conforming. I simply said, "Tell me your story." And I was amazed how different the stories were. It was such a diverse experience. I could never walk away and say, "This is the trans-experience," because it was so diverse.

And I let their stories really move me as an artist. And then I went to the Bible with that question, "Who is transgressing and transcending gender in the Bible? And do any people in the Bible remind me of some of the stories I heard my interviews?" And I wrote a play called "Transfigurations and Transgressives in the Bible." And I wanted to do a scene from that play. Some of you have seen that, but most of you have not. I want to look at some gender differences in the Bible. And I know the Bible can be challenging for some Friends. I get that. Some people are a little anxious about it. And then there are those who know it really well. And I am going to make sure you all know enough about it to get through this story. And those who know the Bible can help me with this set-up period.

I wanted to tell the story of two brothers in the Book of Genesis – Esau and Jacob. They are twin brothers. Were they identical twins? No. So today, if I was going to produce a play called "Esau and Jacob," and if I needed someone to play the part of Esau, based on the text, what do we know about Esau's body? What did he look like? Hairy! There is a consensus of hairy. From a scale of one to ten, with ten being really hairy, how hairy was he? Ten! A quick ten, maybe an eleven. So, we have this big, hairy, bulky guy. What was he good at? Hunting. He was this classic outdoorsman. Out hunting all the time, and he would go on these big hunting trips and come back with things he killed. He was this big hunter.

And personality? Would you say he was a cool, rational person, or was he a gentle person, or did he lead with his gut? His gut! Kind of a gut guy. He got tricked a lot too, unfortunately. In part because of being a gut guy. There's that famous scene where he's starving, and he comes in saying, "I'm afraid I am going to die. I will eat anything." Which brings us to Jacob.

So, what do we know about Jacob? The Bible tells us about his body. The Bible is interested in bodies. What do we know about Jacob's body? Smooth! He's like hairless. It is not too long ago in gay culture that being the hairless gay was very popular. So we have this smooth man.

What was he good at? Was he also a hunter? No! What did he do? He was a good cook. Now we know that men can cook. But in the Bible, there is not a lot of cooking going on by men.

In the Old Testament, you have people making burnt offerings to God, kind of like holy barbeques to God. And in the New Testament, you have Jesus that did like large-scale catering, picnic style. There was a fish fry once. But, for preparing a meal, chopping things up, there is basically no male character in the Bible that does it other than Jacob.

So in the Bible, it has been demonstrated that men don't cook, but Jacob was a fabulous cook. So good, in fact, that when his brother came in starving and said, "I'll give you anything for that lentil stew you are cooking," Jacob got his brother's birthright. Because Esau had tumbled out of the womb first, he was the heir. But he gave that to Jacob for some lentil stew. I have made lentil stews in my life, and it is not easy to make a fabulous lentil stew – maybe hearty or healthy, but not fabulous. So Jacob was a great cook.

Personality type? Warm! Gentle! Sensitive! And he was a bit of a trickster.

So, I painted this picture of these two brothers. They are twins, but they are different physically, and they are gendered differently in the text, not only in our modern understanding. So, Jacob goes off and starts a family. He's got multiple sexual partners and lots of children – all these half brothers and half sisters – and one of the most famous of Jacob's children is Joseph – with the amazing Technicolor raincoat. Any of you seen the musical, "Joseph and the Technicolor Raincoat?"

This character in the Bible is really interesting to me. I have seen a lot of gender differences, not just in his father Jacob, who is reigning over Israel, but also in Joseph. And in fact, there's a mistruth about Joseph that you cannot discover when reading it in English. It's in the Hebrew. And what I am going to do for you is do a monologue for you, to tell the story of Joseph in a different way. I will paint this mystery in Hebrew, and I will weave it in, and then explain it to you afterwards.

And I have to tell you, perspective is very important to me. Who gets to tell a story? Who decides? What flavor is the story? To tell the story of Joseph, I want to tell it through the eyes, and the mouth, and the body of Uncle Esau – big, hairy, Uncle Esau. So here's a scene from "Transfiguring and Transgression of Gender in the Bible."

Yah, I am Esau. You probably know my brother Jacob, who went and changed his name to Israel. We are twins, but you would never know by looking at us. Me, I am a real man. I am big, hairy. I do real men's work. But, my brother, he is as smooth as a woman – very sensitive growing up. He liked to dwell in the tents with the women when they were cooking and gossiping. He was a real girly boy, and since I was normal, my father Issac, well . . . He favored me.

So, even though my brother was a girly boy, he liked the women OK. In fact, he had two wives and slept with both of their handmaidens. And from those women, he had a pack of children. Daughters, sons – strong, young, strapping young men, all of them. Except for one of his youngest – Joseph. He was trouble since the day he was born. Always crying. Clinging to his mother. Not once wanting to go up to the field to do real men's work. And then when he got a little older, he began to have these dreams, these crazy dreams he told everybody about. Listen – boys are not supposed to dream.

One day I pulled my brother aside and told him, "You have to do something about this boy, toughen him up. It is a rough world. It is just going to just rise right over him." But, he does not listen to me. He gives the boy everything he wants. Indulgences. Then he gives him this robe.

You would not catch me dead in a robe like this. For one, it is too expensive for my tastes – a royal robe, the kind of garment that a king would gift to his virgin daughter, a princess dress. My brother Jacob gave his son Joseph a princess dress. And that kid put that dress on, slid about the compound like he was some kind of butterfly. And I thought, this was not going to end well.

Sure enough, one day when the boys were out doing real men's work, Jacob sent Joseph to check on them. No sense in his head, he puts on the stupid dress and starts traipsing across the countryside, making fools out of all of us. And his brothers saw him. They said, "Enough of this." They rushed him and threw him to the ground and beat him black and blue. And beat some sense into him. Now they ripped off his stupid dress, tore it to pieces, defiled it with blood. They came back with the bloodied garment and a story how their brother was attacked by wild beasts and that's all that remains. But, then they pulled me aside and told me what really happened. How they sold their brother off to traders as a slave. And I thought, maybe it would be all for the best.

I am a shepherd. If you have a weak lamb, you gotta take it out. It is just going to bring the rest of them down. Besides, the kid might do better for himself in Egypt-land, where they go in for the girly boy thing.

Years go by. I didn't even give it a second thought. Who has time to mourn? Then we had drought. Famine comes in cycles. You just gotta be man enough to ride it out. But this time it was different. It's like there was this curse against us year after year. Then there was the year we could not scratch much out of the ground. It got so bad, we sent the boys to Egypt to get some grain. Not to beg. You don't beg to anyone.

They were brought before some high official at Pharaoh's court. And at first, they could not tell what it was, if it was a man or woman. In a headdress, make-up, robes – those Egyptians!

Turns out, it was their very own brother, Joseph. Somehow that girly boy worked his way up through the ranks to become the second-in-command of the whole kingdom. Now this was Joseph's chance to get back at his brothers, to get his revenge. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth – You don't let anyone get one over on you. But does he? No, not that girly boy. He goes off weeping like a woman and comes back to try to teach his brothers a lesson. He forgives. He reconciles with them. He gives them food and shelter. He treats them like their sister or their mother, not like any man I have ever seen. And in doing that, that girly boy, my nephew Joseph, he saved us all.

I don't know about you, but I always cry when I read the story of Joseph. Even in Joseph with the Technicolor Raincoat, that moment when he reveals himself, when he forgives his brothers – it moves me. And it is a beautiful narrative. It is beautifully constructed, there in the book of Genesis. And it's a story of about a family. Where there are a lot of half-brothers and half-sisters, there's a lot of tension. And the tension is over inheritance rights. Who's going to get all the stuff?

The older brothers who already have families, by the time Joseph is born, they have fallen out of favor for some reason. Some of their father's focus has shifted, and there is this new child, Joseph, who is the apple of his father's eye. He is the favored son. He's precocious and beautiful. And he is a bit of a brat as well. He lords it over his brothers – with these dreams he can interpret. And to make matters worse, Jacob honors him by giving him this special garment made for him. The Hebrew is a little unclear, he either *made* it or *gave* it to him.

This garment, now in the English translation, it will often be called the “coat of many colors” or sometimes “a royal robe with long sleeves.” But, in most study Bibles, there is a note on the bottom. It says the exact meaning of the Hebrew word is unclear.

The Talmudic don't know what this garment was that Jacob gave to Joseph, which is not so bizarre, because we don't know everything about Hebrew. But, before we do some scholarship, we have to ask, “What is the word in Hebrew? Where else does it appear in the Old Testament?” That could shed some light on what it means. The word is *ketonet passim*. Jacob gave Joseph a *ketonet passim*. And if you look at the Book of Benesis, this is the only place where it appears. The garment that Jacob gave to Joseph, that the brothers rip apart and cover in blood.

But, the Hebrew Bible is huge, there are all these other books – there is Leviticus, Psalms . . . Surely, this word appears somewhere else ? But, it does not. Except for one other story. The story is in Second Samuel, in the story of King David. And actually it is the story of King David's daughter, Tamar. And it's a dreadful story of sexual violence and rape and what happens in a family and a nation when people don't take that crime seriously.

In the story, David had many sexual partners and lots of children, half-brothers and half-sisters. And at one point, Tamar is tricked by her half-brother, Hamnet, and he rapes her. And in a sign of mourning, she tears her clothing, and in the text it says the princess Tamar is wearing a *ketonet passim* And then it actually defines it for us. The garment is worn by virgin daughters of the king – a princess dress. And I can just imagine a traditional scholar looking at the Genesis account and looking at the Second Samuel account and concluding, “The exact meaning of Hebrew word is unclear.” It does not mean anything.

Well, for intellectual Integrity, you have to admit there is one academic interpretation – that Jacob gave his son a female garment. It does not have to be the only interpretation or the definitive one that you ultimate believe in, but it needs to be on the table because it is in the text. And if you go with that interpretation, the story takes on a whole new level of meaning. Because the brothers have issues with Joseph wearing this in public. They get irrationally violent. So maybe there's more going on than the brothers ripping the garment apart and it covered in blood as a ruse to trick their father. If this was fine-ass piece of clothing that they were all jealous about, you would think they would have figured a way to

ditch their brother and somebody would have gone home wearing the *ketonet*. But they wanted nothing to do with it. There was something transgresssive about it. And there is something punitive in their behavior toward it. "We are going to teach you a lesson." And that violence reminds me of the violence I hear about all the time today for gender non-conforming, gender non-binary people, transgender people, particularly transgender women of color. It is epidemic of the violence we have.

And Joseph experiences that kind of violence and he survives. And he ships off to Egypt. And at first, he's favored by everyone. He is a beautiful young man and then he gets into trouble. Then he lands in prison. Incarcerated. But, even in the all-male prison population, his ability to interpret dreams has him rise to the top. He becomes second-in-command of the whole country. And then the brothers come. They don't recognize him. He is in full Egyptian drag. He has the power and the right to destroy them. They treated him cruelly. But he does something very different. He responds in a very good way -- he cares for them and tries to teach them a lesson. He almost becomes the matriarch of the family to bring them all together. Not that a man can't do that, obviously. But, in that family, that was not modeled. He was able to transcend what he was meant for as a man and responds to conflict in a very different way, which makes him a tremendous non-conforming Bible character. Which brings us to Act Three.

### **Act Three: Climate Change**

About five years ago, I had an apocalypse, which is a fancy Biblical word for "revelation." When you have an apocalypse, it is like a curtain is pulled back, and you see what is hidden from sight. That vision jars you awake. And I had an apocalypse because of climate change.

Obviously, I was aware of climate change before, but I had bigger fish to fry, I thought. I had other things I was doing. But then my husband Glenn, he had a breakdown of apocalypse about climate change. And I was like, "Wait. What?" And he started giving me information. We began talking, which happens so often with these things. Someone has a leading, burden. And people in their circle get pulled in, and someone else gets this leading and burden, too.

So, suddenly, climate change came to be real for me. And most of my friends are very confused by this because I don't present myself as an environmentalist. I'm not against the environment, but it's like I'm a human-rights-LGBT kind of guy. And they are all a bit confused. But, when I saw that climate change was a human rights issue and a social justice issue, I was like, "Oh, yeah!" I care about those things a great deal.

So, the first question that popped in my head when I had this apocalypse, the most obvious question, the one reigning in my head was, "What is a queer response to climate change?" Which Glenn my husband turned to me and said, "You have finally lost your mind. What are you talking about? Queer? Is it different from Lesbian/GBT?"

This has something to do with us. This possibly affects us differently from other people. And we have something to contribute that is substantial. We are amazing in a very substantial way. And so what I did . . . My dad had just passed away, he just died of lung

cancer. And I got a little bit of money. He was a working class guy who saved enough money for his kids. And I took some of that money and take a year off from performing. I need to know about climate change. And I studied climate change and climate communication. And I began to experiment, and sat with this query, "What is a queer response to climate change?" And I discovered some things. Like LGBTQ people are more vulnerable to climate change than non-LGBTQ people. Which may sound weird. Would you like me to explain that?

There are a lot people who live on the streets, homeless for lots of reasons. Lots of LGBTQ people living on the streets, lots of LGBTQ youth. Around 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ. These are kids who cannot stay at home any longer. It is unsafe. And they have a will to live. And they have moved out of the house, and they often to go into cities for sanctuary. But, these are often kids who avoid shelters. Many shelters are run my churches or religious organizations, and if you are queer, you know how they will receive you. Pretty much all shelters are highly gendered in body way – boys over here, girls over there. Well, what if you are trans? Or gender non-binary? Gender non-conforming? Where do you go? And who gets to decide? So, what happens when the storms come? This is one of the projections of climate change – more intense frequency of storms, like Super-storm Sandy or Hurricane Katrina. Where do these kids go? Do we know? Do we have LGBTQ-inclusive shelters? Some cities do – definitely New York and Boston, and probably Seattle as well. To me, this is a queer family issue, how we look after these kids.

Another vulnerable group is LGBTQ seniors. And there is a lot of talk about LGBTQ seniors, and how they have received more inequality than non-LGBTQ seniors – in part, because of the historic context of when they grew up. Many of them are estranged from family. If they had children, sometimes they are estranged from their children and their grandchildren. They may have had a long-term partner until recently, but that partner died, and they did not get the benefits. So, they may not have as much income as other seniors. And with a changing planet, we are going to see more extreme heat events. And once you get above 96 degrees – it can be deadly for the very young and the very old. It is very dangerous. And the only real solution is to get to a cooler place, which is expensive. Add there are probably a lot of people living alone who think they can ride this one out. In France, where they don't have a lot of A/C, there was an extreme heat event. And tens of thousands seniors died in two days. It was shocking. Do we have cooling centers for our LGBTQ people? That's a queer family rights issue. We have a list of LGBTQ seniors in our community and in our meeting. And we have plans to check up on them during heat events – before, during, and after. This is a population who may not have children checking up on them.

But there are also other queer reactions to climate change. Climate change should really lead to comic story-telling. So, I began to develop play characters and monologues. So I want to end – except there will also be some closing remarks – with a scene from my play, "Does this Apocalypse Make me Look Fat?" It's a comedy about broken bodies. And I wanted to do part of one of the scenes, which is the queer response to climate change. And I am going to do that with one of my favorite characters, Tony Buffoozio from the Bronx.

Hello, my name is Tony Buffoozio, and I am from the Bronx. How you doing? You alright? Yah! Good!

So, climate change. Alright. First, don't freak out, people. People freak out when they hear "climate change." Right? There is still hope. Alright. We are not dead yet. We're not dead in the water yet. OK. We haven't gone to hell in a hand basket. But we can be honest – we know shit's gonna hit the fan. But we don't know how much shit, and how big of a fan we are gonna be hit with. There are lots of questions that remain.

So, for me I'm gay. Actually, that's not true. I'm actually bisexual. Alright. Which doesn't mean I'm confused. And I am not Greek. Well, I am Greek, but that has nothing to do with being bisexual. So, I was talked to my friend, my LGBTQ friend, about what an LGBTQ response is to climate change. The one thing I've noticed is the uptick of polar bear imagery in the world. There's like, so many polar bears on the internet! It is like polar bear porn, and not the good kind. They take these photographs of these polar bears, and they are on these ice floats, and they look so sad, they look so forlorn. You want to go over their and hug them, right? No, you don't want to hug them. They are kinda dangerous creatures, and they will rip you to shreds. But, it so sad – that their habitat is shrinking, and as a result, they can't go off and murder seals like they like to. What is happening with these polar bears is they are now going on land, and they going into people's garbage cans. Yah! Polar bears have become the raccoons of Alaska.

And there's all this attention to the climate in the North and these polar bears, but the climate is also warming in Central America, too. OK? Where there is this disease, this fungus spreading like wild fire, attacking coffee plants. It is called coffee leaf rust. It's a real thing. Look it up. Now this is gonna sound awful, but I think I could live in a world without polar bears, but a world without coffee? That's a dystopian future I can't take.

Now, the worst-case scenario is the potential – now, don't freak out – but the worst-case scenario is the extinction of the human race. Not going to happen. We are not going to let it happen. But, that's the worst-case scenario.

So, who on the planet has faced the potential of extinction or extermination before? Yah – LGBTQ people. Well, lots of other people, too; but LGBTQ people, too. OK. Back in Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler, he didn't like anybody. He had this hit list. He didn't like the Jews; he didn't like people with disabilities; he didn't like Jehovah Witnesses (I have no idea why); he didn't like the homosexuals. God help the gay Jew-for-Jehovah in a wheelchair. He would arrest these men, he would keep lists of them, and then they arrested them. They put them in concentration camps and did these sick experiments on these men, tried to cure them of being gay, this conversion therapy, they did sick things.

So people had to figure out: How are we going to avoid getting captured? How are we going to look after ourselves? How are we going to survive? They knew a thing or two about the potential for extinction or extermination. And even today, we see potential extinctions and exterminations. There are countries on the planet that will arrest and kill LGBTQ people. Chechnya, we've been hearing about a lot lately. And even here in America, there is an epidemic of violence, both physical violence and legal violence, against trans people and in particular against transgender women of

color. They know a thing or two about potential extinctions and exterminations. And we are constantly looking for ways of making stronger communities and how to survive.

Like, in my old family, people wonder, like, “Tony Buffozio, what was it like when you came out bi? And did your family, did they, like, freak out?” They were actually very cool about me being bisexual. The Buffozios, we’re very cool about it. The problem was, when I came out bisexual, I also came out vegan at the same time. I’m like, right afterwards having a big family dinner, and all the food is coming by, the sausage and peppers going right past me, stuffed shells going right past me, meatballs going right past me, the broccoli then, yah. So like, Aunt Francis says, “Why aren’t you eating anything? What’s wrong?” And I say, “It’s because I’m a vegan now.” And she says, “Well, what’s that?” And my mom jumps in, “It’s a pain the ass!

So thinking about, you know, our possible potential extinctions and climate change, I think about this weird period in history where we’ve had to face a possible extinction. So have any of you heard of the disease, GRID? People don’t know about GRID – Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. Or gay cancer. Or some people were cute and called it, “God’s punishment against homosexuals.” They renamed it HIV/AIDS.

I see some parallels from that time to this time. I mean, you had a disease that had a 100% fatality rate. Back then, when you had AIDS, you were gonna die. And the youngest and the strongest were those who died fastest. You had a government that refused to act. President Ronald Reagan wouldn’t even say the *words*, HIV/AIDS, for his first four years of office. He was an AIDS denier. You had a public that was frightened and hostile, and getting more hostile all the time. You had people suffering. Most hospitals in New York City wouldn’t take AIDS patients. The funeral homes wouldn’t take the victims’ bodies. So in very short order, those people had to act up. Most of them never had any experience with activism or lobbying. But they got in the face of government officials. They did these incredibly elaborate staging of events. They lobbied; they took over offices; they did whatever they could to get the government to act. They had to change public perception. And they used art; they used films; they used music, ribbons, quilts, we’re gay, whatever. And they cared for each other. They had to learn medical interventions and became like nurses, going into people’s homes and caring for these people as they died. So probably the most powerful thing they could do was break the collective silence. Nobody was talking about AIDS. So they had to do whatever they could. Their slogan was, “Silence Equals Death;” we can’t be silent about this. I think there are a lot of lessons to be learned. In a very short time, they did a lot of big things. They forever changed the relationship between patients and doctors. They changed that, they got drugs introduced, they did lots of things, huge successes. But nothing’s perfect. There’s still a lot of work to do.

And there are some lessons we can learn from them, and they also made mistakes. We can learn from their mistakes, too. Because back then, everybody with AIDS suffered, but not equally. Some people suffered more than others, depending on their race, their class, their access to medical care, their strata in society. I mean, like,

everyone was suffering. They were all in the same boat together, right? Just not all on the same deck.

And that's climate change. I mean, climate change affects everybody, but not equally. I mean, climate change globally affects women more than it effects men. Which is weird. It affects people of color more than white people, and it affects the poor more than the rich. So basically, climate change seems like, it's actually, like, it's sexist, racist, classist. I mean, it's all the stuff we are dealing with today – or not – in lots of areas. Which reminds me of a Bible story. You know the story of Joseph and the Technicolor dream coat? I have this friend who says it's a dress. Whatever. That's not the interesting part. What's interesting about this story is that it is a climate story. Alright.

So what happens is that Joseph gets in trouble with his brother. I don't even know why. But whatever happened, he gets sent off to Egypt, and he goes to prison. I don't know why he's there; I don't care. But whatever. So he's in prison, and then the pharaoh, the big guy, starts having these weird dreams, dreams about cats. And Grandpa Fuzzo says it's never good when you dream about a cat. No one else can talk about these dreams of Pharaoh's. But then someone says he knows this kid, Joseph, that knows about all about dreams. Clean him. Bring him up. Bring him up in front of Pharaoh.

"Ok, Pharaoh, what did you dream?" And the pharaoh says it's a cow dream. There are these seven cows that come out of the Nile River. They are beautiful; they are fat; they are sleek cows; they are gorgeous. And then, they are followed by these seven scary, skinny cows. And these seven scary, skinny cows suddenly eat all the big fat cows. And Pharaoh wakes up in a panic. "So, what's my dream about?" So along with that data, Joseph analyzes it, and presents climate change, temporary regional climate change. So cows represent years, fourteen years. You are going to have seven years of plenty -- everything is going to grow; it is going to be amazing, incredible. Followed by seven years of drought and famine. He presents the climate change.

Then he comes up with an adaptation plan. If these things are going to happen, we gotta address it, right? So first, you grow as much food as humanely possible. Store it in silos or whatever. Then, when the lean years come, we have food for the table, right?

And it happens exactly like that. And they put Joseph in charge. It was within those seven years of drought when Joseph got reunited with his family. They came to Egypt as climate migrants, because they heard there was food there. So they came. And the plan was amazing, because it was effective. Everyone got food who could. I don't know about this part. I am Catholic, and I am a little nervous about critiquing Bible characters, but I have a bit of a problem with Joseph's plan. It was effective, but it wasn't fair. It wasn't just. To get this food from Pharaoh, you had to pay for it. And it wasn't cheap. So, the first year of the drought, people were paying all of their money. The next year, they went to Joseph and asked, "What do we do now?" "Well, the pharaoh takes other forms of payment. Do you have any livestock? Like goats,

chickens, and our cattle, or whatever? How about your land? You can still live on it. But, a percentage of everything you produce will be his. It will be his land for now on.”

Next year goes by. “We’ve got nothing else.” “No, you got something else. You got your children. How much would you take to give them to Pharaoh? They could be Pharaoh’s servants. We won’t call them slaves; that’s not politically correct. But they are servants.”

Next year goes by. You’ve got nothing else. You are starving. But you have got one other thing. You’ve got your very own body. Give yourself to Pharaoh as a servant for two years.

So, Joseph’s plan was effective, but it wasn’t just. It led to oppression and slavery, and made Pharaoh into the ultimate one percent.

And to me, a clear response to climate change is one that has human rights and social justice right at the heart of it. So often, in coming up with solutions, we just end up multiplying the discriminations and the oppressions that we already have in the world. Why should we go to the trouble to save humanity and civilization and everything we care about, if we are going to do the same damn thing we have done for thousands of years? We gotta do better than that! I’m sorry, but I’m very angry about it. Frustrated and angry.

And I am worried that we are not going to get off our asses and do what we gotta do. And I’m scared. And lately, I have been hearing these voices – and I don’t actually “hear” voices. I hear these messages, coming to me. And the messages are coming from people in the future. And you think, “That can’t be good, right?” And I am confused by it – that I am hearing these messages from the future. And they are saying to me, to us, over and over, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for everything you did for us. Thank you.” And I’m thinking, “What are we about to do that they want to thank us?”

So our time together in this session is nearly over. And there is more that I could say now, but I will be here for one more day, and I can talk more with you later. And I see my role in the world is just to inspire critical thinking.

It is possible you heard something here that I did not even say. So, I’m interested in to hear what the Spirit is saying to you and to carry on this dialogue. So, let’s just have a minute, because I think we should let some of this stuff settle in.

[Silence.]

Thank you, Friends!

*Peterson Toscano is a playwright, actor, Bible scholar, blogger, podcaster, and gay activist. He spent seventeen years undergoing ex-gay treatment and conversion therapies before accepting his sexual orientation and coming out as a gay man.*

*To see video clips of Toscano’s performances, go to: <https://petersontoscano.com/>*