



SOMERVILLE

COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Reflection – Isaac Walton

Afternoon everyone, my name is Isaac, and alongside Katie I'm the other LGBTQ+ Representative for Somerville's MCR. It's a real joy to speak to you all today, and what a marvellous setting too in this serene place. While all college chapels are open to everyone, I don't know if any others are truly 'a house for all peoples' quite like Somerville's. It's marvellous that so many of our community can be here today, and online, to share the experience.

Community that 'includes the excluded' like Somerville's, however, is not always so easy to come by; who amongst us hasn't questioned whether they'll find their 'people' at some point or other in their lives? I'm new to Oxford this year, but before coming I was fortunate to see some examples first-hand where Queer community can spring up and persevere in even the most unusual settings.

I did my masters at 'The Other Place', and one day I received a slightly mysterious request from a choral friend. One of the churches in Cambridge was having a rainbow compline (compline is traditionally a service late at night that marks the ending of the day); my friend asked if I could possibly help find some singers for a small scratch choir to accompany the service. Well, that evening came, and our small gaggle of hastily assembled singers turned up, slightly surprised to find it would be taking place in a catholic chapel. In the corner, a rainbow flag carefully positioned against a wall. In the congregation, small clumps of people spread out, not dissimilar to how we're seated here in this place, some regular, some very much not. A catholic priest gave a supportive address, and before we knew it, it was over; the attendees of this word of mouth gathering departing silently into the night. One bright rainbow needle and thread, visible for but a moment, before it plunged silently and invisibly into the fabric of the church once more. It was a powerful thing to behold.

Another example lingers in my mind. Though I admit it must sound slightly eclectic as backstories go, I used to work for the Army Reserve before I started my DPhil. I was a musician, I played the Flute, but as part of my role I was attached to an infantry regiment based near where I did my undergraduate studies. While the Army has certainly made great strides with regards to training and diversity in recent years, it is still a very homogenous environment, in infantry regiments especially. As part of my role, I even had to do Phase 1 training, and I'm ever so slightly ashamed to say I hid my bisexuality throughout that part of the process, misgendered my former partner, self-censored my perceived differences, as so many have before. Where does one find the courage in an institution as vast and indomitable as the armed forces, an organisation that is centred around hierarchy and obedience, where does one find the courage to be and live as one truly is when there's no clear example around you?

Clear is the key word here. In my laziness, I looked at a room full of my camouflaged colleagues and saw only my own stereotypes reflected back at me. One of my close acquaintances, someone I would never have imagined, was actually in a relationship with another soldier of the same sex. I would later go on to play at their wedding, as did the whole band in full military dress. Another member was homosexual and had been around since the time where the ban on homosexuality was first lifted, all but invisible to me.

So, what's the take home message from these anecdotes? Well, in these institutions particularly, there are widely held beliefs in the public's mind about how compatible they can be with queerness. Even I, a witness to the events I describe, continually have to challenge my own assumptions on these particular matters, the army especially. There's always work to be done, of course, when it comes to advancing an agenda of equality; this pride is surely one of the most political for some time with regards to the issues of the day, and what we see happening to communities around the world. But hopefully I can end with a truly positive note today. No matter how challenging our circumstances, no matter the attitudes of the institutions and groups we may find ourselves in, LGBTQ+ community does seem to find a way. **Surely then, that's a source of inspiration for all of us.**