My Story.

Tuma Young

I first realized that I was different at about the age of 6 or 7. My parents used to read everything and everything was from encyclopedias brought from yard sales to magazines. The only magazines that were around our house were "True Confessions" and "True Detective" stories. Once a month, they would also buy the National Enquirer and the Globe tabloids. Every day my father would also buy the Cape Breton Post and have us read it. My job was that I had to look for the cat in the editorial cartoon.

These tabloids and the magazines would contain stories about gays and lesbians. Not very good ones-the stories were all about cross-dressing psychopaths who murdered people or ugly diesel dykes who seduced woman and killed their husbands. Plus the stories all said that these homosexuals lived in San Francisco. I don't know why but when I would read these stories I would blush and quickly turn the page if someone else walked into the room. I did not want to be caught reading these stories. There were no Dr. Seuss books in our home.

I was ten when the show "Soap" came on and we watched it every week. Whenever Jody Campbell, the gay character, came on, my ears would start to burn and I knew that somehow he was the same as me. I did not really know what being gay was but I knew that I was. I thought that I would have to eventually move to San Francisco because all I knew about being gay was that's what they lived.

As for publicly coming out, I'm not sure that ever happened because it seemed that everyone knew that I was a "fag" but I think none of them knew what it really was but that it somehow meant me. I would be playing catch on the hill behind my parents house and one of my friends would say "hey fag-you go play outfield" or the woman who lived down the street would yell at me "hey fag-can you go to the store for me and get me some cigarettes? I'll pay you a nickel!"

Because of the way we lived I grew up way too fast. All my friends were sniffing white gas, plastic wood, gasoline, smoking up and drinking. I started smoking up, buying joints from the older men. Everyone's parents drank and they did not drink a glass of wine while they had dinner. They drank the whole bottle. The wine was called "74" and they drank it to get drunk. That was the name of the street I grew up on, "74th Street." It was named after the wine. My street was considered the "Bronx" and people from other parts of the reserve were too scared to come to 74th Street because it was so rough.

By the time I was 14, I was living a double life. I was basically living by myself, going to school and working. I was working summer jobs, weekends and after school. I was the so-called "smart one", the nerd, and also the fag. Some of my friends said the reason I was smart was because I was a fag and everyone knew that fags were smart. Everyone thought that I was the perfect son, the perfect schoolboy, the one who could not get into trouble. At night, I was hanging with an older crowd, drinking, smoking up and hanging out.

Everyone else had girlfriends or boyfriends but I knew that I could not do that because I was gay and that I was alone. There was nobody else that I knew who was gay and I really did not want to go out with girls. No one thought of me as a potential boyfriend. I never flirted or let anyone know I had a crush on them because I knew that was trouble so I focused on work, school, and on just surviving. I prided myself on having the good sense to leave the party just as things went from good to bad. My friends would tell me so and so was fighting or carrying on but I was not there. I knew that if I hung around too long things would happen to me. Either I would get beaten or get raped because I was the fag.

At 15 I moved to a rooming house in Membertou and at 16 I moved into a small apartment in Sydney with some older friends. I obtained a fake ID and started going to the bars. I skipped school but still made A's when it came time for the exams. I hitchhiked back and forth to Eskasoni to pick up my welfare cheque. I had convinced the welfare officer that I was now emancipated. I don't think he knew what that word meant but I did. I hung around with an older crowd drinking, partying and generally behaving as if I was in my 20's or 30's. I was 16 going on 40!

On one of my hitchhiking trips, this white man picked me up and asked me if I fooled around. I was so scared but I said yes. So we went into the woods and we had sex. Once we were done, he dropped me off at the main road where I continued to hitchhike to Eskasoni. I was so scared and worried. I was sure that everyone would be able to smell the gay sex off me. I thought I smelled like a whore or what my bar hopping girlfriends would call "Mntu Tramps." So I smoked a lot of cigarettes trying to mask that smell.

Even my brand of cigarettes screamed that I was gay. I used to smoke "*Avanti*" by duMaurier where everyone else smoked Export A's. The cigarettes were longer and skinny so I felt more sophisticated. I also drank Singapore Slings not Schooner beer. All this while I was going to Sydney Academy High School.

I partied, made good grades and made new friends. I tried kept up my asexual nature but this girl from the Pier had a crush on me. I would not give her any indication that I was interested in her. I felt that was wrong. We were friends and that was that. One night we were partying and her brother walked in. We talked and while his sister was in the other room, he kissed me. His lips were full, moist and his tongue was damn hot. His hands were all over me and he pressed his body up against mine. I had never been kissed before and I liked it!

His sister caught us and screamed at both of us! He said, " What's the problem! Tuma is a girl!" My friends told him that I was not a girl but a boy. I played it off and told everyone that it took me by surprise. I told them all of a sudden the sonofabitch kissed me. How dare he do that! He apologized and said I looked like a girl to him and that he was sorry for kissing me. My friends later on said that was reasonable because if you did not know me, you would kind of think that I was a girl cause I looked like one.

I ran into him a week later and we kissed again!

I thought that maybe if I went out with a woman that might be the answer so one night I got pissed drunk and had sex with a woman. I don't even know who she was. I went out with another woman. Again I had to be pissed drunk in order to have sex with her. This was a problem! Because all along, I had kept myself from becoming pissed drunk because that is when folks go into trouble. I can still hear my friends and family say "Whatever you do, don't pass out! You'll get raped!"

I started going out with older men: the bouncer at the bar who found out that I was underage, the taxi driver who drove my friends to a hotel but wondered why I would not go in for the "good time," married men from Eskasoni who picked me up hitchhiking and knew that I was a "fag" and the drug dealers who had joints when I had no money. Sex became something I just did and it was detached from my emotions. There was nothing beautiful about it. All of it was quick, fumbling, shady, done in secrecy, and it felt very dirty. I could not tell anyone about it. I started to drink heavily.

At 19, I moved to Halifax and moved in with a friend that I knew from Sydney. He took me to my first gay bar-a club at the University de Moncton but he made me take my glasses off and I could not see a thing. After sitting at a table for what seemed a long time he went to the washroom and I went to the bar to order a drink. I chatted with a man who was wearing leather pants but my friend came back and told me we had to leave. My friend told me that I was not allowed to be talk to other men and we drove all the way back to Halifax in the middle of the night. I could not figure out what I had done wrong.

I had a very strange relationship with this man. He took me to Rumours and Cabbagetown and introduced me to gay life in Halifax. Yet he proclaimed that he was straight and went out with women. We sometimes slept together but there was no real sex just spooning, cuddling, and caresses. He could become very jealous when I was hooking up with his gay friends. Once I ended up going out with a friend of his from Cape Breton and I spent the night at his apartment. He was with his girlfriend but came out of his bedroom in the middle of the night to tell me to stop sleeping with his buddy and to come to the couch to where he was. I did as I was told and the next morning his girlfriend broke up with him saying how can he choose me over her.

I never forgot how scared I was when he told me that he loved me. No one had ever said that before. I did not believe him because I thought no one could love me. I did not even love myself. I was just a drunken Indian faggot.

I partied hard and we starting doing hard drugs. I found other Mi'kmaq and Maliseet gay men and lesbians at Rumours. We started hanging out together. We also had lots of drama and the sexual mind games. We all went out with each other and fought with one other. My friend hated them and they did not have any love for him either. In a sense I kept my Mi'kmaq friends away from my white friends. My drinking and drug use progressed where my life was really about that and nothing else mattered.

I remember one time when a couple of us were in a cab and the usual drop off location was "the corner of Creighton & Falkland Street." Then we would walk through a dark alley called "Jack Off Alley", peek around the corner and run into Rumours. I become so tried of sneaking around so finally, one night, I told the taxi driver "I don't know where they are going but I going to that gay bar Rumours. Do you have a problem with that? " He replied, "I don't care where you go as long as you pay the fare!"

I drank more and when I drank, I did not want to be with anyone, let alone be with myself. I didn't have much sexual encounters. One guy told me that we went to a hotel, we drank a bottle and then I kicked him out of the bed once the bottle was empty. No liquor, No love! I blacked out often and couldn't remember a thing. Another guy gave me a bottle of poppers to sniff while we were supposed to have sex but I told him "this is just like sniffing white gas back on 74th Street!" I ended up sniffing the whole bottle and he did not get any action. My real lover was the booze and the drugs.

Then one night, I was out drinking, partying and I ended up at my friends place. I went in and demanded that he give me drugs. His roommate told me that they had none so I took a knife and threatened to slice my wrists if he did not produce them. They produced the drugs and I passed out. The next day he told me that he could not be around me anymore and that I was too much of a mess. I had tried to kill myself for drugs.

I had just turned 22 and I felt like death was close by. I had no emotions, no sense of myself and no love!

I stopped drinking and using. I cleaned up and focused on trying to help myself. I also had to find out who I was and what it meant to be gay besides the drinking, drugging and the sex. I began by educating myself about HIV and AIDS and then taking that knowledge and teaching other Mi'kmaq about it. I did workshops, handed out condoms and along the way, learned about being Two-Spirited.

I wanted to do my family tree so I went to see my great uncle and his wife. They talked about my family, whom I was related to and who was in my family tree. Then out of the blue, my great uncle looked at me and said "Kiloq na Puoinaq! He then started to tell me about so and so, who was an old bachelor and so and so who was an old maid. I realized that he was talking about all the gay men and lesbians in my family. I was stunned to find out that I was not alone and I had a rich history but I had not asked the right questions to the right people.

I started asking questions and folks began to tell me about certain things. Why I was taught certain things. I was taught about plants and how to use them in traditional medicines. I was taught the Kojua dance when I was a child by my cousin but he taught me a slightly different version. I later found out that Two-Spirit people, at one time, danced counter clockwise and in the outside circle. I questioned this because I told the person who showed me the two dancing circles that I had never danced outside and in a counterclockwise direction. He told me that when I was a kid, I usually danced at the mission where the church was very strong. The priests would not like it if they knew I was gay. So to hide this fact I had to dance in the ame circle, in the same direction but different so that everyone would know except the priest.

I was also taught about the Water and Fire ceremony and about maintaining the balance between my female and male spirits. I plunged myself into traditional ceremonies but discovered that I was not welcomed at many. The "New" traditionalists had absorbed all the prejudice and discriminations of homophobia and I was told I could not go into sweats or participate in ceremonies because of who I was. They did not want "fags' around and some of them told me that this was not part of our traditional culture. I begin to develop my own relationship with my Higher Power.

I met this man and moved in with him. He was handsome but I did not know how to have a "proper" relationship with him because I never had one but I was willing to learn. However he had a problem with alcohol and this proved to be very hard on me because I no longer drank or did drugs. I supported him when he went into rehab but he was still in the closet to his family so I retreated back into the closet with him. I hated it! I was right back to where I had started from, not being able to share my life, not to talk about it with anyone and being ashamed of who I was.

When he died of a brain aneurism, I could not bring myself to even tell my family that my partner had died. I went to the funeral and sat behind the "family". They knew about me but I was treated as "the friend" not as the grieving spouse. I felt very much alone and I felt that I could not share my grief with anyone. Imagine my surprise when I arrive back at our apartment and found that his family had come in and taken everything, including my clothes. I did not get his life insurance, his pension plan, the furniture or any of his estate. I was left with nothing!

I learned a very hard lesson and that was I had no legal rights because I was gay. I was no more than a "roommate." I went around consoling myself saying that at least I had his love and that they could not take that away from me. Remember this was before gay marriage or domestic partnerships or even human rights changes. Being gay meant you had no rights. This was around 22 years ago!

Then I started to get angry!

I vowed that this would never happen to me again! Never again would I retreat into the closet! I told myself that as I continue my journey of healing, that I would never be ashamed of who I was. I threw myself in gay advocacy and became somewhat of the stereotype of an angry gay radical. I became active in the mainstream gay lesbian movement. I joined a local group of ACT UP, Queer Nation and marched in the pride marches. At one march, I carried a sign telling folks not to assume that I was a lesbian. In other I held a sign telling the premier that we need to powwow on human rights. I was part of the 2-Spirit Group who were the Grand Marshalls for the Toronto Pride Parade and I felt very proud sitting on the hood of an old dusty station wagon: a "Rez Mobile" going down Younge Street leading 500,000 queers.

By this time I had became more spiritually centered and realized that I could be spiritual without being religious or traditionalist. To me, organized religions whether it is christian or traditionalist; it was all the same and I wanted no part of it. I told people that I threw away my rosary and my sweet grass. I did not need them to communicate with my Higher Power.

I discovered that being Two-Spirited also meant being extra spiritual and that being a sexual being is a spiritual ceremony. I equate the act of sex and being sexual with my partner as being very spiritual and that the act of sex is a form of prayer to my Higher Power. I guess this is why many organized religions and traditionalists have a hard time with various forms of sexuality.

I started noticing an odd thing. At times, many people could not tell what gender I was or thought that I was a woman. I have never tried to pass myself off as a woman but there were some hilarious situations like when this lesbian at Rumours who tried to pick me up. I did not realize it and thought I was a having a lovely conversation with her until a mutual friend told her that I was a gay man. She was so shocked and then we laughed about it. Another time, I was invited to participate in a women's health circle and now I know how to do cervical self-exams using a mirror and a speculum.

There are many times when folks in hotels, elevators, restaurants and stores would call me "Ma'am", "Lady", or "Miss." Little kids are never shy asking whether I am a girl or a boy. Sometimes it is funny. Other times it can be dangerous. Once I was nearly attacked in a men’s bathroom because a couple men mistook me for a woman and told me that I was in the wrong washroom. When I corrected them they became very angry and tried to attack me. I also became very aware of how straight men talked to me when they thought I was a woman and how they changed the tone in their voices once they found out I was a man. To this day, whenever my Two-Spirits are in balance some folks still cannot tell what gender I am.

A few years later, I met another man. I made a breakfast date with him because breakfast meant if we did not click, I would have not wasted the whole day. Dinner dates often meant they expected you to sleep with them and I was not ready for that. I was not ready for love. I was logically planning and taking each step carefully because I was not going to go back into the closet and I was determined not to experience the pain of love again. My guard and shields were up!

We dated for a few months and I found out that he was a divorced man with three sons, a step-grandson, another grandchild on the way and an ex-wife with two dogs. They all welcomed me into their lives. I felt very out of place! This was a new situation for me and what do you do? No one I knew who was gay had kids or lived a so-called "normal" life. What was up with that? He also drinks a glass of wine with dinner maybe once a week! Everyone I knew would drown the whole bottle, get drunk, become belligerent, fight, cry and than pass out.

I prayed to my Higher Power, to Kisulk, to God, to Buddha, to Niskam, to Jesus, to Mohammad, to Bahaullah, to whoever the hell was out there for guidance and I fell in love with this man with all my heart and soul.

We have been together for almost 20 years. He knows me inside out, knows my dreams, my fears, my insecurities, and loves me totally and unconditionally. He has stood by me in my greatest times and also held me up when I thought I would never be able to stand up again. We have gone through many of life's ups and downs. We talk about everything and we have no secrets from each other. Early on we registered as a domestic partnership and all those legal rights I had fought so hard for earlier are now available to everyone, including me.

I introduced him to my family and he is welcomed by them-mind you my mother keeps telling him to learn a bit more Mi'kmaq so she speak to him in Mi'kmaq. His children have accepted me and will introduce me as their stepdad or my dad's partner. His grandchildren are also my grandchildren. One of his grandchildren, as a toddler, could not pronounce my name and ended up calling me "Oma" which means grandma in Dutch.

The best part of my life is waking up in his arms every morning and the hearing him say "Good Morning Tuma! I love you! Also the last thing I hear from him before I fall asleep is "Good Night Tuma! I love you!"

By the way, I did make my holy pilgrimage to the holysexual land: the Castro district in San Franciso!