



WENTWORTH MILLER

SURVIVAL MODE

I've had a complicated relationship with that word, 'community.' I've been slow to embrace it. I've been hesitant. I've been doubtful. For many years I could not or would not accept that there was anything in that word for someone like me. Like connection and support, strength, warmth. And there are reasons for that. I wasn't born in this country. I didn't grow up in any one particular religion. I have a mixed-race background, and I'm gay. Really, it's just your typical all-American boy next door. It has been natural to see myself as an individual. It's been a challenge to imagine that self as part of something larger. Like many of you here tonight, I grew up in what I would call survival mode.

When you're in survival mode, your focus is on getting through the day in one piece, and when you're in that mode at 5, at 10, at 15, there isn't a lot of space for words like 'community,' for words like 'us' and 'we.'

There's only space for 'I' and 'me.' In fact, words like 'us' and 'we' not only sounded foreign to me at 5 and 10 and 15, they sounded like a lie. Because if 'us' and 'we' really existed, if there was really someone out there watching and listening and caring, then I would have been rescued by now.

That feeling of being singular and different and alone carried over into my 20s and into my 30s. When I was 33, I started working on a TV show that was successful not only here in the States, but also abroad, which meant over the next 4 years, I was traveling to Asia, to the Middle East, to Europe, and everywhere in between, and in that time, I gave thousands of interviews.

I had multiple opportunities to speak my truth, which is that I was gay, but I chose not to. I was out privately to family and friends, to the people I'd learned to trust over time, but professionally, publicly I was not. Asked to choose between being out of integrity and out of

the closet, I chose the former. I chose to lie, I chose to dissemble, because when I thought about the possibility of coming out, about how that might impact me and the career I'd worked so hard for, I was filled with fear. Fear and anger and a stubborn resistance that had built up over many years. When I thought about that kid somewhere out there who might be inspired or moved by me taking a stand and speaking my truth, my mental response was consistently, 'No, thank you.'

I thought, I've spent over a decade building this career, alone, by myself, and from a certain point of view, it's all I have. But now I'm supposed to put that at risk to be a role model, to someone I've never met, who I'm not even sure exists. That didn't make any sense to me. That did not resonate... at the time.

Also, like many of you here tonight, growing up I was a target. Speaking the right way, standing the right way, holding your wrist the right way. Every day was a test and there were a thousand ways to fail. A thousand ways to betray yourself. To not live up to someone else's standard of what was acceptable, of what was normal. And when you failed the test, which was guaranteed, there was a price to pay.

Emotional, Psychological, Physical. And like many of you, I paid that price, more than once, in a variety of ways.

The first time that I tried to kill myself, I was 15. I waited until my family went away for the weekend and I was alone in the house and I swallowed a bottle of pills.

I don't remember what happened over the next couple of days, but I'm pretty sure come Monday morning I was on the bus back to school, pretending everything was fine. And when someone asked me if that was a cry for help, I say no, because I told no one. You only cry for help if you believe there's help to cry for. And I didn't. I wanted out. I wanted gone. At 15. 'I am me' can be a lonely place, and it will only get you so far.

By 2011, I'd made the decision to walk away from acting and many of the things I'd previously believed so important to me. And after I'd given up the scripts and the sets which I'd dreamed of as a child, and the resulting attention and scrutiny which I had not dreamed of as a child, the only thing I was left with was what I had when I started. 'I am me,' and it was not enough. In 2012, I joined a men's group called The Mankind Project, which is a men's group for all men, and was introduced to the still foreign and still potentially threatening concepts of 'us' and 'we,' to the idea of brotherhood, sisterhood and community. And it was via that community that I became a member and proud supporter of the Human Rights Campaign, and it was via this community that I learned more about the persecution of my LGBT brothers and sisters in Russia.

Several weeks ago, when I was drafting my letter to the St. Petersburg International Film Festival, declining their invitation to attend, a small nagging voice in my head insisted that no one would notice.

That no one was watching or listening or caring. But this time, finally, I knew that voice was wrong. I thought if even one person notices this letter in which I speak my truth, and integrate my small story into a much larger and more important one, is worth sending.

I thought, let me be to someone else what no one was to me. Let me send a message to that kid, maybe in America, maybe someplace far overseas, maybe somewhere deep inside, a kid who's being targeted at home or at school or in the streets, that someone is watching and listening and caring. That there is an 'us,' that there is a 'we,' and that kid or teenager or adult is loved, and they are not alone.

I am deeply grateful to the Human Rights Campaign for giving me and others like me the opportunity and the platform and the imperative to tell my story, to continue sending that message, because it needs to be sent, over and over again, until it's been heard and received and embraced. Not just here in Washington State, not just across the country, but around the world, and then back again. Just in case. Just in case we miss someone. Thank you.



TeacherRajae