

## **The Shared Mic: Conversations for the Ages**

### *Episode 1: Larry Jewell and Gregory Caswell*

**Salima Suleman:** Welcome to The Shared Mic. I'm Salima.

**Eric Storey:** And I'm Eric. Today on The Shared Mic, we have Larry and Gregory. We gave them the topic of falling in and out of love.

**Salima Suleman:** Just a heads up before we get any further, this is a conversation between two adults, and they do use some language and talk about some topics that might not be appropriate for children.

**Eric Storey:** Both Larry and Gregory are gay men, so much of their life experience has been shaped by their coming out stories.

**Salima Suleman:** So before we launch into their conversation, we'd like to share their coming out stories with you. Here's Greg's.

**Gregory Caswell:** So I came out of the closet, first as bisexual because in 1997, that was the comfortable way to come out as gay. A girlfriend at the time had come out to me and I felt comfortable enough to come out to her with the acknowledgment that I was experiencing sexual attraction towards men. It was a very different time and I grew up in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, where being gay was not acceptable whatsoever. And so throughout the course of my entire schooling, I was heavily bullied by basically anyone. I rarely had many friends, I did end up developing some closer ones but when people were calling me derogatory names that are used towards homosexual people, I didn't want to be that so I really struggled to come to terms with it, because if I came to terms with it myself, it would mean that I was the awful thing that they were calling me. I ended up comfortably coming out as bisexual when I was 17, and then went to university where I decided that it was time to experiment and figure myself out and promptly burnt the closet to the floor and accepted myself as homosexual. The coming out process though, I would say that it I've concluded it, but it went on for many years after that. Just self-acceptance and also gaining the acceptance of others, and then also coming to a place where I didn't care what other people thought that I knew that there were going to be people who didn't understand or appreciate me and that didn't have to affect me.

**Salima Suleman:** And here's Larry's.

**Larry Jewell:** I came out in 1967, which is a while ago, it was my gift to the Centennial, I guess. Coming out then was a different prospect than it is now because by coming out, one didn't mean openly acknowledging to the world at large that I was gay, what it really meant was accepting myself as gay to the degree that I was accepting and finding other people who were gay and beginning to create a social thing and the big problem ... well, there were two

problems. The first that we're in an era in which we are still psychiatrically ill, criminal and ecclesiastically deprived.

So there were lots of reasons, particularly I was a third-year medical student at the time, and I was not keen on being openly identified as any of these things. So just finding people was a huge issue. There was no information at large. What I actually found was pragmatic. Someone had written on the men's room door of one of the bars "Where do the fags go in Edmonton?", someone answered, and I was there the next night.

**Salima Suleman:** All right, and I think we're ready to hear Larry and Greg's conversation.

**Gregory Caswell:** Well, falling in love has definitely changed over the course of my life. I have had my share of boyfriends. I've always been ... I actually learned the term for it the other day: demi sexual and I had no idea what it meant but as soon as they said it and provided me with the definition, I was like, that is me. So demi sexual means that you need to be romantically involved with someone in order to be able to engage in sexual activity. For the longest time I didn't understand why it was different than than other people and why it seemed so easy for other gay men to enter into sexual encounters, and I was always sort of felt like I was weird or had this handicap, but I knew that in order to express myself in that way that I would need to be in the comfort of a relationship in order to do so. And so, I think in some ways, in my earlier life, I probably made compromises for myself in order to stay in what I perceived at the time as a loving relationship, so that I could continue to express myself as a homosexual man in that safety in quotations of that relationship. But now at this point in my life, I do feel that this is the romantic coming out, that I found the one and what's interesting about my relationship now is that where previously I felt like I had to make sacrifices in order to maintain a relationship, I now feel like no sacrifices need to be made, that it's oftentimes compromise and that I have the freedom to be myself within the relationship and not have to hide certain parts of myself. And so, I think that that's really how I've acknowledged or have learned the difference in what being in love actually is. I think that we have this, this notion of what it's supposed to be and that's really based in the stories that were told through Hollywood and the media and the music that we listen to, and that sort of thing. If I was to take a reference from that, I think the number one thing that I've learned over the course of my life is from Sex in the City, the gospel according to Carrie, that at the end of the day, the best relationship that you're going to have is the one that you have with yourself. And if you're truly honoring yourself, I feel like not necessarily that that relationship is going to come along, but that when you're in a relationship, you're going to honor yourself more. And so being in love with someone I feel is being in that relationship where you can be yourself and you don't need to compromise it.

**Larry Jewell:** It sounds like the growth is certainly ... it's a movement toward self-realization which seems to be a positive thing. For me, this has been a great struggle. I am single, I've been single all my life, except relationships ... one lasted a few years, most of the others have lasted weeks or months, sometimes days or hours. And I really found in many cases that I was entering relationships because I felt not to enter a relationship would be a deficiency or a

defect on my part and there is nothing, no way I think of a killing relationship more quickly than being there not because you want the other person but because you want to be seen in a relationship. And it took some while for me to recognize this is who I am and exactly the same process that you went through to have self-realization. And at some point, I realized that I probably wasn't a one romantic partner, but I did have a gift for friendship. And I've been fortunate all my life to have a group of people, some of whom I've had sex with, most of whom I haven't and who really have been very good friends for a long time. The families that we create, the extended families that we create, I think for me, and I think for most gay people are immensely important.

**Gregory Caswell:** I would absolutely agree with you. I know that for a period of time ... well RuPaul says on his show that the wonderful thing about being a gay person is that you're able to create your own family and I love that you brought that up. As I say that I found the one etcetera, I feel like there's sort of this wiring that we all sort of deal with that you shared that you were struggling with at one point in your life, that you're supposed to find the one and that that's how everyone's life journey is supposed to go. But I think is as you, not even necessarily grow older, but go through different life experiences, you start to realize that there's more to it than that. And I don't know how you feel about the term heteronormative, but it is sort of a heteronormative concept that at age 20, you find your partner and you move into a house together and you raise a family. And I think that as gay people, we don't really have to follow that and even as people in general, we don't have to follow that concept anymore.

**Larry Jewell:** Yeah. Well, it seems to me the gay communities as we understand them in the modern west, were basically created by my generation. Before that, there were a few very brave, but for the most part, pretty solitary individuals who sort of started the process and believe me, we weren't thinking of little houses in the suburbs with white picket fences and two matching poodles or something like this. There is I think, a downside to the normalization, if I can use that word in quotes, the gay experience and the being gay and that is we do lose some of the things that made us such a distinctive, and I think a very creative group and we need to find the right balance there because clearly I certainly would not wish anyone who wants a different lifestyle than the one that I've chosen over the years to be denied that on the basis of the fact that they're gay. On the other hand, I really would not like to see the gay underground be completely sort of sanitized.

**Gregory Caswell:** I would agree with you and I would even go as far especially seeing the trends that are currently happening, that people in general are moving away from this concept of that life journey that we're supposed to go on. The game of life version of life, and that people in general, be whatever sexual orientation or background, that we're starting to question and move away from it. I think that that's actually probably for the best. I think that when we're trying to live a life that somebody else has told us to live, it's like you said before, it's never going to work. Same with the relationship that you're told to be in, it's not going to work if it's

under that. But it's funny that you describe the house in the suburbs with the two matching poodles because we have matching Morkies.

**Larry Jewell:** And I would not deny those to you. And one of the things actually, for me, you know, I realized early on that I was given a set of gifts: that I was bright, that I was good academically. But, you know, it seemed that God had a sick sense of humor when he created me because he gave me a set of gifts, none of which seemed to me to be of any use for me in the gay life that I understood. I would have given them all up for a good physique and a nice face. It took a while to get over that too. I see all of these things as being part of the internalized homophobia, which, in my generation, and I hope more than your generation, it really has coloured us and continues to colour us. I belong to a group where people are still reluctant to give their surnames on a mailing list for fear that the police will come. And this is not just people being silly. This is life experiences that are so deeply embedded that you really have to do a lot of work to get rid of them. One of my favorite hobby horses actually is the word queer. I understand the process of reclamation, I just ask people to realize that it isn't retroactive and for people of my generation, it is no matter how much I may be out, I still wince a little when it's directed at me.

**Gregory Caswell:** It's interesting that you bring that up, I would say that my generation, specifically the people in their 30s, our experience is probably very similar in that we're sort of told that we have to be a certain physical ideal. I kind of refer to my generation as "Before Ellen" so that people who didn't have this huge person who really made the queer identity acceptable within the straight community. Yeah, so I just remember watching shows and the representation of the gay man was this incredibly attractive white man, that was so stupidly attractive that it was almost as though it was to convince the straight audience that of course he's gay, look at how beautiful he is and make that excuse for it. And then he would be with his equally beautiful partner and that message really just sort of told me that I couldn't fall in love if I wasn't chiseled and half anorexic. I'm someone as well who thinks that underwear ads should have a warning on them like, 'This person has ran 10 kilometers today' so that we know that that's not realistic for everyone. But I do think, and I'm very inspired by the new generation, the "After Ellen's", if you will, who seem to have this image issue. I hope, and I can't really speak for them because I'm 39, not 19 but I hope that they're starting to become more self-accepting, and that it's not that we need to fit into a cookie cutter, but that we're more allowed to be individuals.

**Larry Jewell:** Yeah, I think specifically perhaps with the sort of physical ideals but in general, when I think back to my experiences as a young man, the best way for younger people to sort of understand that whole context is to look at the situation that trans folks are in today. It's very different I'm sure in many ways and I can't speak for them, but I do have a trans niece and it's all those things. You can't be there, if you are there you have to be sick, if you are there we'll accept you're sick but you should give up your criminal behavior and all the stuff that we

dealt with. So it's probably the easiest way I would think rather than trying to imagine what it was like for a long while ago just to look at what it is for those people today.

**Gregory Caswell:** Yeah, I think that it's important especially ... one thing that I really recognized with (Edmonton) Pride in general this year was that it seemed like every single storefront had their 'Love is love is love' message and all of a sudden everyone was cool with the gays. But it was not for us, it was to sell cellphones and jeans and that sort of thing. So I think that it's important to remember that there is still a struggle, and there's still a politic behind it. And we do see that within the trans community. I also see it, when I came out of the closet, it was comfortable to be bisexual, then acknowledge that I was gay, but now there's many different terms for sexuality that people can identify with that I think is also an important movement. Myself learning that I'm a demi sexual instead of there's something wrong with me. So I guess what I'm going to, is that it's still a struggle, but it's becoming more of a conversation, I would say.

**Larry Jewell:** I have some difficulty with the concept. It dawned on me one day, quite simply that yes, human sexuality is a spectrum. So too is visible light, but we can all recognize red from green. This sort of notion that I first had that everything has to be this sort of murky, ambiguous pool that everyone ... no, people find their place in this entire spectrum and wherever it is will work for them. That's where they belong.

**Gregory Caswell:** And at the end of the day, I think that ultimately where I hope that society gets to is that we stop trying to live in other people's bedrooms and just live our lives.

**Larry Jewell:** No, I certainly agree with that. I had a question and I'll tell you a bit of a background ... I was away last week with a friend whose ex-husband and he were obviously ... they've obviously had some issues. His question to me was can you love someone that you don't like?

**Gregory Caswell:** That's a tough question. Can you love somebody that you don't like or that you hate? I think that sometimes, there's a really funny song from Avenue Q that the more you love someone, the more you want to kill them. I think that love and hate ... when we say hate as in completely dislike someone, I don't think that you can love them. And I know you have a differing opinion on this and I'm excited to hear it, but I think that love in the true genuine form is about acceptance and so if you hate somebody that's not accepting. So my opinion is that they can't coexist together but you have a different opinion.

**Larry Jewell:** Only to a degree, in that I agree with you fundamentally with the love that we would desire and the love that we aim for ... it has that element of acceptance and so on. Most of us I think struggle to get there and there are two ways I think that one can convince oneself that one is in love with someone that one doesn't really like. One is quite simple and it's lust and when that goes away usually there's greater clarity that I really do not like this person and

there's no delusion that this was love. The other though is the person that you like, but you feel you would like just a little better if they would just change one or two little habits that you find annoying and I think that's the situation I was dealing with with my friend. This is still clearly a loving relationship, but it started off with phones and he would pay more attention to his phone than he was to the other partner. So I think sometimes people have traits that really trouble us and the issue is that we're ourselves, that we really can't accept them as they are, we still end up wanting to improve them.

**Gregory Caswell:** Yeah. I would also say that there's that murky area of that and it doesn't always have to be romantic love, it can be an admiration. People take up a rent in your head when they aren't necessarily validating or acknowledging you and because of that lack of returned affection or admiration, it can become this sort of ugly feeling of hatred, where you're like, I hate that person. When in reality, it's just that you're not getting what you are hoping to get from them.

**Larry Jewell:** Right. Yeah. Sometimes, to go back to the families that we create, if you have two people that you both like, and they don't like one another, and this sort of feeling that somehow I've got to make them like one another. I like them both, they hate one another ... that's just fine. That's their problem, not mine, don't keep pushing and trying to fix problems that aren't yours to fix. I think that's pretty good general advice. And on the subject of advice and the sort of, coming out or I guess, anywhere in life experience. What advice have you gotten that you think has really been good or really bad?

**Gregory Caswell:** I would say, I hope that my mom doesn't listen to this, but typically, and I hope if she does, she laughs ... but I would say that typically, if my mom gives me advice, I usually do the opposite. That's basically it.

**Larry Jewell:** I suppose that in some respects the best advice maybe is to not give any advice, and the more you think the person needs your advice, and the better your recommendations are, the more you should stay quiet. I think I probably at this stage in my life I have done more good for people through my weaknesses or deficiencies than I have through my strengths. It's sort of a paradox. But it's not a bad feeling to have at 70, to see that even the things that we do not admire in ourselves can be put to good purpose.

**Gregory Caswell:** I just thought of advice that was horrible that was given to me from my mom specifically. There was this time in my life that there was a job opportunity, and it was not going to pay a lot of money, but I knew that it was going to fulfill me for my passion. Just based on my introduction, you know that I'm in the arts. So I'm a very passionate person who is willing to be passionate for not a lot of money. So my question to her was, 'Should I follow my passion or should I go for the money?' and she told me 'The money' and I said, 'No, I'm going to go for my passion.' But thanks for that, and I'm happy that I did. I probably don't have a lot of my retirement savings fund that I should. But as you said, the life experiences that you have and

the failures that you have and the wins that you have, because you follow the passion instead of the money, I think is ... and don't take this as advice, but in my experience, follow the passion.

**Larry Jewell:** I would agree with that. Let me give you a little story that, again, is not to be taken as advice. I'm not the socially most adept person in the world, but one of the relationships that actually lasted for a few years was with a colleague. When he was in any circumstance, a social event that he felt uncomfortable with, he looked around and imagined everyone replaced by their mother. And somehow, he found it very comforting.

**Gregory Caswell:** It sort of reminds me of a time in my most recent relationship. When we first started dating, I decided to put a picture of him when he was four years old on the screen of my phone, so that if I ever had the urge to anger text I would stop myself because I would be anger texting a four year old. It's not advice, it's just something you can do if you are prone to anger texting your boyfriend.

**Larry Caswell:** Greg, I have a question. I have a couple of gay members in my family. I have a nephew who's gay and happily married as far as I know, and a trans niece. Those are the people I probably least want to give advice to. There are ways that I sort of passed that if you're in trouble, I'm here, I'll try to help you. I'll do what I can. It's sort of tempting to take the things, the mistakes that you make, assume that they will make them and try to protect them from it. A couple of things I found very cool, it's comforting to have other gay members in my biological family that add something and for my 75th birthday, was probably the first time that I really had all of my family plus my closest members of my gay family together, out on an acreage and that also made me realize that we come a long way. For me personally, it was just wonderful to have all the people that were important to me together interacting, because, you know, we talk a lot about people being abandoned by their families. We don't talk nearly enough about gays who abandon their families, which basically is what I did as a young man. I moved to Toronto and unless I needed something, I really wasn't in contact. It took a long time to realize I thought I was just doing the normal thing but I wasn't. I mean, that was part of it, it was professional work, but part of it also was getting away from the people that I was afraid would know me too well.

**Gregory Caswell:** I had the exact same experience. I definitely went to Edmonton when the rest of my family moved to Saskatoon, and that was because I felt like I wouldn't be able to express myself if I made that move with them and then life happened here. It's interesting because our journeys are similar in the way that it's not even a question anymore, I can 100% be myself.

**Salima Suleman:** Well, that conversation had a lot, and it covered a lot of territory. I think my big takeaways from that conversation were about how society is really set up for people to be in relationships. And it's really, there's a lot of pressure for people to be partnered up and if you're not partnered up, it's almost like there's something wrong with you. And all those



pressures get internalized and it is even just financially difficult. Everything is set up for pairs and I think my takeaway was that it's okay if you're not paired up.

**Eric Storey:** What resonated for me was both of them mentioned the internalized homophobia and how that had shaped and coloured all of their life experiences. So there's that but also, as you mentioned the pairing up ... already you don't feel that you're part of mainstream society because of the homophobia. But in addition, if you're not paired, you don't have a place in society. So it's like a double whammy.

**Salima Suleman:** And I think we're even limited in our conversation when we talk about pairs. There are people who aren't in just a relationship with two people. There are people in relationships with more than two people. And I think it's about broadening how we understand relationships. Alright well, that's it for this episode of The Shared Mic. We hope you join us for our next episode.

**Eric Storey:** The Shared Mic is produced by Age Friendly Edmonton, a partnership between the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council. You can find us on Apple, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you subscribe to your favorite podcast. Please subscribe, leave a review and let us know what you think about this episode. Thanks!