[Author's note: This article was written some four months after my decloseting. Now, almost a year after the letter to my bosses, I can see herein some of the marks of the oppressor still impressed upon me: most notably the erotophobia of the piece. No longer can I say that "the use of class time to talk about personal sexuality is deplorable to me." Today I am disturbed by those who abuse class time by never talking about sexuality. I feel that as gays we have much to give up-tight straight colleagues by our being, once out of the closet, inescapably the teacher as sexual person. Still, the article remains an honest statement and is a moment detached from a continuing process of personal liberation. Any pangs herein are birth pangs.]

Last November a combination of pressures led me to revise dramatically my professional self-concepts. In a letter which I read to my students, I outlined to my administrators these pressures and knowingly, irrevocably charted new directions:

Gentlepersons:

I wish to take this opportunity to speak clearly to explain an unusual action which I have taken in the last five minutes of each of my classes today. I have told my students that I am gay, and I have tried to explain the reasons for my so saying. These reasons are very important to me, and I would like to reiterate them.

First, I can no longer tolerate the mask of having people assume that I am what I am not. I want honesty, with other people, yes, but most essentially with myself. Sexuality is a part of any person's whole personhood, hence a part of his integrity. The use of class time to talk about personal sexuality is deplorable to me; my use of the time is merely to free people from their logical misconception about my identity. My integrity, my

"Thriving Declosed in Rural Academe." 

*Editor's note: For further information, contact the Gay Academic Union, Box 480, Lenox Hill Station, New York 10021.
wholeness, demands clarity.

Second, all study for serious scholars is a passion, and all passion is in some vague way related to sexual passion. My passion for literature is definitely of one piece with all aspects of my identity. Any literature demands judgment based on human experience. I feel that my students have a right to know the potential biases of my judgments.

Third, I am involved deeply in some... important research into homosexuality... I feel that I would be intellectually dishonest if I were to use the pronouns they, them, and their when I really meant we, us, and our. I cannot be healthy if, as a scholar, I bring one level of honesty to my research and another level of honesty to my classroom.

Fourth, sexuality is only a minor part of any person's identity. When hidden behavior is discussed, it assumes major proportion through gossip and distortion. I prefer to be open so as to minimize sexuality and to hold myself publicly accountable for my behavior. I can take no responsibility for my affections, but every responsibility for the use to which I put them.

Fifth, my many gay brothers and sisters on this campus and throughout the world need the support that can come only through leadership that is strong and healthy. I am grateful to do whatever I can, and I hope that others will not have to remain afraid and lonely so long as I chose to do. I am sensitive to the fact that the timing of anyone's coming out is immensely complicated. I am grateful that I have all along had the privilege of being of some help to such persons. I have notified campus counselors... volunteering my services in any way that they may be useful. I have similarly notified my Bishop and my priest... I suspect that my main services will continue to be through articles and other scholarship.

I wish to make it very clear that this letter and the class statements which prompted it are not intended to be a radical confrontation. I am thoroughly committed to the assignment I have accepted here, and I am giving my fullest energies to the institution, which has my great loyalty and respect. I am not asking for any special treatment, only this brief opportunity to make it quite clear who I am. Most assuredly any dangers rightly or wrongly associated with a gay identity are hereby greatly
minimized. I ask only to be judged on the quality of my work, not on factors over which none of us has control.

Finally, I wish to thank all of you for making my stay here thus far one that has been immensely enjoyable and productive. I thank you for the faith that you have shown in me, and I hope through service and work to justify your trust.

Warmly and professionally,
Louie Crew, Associate Professor

This letter was never officially answered. One dean, in confidence, admired my "courage." All others continued to treat me pleasantly, and I have not been notified of being fired, as I would have had to be by the first of February, according to faculty statutes for first-year people without tenure.

It is gratifying to report that the euphoria of that first day of revision has been at least partially sustained in many of the consequences. In my classroom, I speak from a clearer, if narrower base of authority; hence my students more freely negotiate my comments as they pick and choose in the charting of their own literary judgments. For example, I now offer as an insider my critique of Somerset Maugham’s preference for heroes and anti-heroes who never share themselves openly, who never decloset, who, like Maugham himself, endure stoically, sterilely. (Cf. Noel Coward’s similar gay indictment in Song at Twilight.) Likewise, I now possess an outsider’s detachment in evaluating literary heterosexual conflicts. I no longer have to translate into my experience and ignore what is lost in translation. All of us who are gay have been living in straight families all along, and we know the truth about loveless families, about unwanted babies, about careless birth control, about a marriage license as an excuse for legalized rape, about a whole host of crimes against the human spirit in which we have not been directly involved, except often as victims. We do not have to go along with straight writers who make special pleadings for straights who are inauthentic.

As a teacher of black literature, I have often been frustrated by my black students when they tell me that they do not need to read most black literature, that a man like James Baldwin, for example, writes only to tell whites about the black experience, an experience they claim already to know all about. When I have told them that Baldwin speaks to me as a man, not as a white man, many students have said that I
muddle only from my white experience. Perhaps I do. But now I can say what I really mean, that Baldwin speaks to me as a gay brother, that I read myself more readily into a book like Go Tell It On the Mountain than I read my students into it!

The real importance of this revision of my gay identity in the classroom is not any claim to greater accuracy for my judgments, but the claim to making those judgments more negotiable and accessible as buffers for the students’ growth. Most of my students will hopefully never again invest me with the undesirable role of being spokesman and deliverer of their cultural values. Rather, my classes become vehicles of healthy suspicion, mandates that they weigh all issues and be prepared to defend their positions.

Student response is always difficult to measure. I have always enjoyed high class attendance without requiring it; yet it has risen even higher since my coming out. The first quarter this year I had several visitors almost daily, in addition to those on roll. My department chairperson, who has never specifically mentioned the letter, has told me that she is pleased with my work, specifically with the good response that she is getting from students. For my part, I know that I continue rarely to lose a pair of eyes in discussions. I know too that I like this attention more than ever now that I am not worried about their finding out about “the real me.” Also, I get enough mixed feedback to know that they are neither mesmerized nor otherwise intimidated.

Equally positive has been my continued freedom of mobility on campus. In fact, I am freer. I now fearlessly, evenrighteously, charge my colleagues—particularly librarians, historians, psychologists, but also fellow teachers of literature—with their blatant neglect of gays, not only of those in their classrooms, but also those who ought to be in their textbooks, or on their committees making decisions affecting sexual understanding, etc. For example, one historian here has written the definitive work on lynching, and yet knows nothing of the historic persecution of gays, whether by Justinian or by Hitler. Silent for thirty-six years, I am now discovering my voice, my identity, my wholeness. In fact, I am not even sure that I would still say, as I did in the original letter, that sexuality is a “minor part of a person’s identity.” As I have been asked to speak to classes in numerous other departments (including philosophy [ethics], psychology, physical education, and religion) on our campus and elsewhere, I have become aware of how major a part sexuality is for all of us in the academy. In these forums I am constantly having to counter the stereotypes that straights have
about gay people, primarily because we gays have never been allowed to be visible, or even to write the major accounts of our experience. I have had the pleasure of affirming, celebrating gay diversity. Moreover, I have been free to speak out on behalf of specific gays persecuted by the academy. One gay student dismissed in a witch hunt eight years ago, charged with being "a moral danger," is about to be readmitted because certain administrators would be quite happy if I did not get my right to review his confidential folder so that I can properly advise him. Similar memoranda throughout the bureaucratic land need to be rooted out, and all dishonorable discharges need to be reversed. Even closeted faculty here have rejoiced with twinkling eyes to see me bring the aid they were powerless to bring to this student.

Not all results have been positive. Many have been mixed, as in the case of the talented student who dropped my course in creative writing because he said I "talked about gayness too much." How does one measure "too much"? Did my teachers who were parents draw too many literary generalities from their socially acceptable experiences of sexuality? Am I really talking about sexuality merely to mention my "lover" rather than my "friend"? Maybe it is a mark of my oppression that I never questioned the rights of my straight teachers to allude openly to straight roles? Did my literary textbooks through the doctorate—which never gave a positive view to, rarely gave any view to gay experience—cheat me and my straight classmates of an experience of the world as it really is, with one out of every six of us having had homosexual experience? Am I talking "too much" when I'm the only openly gay professor most of my present students will ever have, when I give less than five minutes out of every fifty to anything directly relating to the gay experience? Clearly one student felt this much was "too much." I wonder how much my professors would have respected me had I dropped a course saying that they talked about straight identity too much; yet strangely I do respect this student. He told me to my face what he felt.

Equally mixed has become the "blessing" of being The Campus Homosexual. By the stingiest straight sociological estimate, I have at least 160 brothers and sisters on this campus of close to 2,000 souls. Their tight closet doors are a partial measure of my vulnerability. Being conspicuous is not new to me. In the past I have been highly visible as Louie the Actor, Louie the Writer, Louie the Choir Member, Louie the Seamster, Louie the Jogger. . . . Now, in the public mind these roles

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have all been subsumed under Louie the Queer. A nice queer, perhaps, but a queer nevertheless. I am often exhausted by taking on this role, by the internalized pressure to feel a credit to my race, my tribe. Still, I consciously fight to preserve, to integrate all other roles and dimensions of my identity while my colleagues and students come to terms with their own homophobia.

Homophobia is indeed the problem. One colleague shared with me the fact that he had overheard some of my students saying that they felt they would be penalized if they told me what they really felt about gay people. This colleague cautiously suggested that their fears were rational. I countered, “Would you think to lower my grade for what I think about heterosexuality?” “Of course not, but that’s different!” he exclaimed. Is it? Why? Fortunately I was able to take the matter directly to my classes and reaffirm their freedom. The game they were all playing was projection, in that, doubting their own ability to be fair to sissies, they projected their own inadequacies upon me. “How,” they rationalized, “can you be fair to us if we can’t be fair to you?”

I have had to expose similar homophobia in many academic social contacts with my students. Always a gregarious person, I noticed shortly after coming out that fewer students spoke when greeted in public, that many looked nervously about when I stopped to chat in the student center. I called this behavior to the attention of my classes so that I might explain that I really don’t like embarrassing people, that I have no desire to have my students maligned by their peers’ thinking that they have something going with the teacher, etc., but also explained that my only alternative is to go to the back of the bus. I refuse. I shall keep on being as friendly as I have always been, even if this means I must sit by those who do not want me, that I must share my oppression until there is indeed no back of the bus.

I have been very fortunate in being loved through all of this by a very great man. I have also been fortunate in having already known a good bit about my strength before I ever dared to make this move of coming out. More than ever I respect my brothers and sisters who have either come out or been forced out without such preparation. Those straights who complain about the gays still hiding, a complaint I hear daily, would better spend their energies making their own families places safe for gay members to come out in. Each person must work on her or his own timetable. To those of you still in the closet, if my experience says anything to me it is the greater awareness I have of how much we have to contribute to this culture. When we come out, we not
only start revisions for ourselves, but also for our straight brothers and sisters. If we keep our heads about us, we may yet make the world a safer and happier, healthier and more knowledgeable place in which to live.

One of my student friends who already knew, told me last November that she had heard about my “confession.” “But it wasn’t a confession,” I said; “rather a profession.” “But why in Georgia and in 1973?” she asked. “Because I live in central Georgia and in 1973; I have no other time or place in which to work out my own salvation.”