

Elyssa Pennell: Okay. So, it is November 20 and we're in Glickman Library in Portland, Maine and I am the student researcher. My name is Elyssa Pennell. E-L-Y-S-S-A P-E-N-N-E-L-L and would please say your name and spell it for me?

Marvin Ellison: Be glad to, so I'm Marvin Ellison. E-L-L-I-S-O-N and Marvin with a V. And we're off and running.

Elyssa: Yes. Okay, so you can refuse to answer any question at any time and you can end the interview at any point.

Marvin: Great. You know the teacher's trick though? You get asked a question and you answer not the question that is asked, but the question you would like to be asked.

Elyssa: Yes, also the politician's trick too.

Marvin: Exactly.

Elyssa: Yes.

Marvin: So be forewarned.

Elyssa: Okay.

Marvin: Keep me on track.

Elyssa: Alright so do you want to start with where you were born? How you grew up? At all?

Marvin: Sure, I'd be glad to.

Elyssa: Okay.

Marvin: So I grew up in the South, I grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee and I grew up as a person of faith in the Presbyterian Church US, which is the Southern branch of the Presbyterian Church and went to Davidson College in North Carolina for my undergraduate work and then after graduating from college I moved to Chicago for graduate school and then to New York for

another a graduate program and eventually came to Maine and finished my doctoral program and was given a job in Bangor theological seminary.

Elyssa: When you, when you realized that you were gay, did your religion and identity ever conflict? Because you mentioned that you grew up in a very religious background and you stayed in the same church? Am I right?

Marvin: Well my story may differ from at least some other gay men because probably on the Kinsey scale I'm about more middle range and I was first married and was married for 13 years.

Elyssa: To a woman?

Marvin: To a woman. Yes thank you. That's right we now live in a time where that's a good question to ask. Was that a man or a woman? At the time it was a woman and we were married for 13 years and I have a daughter from that marriage. Sadly, my former wife died a couple years after we were divorced and after that marriage ended I have had two long term relationships with men and I am currently partnered with Frank Brooks who has also been interviewed in this series and he and I have been together 24 years. So about the question about the conflict between religion and sexuality?

Elyssa: Yeah did you ever face that or was that..

Marvin: You know, that's a good question it wasn't ever a personal struggle for me and I think part of that came from the fact that I was a full adult by the time I came out which was in my mid to late... Let me think about that how old was I? So that was 83 so I was... help me out 30 something 36, 37 and it surprised me that I found myself in a same sex relationship which I loved, I really enjoyed but it surprised me. It's not what I had expected was going to be my trajectory, but by the time I was in my early adult years I had been in college and I had much more both understanding and critique of both gender and sexuality systems as well as race and I

studied religion, but was also trained as a social ethicist, so I had I think a more progressive understanding and then sort of I had to then... I had acknowledge that, oh this isn't something I only understand for others this is something now I understand about myself. So, it really wasn't disruptive to me personally or religiously because the faith communities that I have been part of were progressive and open. I did say to my first same sex partner because I have left a difficult marriage and I said to Rob I can't believe I'm in another relationship, you know having a difficult marriage and feeling pretty burned and was not inclined to ever match up with anyone again and he laughed and said "that's a surprise no doubt but while you're thinking about that also think about the fact that it's with a man" I said yes you're right I have to deal with that too. For me the issue coming out was a struggle primarily because at that moment I had become a single parent, my former wife had died, so I had custody and was raising a young child and I didn't know because I was the first out gay member of a theological faculty whether that would have caused me any grief, whether I was in jeopardy for my job and that was a scary part of coming out publicly and understanding that because this was in the 80s before Maine's non discrimination laws had been approved and so forth so I didn't know what to expect. What I discovered happily both colleagues and the school administration were very supportive and they liked having me on the board as the gay faculty member that they could sort of brag about. I did have a picketer at the seminary.

Elyssa: What is that?

Marvin: It's a protestor, it's a guy who walked the perimeter of the theological school in Bangor holding a sign that read "Can a gay man teach Christian ethics?" and my colleagues would kid me and say sometimes he does an okay job, other days maybe not and they would just laugh, but no I have been very fortunate for me personally I have never had serious harassment or

difficulties either because I was gay or because I was out and gay, more than sort of the low grade hassles you get from folks on the street who encounter you and for some reason get ruffled, but no I have been fortunate.

Elyssa: Do you think it was helpful for your students to know that there was a gay teacher?

Marvin: Absolutely! Absolutely and it was interesting a member of that seminary faculty... it was a small faculty of about ten. There were over the years faculty coming and going. Two other faculty members who identified as LGBTQ and for a variety of reasons neither one of them either chose or were able to be out, it was kind of a closed secret people knew but they hadn't given permission to talk publicly about it and one of those faculty members said to me that they thought they could press students on issues of sexuality and social justice by being closeted because students wouldn't feel that they might be offending or somehow being inappropriate with a queer faculty member. I heard that and that wasn't for me persuasive in part for me as a teacher. Elyssa, I think you might appreciate this. So much of what I was hoping I was doing as an educator in the classroom was encouraging students to come into their strengths, to come into their power, find their voice and it became very clear to me very quickly that if I didn't model that same willingness to take risks and to be more fully myself and let students know not everything about me, not everything about me, but important things like that I identify as a gay man. I felt like I was contradicting my own commitments as a teacher, so it was neater it was simpler to simply be out and if students had problems then we could deal with those but that always as a teacher felt like a gift that I was at an institution where I could be out and that also meant that many students either themselves struggling or with family members struggling who were struggling around these issues often felt that they could come to me because they knew I would understand.

Elyssa: Did you feel like that led to having a more open classroom? Like having more open discussions in your classroom?

Marvin: I would think so, I mean I didn't do it closeted it so I don't really know.

Elyssa: Yeah, yeah.

Marvin: But my sense is yes, my sense is yes and it was interesting I had a student a couple years ago before I retired who called up, he was living in the Midwest at the time and Dennis called me that he was going to be back in Maine and would be visiting family and he was going to be here long enough that he had some time to meet and do other things. So he asked if he could come by and see me. Well I think I was the last remaining member of the faculty still on board that he knew when he was a student, so with a little reluctance I said sure Dennis come by and see me, he was not a student I particularly liked. Well Dennis said to me before he hung up "I need you to know I have been going through a lot of change" and I said well haven't we all? and he said "yes he said but I now live in the world as Denise" and I said oh great that's really interesting well come by and we'll talk about it. She came and we had a great conversation and I invited her to come to a class I was actually teaching that semester on sexuality and sexual ethics to talk about trans issues and everything. It was a wonderful class seminar with her there and after we finished and we were back in my office, I said Denise I have to be honest when you were a student those days when you were Dennis I didn't really like you very much, you were kind of a gruff withdrawn not very pleasant person and she laughed and said "I didn't like me very much either" she said "I am much more who I am now as an out transperson". So, I sort of tell you that story because I think for me the experience of being out and able to be out as a gay man who's an educator and an ordained minister has been liberating and has been empowering. It has meant that some people won't talk to me but...

Elyssa: Because you are a minister or because you are gay?

Marvin: Exactly! I am not sure, but sometimes being religiously affiliated can be off-putting to people for whom otherwise you know being gay would not be the issue. You're exactly right. You're exactly right. Yeah.

Elyssa: In the gay community did you face any issues with being religious or...

Marvin: Yeah that's really good. One of the things that Bangor seminary opened up a program here in Portland in 1991 and I moved from Bangor to Portland and lived in residence in Portland and taught on both campuses. One of the organizations that I became active with in Southern Maine was the Matlovich Society. Have you run across that in any of the LGBTQ archives?

Elyssa: Yes I have, but do want to explain it a little bit?

Marvin: So the Matlovich Society was founded by several people including Lois Reckitt who is a lesbian, for many years the director of family crisis services in South Portland the domestic abuse project in Cumberland County. Lois has retired, but is now in the Maine Legislature and she's a firebrand, she's always been a rowdy. She and some others founded the Matlovich Society in honor of a young gay man who was in the military and died young, may even have been out of suicide, I am vague now on that connection, but in honor of him they formed the Matlovich Society, which was a public forum for way back when that was for gay men and lesbian women because we didn't do BIs or Trans much less non-conforming or genderqueer. You know we were really pretty binary in those days and I often not often, but maybe once every year every other year would give a talk and or would be on a panel talking about religion and sexuality and justice issues and one of the things I remembered saying to that group once is please don't hear from my story that the church, synagogue, mosque, or whatever faith community is necessarily safe for you to be connected to with. The fact that I am connected works for me but continue to

be working with a healthy suspicion about organized religion because it has been such a source of pain and struggle for so many, so while there are many of us who are LGBTQ in religious groups all those faith communities are going through a process of change and struggle some are further down the road than others including the congregation that I belong to in South Portland called its first senior woman pastor in the history of the church and she's also an out lesbian who's married and has two children. If you live long enough. So my career was in theological education in religion issues of spirituality and society and social justice and I have been very much a part of a more progressive social justice focused spirituality.

Elyssa: One thing I wanted to ask you about is you founded the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination correct?

Marvin: I did

Elyssa: Did you want to talk more about that like when it was founded and about what you guys did?

Marvin: When I first moved to Maine. Excuse me when I first moved to Portland. I had been in Maine since 81 came to Portland in 91. Soon after that Portland had the Equal Protection Portland referendum question, which was I mean to think how many years ago was that 25 or so years ago, Portland as a city made steps to protect LGBT folks and well again it was probably just the L and the G folks. Probably said sexual orientation that there would be a commitment not to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation around employment housing public accommodations and credit and that piece of city policy went out to voters in the early 90s. 92? 93?

Elyssa: I am not sure, so it was around 92 or 93?

Marvin: Yeah, I am not always great about dates, but I join that effort not only because that non discrimination policy would be good for me and my friends and for the community, but also because some of the most outspoken opponents of that non-discrimination policy were conservative Christian fundamentalists pastors, so I felt that it was really important that people of faith and clergy who supported non-discrimination step up and be heard from and so after that Portland experience, then there was a statewide effort to pass a non-discrimination bill and we had that series of referendum battles, so we formed the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination to have a statewide interfaith network of progressive faith leaders who would be involved publicly in education and Advocacy for LGBTQ rights. Wonderful network and you know over the years we did a variety of things, we had educational forums, we published a four page newspaper sized educational pamphlet educating voters on the issues. We did work in our own congregations and so forth and it was just very important to many of us both those of us who identified as people of faith and faith leaders, but those who don't very important not to turn over religion as exclusively the possession of the most reactionary voices; the Jerry Falwells and in 2017 Judge Roy Moore and all of the crazies that say "if you're for God, you can't be for Gays" and we just said basically to hell with that. True spirituality embraces LGBT right and respects the dignity of all persons.

Elyssa: What do you think was the greatest achievement of that organization? If you could pinpoint it to one great achievement?

Marvin: Oh that's a great, well we eventually won! I think the greatest achievement I would say was in doing that work we ended up building a vibrant progressive justice focused spiritual movement in Maine that has continued work. I know I was out of town the end of last week, but I know people of faith showed up yesterday for the Trans Day of Remembrance. I know that



these progressive leaders have continued to formally and informally to work on everything from gun control to reproductive rights. Some of us now that the non-discrimination policies have been secured and marriage equality, went on to work on reproductive justice and some of us have organized a volunteer chaplaincy service at Planned Parenthood for example.

Elyssa: And you were on the board am I correct?

Marvin: Yes and I think a similar organization, the Maine council of Churches, has also been a good advocate on many justice issues including economic justice and environmental issues. The thing that RCAD did that I am very proud about is that we were an interfaith group, so we had Protestants, Catholics and Jews. If we had more Buddhist and Muslim colleagues we would have wanted to draw them in too. But we formed RCAD initially for two reasons, the Maine Council of Churches struggled with whether it could support non-discrimination in Maine because the Catholic Diocese was a member of the Maine Council and they agreed to operate on the basis of consensus, so the Catholic Diocese for a long time dragged its feet about supporting non-discrimination policies. It got over itself, it now supports LGBTQ rights. They don't do marriage. But they do believe it's wrong to either beat up queers or deny us jobs and so forth, but initially because the Catholic Diocese was in the Maine Council of Churches the Maine Council of Churches was forced to remain silent. Well that just put my hair on fire, so we said well then we'll just form our own organization, so that's why we did Religious Coalition Against Discrimination and while we were at it we said we want to include others out of other religious traditions. Let's not just be a bunch of christians running around, so and the rabbis in this state, I don't know if you know the rabbis?

Elyssa: No

Marvin: They are fabulous. Oh my goodness they are absolutely fabulous. That's one of the best kept secrets I think if you may not have had an occasion to work with any of the congregations or faith leaders that are more progressive they are a fabulous group of troublemakers they are really just wonderful, yeah so.

Elyssa: So you said you did have Catholics on your group?

Marvin: We did, not priests.

Elyssa: Oh, Okay.

Marvin: And when we came to marriage Equality we had lay Catholics who worked for us.

Elyssa: What does that mean?

Marvin: That means men and women who are catholic, but are not ordained as priests.

Elyssa: Oh, okay.

Marvin: They are not, but Elyssa you have to understand one of the members of the Religious Coalition a catholic woman organized Catholics for Marriage Equality which was a group of Catholics that educated and advocated for marriage equality as Catholics and that was the message. We are taking this stance not in spite of being catholic but because we are catholic because the best values of the catholic tradition are about justice, fairness, and human dignity, human rights and so we think this is absolutely the right thing to do is to support marriage equality for same sex couples. Anne Underwood is the catholic woman who organized Catholics for Marriage Equality. Well her local priest one day said to Anne “the bishop has required every priest at every parish to do an educational program on marriage equality and he has a curriculum but I don't think the curriculum is very good, Anne we want you to design and lead the educational series in the parish” and Anne went “I don't want to, the bishop oh the bishop is Against I don't want to do the educational series” the priest said “Anne did you hear me I want

you to do the educational series” and Anne stopped and she said “oh I get it”. So many priests who are gay friendly couldn't publicly stand against the bishop, but they did all sorts of subversive things like introducing a positive curriculum in their parishes. The same priest said to Anne the bishop has prepared a videotape and required us all to show it in our parishes and Anne said “well where is it” and he said “oh it's stuck somewhere in the back hall it's running right now but I don't think anyone is going to see it”. So the priest did what he was told, he showed the video he just showed it in a dark hall where no one would see it. So lots of people do the best they can under often very challenging circumstances, but the thing to understand in every religious tradition is these issues are being worked on and there are wonderful courageous people who are advocates and are doing good justice work even if we don't know about them publicly, that's very exciting to me.

Elyssa: I did not know that.

Marvin: It really is wonderful. It is wonderful.

Elyssa: Yeah.

Marvin: Yeah.

Elyssa: Another thing I was curious about is you said that you were on the Presbyterian Church the special committee to study human sexuality?

Marvin: Boy, you have read your materials.

Elyssa: I have, I'm like super interested in this so how did you first come to be a part of this committee?

Marvin: You are asking such a good question, a quick background the Presbyterian church split into two denominations over slavery in the nineteenth century there was the northern Presbyterian church that opposed slavery, there was the southern Presbyterian church that

supported slavery. But that single denomination went through such a schism in the nineteenth century when the country itself was divided over the institution of slavery. One hundred years later it was 1983 those two Presbyterian churches reunited everyone agreed yup slavery was a mistake. It just took us a hundred years to sort of all agree and figure out how to come back together okay, so the new denomination is formed. What was the first issue they decided as a new denomination they needed to study?

Elyssa: Sexuality?

Marvin: Human sexuality. I said this church has a death wish they cannot avoid issues that split communities apart, so they formed a committee to prepare for the denomination a study on human sexuality and it took them about a year and a half to appoint the group of about eighteen of us. Well your question of how did I get on it? It's such a good question because I got a phone call.

Elyssa: What year was this again?

Marvin: This was in 1988.

Elyssa: Okay, thank you.

Marvin: I got a call from Isabelle Rogers the moderator of the Presbyterian Church asking me if I would become a member of the task force and I said Izzy I knew her I said Izzy this is wonderful I think this is such a great idea I'd be glad to join. Later on I discovered that my doctoral advisor Beverly Harrison, who was on the faculty advisor at Union Theological Seminary in New York and was a feminist theologian, an ethicist, and also a Presbyterian. When Isabelle Rogers had called her in desperation saying Bev no one will join this task force. We can't get any theologians, we can't get any ethicists. Everyone is turning us down. Because they were so scared of the issue and they knew it would just be full of conflict and trouble Izzy, Bev told me

this story later Izzy called her and said “Bev do you know anybody anybody who might be on the committee and Bev said “well I do have a former doctoral student he's just been teaching a couple years he's not very well established he's good but he doesn't have a name or anything so Bev said why don't you try Marvin Ellison” so that's how I got the invitation. And it was a lot of conflict. I wrote the report which was titled *Keeping Body and Soul Together Sexuality Spirituality and Social Justice* and I wrote a very progressive very feminist very LGBT friendly study document that was informed by liberation theologies and all this work and called the church to task for its sex negativity and its oppressiveness to women and people of color and LGBT folks and you name it and said the church needs to do a deep repentance of its antiquated thinking and change its understanding and its practice. When the draft came before the task force of what I had written the chair of the task force said this won't fly we're going to call in a ghost writer and they called in someone else to write a very bland very meek report and when the task force met the following time and they had the two versions the majority on the task force said we like Marvin's it's much more passionate it's much more what we actually believe and we want to challenge the church to not just take a baby step, but to really stretch to move forward so they went with my version and when it was reviewed and voted on at the national church assembly it was overwhelmingly rejected 320 something to 46 it was a slaughter. It was the report they loved to hate and I have said there are worse things than being banned in Baltimore because Baltimore was the city the church was meeting in for their national meeting because the report itself became a runaway best seller. It sold about 400,000 copies, it was reviewed by the New York Times and Time magazine and Newsweek and the PBS news hour and it sold internationally because it was the first sex positive justice focused Christian statement that any denomination had produced that had that much publicity, so I was nobody I was fresh out of the doctoral

program just a taught of a couple of years and when I went to my first meeting of the American Academy of Religion, which is the national organization for people who teach in religious studies, you know when you go to conferences everyone wears a name tag around your neck and everyone is always looking down at your chest to read your name, so I remember going to my first American Academy of Religion meeting and I stepped on the elevator at the conference hotel to go to a session and as I stepped on to elevator someone in the back of the elevator there was this audible gasp and clearly he had read my name and I said to myself I have a reputation. I'm not so sure I want a reputation of being a scary person but clearly for some people my name causes them anxiety.

Elyssa: Why do you think that was?

Marvin: Because I think, because I think many people expect and often rely on religion to maintain the status quo and I think for so many centuries in the Christian tradition one of the ways many people drew a distinction between good sex and bad sex was using the heterosexual, homosexual binary and what our report did was to say it's not that simple we need a single standard a single moral standard across the boards for those who are straight for those who are not for those who are married for those who are single for men and for women we need a single standard for guidance about our relationships our lives together and what we said was the standard for everybody should be what we call justice love that every relationship all our connections with each other should exhibit our best sense of what is generally loving and respectful and also be fair, be just, be based on mutual care and mutual sharing resources and so forth and we said that if everyone held themselves to that standard only do what is loving and just we would have a lot to change and I think that standard would raise the ethical bar because we would teach each other not settle for less than we deserve which is to be treated really well to

be treated with great dignity and care and respect in all of our exchanges, so instead of because part of what we realized instead of contrary to some that says the Christian tradition has its act together about gender and sexuality and marriage it's just these gay issues and so forth and sexual activity among the non married that we have to worry about and what we said was no actually lots of very immoral horrendous things happen in heterosexual marriage like partner abuse and partner abandonment and that the form of the relationship doesn't tell you its character. You have got to look not at the form straight or married or single you have go to look at the substance not who people are or their marital status but rather how they act with each other. It doesn't seem like rocket science to me that sort of sounds like the gospel love god and your neighbor and thy self. It really was sort of simple, but it just blew things up out of the water. What's really interesting to me is having now been now more than 25 years later the Presbyterian church has so many other especially the Maine line Presbyterian churches have moved on these issues and so no 25 years later that report is not the outlier. That report is where people have moved to.

Elyssa: Why do you think it was controversial because you were moving away from marriage and the status quo?

Marvin: Bingo.

Elyssa: Yeah, did that threaten the church?

Marvin: Oh they sent the national church meeting that rejected the report issued a letter a pastoral letter that was sent to all Presbyterian congregations saying we have rejected this silly report, we hold to the authority of scripture and the standard is sex only in marriage, celibacy for everyone else and what I have come to appreciate in part because of that work around sexual ethics in the Presbyterian church but more recently around the public campaigns around marriage

equality I understand that the religious right doesn't care for me and other LGBTQ people they don't like us and part of that is their religious conviction that god created everyone to be heterosexual and if you're not it's because something has gone wrong typically sin or they might soften that a bit and say you weren't properly socialized or you had an absent father or an overbearing mother, but you're a deviant, you're a defect, normal is exclusively heterosexual and so I have long understood that the religious right rejects all non heterosexuality, but what I have come to appreciate that their primary project is not only to exclude some LGBTQ folks from marriage, the project from the religious right is not only to keep some out, their biggest concern is to keep the heterosexual majority pinned in to a very traditional and patriarchal family structure and what they understand and they are not fools they are right about this what scares them to death is that if you begin to dismantle the patriarchal marriage and family paradigm and you teach men and women to be coequals of mutual worth and respect and power, you break down not only the family hierarchy, but you threaten the social hierarchy and their great fear as living in the world as genuine equals not only men and women but white with people of color and rich and poor and Americans and everyone else and so their anxiety is to by sending a message this is what happens if you're LGBTQ, you're going to be subject to violence in fact killing violence if we can get away with it this is what happens if you deviate from patriarchal norms but their audience they don't want to just scare the likes of me they want to scare heterosexuals not to step out of line. Their great fear is that the heterosexual majority is going to start acting queer and that's exactly what Michal Bronski a gay theorist wrote about in a book called the pleasure principle what's driving the right including the religious right berserk is the number of heterosexual folks who are living and acting as though they are queer. They're living together rather than getting married and they are experimenting with equal partnership stepping



beyond traditional gender roles. Bronski said is very queer. Their involved with their biological families, but they've come to depend on their non-biological families, their tribes, their friends of connection, very queer so what Bronski says is pay attention it's not just the hostility towards the LGBTQ community that you have to watch for. Their real agenda is to push back people into if not accepting traditional gender roles and patriarchal patterns at least to pass as if they are conforming to those expectations

Elyssa: I want to go back to the report for a second.

Marvin: Does that make sense?

Elyssa: It does yes, I want to go back to the report for a second you spent three years?

Marvin: You really have studied this.

Elyssa: And then it was rejected how did that make you feel?

Marvin: Well frankly I wasn't surprised because we got such... I have a thick pile of letters a few of them very positive, but many of them not positive at all. One of my favorites was a cranky old man who said the denomination spent hundred of thousands of dollars over three years supporting your task force you need to pay that money back. Well I thought if I put five dollars a week in savings, how many years would it take me to pay back my share of the bill? One of the things I did was I said to John Kerry the wonderful chair of that task force who was so courageous and he stood for us and by us and he got a lot of abuse I said to John after the church rejected the report. I said John you may not appreciate this but when I wrote the report I moderated my views so they would be acceptable, but now I can write a book under my own name that more or less puts out the full notion of what I believe I shortly after wrote a book called erotic justice which extended the work I had done for the Presbyterians. One of things that John and I had had a disagreement about is around fidelity. I said John I love fidelity I think we

should be faithful and principled in all of our relationships but I think that won't always translate into being sexually exclusive there are some people that honor fidelity in their intimate relationships by only having the one partner and only the one sexual partner and I think that a wonderful way to live out that commitment for fidelity, but I think there are other ways people honor that commitment to be faithful but not sexually exclusive well he just his eyes sort of rolled in his head and I said I know you and I have a principle disagreement so I have written about that and one of things I have written about for example was on the struggle about not only polyamorous relationships but I have written about couples where one partner is living with Alzheimer's and the caregiving spouse may or may not but under some circumstance develop an intimate relationship with another person because they are in that awkward bind of both being married and not married at the same time because their marriage partner is increasingly not present to them mentally, emotionally, spiritually physically and there was a couple a man in Freeport whose obituary was in the Portland press herald not so many years ago and when he died talked about how he regularly up until his death visited his wife at a nursing home who lived with dementia and he with his partner in the family home and his whole community loved them and they knew so I said to John not every *Ménage à trois* not every threesome is ethical it's not the form. I have to know more. Are those three people treating each other in a loving and just way or are they being jerks. I can't tell if it's a plural relationship, if it's ethically good or not and if it's just a marriage between two people a dyad just because it's a dyad doesn't mean it's ethically sound people do terrible things to each other as marriage partners you have to tell me more.

Elyssa: So does it just come down to whether the relationship is love and just is that what you were saying?

Marvin: Loving and just.

Elyssa: Loving and just no matter what form it takes?

Marvin: So now wait a minute. You know there have been these horrendous conversations and you know we're going to have more because of Roy Moore about pedophilia and intergenerational sex and I have to say, well no you have to be careful because being just means you also have to be very mindful of power dynamics and that you're not taking advantage of people who are vulnerable. So yes I want it to be loving and just but just isn't sort of just well it's fair I like it. You have to sort of pay attention to does it have real justice? Is it equitable?

Elyssa: So there needs to be equality between all parties?

Marvin: So for myself I think that's really demanding. That's not an easy ethic but anyway so..

Elyssa: Do you want to talk about your political activism and organizing because I know you have a lot of different things. I want to know more about planned parenthood like what got you to get involved with them? And there was also is the Maine Interfaith Council for..

Marvin: Reproductive choices.

Elyssa: Yeah, so tell me more about those.

Marvin: Yeah and you know I think many of us in the LGBTQ communities work not only on LGBTQ issues many of us work on a range of justice issues because we care about justice for ourselves and for other people so and for another reason we need to pay back our debt to many non-LGBT folks who stepped up to help us around a variety of issues, so I really work politically out of the sense that we're in the same boat. We need to be in this together and I think doing LGBTQ justice work is doing anti-racism work and it's doing eco justice work and economic justice and you got to do it all and strategically you got to focus. I as an educator did some educational work for both planned parenthood and family planning and then in the early nineties

around 90 or 91. There was a referendum battle in Maine over abortion specifically late term abortion because conservatives wanted to change Maine's public policy which is pretty good, it allows women to elect abortion up until the third trimester and then it prohibits abortion except to save a woman's life or her health and health has been interpreted broadly. Her psychological health, her emotional health. So Maine has had very progressive abortion laws and the Conservatives wanted to change Maine's law to only allow late term abortions to save a woman's life and many of us thought no the present law is good enough and again it was primarily very conservative religious leaders who were the proponents of the change and it meant those of us in the religious community who differed needed to step up and so I helped to organize this Maine Interfaith Council for Reproductive Choices to do similar work around reproductive justice issues as we had around gay rights. And so if you had been in a MICRC Maine Interfaith Council of Reproductive justice meeting you might have thought when in walked in the room that you were in a Religious Coalition Against Discrimination meeting RCAD because it was the same cast of characters you know same people just different issue and again there were Catholics who opposed that referendum to ban abortion in Maine and I remember after the referendum was defeated which was good someone wrote a letter to the editor to the Portland Press Herald complaining that the bill had not passed because Catholics had unfortunately not gone to the polls to vote because if they had surely the vote would have passed and after that letter a whole series of other letters came in from readers who identified themselves as Catholics saying "Oh no we voted we just voted against the bill because as Catholics we thought it was a bad bill" so again it wasn't...you really have to be careful not to make assumptions of how people are going to vote or work on issues depending upon any identity including their religious identity and many many Catholics... Catholics were the group,

the religious group that changed most dramatically on marriage equality and were some of the fiercest defenders of marriage equality. So I worked on the reproductive justice issues and when I was asked to do that work, to organize for the opposition to the abortion ban I said to Joann who headed up the full campaign. I said Joann she and I knew each other for many years. I'm glad to do this work but I just need to make sure I'm not going to cause trouble for the campaign because I am known as a gay activist and I don't want to set back the work on reproductive justice if my being visible in the campaign with faith leaders if that's going to give people an easy way to just sort of tune out and reject what we're trying to do and she said "It's all one struggle we're delighted come on" so that for me was a very important moment and recognition of the solidarity across differences but you know I think it also speaks to how there have been moments even in our recent history where not even our allies wanted to be publicly associated with us we were too out there too flaunting too which isn't about being whatever the exaggeration of flaunting is about being too proud and happy you know I think many conservatives put up with gay people as long as we're missable and self-effacing and sad I think when we're happy and proud and enjoying life and feeling good it really pisses them off.

Elyssa: Because it challenges their norm again.

Marvin: Yup, is this going the way, is the helpful during the interview or do I need to change the way I am responding? You have good questions.

Elyssa: No, no no you're great.

Marvin: Okay, I just want to check.

Elyssa: What else? Do you want to... I did have a question about your education. I know you studied religion like throughout your educational career, but did you ever think about studying something else? Like was religion always your...

Marvin: I thought originally in college I was going to be a Classics major, that would have earned my fortune. I was going to study Greek and Latin in part because I had Latin in high school and I loved it and I liked history and I had a great grandfather who taught classics back at the turn of the century in the 1900s and so I thought about being a Classics major but I started taking courses in religion and I was in college in the late 1960s which was a time of a lot of social ferment and a lot of change on college campuses the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Civil Rights movement the beginning of the Feminist movement and so forth, the religious studies program that I was in had some really go faculty but I began to study especially in bible courses the prophetic tradition of Judaism and Christianity which is very critical of the status quo and very energized around calling the community to do justice especially for the most marginalized and that just resonated very deeply for me. You know looking back I sort have thought about my own biography autobiography and I sort have thought how did I come out of a conservative white Christian family in Knoxville, Tennessee. That wasn't necessarily what anyone in my family intended. What I realized is I grew up in a segregated community under Jim Crow segregation an all white congregation and Sunday in and Sunday out I heard the Bible read and the gospel preached and I think I heard a message that no one intended me to hear but it was all about freedom and liberation and justice and compassion and that message I heard even though that's not what was spoken necessarily and that has taken me great comfort over the years to think that as teacher in the classroom, it may be the words I say that students hear and take away, but I don't really control that it's a process you know the spirit moves where the spirit moves I'm hoping no matter what I do or say in the classroom students hear a more radical liberating message than they were prepared for and maybe I had a little bit to do with it, but it's been one of the small proofs for the existence of God. The United Church of Christ which I belong to now

their slogan is “God is still speaking” which means his spirit continues to move, new challenges new perspectives new opportunities break in so put on your seatbelt be prepared

Elyssa: So when you were hearing that message, do you think that was God trying to show you a different path than what you were on?

Marvin: Well, that’s sort of high language to say that God was telling me, I have to be a little more modest, I’m not sure God singled me out but yeah I heard something and a lot of young people were hearing something in the late 60s. Some of us were religious, came out of religious communities stayed affiliated many of us didn’t but many of us heard a call for renewal and transformation and social change that was very life giving very challenging, but also very life giving. For me that has not only been joining a broad social change movement, it has also been the way I have experienced my deepest spirituality.

Elyssa: Explain that a little more.

Marvin: Well these days I think many of us who are socially progressive women's issues racism ecology and of course LGBTQ. I think many of us that are progressive on those social issues and understand that at the heart of our spirituality is a call to justice. I think many of us who are energized by that spirituality of justice and love find ourselves making easy connections with progressive those of us who Protestant Christians white Catholics who are progressive progressive Buddhists progressive Muslims progressive Wiccan progressive non religious people than we do with our conservative counterparts. I realize my calling is not to educate and help change Christian fundamentalists I don't have that gift they Drive me crazy God loves them I can't so I'm letting God love them I don't want to kill them but I don't really want much to do with them and I want them to be quiet some people have the gift to work with them that's not my gift, my gift if I have a gift is to make connections to mobilize progressive and potentially

progressive people of faith and so part of what I've tried to do is say to my more timid colleagues, it's okay step out step up. One of the things that many surveys show is that faith leaders across the political spectrum are more progressive on many of these issues than you would ever imagine, but many are silent because they are fearful of causing conflict and losing their jobs. And so part of what I've tried to do is to encourage my silent friends and colleagues to just take the next step move out a little bit and be a little more public with your beliefs and to give them support to do that. And sometimes that works not always but often times that works because my model of history what moves history what causes history to change are broad based social movements.

Elyssa: What helped you to like be open?

Marvin: God knows, God knows

Elyssa: Did you have support like you are trying to support your colleagues or?

Marvin: Such a good question. So alright my mother wrote in my baby book one of the first entries in my baby book. She wrote willful, stubborn, bullheaded and I think for good and for I'll I have had a passion for justice. Another thing my parents have said over the years is I nearly wore them out by asking why? I was one of those people that just didn't accept things as they were. Well why? We don't have any black people in our church. Why? It didn't make any sense to me. Why not? Women should stay a home and raise babies not have careers. Why? This just didn't make sense to me. No, I don't why? I think I have been blessed with being discontent I just I have a good life I am a happy person I have a wonderful relationship and friends and I have much that I feel very grateful for but yet at my core I experience a discontent. The way the world is, is not the way it should be. And why do I have that? I have no clue that's just the way I have



been in the world. And I have had a few people along the way who liked that in me a lot of people didn't.

Elyssa: They saw it as a threat?

Marvin: Yeah, let's not talk about that you know let's just be nice but I have loved. I think it was Teddy Roosevelt's niece Alice Roosevelt Longworth, lived in Washington, D.C and was a well known matron and hostess and she had a needle pointed pillow in her parlor in Washington and it said "If you don't have anything nice to say, come sit by me" and that's sort of me you know?

Elyssa: So we have like ten minutes left is there anything that you really wanted to discuss that we haven't discussed?

Marvin: You've asked really good questions. I tell you one small thing that I would add on to this. You know the thing that I would say I was raised Presbyterian and the Presbyterian Christian tradition was shaped by a Protestant reformer in the 16th century named John Calvin who was rather stern and believed in doing good but he also believed in the importance of being responsible person and doing your duty so Presbyterians can be kind of stodgy and cranky and yeah stern so I'm enough of a Calvinist that if I go to a party and I'm having a good time something will go off in my head saying "be careful, you're having fun, shouldn't you be doing something hard and difficult aren't you supposed to be doing your duty, not just having pleasure so I have had to struggle as a Presbyterian and a Calvinist to understand the goodness of pleasure and joy and one of the big surprises and it is a spiritual blessing in my life is doing this justice work and building a more hospitable inclusive community is not just doing the right thing and it's not just being a responsible person and it's not just doing your duty as a good citizen as a good person it's also a source of amazing joy there is so much fun doing this justice work. Not everything is fun but I have experience such camaraderie and laughter and delight and pleasure

and joy of working with other people to pass marriage equality I mean it was hard work and people did amazing things but it was also a delight this justice work is where I have felt fully alive and I think that's the spiritual project. How do you live your life fully alive?

Elyssa: Do you think that's your duty?

Marvin: Well yes, you've caught me I think you're probably right as a Calvinist I have to think about it as my duty, but the reality is it's really a joy. It's really fun. But yeah it's probably, I probably have to calm myself down and say it's okay, you can really have this much fun because you're also doing your duty. Yeah probably

Elyssa: So you can't, your duty cannot be fun, like there cannot be joy?

Marvin: Yeah, no I think so but I'm having to work on that. I know you know that's just... you know when you have stuff in your life and you say Oh my gosh where does that come from?

Who's tapes are running in my head? Often I have to go back and be like wait that's being Presbyterian that's John Calvin. When I was on the Presbyterian task force on human sexuality and wrote the report and it got a lot of publicity and either Time or News Week Magazine titles its article about the report with the title "Roll Over John Calvin".

Elyssa: Oh, did that shock you?

Marvin: Well it tickled me, it was like yeah he does need to roll over and sort of get out of here because there's much of the Christian tradition, I value, but one of the places it has been dead wrong and has caused such harm such injustice so much oppression has been around women has been around sex has been around body has been around pleasure and so the Christian tradition in particular, other traditions as have had to go through and are still going through a renewal of their understanding of these issues. You know Christian tradition is 2,000 years old. This renewal work is really at most less than a century. It has really been propelled by second wave

feminism and the LGBTQ movements so reversing the legacy of sex negativity and misogyny and homophobia in the Christian Tradition, that's not going to come quickly we're making some gains, but there's horrendous backlash and you know it's painful for me that when many many people hear the word Christian, or hear the word church they think anti-sex and a lot of other stuff and lot of my colleagues and friends have left the church because it's been a source of oppression. For me and for some others, we have chosen to stay in the church and the religious tradition in order to challenge it and change it. So which is the better choice? I think neither, both, I think both. I think it is with great integrity that people say I am not going to stay and get beaten up anymore and for my health and sanity I'm leaving, and I'm leaving the church, but I'm not leaving my spiritual commitments and values and that has great integrity others of us who have stayed in have struggled with whether we're being used to make the church look better than it is. I don't worry about that too much because.. but when I joined the congregation as a member in South Portland, the senior minister at the time said "why are you joining this congregation"? 'Cause I told him that I had about a fifteen year dry spell and I stayed away entirely from church, I had just maxed out and I'm sure part of that is from the defeat of the Presbyterian study and you know you can only get beaten up so much and then you need to take a break and so for about fifteen years I kept my distance but I had great respect for John and that congregation, they were really open and affirming and did other good things and I said to John I am willing to join this congregation because when I walk into the church building I don't have to brace my back. I don't feel like I am going to get zapped or be treated as an alien and how did that happen? Because people did a lot of work and they changed they were pushed and they were willing to be pushed. I think many people who are not LGBTQ are attracted to congregations that are welcoming of

LGBTQ folks because they know if that is a place that welcomes LGBTQ folks that is a place that does its work and are probably decent people that you'd want to hang out with,

Elyssa: What made you go back to church after fifteen years?

Marvin: I miss the community. And people ask me won't you come back? And I just wasn't ready and somebody who was a teacher and ordained I would often be called to preach or to do an educational forum and I wouldn't do that. I just couldn't do Sunday in and and Sunday out sitting in the pew. I wasn't willing to be the vulnerable and I had worked with John McCall who's wife Andrea McCall both now retired, John was the senior minister at the United Church of Christ Congregation in South Portland his spouse Andrea McCall worked here for Student Life and was the campus Interfaith minister at USM fabulous people and we were friends and we worked on the LGBT issues and we worked on the reproductive justice issues, we worked on the poverty issues, all sorts of things and I just liked John and Andrea so much so I don't what allowed me to do it but I think maybe a Christmas or an Easter I sort of snuck in there was going to be a big crowd and no one would notice me and I think I just barely put my toe in and John or Andrea saw me and they just gently said we're so glad to see you. They didn't say you know you have to join or anything just we're glad to see you so I tried another Sunday and then another Sunday and then finally John said you know we're offering new member classes if you come and you know decide we would love for you to join the congregation and I said okay and then like I told you early Cindy Maddox the senior minister at that church is an out lesbian never in my lifetime would I have predicted in Portland Maine that my minister would be an out lesbian. Married to a woman with two children! And the congregation loves her. The struggle in that congregation when they called was not... it was so interesting there was a small clump of older widowed men who were not clear that a woman could pastor men as well as women. That's what

they asked her, now they had never asked John McCall if could pastor women as well as men, but those men had never experienced a woman at the pulpit or as pastor, so they said well do you think you can work with men as well as women and Cindy said yes she thought she could do that. So interestingly that congregation because it for a dozen years or so had been open and affirming had been intentional about welcoming LGBTQ people didn't struggle with the fact that she was lesbian a few people struggled with the fact that she was a woman, but now everyone's gotten over that and you know it's quite lovely. You know it's been a gift, it's been a delight to I'm now 69, I have lived long enough and I have seen enough change that women in ministry not unusual, out lesbian women in ministry not that unusual either. It's really good and other words we are now at the point where someone wrote many years ago justice will when a..something along the lines of justice will be not when an overly competent woman is hired to do the same job as an incompetent man, but when a incompetent woman is as ordinary in the job as an incompetent something along those lines women don't have to be extraordinary fabulous to get jobs they can just be good. So things still need to change a lot and I'm very proud to be proud of the LGBTQ communities in Maine. A little state where some of the best work has been done. We were the first to pass by a popular vote marriage equality. We passed non-discrimination legislation by referendum we've had out legislators and Mary Bonauto of Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders lives here in Portland and is the one who argued the marriage equality case in front of the Supreme Court. Maine this little odd place, so yeah it has been really good. I have said I have great gratitude to Bangor Theological School for hiring me as the ethicist on their faculty. I have long said it is a gift to work at an unimportant institution and I didn't say that because Bangor Seminary hasn't trained people well or had a good faculty it has but it isn't Harvard or Princeton or whatever it's been this small little school and being the small little

school it has had this remarkable freedom to experiment and do things its own way so you know I think at a more prestigious institution when I was hired and when I came out early on in the faculty I might have been booted out because it would have not looked good for a prestigious institution, but this little small feisty institution that was scrappy and did its own thing said sure and in fact they said we'd like you to be out there because you like doing community work be our public theologian. So they encouraged me the presidents would say we think we should reduce your course load because you're taking so much time working on these campaigns and I say oh okay. So I have been very fortunate in my personal life and in my professional life that I had a community and I had a workplace that supported me.

Elyssa: When you moved to Maine, did you feel like it was welcoming? Or do you think there was a lot of work that because I know there was a lot of work that was done. But did you feel welcomed?

Marvin: Well that's a wonderful question because I was living in Bangor in 83 when Charlie Howard was murdered and that was before my own consciousness raising about my own sexuality and it was a horrifying event. Part of what was so painful was the three high school boys that threw Charlie Howard off that bridge and he drowned because he was asthmatic and the three high school boys and you may have heard this or read this?

Elyssa: Yeah we did have to read this.

Marvin: Yeah the school psychologist that interviewed them said they weren't teenage delinquents rebelling against society's norms, they were social conformists who were acting according to social norms because they thought that they would be rewarded for that behavior and when they went back to high school, they were cheered as heroes. Yeah that was really sobering. A lot changes because a year or so later, I find myself falling in love after having been

divorced and starting a new relationship and finding its with a man and therefor I have to reconfigure my own sense of myself and my identification and so it felt and I think I said early on probably on the Kinsey continuum of sexualities I'm probably bi but it has always felt neater and for me the right thing to do was to identify as a gay man because I was in a relationship with another man and in those early years there was a lot of pushback if you identified as bi because that meant you were scared. You were sort of hedging your bets. I may sleep with men but I also really like women it was this sort of hedging and don't reject me because at least I'm halfway right or some sort of silliness like that, but it just felt both politically and spiritually that's where I want to be identified and how I want to do my work and I have been very fortunate to do it to do the work and so this was great.

Elyssa: Yes, so is there anything else you want to add?

Marvin: Oh I'll probably walk to the door and stop say this thing and that thing, no do you think you got what you needed?

Elyssa: Yes.

Marvin: You don't have to transcribe this do you?

Elyssa: I do have to transcribe this.

Marvin: Oh my God! Oh my God

Elyssa: It's okay, it will be good practice.

Marvin: Are you a good typist?

Elyssa: No, so thank you very much for this,

Marvin: You are more than welcome.

