

Wendy: So this is June 14, 2018. I'm Wendy Chapkis, W E N D Y C H A P K I S, and you are?

Robert: Robert Diamante, R O B E R T D I A M A N T E.

Wendy: Robert, I'm going to ask you to undo one button so I can move it [the mic] down a little bit, just so that you don't accidentally touch it.

Robert: Sure.

Wendy: Okay, perfect. Robert, as you know from the consent sheet, you can refuse to answer any question you want, you can stop the interview at any time. We'll go for an hour or 90 minutes. If it looks like there's a lot left to do, we'll just schedule a follow-up. And I would love to do an interview with you at Special Collections when we go through the photos [you donated] and talk your way through them.

So, first you mentioned you would be willing to talk about your family of origin. Can you tell me about where you were born, a little about your parents, and any siblings.

Robert: Sure. I come from an Italian American family from New Jersey. I was born in New Brunswick in 1968 in June, and my mother's family is—my mother was second-generation, my grandparents, my maternal grandparents were from Italy, and my great-grandparents on my paternal side were also from Italy. So I'm all Italian, Italian American, Catholic, from New Jersey. You've seen it on TV.

Wendy: And you have siblings?

Robert: I do. I have an older brother, two older brothers, and an older sister. I'm the youngest of four.

Wendy: Anything memorable about your childhood growing up in New Jersey?

Robert: In terms of just...?

Wendy: Anything that you want to share, that you want to put down in posterity.

Robert: I think it's important to note, knowing where I'm at today about to turn 50, that I was always sort of maudlin child, and always kind of a loner, and that lead to a lot of the inquiry as an artist and as a theologian. I had a lot of questions and doubted a lot. I think I was born in a state of doubt.

Wendy: About religion specifically, or other things?

Robert: Well, of course, growing up Catholic, or being inducted into the Catholic religion by almost cultural default, growing up with the stories and the imagery of what I

would call the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament in particular created a lot of questions in my own mind, theological questions that were probably better answered by a first system theologian rather than a priest or a parent, and that set the stage for pretty much the rest of my life. And I would venture to say that I've always known I was attracted to men. I don't want to say "gay" because that word didn't exist for me until quite a bit later.

Wendy: So was that part of the questioning around religion, that you knew you were attracted to men?

Robert: It became when the realization struck that it was a religious issue, "it" meaning that being gay and it being wrong, being gay, that it's wrong to be gay, was really foundationally a religious question, which, you know, later in life I've realized it was a cultural evolution of a theological question, and it became cultural. It really didn't become an issue for me until my teens.

Wendy: So what were the early things that you were questioning, then? If it wasn't based on sexuality in the Church, what were the things that were troubling you or that you needed?

Robert: They weren't troubling me so much as they were...not feasible. Like Noah's Ark, for instance. And people try so hard to explain it scientifically, and rebuild an ark, and really work hard to reinforce that story. It wasn't until later in life that I, you know, sort of developed a much better understanding of those stories and what they point to, what their meanings could be, whether allegorically or culturally and so forth. But back then, I remember I had a View-Master. Remember View-Masters? Those things that you would put the disk in and you would click them? I had a talking View-Master, the very first one I had was Noah's Ark. And I remember flipping through those and just thinking, "This is a great story. It would make a great movie, but I'm sorry, this just doesn't work for me." And that story, Adam and Eve, I had a lot of questions about Adam and Eve.

I did go to Catholic school, and of course you don't ask those questions in Catholic school. I also went to a very progressive Catholic school. I learned, I had sex education in the third grade, which was—St. Peter's was a very progressive school in New Brunswick, New Jersey. But the mythology just didn't add up for me as a basis for meaning. And of course, as an adult I can explain it that way. As a child, I can only remember shaking my head "no." And I don't—really, I can't even, I'm not even going to project what little Robert was thinking at that time, but it was just, "No, this doesn't really work for me as a basis of meaning."

By the time I got to Confirmation when I was ten, I refused Confirmation, which was huge in my family. Nobody had ever refused Confirmation. My father had actually gone to seminary, there were monks and nuns in my family, and I just patently refused. I said, "I don't believe in God." And I—what I was saying back then is, "I don't believe in God, believe in God the way you are explaining it to me." And if they had been... I don't want to blame my parents, and I'm not

blaming my parents, because they clearly didn't know what to do, they didn't have any real experience with that level of doubt coming from a ten-year-old, almost an obstinance, but a really entrenched belief that this was not working for me. I just remember being very, very entrenched, and it wasn't rebellion, it was just, "No, this doesn't work. This is not, this is not feasible. I need a better explanation than what you're giving me on all of this stuff." And perhaps if they had sent me to a seminary, and much later in life I did go to a seminary, and those questions were answered, perhaps things would have gone a different way. But as it stood, it kind of created a rift between my father and I, because he was such an ardent Catholic. I think my mother didn't really care very much.

Wendy: Help me understand how the ten-year-old who didn't believe ended up being an adult that goes to seminary?

Robert: Those questions always stuck, because they were deep, existential questions. Not just whether or not this is true or not, I wasn't looking for somebody to tell me whether or not these were true stories or prove whether or not these were true stories, but it became an existential question. And all throughout my teens, I struggled with those questions. And of course, I found other teens, other nerdy guys like me, who didn't mind sitting around and talk about the nature of God and spirituality in a very, probably a very immature way, and probably very stoned way.

And I had a run-in with a teacher in the 11th grade. I had come out in the 10th grade, so it was pretty much known around school that I was gay. I was a tough kid, so I took care of myself. It wasn't a problem for me. If anyone gave me any flack, I would pretty much beat them up [laughs]. I hate to say that, that's really awful, but I had very few confrontations. And so I was kind of left alone, and I did have a teacher and we... She kind of took me under her wing at first, and then later in the semester there was a Christmas break, and then after Christmas break she came back to me and she said, "You know, I had a revelation over Christmas," and that, you know, "Jesus is the way, and I want you to come to the Church with me." And she was trying to induct me, and I receded, I completely receded from her, and I stopped going to her class. I failed that class. The first time in life I've ever failed an English class, of all things. And I went to the art school, art room every day. I created some great artwork. And ended up having to take that, rebooting that class in summer school and passed and all that stuff.

I always wondered why adults never stepped in and said, "What's going on here? You're not going to class." Everybody knew. Years later, I actually found out that the principal knew, my guidance counselor knew, my parents knew, the teacher, obviously, the teacher knew, the art teacher knew, and everybody just stayed out of it. They didn't intervene. And that was a huge betrayal. A huge betrayal. And I felt that back then. I felt like it was a conspiracy. And I really, I came to find out that they were hoping that I would convert, and that I would become a very good boy. And needless to say, I didn't.

But I did very well in the next year and went to art school, and those questions were still there. By the time I became a senior in art school, as a photographer I did a body of work based off of Catholic iconographical stories. That's the work that I donated to the Sampson Center, and we can talk about that work when we get there, but I was kind of visually regurgitating in the language of early Hollywood glamour portraiture and looking at Mapplethorpe and looking at George Harrell, and wonderful photographers like F. Holland Day and Julia Cameron, the pictorialists, and recreating my interpretations of those mostly Old Testament stories. Some New Testament stories, like the Annunciation, and also images of saints. I was using my classmates as saints and I was Jesus, of course [laughs], and I grew a beard and I fashioned a crown of thorns out of forsythia branches.

And so there was this wonderful body of work that was addressing something for me. Those issues had come up because I learned the fall of my senior year that my mother had cancer, and I just knew she was going to die. It was a really awful knowledge, but I just knew she was going to die, and so those issues started bubbling up for me, like mother issues. And of course, being Catholic and growing up in that type of environment, that sort of leads to a Marianism and all of that, without getting, you know, hugely philosophical, it was bringing up family issues as well.

And so that body of work became very important to me at that time, and it was wonderful and I graduated. We had a wonderful show for graduation, and my brother was there, he videotaped the graduation. Actually, the Maine Gay Men's Chorus sang at that graduation thanks to my pushing for that. I think they sang "Anthem." And of course, that was kind of a coming out to me, for me to a larger audience, because I was standing up on stage with them singing. And then my brother went back to Texas, showed my mother the videotape, and she died that night. So it was, it became a very important body of work for me.

And I didn't know what to do after that, so I stayed in Maine, started a business photographing jewelry. At that time, I was still singing with the Chorus, so I was photographing the Chorus, and those are photographs that we can talk about as well. Still doing photography and working on my business, and I decided to stay here and make a life for myself here in Maine. And...

Wendy: Can I just interrupt for a second? So how did you end up coming to MECA? Or was it MECA...?

Robert: It was the Portland School of Art at that time. I was actually the first graduating class where it said Maine College of Art on the degree. I had interviewed at Bowdoin College when I was interviewing for colleges, and I was in Maine for a day. I flew up from New York alone, and I had an hour to kill so, I walked up from the bus station—and at that time you took the Trailways or whatever it was, Peter Pan, up to Brunswick—and I walked up to the Western Promenade and walked around, came across the Western Prom Cemetery, which at that time was

still overgrown. This was 1987, probably. And it was a beautiful, crisp fall day, and I just felt the magic of Maine. I fell in love with it. I'll say this, and I still don't have an explanation for it, because I don't know that I believe it deeply, but I felt as if I had been here before and I never had been. It felt—so there was either something in my childhood which was triggered by that day, or who knows, maybe I did live here in a past life. Probably more of something from my childhood or just feeling the newness of a new place and really being in love with the history and the age.

Went back to, I ended up not getting into Bowdoin, and I ended up at Pratt Institute, which is quite a good art school, of course. And I went there and I just was always plagued by this memory of Maine, this one day in Maine, and it was nuts. I mean, it was so crazy. And I talked about it very little to my family. In fact, I don't think my family knew. So I was really kind of keeping it inside of my journals, or probably I wouldn't want anybody to read what those were like at that time, what those were...probably regurgitating the same stuff over and over, "I'm going to one of the best art schools in the country, but I want to move to this rural state, and I have no explanation, but I'm feeling this pull."

And I was working at a bookstore in New Jersey at that time. It was, I worked very hard to go to school and to put myself through school and to work, I had several jobs. But I loved that bookstore job, and I just remember going in one day and looking in the, what is it? The Barron's College Guide? And I just looked at colleges in Maine, and I saw Portland School of Art, and I thought, "I wonder what that's all about?" So I called them up, got a catalog, and the catalog came, I looked through, and I said, "Yes, this will do." And I called up the school and I said, "I would like an appointment, I want to go to this school."

I drove my Chevy Nova all the way up to Maine. Very quickly, this all happened very quickly, and I essentially walked into the meeting with the dean and I had all my artwork sort of spread around and he just looked around and he said, "Clearly you're talented, and clearly—but why do you want to leave Pratt Institute to come here?" And I just looked at him and I said, "I have to get out of New York City." And there were other things going on we don't need to go into, but it was very, you know, my family was there, Italian American, very suffocating, and I decided that it was probably really good for me to go out on my own. It would be a great experience for me to go out on my own.

And I did. I got accepted and I moved up to Maine the following fall, and I've been here ever since, except when I moved to Bali and this recent Boulder thing. But I've always considered Maine my port of call, and no matter where I go in the world, Maine would always be my port of call. It's just become home, and this is where all my people are, and...yeah. It's lovely.

Wendy: So I want to circle back for a minute to the fact that you knew from a very young age that you were gay, and then came out in high school. What year are we talking about coming out in?

Robert: So it was probably about 1984, and I should circle back and say that I, we moved to Houston when I was 12, so halfway through my eighth grade, we moved to Houston. My father was in the oil industry, and that was, of course, a booming time, that was 1980. I spent my Reagan years, essentially, in Woodlands, Texas, right outside of Houston. And I hated it at first, I just absolutely hated it. I grew to love it, and I actually had a really great time in high school. I met probably not the best influences, but really fun people, and we spent a lot of time at the art museums and going to the Rothko Chapel, and going to art openings. It was cultural, going to the River Oaks Theater.

I mean, we were kind of, you know, the suburbanites that were, I don't know, maybe a little uppity or...but there was also a part of me that was into punk, punk rock, and so I went to punk rock shows, and I wore a chain around my neck for a number of years, and saw the Dead Kennedys and Black Flag when Henry Rollins was still with Black Flag, that was a lot of fun, and all of those bands, because Houston was sort of a locus of activity in the punk world, hardcore.

And so I evolved into a person with a very determined personality very early, and in tenth grade I decided to come out to friends. I had other gay friends, and we all just sort of came out. Some came out that weren't even gay. Wasn't that when the *Preppy Handbook* was really popular and all this stuff? We were kind of almost countering that. You know, I wore very flamboyant clothes. My nickname for a very short time was Lord Byron, because I went from jeans to Girbaud, remember Girbaud baggy pants? And loose belts, and my dad's work shirts and stuff like that. And it was the Duran Duran period, it was The Smiths, it was The Cure, so there was that, you know, the hair bands, and the makeup bands, and we really just latched onto that, and it was okay for us to come out and be gay even though we were going to kind of a conservative high school, it was still, you know, a very proper middle class to upper middle class environment where maybe it would have been more difficult in a different environment, I don't know. But there was a permissiveness, I think, even amongst other groups, not just our little clique. Even amongst the other cliques there was...I don't know, I can't dissect high school, I can't even go back there, I don't have any dealings with high school kids and stuff like that. Who knows what was going through our minds? But we were rebellious and self-determined.

Wendy: So let me ask, now it sounds like there was some pushback. Did you literally have to get into fights over being who you were?

Robert: There were a couple times where... Actually, interestingly enough, my parents were getting phone calls from somebody, and they were saying—my parents never told me what this person was saying, they never told me exactly. They refused to tell me. But I found out who it was. One of his friends narced on him, and I saw him in the hallway one day [laughs], and pretty much grabbed him and slammed his head up against the locker a couple times, and I just said, "If you ever call my family again, I will beat the shit out of you." And the phone calls stopped. That worked. I don't, I'm not a person that starts fights, I just don't do

that, but I like to end things. And I'm also not a violent person, but I just felt in that moment, I guess, being a teenager with no filters, that, you know...

Wendy: And it worked!

Robert: And it worked! [laughs] There were just a couple other times where, you know, jocks say something and you confront them, and it, "Okay, sorry dude. I'm not gonna, not gonna go down that road."

Wendy: So you come out, but you're kind of—I mean, were you sort of butch presenting even back then? I mean, I think of you as sort of...

Robert: This is an interesting conversation, because in the 80s, and, of course, being a teenager, at that point in history we didn't have too many ways to be gay. There was the butch dyke, there was the lipstick lesbian, there was the fairy, but who knew about bears? Who knew about—and then, all, you know, of course the '70s leather guys, you know, my picture of the '70s leather guy was Freddie Mercury, and he was, you know, far from the truck driver that we idolize today in the bear community, if you know what I mean.

So there was actually a confusion in identity, because I started going to gay bars early. One of my first experiences at a gay bar was a place called Numbers in Houston, and I remember this perfectly. It was a place that gays, Mexicans, punk rockers, everybody went there. Everybody went to Numbers in the '80s. It was like, the place. And they played, you know, fabulous '80s music, but they also played punk music, and they had bands, and Marianne Faithfull was playing one night. Marianne Faithfull, my very first concert. Opening were the Lords of the New Church, and we had to go, so we dressed up and we ratted out hair, and there was the question of how I was going to get in, so I kind of swiped my brother's ID. I actually asked him for it, and he was just like, "I don't think it's going to work, but..." I got in, and my art teacher was there [laughs]. She was like, "How did you get in?" and I just said, "I just waved at the doorman, and sailed through." I will never forget that night. Marianne Faithfull was unbelievable, she was, she's been my muse ever since. She's an amazing woman. So anyway...

But the image of the gay male in the '80s didn't really jive for me, and then, of course, moving to New York City after that and going and hanging out in the Village, there wasn't a, there wasn't a laundry list of gay men that I was meeting who I felt, and I sort of...what's the word I'm looking for? That I could identify with. And, you know, I have an older brother who's a hunter, and my family, I don't think they ever had a problem with me being gay necessarily, but my sister once said to me, "You know, I don't mind you being gay, but I just don't see you as being gay." And it was very interesting to me, because the idea that most people—maybe from that generation, maybe still—have of gay men is the sort of the, you know, effeminate and, you know, not into the things that I was into, and, you know, nature, and hiking, and going outside. You know, "What do you mean, you camp?! You actually camp? You go out?"

The urban gay image has really stuck in our culture for a very long time, and I think it's become unstuck. And it unstuck for me when I moved to Maine. I think there was secretly a part of me, a secret part of me that thought I was going to meet a lumberjack, you know, a real manly man, and I certainly have met those types, truthfully. And they're out there. Some of them are out, some of them are not.

My idea and my identity developed later, like probably in my 30s, when I began meeting more rural gay men. You know, men from central and northern Maine who had grown up in these rural communities on farms and in places where they didn't have access to the idea of the urban gay man. You know, perhaps it was a dream for them to move to the city, and for some, they just, it wasn't their identity. They just didn't see that in themselves. And I thought, "This is really great. This is another way of being, where I can be myself, and I can actually really feel like myself and do the things I want to do." And I started meeting gay guys that, you know, actually do hunt, or do archery, or dig in the dirt, and like plants, but not flowers [laughs].

That was kind of a metaphor, but it was a huge relaxing of my identity, because I never did feel like—not that I ever vilified, because I certainly didn't, but I always felt just on the outside of the barroom door, just on the outside of that. I never really felt that I was excluded, but I just never felt like I wanted to dive in and become, but I still felt a part of. And so becoming a part of a... I don't even want to say alternative culture within the gay community, but a segment of the gay community whose voice, I think, is still very, very quiet, is very important, was very important to me, and that really helped. I don't think I really became comfortable in my skin, really, until my late 30s and into my 40s. That's why I think my 50s are going to be great, so...

Robert: Does that help answer your question?

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So before we move on, I just want to come back again to the coming out. You knew from a very young age that you were gay, you're in a very Catholic family, then you move to a really conservative part of the country. Was there ever a moment where you just thought, "I can't be gay. I can't—"

Robert: Oh, sure. Absolutely. I had a girlfriend when I—I kind of went back in in my senior year, and I met a high stepper—that was like a cheerleader, they were, the high steppers did the halftime shows—who was a very proper girl, whose mother was the typing teacher, and who was also questioning from her side. And we met in a writing class, creative writing class, and we met in the middle somewhere. The bad boy met the good girl, and she's been my closest friend to this day. We've—in fact, I just talked to her the other day. We are, I'm very much in love with her as a friend, and I don't know what my life would be like without her. I think we taught each other quite a bit. And I tried, I tried with her, and she even knew. It was kind of like, she's like, "You're just not into this, are you?" And I was just like, "Not really." But I tried for a little while, and even I tried the idea of

being bisexual for a while. It's not so much the sex with a woman. I could do that easily, I've had sex with women. It's not a problem. Some men are very, some gay men are just like—what would it be on the Kinsey scale? Like a...

Wendy: Six.

Robert: Like a six. You know, I'm probably psychologically somewhere in the center, I don't know, I never, I don't really care that much. I just know that I never wanted to get married to a woman. I never wanted to live within that paradigm, I never wanted to have children, necessarily, although I wouldn't mind having a son or a daughter. It's just not something that I really ever saw myself doing. So it was kind of like a phase [laughs]. You could call it a phase, heterosexuality.

Wendy: Okay, so now we're—I want to move back to Maine. You do MECA, you do the Maine College of Art, you graduate, and then what happens?

Robert: I decided to stay, because I really didn't have a plan. I had looked at graduate school, the possibility of graduate school, but after my mother's death it threw me into an existential crisis. She was very important to me. I was very close with her. She shared things with me before she died that I would never share with anybody else. She told me her secrets, and what a gift, what an incredible gift that was. I will never forget those. And I've never shared them, even with my own siblings. I would never do that. She was frank with me, and we talked because I think she—well, she did know she was dying. She told me things, I think, as a way of being seen and being remembered, and that was an incredible thing to carry. And I decided to just stick here and just go with the flow for a little while.

And, of course, being who I am I had my own business within a couple years, and, of course, photographing jewelry, that whole evolution is not something we need to get in here, but I started photographing jewelry in college for my classmates, and that just evolved into a business that kind of became the basis for my career today.

By 1999, you know, I was making pretty darn good money, and I was beginning to travel. And I think between 1993 when I graduate and 1999 was really just this huge growth period in terms of business development, finding my way here in Maine, building a life, building an identity, meeting people, meeting friends. And I began to travel in 1999. That was when I kind of woke up one day and said, "Okay, I've got something going here. I've got money in the bank and I'm doing pretty darn good. I need to start making art again." And the whole thing with theology was always, of course, with me, but I wasn't interested in revisiting that work, but I was interested in revisiting the questions and experience.

And I had an opportunity to go to India with two wonderful people, Stephanie Briggs, who was a jeweler who I knew through the industry, and Dana Sawyer, who is a professor of Eastern religions, he taught at the art school—he is now retired, but he also taught at the Bangor Theological Seminary. He taught Eastern,

Hinduism and Buddhism and Eastern religions. And I was very good friends with them. I am, still, very good friends with them, and they invited me to go to India with them, to meet them in India, and I went to India in 1999, and was overwhelmed by the presence of religion in that culture. Ceremonial practice, bakhti, ever-present, everywhere, their gods and their avatars and their worship, their practice, and, of course, the culture itself is very insistent—I don't know if you've ever been to India, but it's a very insistent place to go. And I was just blown open. I had some doors blown open. And I had a lot of questions. And, of course, Dana was interviewing some Dundeeds, he was doing a book on Dundeeds, religious men, holy men. And I got to sit in on a couple interviews, which was really remarkable. And I had a lot of questions, and he recommended that I take his class at the seminary. So I get back, and I... Before I go on, does this answer your timeframe question?

Wendy: Absolutely.

Robert: Okay. Because I think it's important from 1993 to 1999 that that was a time of foment, and that in 1999, with that doorway opening, which led to the seminary on the other side of that door was the seminary, that's really, that was a different chapter, really. So what led up to it was important, but it really became important because it allowed me financially to do it.

So I looked into the seminary, and I signed up as a special student. And interestingly enough, I was going to take his class first, but I had an opportunity to go to Papua New Guinea to do a photo shoot, and I decided to go. Who wouldn't? I always wanted to go there, and it was actually west Papua, which is the Indonesian side, but it was really quite remarkable, and that country was in a bit of a revolution at that point, so it was a really interesting time to go. That's a whole other story.

So I got back, and the very first class I ended up taking was an exegetical methods class with David Trobisch. So exegetical methods are all about interpretation and hermeneutics, using different forms of criticism, form criticism and historical criticism and literary criticism, and you take, for instance, a Bible passage, and you look at it from as many lenses as you can to glean meaning and interpretation, and form criticism becomes so important because it's about how it was written and the original language—I had to take ancient Greek. And then, of course, you know, literary criticism and source criticism, where did this come from? And historical criticism, what was the context? I can remember asking Trobisch after the first class, “Are we really allowed to do this?” And, of course, he was German, and he's just like, “Yes, of course.” [laughs] You know, “Yes, of course you—it's what we do. We're theologians, it's what we do.” It opened another door. I mean, the door was open already, but another door opened up right after that, and I was like, “Wow, exegetical methods everything.” And that really became the, it really kind of became the foundation of my experience at seminary.

So, you know, I was kind of referring back to being gay in high school and kind of feeling betrayed by somebody on the inside of a religious structure that I was in—she wasn't Catholic, she was Baptist—but kind of not buying the Catholic thing, feeling betrayed by the Baptist thing, by the sort of hardcore religious sentiments. And then suddenly being introduced to a way of interpreting the language. I thought, "This is a great opportunity for me to arm myself with ammunition against the religious." And, of course, this was an idea that came to me well before seminary, you know, it's like, all these religious arguments against gays. They just, there's just something smelly about them. They just don't really, they're not jiving. So what's the source of this? It gave me an opportunity to go into the inside, into what I would consider a very liberal seminary with a German theologian and examine the questions.

And I did. And I looked at just about every reference that's in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Gospels and the letters, to glean some deep sense, or a deeper understanding of the oppositional voice, and I came away—and I thought my entire seminary would kind of be based on this, and I would come through the other side and I'd be this great voice for gays, you know, against religion for gays, and by probably the second semester I was done. I was just like, "This, the argument's just not strong enough for me to even really want to stay inside, and there's so much other really beautiful material in here." And there's so much to learn, that staying inside of that opposition, oppositional positioning—I don't know of a better way of putting it right now—was just not interesting enough for me.

So I kind of put those notebooks aside and said, "Okay, I have my own, I have the foundation of my own belief system. These arguments aren't strong enough for me to even stay inside." I do have to say that if I ever get into a conversation with somebody about Leviticus or any of the, you know, what is it? Matthew 19 talking about the whole eunuch thing, I probably have a little bit more information than I did when I was ten years old, but I'm not interested in having those conversations anymore unless somebody really wants to throw it on the table. And then I can say, "Alright, let's have this conversation."

It almost had the opposite effect. It mellowed me out. And it opened up the opportunity to study religion, or Christian religion, specifically, in a way that was more justice-related and more related to the expansive, open, and invitational way that I think it really should be interpreted, rather than the exclusionary way. At least, that's the way that I approached it. And I can't say that I came through seminary becoming a Christian, but I might say that I have a better understanding in my own way of true Christianity than some people who claim, on a very superficial level, to be Christians. I don't want to get into the argument of like, who's more Christian than not, it's not, that's not what it's about. It's more about kind of understanding the foundation of the belief, and what the concern is pointing to, and understanding the history, and understanding the location of the characters at a point in history, and what the writers might have been interested in,

and what their concerns were as authors is really quite remarkable, and that was a gift. That was a tremendous gift.

Wendy: So you went all the way through and you graduated?

Robert: Mhmm. Yes, I did.

Wendy: What year was that?

Robert: That was 2010. I actually took ten years to go through. I did have a... I took like, two classes a semester here and there, and I really focused on those classes, so it wasn't like I was taking a full course load and just doing the work. If I took Christian Doctrine, I dove into it. If I took the Historical Jesus class, I dove into that. I read all the books, I read other books and stuff like that. So I really got the most out of my seminary education. I would say I did better in seminary than art school, for sure.

And by the end of it, I... Let's see, it was 2010, I had just a couple more classes to take and that's when I had the opportunity to go to Bali and work with a big jewelry company, and I decided to do that. I talked with Marvin Ellison who had been my advisor, and he said, "You really should do this, and just go. The seminary will be here when you get back." And I did that, and of course, going to Bali opened up another, you know, avenue of religious study, because there's such an amazing and isolated culture for the longest time, and their religious practice is very unique. It's unlike any other religious practice in the world. You know, based on Ramanyana in Hinduism and animism and Buddhism and other things, and just to be able to live inside of that, and I was lucky enough to have a personal assistant who was Balinese and very well educated, and I just got a great dose of culture when I was there.

So I came back and I finished off my coursework, and I worked for a year on my thesis. I could have taken six months, I decided to do it in a year. I read for six months and then I wrote for six months. It was the best time of my life. I will never forget that, so it's been a nice parallel between working in the jewelry industry and having a theological background and where those—my thesis actually blended those two. So we're looking at ancient near Eastern culture, archaeological history, and the material history of the ancient near East. Overlay that with theology and you have a really interesting conversation, at least to me, so that's what I created for myself for my thesis. Yeah.

Wendy: Okay, so—

Robert: Nothing gay about it! [laughs] There was nothing gay in any of that.

Wendy: So I want to go back to something that was gay. At some point when you were living in Portland, and I don't know what the years were, you met the very famous writer and SM figure John Preston who lived in—

Robert: Oh, yeah, John.

Wendy: Will you talk a little bit about how you knew John, what your relationship to John Preston was, how that fit into your life story?

Robert: Absolutely. That was a very interesting time. I had just moved here, I met— Agnes Bushell was my English teacher at the art school. She and I became friends very quickly, and my sophomore year is when I began photography—and I think it was the beginning of my sophomore year, which would have been 1990, fall 1990 into '91—somewhere around then she introduced me to the idea of working with John. John had been working at that time on *The Big Gay Book*, which was this encyclopedia of gay resources before Google, and I think you can still find copies of it on Amazon. I know I have a couple copies. And she said, “This guy I know, John Preston, have you ever heard of him?” I said, “No.” You know, even all my years at the Oscar Wilde Bookstore in New York, haunting that place, never heard of him. I was not into S&M, it was, it’s not my thing, it still is not. And it’s not a criticism, it just is not. And I said, “No, but, you know, what can I do?” She’s like, “Why don’t I introduce you to him? He’s looking for somebody to help him fact-find for his book.” And I say, “Sure.”

So she introduced me to John. I go over there at his place on Park Street and he immediately puts me to work. So I start calling up, you know, AIDS crisis centers, bars, bookstores all over the country. And actually, in some cases, all over the world. I think there were some European places, I can’t remember, I’d have to go back and look. I definitely know I was calling up places all over the US and making sure their phone number, their address, whether or not they were still in business, were they a leather club, what kind of bar were there, and, you know, fact finding, doing all of these, you know, meticulous notes. I’m still that way, I take meticulous notes and everything’s alphabetized.

So that worked very well, and I did that for him. And I remember the very first... I can’t remember. It was after the first time that I met him, after the first day I went in he was laying on his bed. It was late at night, and he was laying on his bed and he was watching *The Simpsons*, so it couldn’t have been too late at night, but he was laying on his bed. And I sat down next to the bed and I was watching the show, and I just turned to him and I said, I asked, “So—” Oh! I know what it was. Agnes had given me a copy of *Mr. Benson* and I read it, so it must have been after the first day. And I read *Mr. Benson* and I was like, “Huh.” Now I had also read the *Story of O* not too long ago, and I loved the *Story of O*, I think it was great, and I got the concept of self-slavery and giving oneself over and, you know, what O ultimately sacrificed and what that meant on a very fundamental 20-year-old level. And so I read *Mr. Benson*, and I read it through the lens of, what was it? Pauline Reage, the *Story of O*, and I go into the bedroom and I sit down and I say, “So why do people do S&M?” And without even looking up, he just sort of like, I could just see him almost rolling his eyes, and he’s like, “It’s just a way to have sex.” And I was so unsatisfied by that, and I was like, “Well, *Mr. Benson* is really a piece of literature.” And he had already done this interview with, was it USA

*Today* or something like that? Where he had said, “You know, eroticism is for rich people. The rest of us get porn.” Something to that effect, I think, I don’t want to quote him, but... And I could just, I could just almost see how bored he was with me and my questioning, and I just, I got that and I, you know, we kept it very professional.

But then he asked me—he knew I was a photographer, I had just started taking photography—and he said, “Well, I’m going to need a photograph for this other book that I’m doing called *Flesh and the Word*.” And I was so excited. He was like, “Oh, you know, I’ll pay you to do it.” And so I get all of my camera equipment together, I take a bunch of photographs, and that’s the photograph of him with the cat on his lap, and the cat’s sitting on the manuscript, and there’s a bookshelf of all of his different books, his porno books from the—I can’t remember his pseudonym from, or his pen name from the ’70s, whatever it was—and he’s looking into the camera, and that was my first commercial job, and was all over the place. I remember A Different Light bookstore used it, Oscar Wilde used it, it was in several magazines, and I was kind of like, I was so excited! And when the book came out, *Flesh and the Word*, which of course is porn, I was so excited to see my name on a book jacket that I sent my parents the book [laughs]. And I have no idea what their reaction was, because they never reacted. You know, this was, of course, years before my mother passed away, and it was just...I don’t know what I was thinking.

And I did a couple other photographs for him. I did another book cover, I can’t remember which book. And, you know, John and I kind of kept in touch. We weren’t—I wouldn’t say we were close friends. He had his circle of, you know, young muscle boys around him, and those were his inner circle. I was probably a little bit too existentially effete for him, and maybe a little too, like, sort of...in my head, definitely. But I did see him. He invited me to his party at the Outright Convention. That was at the Copley Plaza back when that existed...I think it’s still there. But he had a book party for—I don’t think it was *Flesh in the Word*, it was another book. It might have been *Hometowns*. I think it might have been *Hometowns*. And he had a book signing party, and he invited me to that, and that’s where I met Scott O’Hara, and I went to the Outright Convention that entire weekend.

It was wonderful. That’s where I met, I think, Michael Bronski was there, and Pat [inaudible], just a, I was just like in, you know, these were the intellectual dynamites of the world that I was delving into. The writers and the intellects and the... And if I’m not mistaken, Pat winked at me from the front row, because I was this young kid sitting in the front row, and I was just rapt at her. And I think she just looked over, I think it was her, and she just kind of winked at me, and I was like, “Oh my God, this is, like, amazing!” And that whole weekend was really wonderful. And it was in, of course, in Boston. And Scott and I hung out a lot that weekend, and I didn’t know who he was. He was, he said, “Well, I’m a writer and an actor and I live in Cazenovia, Wisconsin, and I do Shakespeare festivals,” and oh, I was just, you know, we talked about Shakespeare and we

talked about art and we talked about literature and gay literature and all that stuff, and we became pen pals after that.

And I can just remember, like, the next morning, maybe after a couple days, I saw John at the Copley Plaza and he was stirring his coffee, and I was like, “Morning, John.” He’s like, “Hey. So you’ve been hanging around with Scott O’Hara?” I was like, “Yeah, he’s such a nice guy.” He was like, “Well, do you know who he is?” I was like, “Yeah, he’s a writer.” And he just didn’t say anything, and he’s like, “When we go back to Portland, I’ve got something for you.”

And we get back to Portland and I go over to John’s, and I think he was giving me a couple of his books to give away or whatever, and he gives me a stack full of VHS tapes, and I just knew to watch them alone, and I saw a different side of Scott than I had seen before, and I was like, oh, Scott’s a—he was a porn star, obviously. I mean, he was a very famous porn star. But boy, was he—not “but,” I shouldn’t say “but.” That’s not to say porn stars aren’t smart, but he was smart. He was a very, very smart man, and we became pen pals and stayed in touch for years, and the last letter I got from Scott—I can’t remember when it was—was a posthumous letter that he had instructed be sent out after his death. And it took me a couple reads before I figured that one out, but that was interesting. That was an interesting time.

So John died in when, 1995, 1996? We didn’t really keep in too close of touch. Every now and then I’d go over and I’d visit him and we would hang out. And when he got sick, he was receiving very few people. And his final time in the hospital most people were instructed, I think, not to come. I don’t really quite remember what the rules were, but I just remember not getting the whole AIDS thing at that time. And I remember—

Wendy: Say more about that. Why, what was it about AIDS that you weren’t getting?

Robert: I mean, the environment in New York at that time was you just don’t, you know, as a teenager was, you know, don’t have sex, you’re going to get, you’re going to get AIDS. I didn’t really know too many people that had HIV. I mean, I was living in a very, kind of an insular Italian American community, I was going to art school, I wasn’t really hanging around with a lot of gay people. My cousin and his boyfriend were pretty much the only gay people I knew at that point even though I was in New York City. I mean, I really wasn’t going out that much, I wasn’t really doing the bars and...occasionally I would. And I’d hang out, I’d go to a bar every now and then in New Jersey and sort of dip my toe in the water, and the guys that I would meet, of course, were the—you know, the guys I was attracted to were the bodybuilders and the butch guys, so conversation wasn’t really, you know, on the menu.

And moving to Maine, very isolated community to some extent. At least my community, I should say, was very isolated. And going to art school, you know, I

knew AIDS was out there, but I was much more interested in gay rights, and, you know, the AIDS activism was, of course, mixed into that, but I really kind of stayed inside the gay rights movement. And of course, I was an art student, so I was really preoccupied by that. I didn't really, I didn't really, it didn't trigger for me until John and his writing. He was such an amazing, he was an amazing writer. I mean, he was a writer. He became an amazing writer when he began unpacking the gay community and our history and our people and our stories. He became really important for AIDS activism, and I would say that John is the one that introduced me to the conversation and the world inside of AIDS. If I'm not mistaken, he was the founder of the AIDS Project here in Portland, which is a really important story that somebody should tell, and I think I have some people that you can talk to who would be really great documentarians of that time period, which really met the AIDS crisis here in Portland and in Maine head-on. And those people are still around, I know some of them are still around.

And I became introduced to the personal side of it when John went into the hospital and ultimately died. And that's when I understood it as really, this isn't something that I'm isolated from. I'm really, these are my friends, these are my people. You've gotta have safe sex, you've got to take care of yourself inside of this, but you also have to understand the story and the evolution of this and put it into the context of what's going on here.

And, you know, in 1993, I began singing with the Gay Men's Chorus. So this is post-, you know, post-meeting John, but before he had passed away, and that's when I began to meet more men who were living with HIV, and I began meeting more men who had been married and had kids, and really kind of the urban gay was clashing against this sort of—and I would say even in Portland at that time—I would call it a rural gay community, a community that was probably more rural than urban, that had elements of both. So I was meeting men from the County who had moved down because they got divorced and needed to be amongst their own, or meeting men from Lewiston or, you know, Sabbathus, and all of these places who had come to sing with the Chorus and be a part of this community. And of course, AIDS was inside of that. We sang about it, we opened up that conversation inside of the Chorus as a vehicle for expression. And it wasn't just the political Vote No campaign from 1991—I think that was 1991, the first one—and the Lewiston campaign, and the Bangor campaign, those became vehicles for our expression. We weren't particularly political, but we knew who to sing to and what our concerns were. That's what I loved about the Chorus in the early days, we were so fervent, and we were so, just, alive. I don't know what it's like today. I'm sure it's really quite wonderful, but in the early days, we would—after our first concert, I just remember specifically we all cried. Everybody cried. We just sang our little hearts out, our little gay hearts out, and then went into the back of the Congregational Church up here in Portland and then we just all kind of sobbed. It was really powerful.

Wendy: Was that the early years of the Chorus as an organization?

Robert: Yeah, it was 1992 was when it started, I believe. I was a charter member, and i was... So actually, this is all synonymous with—I'm putting the pieces together as we're talking here—this was all synonymous with my mother announcing she has cancer my senior year in college. I was going to quit college and go to Texas and be with her, and she said "No." She said, "I want you to stay, I want you to finish school and then we'll deal with it after you graduate. We'll talk." I think she just knew.

So in 1992, I was taking voice lessons from Bruce Fithian because I decided I wanted to sing as well. I was just exploring everything. And he said, "Oh, well I'm starting this chorus. It's a gay men's chorus. I don't know if you're gay, but if you want to try out." And I said, "Yeah, I want to try out!" That was like 1992. I think our first concert was, like, 1992, the Christmas concert, because I graduated in 1993 and we sang at my graduation, so it had to have been 1992. And I was even the charter president. I think it was because I was the youngest and most susceptible that they just said, "You're president, you're pretty, stand up front." Oh, I was so nervous about that.

But that was, yeah. It seems, I think my time frame might be off a little bit, because it seems like I was involved with them when the Vote No campaign was going on, and I want to say that was 1991, so I don't think I was involved with the Chorus at that time. I think I was just doing something else. But certainly, the Chorus started in 1992 for sure, and then I began photographing behind the scenes almost immediately, and I probably have about three or four years of behind-the-scenes photographs. I had my first show I want to say in 1994, it was called "Boyfriend, Girlfriend." There was another friend of mine, a lesbian, who had been photographing her lesbian world. She had great photographs, and we had a joint show, "Boyfriend, Girlfriend." And—

Wendy: What was her name?

Robert: Her name was Jen McDermott, and I don't think I'm outing her here because I'm pretty sure she's out, and I want to say she teaches at USM, or she used to. Sorry if I'm outing somebody, I shouldn't be, but I'm pretty sure she's kind of known. Plus we had the show together, so there you go. I'm always sensitive to people's personal stories.

Wendy: So what, tell me a little about the Gay Men's Chorus in those early—

Robert: Oh, it was so much fun. It was just so much fun. And there were people who were in it that were just, they were just there because they didn't necessarily even want to sing, they just wanted to be with the Chorus. And Bruce Fithian was one of the founders. I want to say Douglas Eaton, Glenn Anderson, those were kind of like the core people, and there were just lots of guys that wanted to be a part of it. Some of them were more professional singers, church singers. Delmar Small was our accompanist, and he was a church accompanist up in, somewhere up near

Richmond, I want to say Litchfield or something like that. And we just all wanted to come together and we sang. It was like a family. It was fun.

The music was literate, I want to say. Bruce is, you know, the director of opera at USM—I don't know if he still is, but, you know, he was the director of their opera program, so he had a very, pretty expansive lexicon. And he was really good about mixing historical music, early music and opera, with contemporary music. You know, "You want to sing 'It's Raining Men?' I'll make an arrangement." But better music, like stuff from *Chess*. I think we sang "Anthem," from *Chess*. And he made arrangements of liturgical music that were just, you know, exquisite. So we sang choral music, we sang pop music, we sang opera, and he just had an amazing way of putting things together. And some people liked it. Some people wanted to be more gay than we were. Some people wanted us to be a little more literate, more, you know, serious about things. I thought it was just right. It was the Goldilocks moment.

And he must have been doing something right, because we sang with Holly Near, we sang with—what was the band from that movie with...*Philadelphia*. They were a *Philadelphia* band, they were a quartet, they were four guys. I can't remember. They were, it's going to come to me the minute the recorder goes off. We sang with them. A couple of us sang with [laughs] oh my god, my brain. "Clouds from both sides now..." Not Joni Mitchell, but the one that made it popular, the singer that made it popular, we sang with her. Oh my god, I know, getting 50, becoming 50. We sang with her. We sang with the Boston Gay Men's Chorus, I think we sang with Connecticut. I'm almost willing to say that we sang with the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, I don't know, that may be just a false memory, but we definitely sang with Boston, we'd go down to Boston. So we were doing things. We sang in Lewiston, I know we sang up at the Collins Center up in Orono, I mean, we were going all over. We were just on fire, and I stayed with the Chorus for about three years.

And it was wonderful in the early days. It was a place for men to, gay men to come and feel like a part of something that wasn't too political, that was artful, where they could express themselves but also meet guys. For years, I played canasta with the same group of guys from the Chorus, you know, which was wonderful. There were different little canasta groups that used to play. Have picnics together, and, you know, people paired off, became lovers, met each other. I know of a couple couples that met through the Chorus that are still together after what, 20-something years? 25 years? So it was a really, it was a great thing for the community, but it was also a really great thing for all of us who participated, yeah. Does that help?

Wendy: Totally. I think we've gone through all of the things that you said—oh no! *Maurice*. You have *Maurice*—

Robert: [laughs] The movie? Oh, we don't have to talk about that. We don't, no.

Wendy: I'm just wondering, you wrote it down.

Robert: Well, it was like, kind of like the New York time. It was just a funny story about *Maurice*. I had just moved from Houston back to New Jersey, and I was just beginning to visit colleges and stuff, and my cousin was gay, I knew he was gay, and his boyfriend, they lived in New York City. And they said, "Why don't you come over to the Village Saturday and we'll show you around?" And blah blah blah. And I go, and there was this great street fair, and all this time I'm seeing these posters. Remember the posters for *Maurice*? The Merchant and Ivory film, the two guys on the...? And I just remember thinking, "That's gay. That, I don't know what that movie is, but it's gay. Those two guys on that horse in the foggy little field, it's gay." I just knew it. And so I'm in the Village and we're kind of like exploring this flea market, and I run across a bookseller and he's got a first edition of *Maurice* by E. M. Forster, so of course I bought it. And I'm just like, "I'm going to find out what this book is about." And I read it that night, and I was like, "I've got to see this film." And I thought, "Well, nobody's going to see a gay film." And it was at the Paris Theater. And it was premiering, like, I don't know. I don't remember the time frame. Probably within a couple weeks. And I said, "Well, I don't really have to, you know, I can probably walk up to the box office and get a ticket. No one's going to go see this gay film." And the line stretched around the block, and I thought, "Oh, I'll never see, I'll never. This is ridiculous. Who would, who are these people going to this film?!" And of course, it's all of us. And I get in line and I'm next in line, and they announce that it sold out. And so, you know, you can't buy tickets, you can't buy advance tickets, and you can't leave the line, so I was going to be stuck in line for two and a half hours, and then somebody came out. It's not a very interesting story, but it was like, somebody came out and said, "You know, I've got a ticket." And I jumped on it, got the ticket, went in, probably got the last seat, and just—not only was it Merchant and Ivory, which, of course, it's a beautiful piece of art film, and I had been way into films at that point. I mean it was, you know, I used to go to art films all the time. And I remember their *Room with a View*. So I was kind of familiar with, okay, their lexicon, their visual lexicon. But oh my god, *Maurice*, I was just rapt. And all I remember is when Ben Kingsley came on the scene when he was doing his thing, just the place erupted with laughter and clapping. People were just clapping. It was just so funny to see him in that role after like, *Gandhi*. So that was my *Maurice* story. It isn't really, it's just like a side story, but that was kind of like my first gay moment in New York City. And it was, of course, around art. So...

Wendy: So to end, tell me, is there, first of all, is there anything that I haven't asked about that you want to talk about now that you're thinking about it? And also, can you reflect on where you are now and how things have changed over, you're almost 50, so you know, what have you seen over the course of your life that's really different now in terms of being you and being a gay man?

Robert: It feels really different because... Gosh, all of the things we've fought for, we got. And I—A huge nod to my brothers and sisters in history, because I think we all

fought. And I know that the fight began in Maine much earlier than the 1970s, but I remember talking to people who were around in the '70s, and I can just imagine how they feel. So feeling like I'm a part of something that is in a continuum is pretty remarkable, and even though we don't necessarily reproduce, we do pass down our stories from generation to generation, which I think what you're doing is really wonderful and remarkable, and we can't ever forget that. It's changed a lot.

Has it changed a lot for me? Not really. I've never really had a long-term relationship, I don't have kids, I can't imagine getting married. I'm, you know, I've always been sort of a singular kind of dude, and that may change for me in my 50s. I think maybe I'm hitting my stride and I might meet somebody. But I'm glad to know that if I decide to meet somebody and get married, that it's, that I can. I never felt like I should not have been able to. It was always, I always felt very indignant by—who are you to tell me what I can't do? I pay taxes. I own a business. I pay a lot of money for this, and you want to, you know. If you're going to criticize me for being an American and being patriotic, it's like, well, wait a minute here. I read Ayn Rand. I pay my taxes. I vote in every election. I participate. So it's kind of good to know. I mean, obviously I'm joking around, but it's good to know that all of that stuff is there. We have to just, we have to keep it. We have to keep it.

Wendy: Thank you, Robert. That was fabulous.