

Conjuring Up Courage

#128

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode #128 of Conjuring Up Courage. In this solo episode, I'm answering the question: "But how did you not know you were gay?" It turns out that when you get divorced and come out as gay in your early thirties, people tend to be pretty curious about it. So I thought I'd share more about my personal story.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/128. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/128.

[Music plays]

This is Conjuring Up Courage, and I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. As a self-trust coach, I help people come home to themselves so they can be more of who they are and less haunted by who they think they're supposed to be.

I created this podcast to celebrate what's possible when you commit to being brave. You'll hear from diverse guests who are refusing to let fear and self-doubt stop them from building fulfilling lives and creating a better world for everyone. I'll also teach you my favorite tools, strategies, and mindset shifts so you can do the same.

Consider this your invitation to stop living according to "shoulds" and to step into your motherfucking magic instead. Stay open, get curious, and let's grow together.

[Music fades]

Why, hello, everyone. If you happen to be listening to this episode on the day of its release, then that means it is Lesbian Visibility Day. I am

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wishing a happy day of visibility to all of my fellow lezzies. We are a beautiful and magical bunch, and I am proud to count myself among you.

Last year, I privately acknowledged Lesbian Visibility Day, but I wasn't yet ready to publically celebrate it. At that time, I was no longer identifying as bisexual, but I hadn't quite made it all the way over to lesbian land, at least not publically. So I was simply identifying as queer in online spaces. Ultimately, lesbian was the label that felt best for me, and the labels I use for myself these days are lesbian, gay, and queer, pretty much interchangeably, in case you were wondering.

So when I saw that this year, Lesbian Visibility Day is not only a Tuesday, it is also a podcast release day Tuesday, I knew that this was the episode I wanted to record to come out on that day. And you may recall that a few weeks ago in Episode #126, I promised that there was gonna be a part two of sorts for that episode where I'd be revisiting my coming out as a lesbian and answering the question: "But how did you not know you were gay?"

That is a question I've asked myself repeatedly since ending my marriage in 2020 and coming out for the second time as a lesbian. It's a question that some people have asked me point-blank, some people have asked other people about me, and some people, I'm sure, have held back from asking me in spite of their curiosity because they figured it was inappropriate to ask.

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Today's episode is also not the first time I'm attempting to shed light on my answer to this question. I did discuss this topic a little bit back in Episode #100, which was the very first episode I recorded where I talked about my divorce and coming out again. But so much has happened between that episode and now, and I have a much better understanding of my sexuality today than I did at that point. So, it was important to me to revisit the topic on the podcast.

More recently, I wrote an Instagram post on this topic for National Coming Out Day last October. And that post got quite a bit of traction. It was shared a lot and saved a lot. I'll link to it in the show notes in case you want to check it out. Obviously, Instagram posts have limited space, and I was attempting to answer a pretty complex question in only ten slides. So, I'm using this episode as an opportunity to expand on what I said in that post, with the added benefit that I have an additional seven months of being an out lesbian under my belt, which has helped me fill in even more blanks.

If I'm being honest with myself, I've been feeling a little bit nervous to record this episode because I just know people are going to have feelings and judgments about this topic. But then I think about all of the other late-bloomer queers who are at various stages of the coming out process, and really, I'm recording this for y'all. I'm recording this so you know that you are not alone. I'm recording this so you know that there's absolutely nothing wrong with you for figuring out your sexuality past your teenage years. Better late than never, as I like to tell myself all the time.

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And maybe your reasons for discovering or acting on your queerness later in life look a little different or a lot different from mine. And that's totally fine. What I know for sure is that no matter how you got to this point, it took a lot of courage for you to get here. And while I may just be a stranger on the internet to you, I am still super proud of you. So I hope y'all will remember that as you're listening to this episode and as you're moving forward in your late-bloomer experience. If it ever feels like no one is in your corner, know that I absolutely am. And my DMs are open, so please don't hesitate to reach out if you need someone to talk to who gets it.

Alright, before I officially get started, you know what time it is—or at least you do if you've listened to my solo episodes before and you've paid close attention. Welcome to Shohreh's Caveat Corner, where I do my lawyer thing, and I try to anticipate what issues people might have with an episode in advance so I can address them off the bat. You're welcome! Indeed, this is the kind of brain a legal education and being a recovering perfectionist will get you.

Caveat number one today is the reminder that I'm going to be talking about my own personal experiences which I believe contributed to me not fully figuring out my sexuality until I was in my early thirties. I recognize and honor that other people's experiences with their sexuality are different. Especially for queer folks who knew they were queer from a young age, I know it can be confusing to hear about experiences like mine. My own girlfriend and I had many conversations about my sexuality at the start of our relationship because her

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experiences were so vastly different from mine that she struggled to understand.

I've also gotten some pushback from folks who identify as sexually fluid who are confused about why I don't describe my experience as sexual fluidity. And there may very well be a degree of sexual fluidity to my own sexuality. Perhaps I really was previously a bisexual before loading up my U-Haul to lesbian land. But what I do know in my heart is that I, personally, didn't move from straight to queer. I've always been queer; I just wasn't able to label that queerness in any form, whether bisexual or lesbian, until my late twenties. And that disconnect is what this episode is about.

So if you've known you were gay since you were three, awesome. If you used to be straight and now you're not, lovely. If your attraction to one, sole person caused you to rethink your sexuality, that is wonderful.

There are infinite ways to discover and embody queerness, and I celebrate them all. Today's episode, though, is specifically about my experiences. And since we're different people with different upbringings, what I've been through might be foreign to you. But that doesn't make it any less valid.

My second caveat is that even though I'm going to be talking about the various things I think contributed to me not knowing I was gay, I'm not doing so for the sake of casting blame. Even if I wanted to, there isn't one system or event or person, myself included, I could point to or blame for the knowledge gap.

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Don't get me wrong—for a while, I was pissed off that I didn't know my queerness earlier. I was pissed off at the world and pissed off at myself. And then, when I stopped being so angry, I was really sad. And I'm still sad about it sometimes. I'm sad about the experiences I missed out on. I'm sad about the hurt coming out late caused to people in my life. I'm sad about the other paths my life could have taken, even though I am so happy with where I've ended up.

But rather than waste time trying to blame anyone, I mostly just want to focus on being my best queer self with the time that I have to do it. Because amongst all the other feelings, there's also gratitude. I am immensely grateful that I discovered the truth of who I am and how I'm meant to love before it was too late.

My sincere hope is that we eventually live in a world where queerness is not only visible, but also so celebrated and so protected that coming out late becomes far less common. And that's why it's so important for me to record this episode. I can't turn back time for myself, but I sure as hell can contribute to making the world more welcoming for future generations of queer kids. So without further ado, let's talk about some of the reasons why I didn't know I was gay.

Maybe this sounds silly, but I didn't know I was gay because no one ever told me that being gay was an option for me. When I was growing up, no one ever told me that girls can love and be attracted to other girls and boys can love and be attracted to other boys. No one. Not one of my family members. Not any other trusted adults or teachers.

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Not any of my friends. I had no idea! And that's what it is to grow up in a heteronormative world.

My girlfriend Jessie told me that when she was little, she was always attracted to girls. And as a result, she wanted to be a boy because she didn't think girls were allowed to be attracted to other girls. And that is fucked up!

We grew up in a society where heterosexuality was the default and queerness was suppressed, ridiculed, and punished. And that is still the case today, even though it is to a slightly lesser extent than it was when we were growing up.

When I think back to my childhood, I was completely surrounded by and inundated with straightness and straight relationships, from the books I read, to the TV and movies I watched, to the kinds of things most people don't even think of. Like, take school assignments. Think about the years of school you attended where things like math and science problems had stories that with them. And any time a dating or married couple was included in one of those stories, or a family, it always revolved around a straight couple!

And what is bananas to me is that I was a prolific reader growing up. I was reading very adult books by fifth grade across a variety of genres. I read literally thousands of books as a child and an adolescent—that's not an exaggeration. And of all of those books, I can think of only one book that I read that had queer representation in it. Interestingly, it was in one of my favorite books of all time, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*,

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which is just another example of the ways I was drawn to queerness long before I knew that I was queer.

It's not that queer media didn't exist at that time; it definitely did. But there was a lot less of it, and what was there, you had to seek out. The public library in Flower Mound, Texas, where I grew up, was certainly not displaying books that centered around queer relationships.

And it's not like the queer representation on TV or in movies was much better at that time. There was *Will & Grace*, which I wasn't allowed to watch even though my parents did. I also wasn't allowed to watch *Friends*, which had the example of Ross's ex-wife being a lesbian. There was *The Ellen Show*—not allowed to watch.

When I was racking my brain for queer representation in the shows and movies I *did* watch, I could only think of two examples. So there was Marissa Cooper's brief relationship with Alex Kelly in *The O.C.* And then in the movie version of *Rent*, there was the relationship between Joanne and Maureen. So of the hundreds and hundreds of hours of TV and movies I watched growing up, queer representation was a teeny tiny blip on the radar.

I've also mentioned before on the podcast how I didn't have any out peers in middle school or high school. In my youth, "gay" was everyone's favorite negative adjective. I remember my brothers using it constantly. And "faggot" was an insult that was regularly tossed around.

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I had guesses about who at school might be gay, and my guesses were all about guys, which in itself is interesting. The limited LGBTQIA+ representation that existed at that time was centered around white gay men. So it makes sense that I was never even thinking about the L's or the B's.

I could keep going on for hours about my heteronormative upbringing, but the point I'm trying to get across is that no one ever gave me any reason to believe that I might be queer. No one ever encouraged me to think deeply about who I might be attracted to or might want to be in a relationship with. 99.99999% of the messaging I received from the people in my life and from media led me to conclude that I must be attracted to boys and that someday, I would marry a man. It was just that simple in my head.

Which leads me to another reason that I didn't know I was gay. Not only did no one ever tell me that being gay was an option for me, I also didn't know I was gay because I was explicitly told that being gay was *not* an option for me.

I grew up in a very religious household. My parents' religion, The Bahá'í Faith, is a religion that many people haven't heard of, but it is one of the major world religions. I am not currently religious, and I haven't been a member of the faith for many years at this point, so I want to be clear that I can't speak to how things are now. I've had Bahá'ís reach out to me in the past to say that there are a lot of out LGBTQIA+ members of the faith now who are accepted and loved, and if that's true, that's wonderful.

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But when I was growing up, the official party line on gay people in The Bahá'í Faith was that it wasn't their fault that they were gay, but they shouldn't act on it because doing so was a sin. And you know what that pretty much amounts to? It amounts to the message: don't be gay because being gay is bad. And that is the message that was hammered into my head growing up.

And I used to argue with my parents about it all the time. Before I ever knew I was queer, I felt in my bones that such a belief about gay people was wrong. And when I left The Faith officially and my parents wanted to know why, it's one of the things I pointed to. I just could not participate in a religion that didn't treat members of the LGBTQIA+ community as equally valued members of society.

But I didn't leave The Faith until I was in my early twenties. I was forced to participate in the religion the entire time I lived with my parents and on college breaks as well. So I was soaking in the message during all of my formative years that me being gay would be unacceptable to my parents and all of their friends and our religious community.

Outside of the religion part, my mom, especially, was pretty openly homophobic at the time. She directly told me and all of my siblings that if any of us were gay, she would kick us out of the house. I remember getting in heated arguments with her about it because I thought that was so cold and utterly ridiculous. Like, you'd really abandon your own child if they weren't straight? But she would refuse to back down from that stance.

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So the environment in which I grew up was openly hostile to people who were gay. And that definitely contributed to my disconnect from my own queerness because how could it not?

Continuing along, I didn't know I was gay because I grew up in a patriarchal world where I learned that my worth and power came from what I could offer a man. Like all little girls, I started getting the message early on that how attractive men found me was extremely important and that there was a hierarchy of women based on attractiveness. I also got the message that how good I was in bed was important and that the better I was, the more access I would have to "good" men. Men who were attractive and educated and had jobs that paid well.

And while I can say that matter of factly now, it's not like when I was five or eight or 12 years old that someone came up to me and outright told me that. But they didn't have to because I was living and breathing misogyny and sexism every minute of every day. I was self-objectifying by the time I was 11 years old.

You know, I mention in Episode #100 that some people would have described me as "boy crazy" when I was a teenager. And a year ago, when I recorded Episode #100, I would have told you that yeah, I was attracted to boys and men. But when I recorded that episode, I hadn't yet been with a woman. And now, I can tell you that I am doubtful that I was ever truly attracted to men, at least in the way that straight women are attracted to men.

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Like most teenage girls, I wanted to be popular, I wanted to be seen as hot, I wanted to be desired. I was seeking social acceptance in the form of hooking up with and dating boys. And there was a certain thrill that came with that for sure, but I don't think it was ever a true enjoyment. For most of my life, when it came to sex and love with guys, I was performing. I was trying to replicate something I had seen without actually feeling what I was supposed to be feeling.

And I'm gonna talk more about that in a second, but while I'm still on the subject of patriarchy, I also want to mention the influence of purity culture. Since I grew up in a pretty dogmatic religion, purity culture absolutely had an influence on me. Among other things, I was told that I shouldn't have sex before marriage and that I shouldn't wear certain kinds of clothes, and I wasn't ever encouraged to explore my own sexuality or pleasure.

Part of a patriarchal society is that women's pleasure is overlooked and outright dismissed. Outside of the two serious relationships I was in, none of my sexual experiences with guys were ever about my pleasure or enjoyment. And even within my serious relationships, including my marriage, where I had partners that cared about my pleasure, I was still fighting my own programming and all the messages I'd internalized about sex. I was still putting on the performance of what a sexy woman in bed is supposed to do.

And go figure, it was when I got older and wiser and stopped doing that in my marriage that my libido disappeared and sex suddenly became the last thing I wanted to do. And for a long time, I just

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assumed something was wrong with me and tried to find solutions to fix the problem, when in reality, there wasn't a problem. I just was gay.

I also didn't know I was gay because for me, it was easy to confuse attention and companionship with love and romance due to the lack of emotional intimacy in my childhood. And yes, that's therapy speak, but it's because I've done a lot of therapy and I'm also friends with a lot of therapists.

But over the last year, I've spent a lot of time unpacking my relationship with my parents and doing inner child work. And one of the realizations I had was that both of my parents really struggle with emotional intimacy to this day. I actually read an excellent book titled *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents*, and it really helped me better understand my parents and accept what they are and are not capable of offering me in terms of emotional intimacy.

While I was reading that book, it occurred to me that because my relationship with my parents was lacking in emotional intimacy and because I always felt like my parents didn't really see me or get me, that when I was dating men, I was so happy to get those things from my two long-term partners that I really believed emotional intimacy was the main thing that characterized love and romance.

If you've gotten to experience healthy relationships with people who are of the gender or genders you're attracted to, it might seem ridiculous to you that I didn't realize something was missing sooner. So let me give you an analogy that I've grown really fond of. Imagine that

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you go your whole life only being able to see in black and white, but pretty much everyone around you can see in vivid color. So everyone your whole life is telling you how beautiful and amazing their colorful world is, but because you're unaware that you're seeing the world through a different lens than they are, you try to match your experiences to their experiences. You may have a vague sense that things don't line up quite perfectly, but they line up for you well enough that you're not that suspicious.

And that's what was happening to me with my relationships with men. My whole life I had heard love and sex described in one way, and because I was in relationships that were objectively solid relationships with loving partners, I had no reason to think that I wasn't seeing the whole picture. So I would rationalize what I thought love was, what I thought sexual attraction was, what I thought a good relationship needed, because it was the only way to make sense of what I was experiencing. Until eventually, I had gathered enough clues that I was suspicious. And I got the sense that people were having a different experience than me. And the only way I could find out if that was true was to get a divorce.

So when we got divorced, I was pretty convinced that everyone else had been seeing things in color while I had been seeing things in black and white, but I didn't yet know for sure. And that was really scary 'cause what if I was wrong? But then I started dating Jessie and everything was in color for the first time in my life.

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Y'all, I was like, are you *fucking* kidding me? *This* is what I've been missing out on all this time? This is what sex can feel like? This is what attraction and desire and romance can feel like? I couldn't believe that I hadn't realized sooner. But at the same time, I'd never had anything to compare it to, so of course I didn't realize sooner.

And to bring it back to where I started, maybe if I'd had a different upbringing, I would have realized sooner. Maybe those clues would have been so much more obvious to me. Most likely, the specifics of my upbringing contributed to why I had the relationships with men that I did and why it took me so long to realize my queerness.

There are two other reasons I didn't know I was gay that I want to talk about briefly. The first is that I didn't know I was gay because the model I had for relationships taught me that I was supposed to date, get engaged to, and marry a man on a strict timeline. This is also known as the "Relationship Escalator", and it's a concept I talked about in Episode #42 with Melissa A. Fabello.

And there are regional differences in the specific expectations of the timeline. So growing up in Texas, I knew a lot of people who got married immediately after graduating from college, whereas in the New York City and D.C. areas, it's more common for people to get married in their late twenties and early thirties. But the core of the Relationship Escalator remains the same, where there are prescribed steps relationships are "supposed" to follow.

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One of the issues with the pressure to follow those steps is that if you're always focusing on the next step and the next step and the next step, you're less likely to be fully present where you are in the relationship. And I know for me, anytime unease cropped up in my relationship with my ex, soon enough, we'd be moving onto the next step. So that unease would be buried in the excitement of whatever it was we were doing: moving in together, planning a wedding, buying a house, etcetera. And in my case, because my unease was always general and I didn't know what it stemmed from, it wasn't that difficult to write it off.

Which leads me to the second reason I wanted to mention here: I didn't know I was gay because for a long time, I didn't have access to the information and tools required to make that kind of connection. Even as my body figured out the truth and increasingly tried to tell me with that feeling of uneasiness, I didn't have the keys to decode what my body was saying.

In this episode, I've mentioned a whole lot of reasons why I didn't know I was gay. And I'm sure there are other reasons I've yet to discover, as well as some I'll never figure out. The impact of all of those things together is that my queerness was buried in plain sight. I couldn't see it. My parents couldn't see it. My friends couldn't see it. Maybe people had inklings or wondered about it, but if they did, they never told me.

Has my queer journey been easy or simple? Absolutely not. Did it cause me a lot of heartbreak along the way? You betcha. But, it's still mine, and for that reason alone, it's beautiful. And I've gotta say, who I am

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today is the most true and comfortable version of myself that I've ever been. I'm also in the healthiest, most equitable, and most magical relationship I've ever been in. So I'd have to say it's all been worth it.

To wrap things up, I want to remind you that there's no rush to figure everything out, choose a label, or come out. You can do things on your own timeline. You can come out and change labels as many times as you need to. There are truly no rules for this shit, and fuck anyone who says that there are.

Also, in case it's helpful, this is a reminder that I am a self-trust coach, and I work with queer folks and our accomplices. I love, love, love working with people who are exploring their sexual orientation and gender identity, and I offer both one-on-one coaching and a year-long membership program called Follow Your Arrow. I'll put links for both of those offerings in the show notes. And if you would prefer something of the free variety for the time being, I have a newsletter called The Queer Agenda where I send out thoughtful essays about self-trust. I'll link to the page on my website where you can subscribe to that in the show notes too.

As always, thank you so much for listening. Y'all are incredible. You've been so supportive of me throughout my entire journey, and I deeply appreciate it.

[Music plays]

And that's our show for today. If you're enjoying Conjuring Up Courage, don't forget to subscribe through your podcast provider of

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