Keep quiet about homophobia or open up?

I pride myself on coming from a place of "yes." So it was uncharacteristic that, when my department head asked me to share my experiences of homophobia at a recent virtual diversity town hall for faculty, my first reaction was to decline. He did not know what had happened to me just the week before. I was out for a run when an SUV pulled up next to me. A young man rolled down his window, hung his head out, yelled "faggot"* at me, and laughed as the SUV drove away. I said nothing.

I wish I had shouted, "This kind of bullying is the reason 20% of gay teens attempt suicide" in the hope that it might help him understand the implications of his actions. But in that moment, I wasn’t Dr. Mustanski, leader of an LGBTQ health research institute. I was just the same Brian who had been called “fag” countless times—and had learned in such situations it was safer to keep quiet.

In my work, it’s a different story. I have dedicated my career to research advancing the health and well-being of the LGBTQ community, including documenting the physical and mental health effects of bullying and victimization. I talk passionately about my research to policymakers and journalists, and in public forums. Still, I rarely discuss my own experiences. I’ve always thought, “Who wants to hear about me when I can share the voices of thousands of research participants?”

Our faculty meetings are typically dedicated to announcing new grants and departmental policies, not telling harrowing personal stories. So, I asked my department head, “Why would I ever share such experiences at a faculty meeting?” He offered that it might make me seem more approachable. The comment both stung and resonated. Like many minority individuals, I put up walls because that feels safer than to risk looking vulnerable, which can be a lure for harassment and abuse. Why would I take off this armor?

But in the end I decided to prepare an essay to read, hoping that opening up and showing my vulnerability could break us out of academia’s typical dispassionate and intellectualized discussions about discrimination and diversity. I described how the slur was yelled at me. I told a story of a customs agent at the airport refusing to process me and my then-husband together; instead of demanding the agent accept our civil union or asking to speak to his boss, I remained silent, too afraid of what could happen if I complained and too exhausted from 8 hours on a plane and a lifetime of homophobia to protest. I shared how I was advised to hide being gay during graduate school interviews because being open about the -isms that plague academia and beyond. Yet I saw the motivating power of sharing vulnerability with the right audience, and I have noticed other faculty and staff feeling newly empowered to share their personal experiences. Will such inspiration be enough to advance the hard work of making structural changes to increase equity and inclusion? I honestly don’t know. But I do know that, although the young man who called me a “faggot” probably won’t read this essay, the scientific community is in— and our— sphere of influence. And by opening up, perhaps I can help spur change.

In the months since that meeting, I have had mixed feelings. I believe it is unfair to ask marginalized people to take on the burden of educating others about the -isms that plague academia and beyond. Yet I saw the motivating power of sharing vulnerability with the right audience, and I have noticed other faculty and staff feeling newly empowered to share their personal experiences. Will such inspiration be enough to advance the hard work of making structural changes to increase equity and inclusion? I honestly don’t know. But I do know that, although the young man who called me a “faggot” probably won’t read this essay, the scientific community is in— and our— sphere of influence. And by opening up, perhaps I can help spur change.

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*Science’s policy is to not print slurs in full unless it is crucial to the story.
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*Science*, 373 (6556), .
DOI: 10.1126/science.373.6556.826

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