

Queerology Episode 70 - Feb 5, 2019

Ellie Dote Was Not Gay

Episode Transcript

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Matthias: Hey friends, this is Matthias Roberts, and you're listening to Queerology, the podcast on belief and being. This is episode 70.

Ellie: Everybody expected me to be gay, and at some point, I was going to come out, and it was going to be fabulous, and all that stuff. But that never was the case.

Matthias: Ellie Dote is a 41-year old queer transgender woman whose past includes time spent in full-time ministry within Evangelical Christian communities and voting. She began her transition to become Ellie two years ago and since that time, launched her web design and branding business, EllieGirl Creations. In her spare time, she still works within the Evangelical Church and surrounding community to share her story with the belief that by sharing our stories, we build acceptance and understanding.

Matthias: I'm so excited to have Ellie on the podcast today. She reached out to me a little while ago, and then after watching a speech that she gave at the Women's Day March just a couple of weeks ago, I was like, "I've got to get this woman on the podcast." We get into some really interesting conversations around binaries, binary thinking, and how that kept her kind of trapped in this world of thinking that she was gay for a long time when that wasn't the case. So interesting.

Matthias: Ellie also shares about halfway through this podcast episode some information about her health that she has actually never talked about publicly before. And I mean, like all things on this podcast are, it's some really vulnerable stuff. So I would hope that we would be able to hold this as a community really well. She's open to talking about it. We had a long conversation afterwards as to whether she even wanted me to include this in the episode, and she said, "No, I do want to talk about this." But it's her first time talking about it publicly, so let's hold that. Let's hold that well.

Matthias: No announcements today, so let's just go ahead and dive in. Ellie, hi. Welcome.

Ellie: Hi. It's good to be here.

Matthias: I'm so excited to have you on the podcast today. Thanks for joining.

Ellie: Yeah. Well, it's my pleasure.

Matthias: So to start, this is a question I ask everyone, but how do you identify, and then how would you say that your faith has helped form that identity?

Ellie: Well, I identify as a queer transgender woman. And goodness, my faith has ... It's a long journey to try to understand how my faith has informed my identity, because I think I was in a space where I have kind of formed my identity apart from church, and then now just starting to reintegrate into church again. So my identity is kind of shaping my faith.

Matthias: I'd love to hear kind of more about that. Like A, the forming apart from church, and then what it's been like to try to reintegrate?

Ellie: I came out about two years ago, and it was in a very scary time in my life, because my health was really bad, and I, at that point in time, had been kind of estranged from the Evangelical world. I had been working for several years as a musician for a local congregation that was a federated congregation of the UMC and the UCC Church. But realistically, having grown up in the Catholic Church for a good portion of my life, liturgy is just something that never really connected with me in the same way that mainline Evangelicals did. But I had a lot of pain from my past in the Evangelical world as well, and so about 11 years earlier, I had just left.

Ellie: And two years ago when I was beginning to struggle with my identity, and coming out, and all that, I knew at the top of my head that if I make this decision to come out publicly and transition publicly, I probably will never be able to set foot in an Evangelical church again, and that's kind of where I felt like things were. At that point in time, I was so done with the church that it was a major thought in my head, because I thought that, "Well, what if down the line I change my mind?" And all that, but really, the fact that I had been away from church for so long, I just figured that I had to follow that and come out, and I never thought I would be back in the church.

Ellie: About seven months of ago, a friend of mine invited me to a woman's event at her church in the area, and I knew from experience that this church was pretty conservative. It's the type of church that I probably would have had no problem attending in the past, but now as a trans woman, I was looking at it going, I don't even know how this is going to go down. But she convinced me, and she said, "It'll be fine. I've got you, and you'll be safe. You'll be fine."

Ellie: And I remember pulling up into the parking lot that evening and just freaking out. I probably sat in my car for a good 15 minutes wondering, do I even belong here? Can I even be in this space? What if somebody says something? All that stuff. And then like, God forbid, what if I need to use the bathroom? What do I do with that?

Ellie: But I remember walking in, and one of the first songs that the worship band sang was, "No Longer Slaves." And the chorus talks about how we are no longer slaves to fear, because we are children of God, and that's the mantra that just kept going over and over, and I just felt God saying to me, "You know what? Ellie, this is exactly where I want you to be, and I have you. You don't have to be afraid. I'm with you right here."

- Ellie: And I have to say that it was the most amazing night of worship that I have ever experienced in my life, and it wasn't because that there was like smoke machines, and a band, and all of the fun stuff that I missed. But it was because for the first time in my life, I realized I was able to worship just as I was, that I wasn't in the space of worshipping God thinking, "I need to pray harder. I need to be closer to God, because I have this struggle inside me, and I can't understand what it is. I'm scared of it."
- Ellie: And previously in my worship experiences, that's what it consisted of. I knew from a very early age that I struggled with my femininity, and as a male, that's just not what you do. And so I thought I had to pray harder. I had to go to church more. I had to be in ministry, and all of that. And for the first time, I was able just to sit there and worship just as I was, and I felt really like God was saying, "This is where you need to be."
- Ellie: It was so impactful that later that evening after the event was over, I had to seek out the women's ministry director and say, "You know what? I need to know. I know God wants me back in church. I know that God wants me to be around people and in community with people that will help me strengthen my faith. But here is the whole picture. This is who I am. And I need to know, can I be here? Am I allowed? Is this a place where I can grow and deepen in my faith?"
- Ellie: And as those words came out of my mouth, I felt God really saying, "That is the conversation that needs to be had in traditionally non-affirming spaces." And so that's been my job right now, or my goal. It's not a job. I'd like to get paid for it, but you know. It's been my goal right now to go and have these conversations with traditionally non-affirming pastors, and church leaders, and Christians to basically ask that question. Are you a person that I can be around? Or is this a ministry that I can be around? Because my desire is to just grow in my faith, to grow in my relationship with God, and I need people around me that will help me do that.
- Ellie: And that question has opened up conversations with so many amazing people and so many places that I never thought I would be able to approach, especially as a queer trans woman.
- Matthias: I really want to hear more about those conversations, and maybe before we dive into that, I would love to hear about ... So when we were kind of talking before the call, you were sharing a little bit about how, as you were first kind of trying to come to terms with yourself, there was this binary of gay and straight, and this kind of binary world, and how you thought ... Well, you said you didn't think you were gay, but how that was the box you were being put in. I would love to hear what some of that struggle was like, and what those binaries kind of did.
- Ellie: Well, it's really interesting. I can think all the way back to when I was in kindergarten, and my parents being called in on the parent-teacher conference, because you know, "Your son isn't playing with the other boys. He's out there skipping around the playground, and picking flowers, and turning cartwheels with the girls." And my best friends throughout my entire life have all been girls. I knew that there was femininity there.

- Ellie: I remember clearly in first grade being told, "You need to watch the way you walk. Boys don't walk like that. Boys don't swing their hips when they walk, so you need to watch that." And remembering how I had to concentrate on how I walked. Boys don't motion with their hands as much, and boys don't get so emotional, all those like stereotypical cultural things where it wasn't appropriate for boys to do this.
- Ellie: So I knew from an early age that I didn't fit into the societal norm of gender roles. But I didn't know what to do with that. Now this was around the mid-80s to the early 90s. And at that point in time, we were also facing the AIDS crisis. We were facing ... I remember Ellen coming out, and I remember how big of a controversy that was to the point where she lost her job.
- Ellie: I remember looking at that, and nobody ever had to tell me that being gay was bad. Nobody ever did, but all of the societal stuff that was going on made me believe that it was and made me feel like, okay, well, even if this is true, even if I am gay, because that's what the kids were telling me I was on the playground. Even if that's true, that's not some place I wanted to be, because it would absolutely mean that my life would be over. I was either going to end up dead or unemployable.
- Ellie: And so I really grew up in a space where there was gay or straight. We didn't have the big, long acronym that we have now, the LGBTQIA+, and it keeps expanding. So all I knew was that it was either gay or straight, and I didn't want to be gay. I felt attracted to women all of my life, and I didn't know what to do with that.
- Ellie: So I found my niche in the church. I began working in music ministry, and that was in the Catholic Church, and worked my way up in that until ... By the time I was a junior or senior in high school, I was working for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles helping to put on a big event that we did every year. It's still going on as one of the largest gatherings of Catholics in America every year, and I was helping to put that on. And all of a sudden in my senior year of high school, I transferred from a private Catholic school, a private Catholic all boys school mind you, to a public school for their arts program, this school of the arts.
- Ellie: And the first people I met on campus were Evangelical Christians, and for the first time in my life, I began hearing about what it meant to have a relationship with God, that it was more than just a religion. And I began to wonder, "Well, maybe this is why I'm still struggling with my faith or with my identity. Maybe this is what I need."
- Ellie: So I left my entire career path behind to follow the Evangelical movement, which is a pretty large movement in Orange County. As you can in the mega churches down there, I was able to go to church six days a week. And so I did. I was in church almost every day. I started volunteering in ministry, then I started working in ministry, then I went to Bible College, and then I went into full-time ministry.
- Ellie: And all I found was that the higher up I got, the more I had to work to just hide what I was struggling with, to the point where I couldn't do it anymore. Church had become kind of ... not a drug, but kind of like a prescription medication that I felt like I needed to have it, or else I will give in to this issue in my life.

- Ellie: And I look back, and I go, you know, it really wasn't my involvement in a church. It was more so that I was busy. I didn't give it time. I didn't give my struggle time, and so I couldn't think about it. And all of that came to a halt when I completely burnt out, because there was just a point in time when I couldn't keep doing everything just to avoid dealing with the subject.
- Matthias: What brought you then to dealing with the subject?
- Ellie: Oh, goodness. So when I burnt out on church, I was working up in the Bay Area, and as things are up there, it gave me plenty of opportunity to explore and discover who I was. I made a number of really, really stupid decisions at that point in time, just trying to figure it out. Because at the same time, I couldn't let anybody know, and so whatever I did, I had to do under the cover of anonymity, and I couldn't talk about it, no matter what.
- Ellie: And I figured out pretty early on that I wasn't gay, because I have no attraction to men. But I didn't know what to do with that, and so I fell into a pretty big depression and just started on this route of okay, medication after medication, whatever the doctors wanted to do, therapy, all of that. And nothing touched it.
- Ellie: And then in about 2013, I began getting sick. The doctors started prescribing other medication to deal with the different symptoms and things that were happening, and nothing was touching that until about 2016, when I had dropped down to about 95 pounds and couldn't eat. And the doctor finally said, "Let's order some lab work," because the first three years of treating this was like ... I have no clue.
- Ellie: I still look back on that with this incredulous like, "What in the world were you thinking?" type of mode going, okay, three years of treating symptoms. It makes me highly cynical of the medical world going, "What, did you just have to try every single medication that you get a kickback on before you decided let's figure this out for real?" I don't know, whatever. But that's a whole other thing.
- Ellie: But in October 2016, the lab work came back, and the doctor sat me down and said, "You're HIV-positive." And I knew that it had been eleven years since anything had happened, and so as the numbers started coming back in, I didn't know if I was going to make it or not. It had progressed. I had had it for a full 10 years undiagnosed. At that point, it had progressed to full-on AIDS, and my numbers were not even on the chart. I probably shouldn't have been alive.
- Ellie: That forced me to come clean to my wife who had no clue. And we had to have that conversation of, "Who are you? What is this struggle, and why couldn't you share it with me? And are you gay?" No, I'm not. I don't know what's going on, and in my frustration, I decided that I needed to look for answers in the place we all look for answers, right? Google.
- Matthias: Yeah. I thought you were going to say the Bible there for a second.
- Ellie: Well, you know, right? And so I came across the story of somebody who had transitioned, and it was the first time I had realized that I wasn't alone. And immediately, it began to click, and I remember reading, and reading, and reading all of these stories

and these accounts of people who had gone through that process of coming out and dealing with their gender identity, and every single one resonated with me, and I knew that this was what I was dealing with all along.

Ellie: So I began the process of transitioning, of coming out, and all of that. It was at the same time I was trying to recover and begin the treatments and everything. Luckily for me now, I look back, and I go, "I don't know what I would have done if this had been 10 years earlier," because things have progressed so far medically. I'm expected now to live a full, healthy life, but it was a scary time. And realistically, there still is a stigma attached to the HIV community, so that's where my hesitancy is in saying, "Okay, well, this should be a part of the podcast episode or not."

Ellie: It's hard to try to figure out, okay, how do I explain all of that? Because it is a part of my coming out story, but at the same time, there is still that stigma of ... Okay, well, you know.

Matthias: I will let you know we're doing an episode with another HIV-positive person. It's either next week or the following week. Who's doing a lot of work around working with stigma, and so that's something we're getting into on the podcast within the next few weeks.

Ellie: Well, and medication has come such a long way. It's just there is a lot of pain and hurt that we're still dealing with right now.

Matthias: Thank you for just even sharing that with me. Yeah.

Ellie: It's no problem. It's not a problem for me to share it. It's a problem of dealing with, okay, what's the fallout going to be? Because it's a public forum.

Matthias: Totally, right. That absolutely makes sense. So you talk about really, how you thought for so long, like the only options you were presented, gay versus straight. And there wasn't even this category for gender in there.

Ellie: Yeah, and that was even until recently, until two years ago when I first started just struggling and trying to understand what my gender identity was. I mean, I knew that trans was in the news. I knew that it was out there, because I even knew a couple of people who identified as trans, but I didn't make that connection at all, because I didn't associate it with something that was even remotely who I was.

Ellie: So yeah. I was in this space of being, there's only gay or straight as a possibility for me. And after all, the kids throughout my childhood, that's what they used to say. "Oh, you're gay." And I really internalized that thinking, "Okay, well, maybe that's what I'm supposed to be." And it was to the extent of, when I went into ministry, I didn't completely feel like that was me, but I felt like everybody expected me to be gay, and at some point, I was going to be come out, and it was going to be fabulous, and all of that stuff.

Ellie: But that never was the case, and so I, in the back of my head, tried to logically understand it. And then the only conclusion I could come to was, well, I think I'm supposed to be gay, but I'm choosing not to be. So being gay then, logically, must be a choice, and that is where I ministered from. That is where I thought ... It was in line with

Evangelical thinking, that being gay was a choice, and so I knew from experience then. Yeah, I'm choosing not to be gay. Everybody thinks I'm gay, but I'm not. I'm choosing not to be, so there. It has to be. So these people are saying, "You're just born gay." They don't know what they're talking about, because I was born this way, and I'm choosing not to.

Ellie: I understand differently now, but it's interesting for me to remind myself that that's where I was, because I have to realize now too that people that are ministering out of a space of ... Especially within that ex-gay ministry movement, there are a lot of people that are dealing with ... They may have had that attraction in college, or like at some point in their life, but they overcame it.

Ellie: And I look at that now, and I go, okay, I have to realize that identifying as LGBT, that exists on a spectrum. And for me, I couldn't see my life as continuing as a cisgender male. The struggle for me was so strong that as soon as I realized it, I realized I had to fully transition. I had to change my name, and change my gender, change my appearance, and all of that.

Ellie: Other people, I've met people that have come out and said, "I struggle with my gender identity, but I am going to continue living as a cisgender male." And that is perfectly fine. They exist on a different space in that spectrum, and we all have a different space in there. These people that are dealing with the ex-gay ministry, a lot of times they're somewhere on the spectrum that's a little closer to straight, but their experience tells them that they can overcome it, so why can't everybody?

Ellie: And we're not seeing things on the spectrum that says, "Well, that might be what your experience tells you, but we need to understand that the experience of other people means that there are people that exist further down the spectrum that can't even fathom the idea of being in a relationship with somebody from the opposite sex." And it's just this whole convoluted thing that we need to be thinking of things as less binary and less black and white, and understanding that all of this exists on a spectrum.

Ellie: But we also need to understand that with that, people are speaking out of their experiences. And we need to not discount their experience, but we need to help bring understanding and say, "I appreciate that this is where you're coming from. I'm glad that this works for you. This is not where I am." And helping to bring understanding there.

Matthias: And that sounds like that's work that you're actively doing, trying to bring understanding back into these more conservative spaces?

Ellie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthias: How's that going? Like, what have those conversations been like?

Ellie: That has run the whole spectrum as well. But what I understand is from my past, I realized that there's a lot of hurt. There's a lot of pain, because I was existing in a space where we couldn't talk about it in church. I couldn't talk about my struggle in church.

Ellie: I even think back to the men's group that I was a part of, and I remember sitting in there, and having them talk about, "Oh, did you see that game this weekend?" And, "Yeah, I

can't believe that ref made that call." And whatever, this play, and that play, and I'm sitting there in this group of like five or six men thinking, "Okay, well, what did I do this weekend?" Because it wasn't football. It was, "Oh yeah, I sat on the couch, and I watched The Notebook, and I cried my eyes out. And then I ate a pint of Ben & Jerry's. Oh wait. I can't say that in this group, can I? It's not a safe space to say that." And that's kind of this culture that we've built in the church.

Ellie: So I couldn't talk about my struggle in church, but at the same time, I'm watching ... Like during the Prop 8 battle. I saw the owner of a theater company here in Sacramento that, he was Mormon. And he donated to his church, and so his name appeared on the list of donors to Prop 8, which was to make same-sex marriage illegal in California. And because his name was on that list, he was threatened. He had all sorts of stuff done to him and his family. He lost his job. He's blacklisted from theater, and it really put this fear in me that I couldn't even ask the LGBT community, as a Christian, to say that my faith is important to me, but I need to understand what's going on inside of me. I need to understand what this struggle is. There was no space for me to have that conversation with the LGBT community without thinking if I even ask the question, then I'm going to lose everything that my life is centered around right now. There wasn't room for growth and doubt.

Ellie: And so what I had to realize is that it's very much so like what they teach us. I went to a church down in southern California that was very similar to a Billy Graham type of ministry. And so we did a lot of work in evangelism. We did a lot of outreach training. And I remember sitting down and going through that training of, we start with questions. We have open dialogue. We understand where people are coming from.

Ellie: And those concepts of personal evangelism are things that we in the LGBT community could really, really use as well when we discuss things with the Christian community. It is very much so that idea of, we need to help people understand their story, help people understand their struggle, but too often what ends up happening is we go in there with our hurt, with our pain, with all the stuff that's happened to us, and we say, "You guys are wrong." And that immediately shuts down the communication, and we don't get anywhere.

Ellie: I've had conversations now with about six different pastors, pastors of the largest churches here in Fresno. And each and every one of them have told me that I am the first transgender person that they have ever encountered in their life. And that tells me then that they are ministering from a space of, trans is just an abstract concept. I know that they're teaching on the subject, but they have no personal connection to it, and now they do.

Ellie: So for me, the importance is, I don't think we're going to change minds over night, but at least I've planted that seed of going, "This is my story, so the next time you talk about this issue, and the next time you're discussing this issue, the next time it's a political issue at all, you know that they're somebody in that community that you can attach a name and a face to, that is actively trying to pursue God."

Ellie: And that, to me, is more important than just trying to change minds and trying to change hearts, because I realize it's not going to happen overnight. But the same thing is

with Christianity. Most people do not convert overnight. It's not one of those, I'm sitting in church, and suddenly the light bulb goes off. Sometimes that happens, but the majority of time it takes place over time with relationship. And there is such a fear of being able to just talk about it that we haven't really been able to have a conversation, and that has been one of the most amazing things with talking to the pastors, and the Christians, and the church leaders in my area, and I'm hoping to continue that when I move down to L.A.

Matthias: That is so incredible, and thank you for doing that work, because there's a cost to it. Like any time we walk back into those spaces, there's a cost to it.

Ellie: There is, and what's interesting to me, and this is why I wanted to have the opportunity to address this is because the hardest attacks that I have had to deal with are attacks from the LGBT community. People within the LGBT Christian community, in fact, that have said, "Why are you wasting your time? They're only against us. They can't change. They can't." And you know, I have to believe that if God values who I am, if God sees value in who I am as a LGBT Christian, then God can change hearts. And I have to believe that, that I need to invest of myself in this work, because they need to know the pain that they're causing is so deep.

Ellie: And it was something I actually heard on another podcast, that when we look at the suicide rates, when we look at how within the LGBT community in the church, people that are dealing with these issues in the church, the suicide rate is 38% higher if you're active in church than people dealing with LGBT issues outside of the church.

Ellie: And that tells me that we have a fundamental problem there. You hear from people that say, "If this is the struggle, and the Bible really says that homosexuals will not enter the kingdom of God, if this is where I'm at, then it's better for me to die than to give in to this temptation." And that's this mindset that's being perpetrated and taught, because we haven't been able to talk about it, and so I feel like we have to have these conversations, because no matter if we believe it's sin or not, at the end of the day, God values these lives so much more than He values where we stand on this issue.

Ellie: Now the issue itself is important, but I start from that space of going, you know what? We have to talk about this because we are losing lives. And if we are going to say that every life is precious to God, then we need to understand that and have this conversation, because our inability to have this conversation means that people are dying.

Matthias: Yeah. Amen. Ellie, thank you so much for joining me.

Ellie: Oh, of course. Thanks for having me.

Matthias: It's been such a pleasure. How can people find your work?

Ellie: I do a lot of blogging. Well, I've been trying to do a lot of blogging. I'm in the process of getting ready to move, so it's kind of tapered off for a little bit, and I'm also in the leadership cohort for The Reformation Project-

Matthias: Oh, congratulations.

Ellie: Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, it's been an absolute blast. All of that has taken up my time, so my blogging has kind of like tapered off a bit, but you can find me at EllieDote.com, E-L-L-I-E D-O-T-E dot com. I'm also on Facebook and Twitter. I'm on Instagram, but I'm old, so I don't really do it too much. The kids do, but.

Matthias: Wonderful. Well, thank you so, so, so much.

Ellie: Well, thank you, and I hope to meet you in person at some point soon.

Matthias: Yes. I'm sure it will happen.

Ellie: Yes.

Matthias: You can find Ellie over at EllieDote.com. She's also on Twitter, @Elliegirl77. Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram @QueerologyPod, or you can tweet me directly @MatthiasRoberts.

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