

OPENING Pandora's Box

After fifteen years, journalist Steven Petrow
uncovers his past to write his memoir

by Dave Korzon



Journalist and online media pioneer Steven Petrow lives a comfortable life at the end of an unpaved road most people couldn't find with a fistful of maps. Peaceful. That's the word running through my head as Petrow greets me at the screened-in entryway of his Chapel Hill, North Carolina, home. Tea is prepared, dogs are introduced. His partner, Jim, isn't home, but will be shortly. Petrow himself is glad to see me, relaxed, and ready to talk the afternoon away. And that's just what we do.

I suppose none of this would be remarkable if not for the life up for discussion. Steven Petrow has had a distinguished career as a writer, award-winning historian, and journalist, authoring four books including the acclaimed *Dancing Against the Darkness: A Journey through America in the Age of AIDS*. But Petrow's own journey has been anything but easy. He grew up in an America where homosexuality was wildly misunderstood and throughout most of his teenage years still classified as a disease. A native New Yorker, Petrow came of age in the seventies at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, where gay culture was practically nil, or at best, very much in the shadows. It was a confusing time for the seventeen-year-old to be adjusting to college life and struggling with the issue of sexual identity. Later on, in his twenties, Petrow stared down testicular cancer, dealt with an incorrect AIDS diagnosis, and fought for acceptance not as a gay journalist, but rather as a journalist who just happened to be gay. And while Petrow is quick to point out that the story of his life is not exclusively wrapped up in his sexual orientation, that there are universal themes here of struggle, finding one's identity, and fighting for one's health, there is in Petrow a personification of how gay America has found its way out of the shadows and into the mainstream. There have been periods of remarkable loneliness and pain along the way for Petrow to be sure, but he has now arrived at a place in his life where he is ready to examine his past and tell his story. It's time for Steven Petrow to write his memoir.

"I'm past a lot of the early hurdles of living," he tells me as we settle in his well-appointed living room. "I'm ready to explore my past, and in a sense see how I became the man I am. Having started to do this process, I think there is a certain universality that I hope readers will find by reading this story."

Armed with a box full of his journals, diaries, and letters dating back to when he was twelve, Petrow now finds himself in the middle of perhaps his most challenging assignment. The editor and journalist who has worked at publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *LIFE* magazine, contributed to numerous magazines and dailies including *The Advocate* and the

Los Angeles Times, and who rose to become executive editor at Time Inc., now feels ready to look inward.

And interestingly, he is writing about his past just a short drive from Duke, where he first began to carve out his professional intentions in the Duke Oral History Program. Petrow tells me this afternoon that he has always felt an affinity for this area and while he can't put into words exactly the impetus for his decision to leave San Francisco and relocate here to this part of North Carolina, he does connect it to his current project: "When I was living in this area and going to school I was going through the most change and in terms of text I have the greatest number of letters and journals from that time. So in a way, writing the book here almost feels like a bookend type of affair. My earlier time here was formative and very emotionally engaged and there was a lot of personal growth that I now have the capacity to understand. So being here feels like the right place. But as far as a greater cosmic karma? I don't have anything to say about that."

His professional life today centers on Waterfront Media, an online publishing company with the flagship site www.everydayhealth.com, and of which he is a principal. "We publish websites that are based on books that mainly have to do with health issues. Basically trying to help people live happier, healthier lives and using the web as a medium to do that." Petrow has also started contributing to the editorial pages of Raleigh's *News and Observer*.

And in a wonderful, coming-full-circle kind of way, Petrow has reconnected with Duke, recently speaking to a group of undergraduates about his experiences as a gay student on campus in the seventies.

Steven Petrow is a unique interview for me. It is rare to talk to a writer who's in the middle of writing a memoir. Isn't there the danger of the talking fouling up the writing, I wonder? Am I going to get an abridged version of things? But Petrow shares his life and his memoir-in-progress, which he calls *Pandora's Box*, openly with me. And as he talks about the challenges he has faced, there is a calmness as he looks back on different periods of his life that are now coming under his writerly emotional control. There's courage in writing your memoir, in looking back, and turning your writer's mind inward. Steven Petrow has taught me that. Even as he continues to learn this process himself.

DAVE KORZON: Steven, was there a certain trigger for you in deciding to write your memoir at this point in your life?

STEVEN PETROW: When my paternal grandmother died in 1992, my father was in charge of distributing her things and

selling her house that she'd lived in her whole life. A lot of our family's things were there. One thing I got was this box. This box had all of my diaries, journals, and letters from around the age of twelve through my early thirties. It also had every letter I'd ever written to her. She was a librarian, so it was all catalogued. So I got this box, with my past, very neatly organized by my grandmother. But I hoped, though, not read by her [*laughs*].

I looked into that box a little bit then, and basically I was afraid of what I saw. Because the handful of sheets that I looked through showed me someone who struggled a variety of times—struggled with my sexual orientation, struggled with a cancer diagnosis, and with a misplaced AIDS diagnosis. And I wasn't ready to go back and look at that person and understand what happened. So I just carried the box around with me starting in 1992 until the present. I've moved probably four or five times and what I was most worried about, each of the times, was where was that box? Was that box safe? Because I also felt like there were a lot of keys to my past in there. And so it's really only in the last year that I was at a place in my life to open the box, which I think is also a metaphor for going inward for me. And I think that probably does have something to do with turning fifty, feeling like I'm fully in midlife at this point.

KORZON: Is this going to be the memoir of a gay man, or the memoir of a man who happens to be gay?

PETROW: Certainly part of my story is coming out as a gay man, but I also think what that's really about is finding out who you are, *whatever* that means to you, and that there's a certain coming of age that we all go through.

What I've found is that I grew up in an academic house. My father was a professor, my mother was a psychiatric social worker. This was in New York City. A very liberal, a very verbal kind of family, a lot of heated political arguments. And at a certain point around the time when I had my cancer diagnosis, I found that I had lost my voice in a certain way, that voice that had been cultivated. It took me the ten years after that to both realize I had lost it and then to start to re-find it. So I call the book *Pandora's Box* because of the metaphor of the box and sort of not knowing what's going to come out of it. But I think the larger theme will be finding your own voice in life and accepting all of the parts that you are. And being known to the world. I think there are universal touchstones to all of that. I don't think it's so much a gay story as hopefully a human story.

KORZON: It's amazing to me that you lived with this box for fifteen years without really wanting to explore it. What was your relationship with the box? Was it under your bed, in a closet? Did it have a prominent place in the house?

PETROW: When I got the box I was in New York, and I was going back to California. I took it on a Northwest Airlines flight—and I was so afraid of what was in this box at this point—and I was drinking on the plane and I think I took some Valium. We had a stopover in Minneapolis and I got out. I got off the plane to switch flights, and here I am with the box, and I passed out with it in Minneapolis. This was very metaphoric because I was afraid of my past. I think in large

part I was anticipating seeing the pain that I'd gone through, you know sort of major points.

So I got the box back to California. I always kept it somewhere inside, although not fully inside. So it might be behind the sofa or behind a chair. It sort of had a life of its own.

You know, I felt it had this power. Sort of the idea of the power of history. I've been very surprised by much of what I've relearned about myself and how I described things and how I felt. I think as we grow up many people develop this ability to create a bubble that they can live in. It's sort of a comfortable bubble and yet it's really an entire fabrication. Because, as you probably know from some points in your life, things happen and all of a sudden you're cast out—the bubble bursts. It's actually very clear how I constructed these bubbles of denial at important times. It's also helped me move through some of the hard things that I've had to face. It's been twenty-three years since my cancer treatment, and I have people often ask me, well, what was that like, what did it feel like, what did you go through? One of the blessings of the bubble was that I don't have that memory. It's been protected and put away. But *now* I do have that memory in that box. And a lot of the awfulness. It kind of lives there. That's the sort of very difficult relationship I have with that inanimate object, which—it sounds crazy, right?

KORZON: Not at all. You mentioned that all your journals were in the box, beginning from when you were...

PETROW: In 1969, when I was twelve.

KORZON: Were you a disciplined journal writer?

PETROW: Every day, every single day.

KORZON: That's impressive. Were you aware at that young age of using your journal as a coping mechanism? Did you feel better after you wrote in it? Was it your friend in some ways?

PETROW: I was just going to say, it was a companion to me. And it became a vehicle where I could really be honest about how I felt—scared, happy. It was my friend. I would talk to myself in it. I was able to understand myself. And one of the things now that I've seen going back is sort of how my homosexuality came into my consciousness. There was a time when I didn't even know what that word was. And I talk about feeling different and not understanding why I didn't seem like the other boys, wanting to do some of the same things they did. Language becomes very important here. I didn't even have the vocabulary to describe it, and then I see over time that here's this word "homosexual." And then it's sort of like—and remember this is in the early seventies at this point—not such a great thing in my mind. It was at a time still when it was classified as a disease by the American Psychiatric Association. And I remember there was something on *60 Minutes* that was all about these men behind potted plants who were deviants and so on and that was very scary to me, to think that was the word that I probably was identified with, and that those were people that were part of my understanding of it. I had a lot to say to myself about that because it seemed very fearsome.

KORZON: It's amazing to me that homosexuality was classified as a disease that late.

PETROW: 1974 was when it was declassified.

End of excerpt