Timothy Kurek has an easy humor about him, something that might be unexpected due to the seriousness of the topic of his talk. Armed with Hutch the library dog by his side, Kurek was the very first in a series of human books last Tuesday and Wednesday at the Augustana’s annual human library kickoff event. Kurek started the evening by saying that he “loved the concept of a human library” as we are all essentially human books, with our own cast of characters, romances, devastations and happy endings. But the last few years of Kurek’s life lend itself to this concept a little more readily than most. His presentation, based off of the paper book he published in 2012 entitled The Cross in the Closet, describes his year-long journey of “coming out” as gay to his strict and very conservative Christian community, even though he is actually a straight man.

Kurek starts his story by describing his very conservative Catholic parents and his sheltered childhood. Just as in an actual book, Kurek establishes for his audience, his “readers,” a setting, a list of secondary characters, and rising action. Kurek is completely isolated and entrenched within the bubble of his religion and uncomfortable when he ventures outside of it, speaking of his struggles with insecurity and not fitting in with less religious children. But soon, Kurek finds out that the people he thought granted that belonging and security would soon turn against him simply because of his sexual orientation, or what they believe to be his sexual orientation.

The turning point for Kurek was standing outside of a karaoke bar frequented by members of the LGBTQ community, with a young woman in his arms who had just been exiled by her Christian friends and family members for coming out as a lesbian. Although trying to comfort her, Kurek shamefully admits the only thing he could think of was “how to tell this girl she was an abomination without making her feel like an abomination.” After this, Kurek couldn’t sleep. Wracked with anxiety and guilt, he decided that he had to do something to change his way of thinking, thus began his year long journey of pretending to be gay – lying to his family and friends in order to get a small glimpse of what the label would bring.

It brought silence, from those he thought would love him no matter what, as his friends and community “instantly disappeared.” Harder still was the reaction from his mother who “didn’t know how to handle” him, and who wrote in her journal that she’d “rather have terminal cancer than a gay son.” Although the journey was difficult, Kurek’s mother eventually came to accept her son, and he now regards her as an ally of the LGBTQ community. And while the rest of his former community remain silent, Kurek spoke of the welcome and support he received from his new community, and continued to receive event after “coming out of the closet as a straight man” at the end of the year and his experiment. Although afraid that those he had been lying to for a full year would turn their backs on him, a feeling he knew well, much of his new community appreciated the idea behind his actions and remain close to him. Kurek spoke of this process as one of “intentional empathy,” to look towards other people as the main characters of their own lives instead of how they fit into yours and your own belief systems. He also relates that the year actually strengthened his faith and taught him to listen to “the good voice inside” that preaches love and acceptance as opposed to hate and intolerance.

Although Kurek made clear that he could never actually know what it’s like to be gay, the idea of pretending comes with its own set of difficult questions and criticisms. But as he began his talk, Kurek spoke of being young and still uninformed, and asked the audience to forgive him for still being an “early draft.” Early draft or not, Kurek’s journey, and the Augustana human library more generally seeks to discuss the uncomfortable, to foster discourse around prejudice and discrimination and be allowed the opportunity to think beyond ourselves, towards a more empathetic and encouraging future.