

You Are Not Alone: A Plea for Understanding the Homosexual Condition

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I WAS ON THE PHONE WITH A COUSIN and asked how his family was doing. "Fine, except," he added reluctantly, "one of my sons just informed us he's homosexual."

"What was your response?" I asked.

"Well, we're doing all the right things," he reassured me, "prayer, fasting, taking him to church, reading scriptures."

"That's fine," I countered, "but don't expect too much. If he is truly homosexual, that approach probably won't change his sexual orientation."

"What do you know about it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Many LDS parents share your dilemma," I replied. "You are not alone." Then although I knew that what I was going to say would be awkward, out of empathy for the young man in a hostile world, I admitted, "And like your son, many devoted church members, including myself, have had to deal with same-sex feelings."

After he recovered from surprise, my cousin asked, "So what do you suggest we do?"

I thought back on what would have helped me most when I was in his son's position. "Love him. Accept him. Listen to him."

Shortly thereafter I had a similar conversation with a former bishop who confided that one of his sons and perhaps a second was homosexual. Thus began an introspective dialogue with both families by phone and letter. The parents, if not fully understanding their sons' homosexuality, have been loving and supportive. The young men have since come to comfortable terms with their homosexual feelings. Two of them have served missions, one has married, and all three are doing well in college. When other LDS cousins learned of my sexual orientation, they too were

loving and supportive. Although well educated, they knew little about homosexuality in spite of all that has been written.

Dialogue has published several articles on homosexuality, including an admission by R. Jan Stout, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Utah, that his previous beliefs that homosexuality is a "learned behavior" and therefore an illness "to be treated and corrected" were "wrong and simplistic."¹ Carol Lynn Pearson poignantly revealed the trials of marriage to a homosexual man in *Goodbye, I Love You*.² The book caused many in the Mormon community to reconsider their positions and attitudes. A close friend of mine ten years earlier published a booklet describing his near-fatal bout with a bleeding ulcer resulting from his coping with same-sex feelings.³ Wayne Schow wrote a heart-rending essay about his own son's homosexuality and eventual demise from AIDS.⁴ I had hoped that these first-hand experiences would usher in a new era of empathy in the LDS church. My expectations were premature.

No doubt for some these and other articles and books have been enlightening and moving. But for too many others, pleas for understanding have either been ignored or unheard. Most Mormons rely heavily on the *Church News* and *Ensign* for answers, and these publications have never dealt with the homosexual condition. When first confronted with homosexuality, members are therefore unprepared and perplexed as they grasp for answers. The unfortunate result is that homophobia and the same shallow arguments against homosexuality—often with tragic results—persist in the church as some recent articles and letters demonstrate.

What I consider a clear example of homophobia appeared in *Sunstone* in which Orson Scott Card, noted science fiction writer, seems lost and threatened in the unfamiliar territory of homosexuality.⁵ With no references to his own qualifications or experiences in this complex area, Card claims to know best the laws by which the homosexual can find happiness. Making no distinction between homosexual orientation and homoerotic behavior, he indiscriminately refers to their "sin" but never defines it. Card is convinced that the main purpose of all homosexuals is sex and that they cannot resist temptation. Unable to get beyond mere sexual involvement, he

1. R. Jan Stout, "Sin and Sexuality: Psychobiology and the Development of Homosexuality," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Summer 1987): 29-41; also in Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes, eds., *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991).

2. Carol Lynn Pearson, *Goodbye, I Love You* (New York: Random House, 1986).

3. Cloy Jenkins, *Prologue* (Affirmation, 1977).

4. Wayne Schow, "Homosexuality, Mormon Doctrine, and Christianity: A Father's Perspective," *Sunstone* 14 (Feb. 1990): 9-12; also in Schow et al., 117.

5. Orson Scott Card, "A Changed Man, Hypocrites of Homosexuality," *Sunstone* 14 (Feb. 1990): 44-45.

ignores the wide range of non-erotic similarities between homosexual and heterosexual problems. "Unrepentant" homosexuals are hypocrites, he argues, because they are "unwilling" to change their behavior and should therefore "withdraw from membership." Their "lies" and "arguments" should be met with "complete intolerance." Card's uninformed attack on homosexuals is an attempt to enlighten the "Hypocrites of Homosexuality" but instead conjures up old and dreary clichés so readily used by the "Hypocrites of Heterosexuality."

Another example of uninformed advice comes from Samuel W. Taylor, a popular novelist and writer of Mormon history who is out of his field when writing about homosexuality.⁶ He borrows a dated argument from Desmond Morris, the anthropologist, who in *The Human Zoo* states that humans like captured animals are no longer living in conditions natural to our species (he does not explain what conditions are natural) and manifest sexual abnormalities from being "caged" in cities.⁷ Although Morris's conclusions have since been discredited, Taylor uses them unabashedly to suggest that homosexuals "got that way from the environment not through heredity." "They should," he states coldly, "take therapy for it."

In a letter to the editor of *Sunstone* Alan Seegmiller offers what on the surface appears to be positive hope for change.⁸ He claims to be one who "personally transcended same-sex attraction and is happily married." As a member of a Christian group called "Evergreen" which attempts to help homosexuals "recover," he professes to have witnessed "changes in sexual orientation daily." He does not mention how many *inabilities* to change or *failures to sustain* change he has also witnessed. From his own experience in changing his sexual "attraction," he encourages all members of the church so inclined to avail themselves of the "opportunity to repent of homosexuality."

A parallel situation comes from a friend of mine who writes of a man in Provo, Utah, who once led a "very, very gay life but was miraculously made heterosexual by prayer."⁹ The repentant man's recent marriage is "incontrovertible proof of change." My friend suggests that this "cured homosexual" along with others should go on missions as witnesses to gay Mormons that they can be "cured."

Suggestions offered in articles and letters such as these may at first sound logical and promising, but at the same time they paint a limited and distorted picture by ignoring complexities in the homosexual condition, discounting real-life experience, and rejecting responsible research. This

6. Samuel W. Taylor, "A Human Zoo," *Sunstone* 14 (Dec. 1990): 6.

7. Desmond Morris, *The Human Zoo* (New York, 1969), ii.

8. Alan Seegmiller, "Transcending Homosexuality," *Sunstone* 14 (May 1990): 4.

9. Personal correspondence, Mar. 1991.

marginal approach can mislead the sincere but naive into false expectations and disheartening failures. These seemingly obvious solutions, which no knowledgeable therapist would offer, originate, except for a few ambiguous scriptures, from common beliefs that homosexuality is unnatural and a matter of personal choice which therefore can and should be reversed. Although the homosexual condition has been clinically shown to be much more complex than just a matter of choice,¹⁰ this equivocal attitude has created much confusion and many painful problems and complications for the homosexual person as well as for those offering assistance.

No doubt more than one anxious parent, desperate for a cure, has grasped at such advice and thrown down the challenge to fight the good fight at the feet of his or her "unrepentant" homosexual son or daughter. And doubtless more than one tormented but obedient child has accepted the gauntlet, suppressing old fears and feelings, and marched forth in the armor of new resolve determined to face the raging war inside.

But more often than not this battle is lost, and the resolute warrior retreats ingloriously beaten. His or her initial failure to achieve what sounded like easy conquest often discourages further attempts. The problem is not that peaceful solutions to homosexual struggles are unattainable but that the untrained soldier has rushed into battle with the misconception that one skirmish will end the war. But most wars are fought over time with the successes and failures of many battles supported by wise and experienced counsel.

Admittedly one cannot totally dismiss the sincere witness of anyone who claims to have been "cured" of same-sex feelings. But too often it is assumed the story ends there. One must further question: How strong were the same-sex feelings? Did opposite-sex feelings already exist? How effective was the cure and for how long: Is the testimony a statement of accomplished fact or merely of faith in some hoped-for future achievement? Were the sexual feelings and responses really changed or merely the behavior? And because some people claim to have conquered the "demons" within, can one reasonably and responsibly predict a similar victory for others?

Until now I have been hesitant to enter the battle, for anonymity is comfortable. But sadly I continue to encounter many innocent, tormented, and uninformed victims. To deal with these complex issues intelligently and successfully, many aspects must be considered. Although I possess no academic degrees in the field of sexuality, my own experiences with same-sex feelings, years of personal therapy, my acquaintance through various support groups with hundreds of tormented people, and years of re-

10. See Stout.

searching the matter and discussing it with them, with scholars, and with practicing psychologists and psychiatrists have opened vistas which I now feel obligated to share. (To keep my comments manageable, I have focused mainly on male homosexuality which I know best.)

Like Alan Seegmiller, I too have met people from "ex-gay" ministries such as Evergreen, Love in Action, and Deseret Spring, organizations claiming to have successfully changed people's sexual orientations. I was unable to follow up to determine the permanence of such alleged changes. But I did gain some insights from two male presenters from one such group. Speaking to a large audience, their message was clear and firm: they were totally cured from same-sex feelings, and therefore others could be too. Later in private I learned that these two young men travel all over the country with their message—together (that they face such a temptation is supposed to dispel doubt that their cure is not permanent). One of the pair, however, hesitantly admitted to me that he still has some same-sex feelings but that "from abstinence they were gradually diminishing." (Heterosexuals sometimes have the same lament but with no resulting change in sexual status.) Another presenter swore to me his homosexual feelings were gone for good but that he did not trust himself near a men's locker room.

In *The Third Sex*¹¹ Ken Phipott presented six young men "cured" of homosexuality in Christian conversion. Soon after its publication, however, four of the six reverted to their previous lifestyle. The two male founders of another organization that claims to cure gays, Exodus International, reportedly left it, married each other, and denounced the organization as "a destructive fraud."¹²

The suggestion that animals indulge in unnatural sex only when found in an unnatural environment contradicts research. Animal behaviorists have discovered overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Evelyn Hooker, psychologist from Johns Hopkins, author, and researcher on male homosexuality, cites studies which show that chimpanzees practice homosexuality (although not exclusively) in the wild.¹³ So do California sea gulls on Catalina island, with female birds pairing up with other females for life. All animal breeders observe the occasional presence of homosexual behavior. In addition many animals are bisexual or ambisexual.¹⁴

Can we blame crowded city life for homosexuality? More than one cultural anthropologist has written about experimental homosexuality

11. Reported in Linda P. Cushman, ed., *Human Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (Greenhaven Press, 1985), 201-204.

12. Tony Collette, in *Affinity*, May 1992, 9.

13. Evelyn Hooker, Personal communication, May 1993.

14. John Money, *Gay, Straight, and In-Between* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 13.

among farm boys, sailors, and explorers in the wilds and among islanders—none of whom lived in cities. Most native American tribes in their natural environment not only accepted homosexuals (called “berdache”) but, according to Walter Williams, in many cases even honored homosexuals as special and contributing gifts from God as nurturers and healers to improve society.¹⁵ C. Ford and F. Beach stated in 1949 that they could discover very few societies modern or ancient in which there was no homosexuality.¹⁶

If homosexuality was caused by a crowded environment and not through genes or heredity, why don't more people “catch it”? The majority of us are locked in “cages” of city environment, and yet less than 10 percent of the population is exclusively homosexual, although Alfred Kinsey reported that over 30 percent have engaged in some homosexual behavior.¹⁷ Research from Simon LeVay, formerly of the Salk Institute, demonstrated a physical, structural difference between the brains of homosexual and heterosexual men.¹⁸ His studies strongly suggest that brain physiology in males may play a significant part in their sexual orientation—they may have been born homosexual or heterosexual. Surveys also show that where one twin is gay, the other is likely to be also, thus indicating a biological component in one's sexual orientation.¹⁹ Still unanswered is the question: If homosexuality is biological, why aren't both twins gay in every case? Results are inconclusive, and more research is needed.

John Money, a professor of medical psychology at Johns Hopkins, is among those who believe the whole argument of nature versus nurture is obsolete. What happens in the womb (nature) is biological, and what happens shortly after birth in the brain from social communication (nurture) is also biological. Both, he concludes, influence sexual orientation.²⁰

Homosexuals so often hear the remark, “You chose to be that way, you can choose not to be that way: get therapy for it.” No homosexual or lesbian I ever spoke with recalls “choosing” to be that way, and if it turns out to be biological, what use is therapy anyway, except for adjusting? Do the challengers understand what causes homosexuality, or for that matter what

15. Walter Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 18.

16. Evelyn Hooker, Personal correspondence, Apr. 1991.

17. Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948), 636-59. A more recent survey released by the Alan Guttenmacher Institute suggests the number may be lower (*New York Times*, 15 Apr. 1993, A3).

18. Simon LeVay, “A Difference in Hypothalamic Structure Between Heterosexual and Homosexual Men,” *Science* 253 (30 Aug. 1991): 1034.

19. *New York Times*, 17 Dec. 1991, A21. Northwestern University psychologist Michael Bailey concurs. “I would—and have—bet my career,” he says, “on homosexuality being biologically determined” (in Chandler Burr, “Homosexuality and Biology,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Mar. 1993, 65).

20. Money, 50.

complex processes made them heterosexual and when if ever they chose to be that way? Would therapy or social pressures to change make any difference in their heterosexual orientation? If admonished or shamed into feeling romantic affection for the same sex, could they? Or have they even thought about it? Perhaps they should, for according to Money, what one understands about heterosexuality applies to homosexuality and bisexuality as well. To begin with, he insists that one does not become heterosexual by preference or plan, it is "something that happens."²¹

The superficial admonitions above are merely examples of the conflicting advice bombarding homosexuals. Elder Boyd K. Packer in a twelve-stake fireside at Brigham Young University offered another such explanation for homosexuality when he said that "selfishness" was at the root of it.²² What he was suggesting is not clear. Many homosexual Latter-day Saints I know are unselfishly devoted and committed to the church. They take leadership positions in their wards, preside over their quorums, direct and sing in the choirs, do home teaching, work on welfare farms, visit the old and sick, initiate service projects, and serve on missions. (The elder my mission president pointed out as the finest, hardest working, most spiritual missionary he had ever known—one we should all emulate—later revealed he was homosexual.)

Of course there are exceptions, but in many cases these homosexual members hide their sexual frustrations in church work that others may avoid because they are too busy pursuing normal heterosexual interests. Bishop Stan Roberts reported that although many heterosexuals were hard workers, the percentage of gays in his San Francisco ward doing their jobs "was higher than the straights."²³ Some of these homosexual people, eager to fit the accepted church mold, painfully ignore their strong personal inclinations, marry, and even rear children. How does this kind of devotion demonstrate selfishness? Elder Packer offered no illumination or concrete solutions, but in a later talk he candidly admitted that "perhaps the leaders of the church do not really understand these problems."²⁴ A friend and missionary companion of mine received a similar admission in a letter from a member of the First Presidency twenty-five years ago.²⁵

But what about these brothers and sisters who have been "cured" with prayer and fasting and are now happily married? I am personally

21. *Ibid.*, 4, 11.

22. Boyd K. Packer, *To the One* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978).

23. Stan Roberts, "Pastoring the Farside: Making a Place for Believing Homosexuals," *Sunstone* 14 (Feb. 1990): 13.

24. Boyd K. Packer, "Covenants," *Ensign* 20 (Nov. 1990): 85.

25. Personal correspondence, 1967.

aware of several dozen such individuals who were "cured" of same-sex desires and went on to marry and have children. Among them are personal friends and family members. Have they lived "happily ever after"? Perhaps in storybooks, but the "cure," many later admitted, was more of a "suppression" that they learned to live with for years. And in each case, despite sincere and honest efforts to make the marriages work, same-sex feelings eventually surface, leaving families torn apart and emotionally scarred. Most of the marriages ended in divorce. Among these individuals were a bishop with eight children, a bishop's wife with four, a member of a high council with seven, and a mission president with six. For many following the marriage dissolution, a same-sex lover soon came into the picture.

A few have hung on, and to the outside observer their marriages look stable. One of these husbands confessed to me he wished he had never married, and another, an elder's quorum president, confided that he enjoys his family but has had sexual intercourse with his wife about as often as he has had children. Even then, he candidly admitted, he has to "fantasize being with a man." Can this honestly be called a cure? There are no doubt other cases where lasting changes or adjustments do occur, and it would be beneficial to have these cases honestly documented with insightful details. Still it appears that marriage for most homosexuals is not the end of the story.

The issue of one's sexuality is far more complex than homosexual versus heterosexual. One of the reasons why some homosexuals are able to enter into heterosexual marriages is partly explained by Kinsey's seven-point continuum²⁶ and if accurate is the key of which so many would-be therapists are either ignorant or unaware. Recently I discussed this key with Evelyn Hooker.²⁷ She reemphasized the importance of the Kinsey continuum which places sexuality on a scale, with exclusive heterosexuality at 0 and exclusive homosexuality at 6. A person identified as a 1 or 2 on the heterosexual side or a 4 or 5 on the homosexual side will have strong feelings (including dreams, fantasies, and involvements) for one sex and varying degrees of these for the opposite (Hooker believes the scale should be expanded). A 3 will have equal or near-equal feelings for both (bi-sexual).

Mansell Pattison, chair of the psychiatry and health behavior department at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, believes that over time some people may shift positions somewhat on the scale (this shift, however slight, is the basis for most testimonials of cure). The 2 or better yet the 1

26. June M. Reinisch, *The Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 140-41.

27. Evelyn Hooker, Personal correspondence and interviews, May 1992.

person might suppress homosexual feelings and in time emphasize the heterosexual.²⁸

But what of those who have little or no sexual desire for the opposite sex and strong feelings for their own? "Some 1s or 2s might have managed to reverse a temporary same-sex orientation, but is it possible," I asked Hooker, "for a 4, 5, or 6 homosexual to ever become a successful heterosexual?" "Not in my book," she insisted.²⁹ If she is right, then to offer hope for a complete transformation through prayer, fasting, and/or therapy without first analyzing a person's position on the scale is not just cruel and irresponsible; it is, according to Hooker, "immoral."

Hooker further explains that for a time, with intense therapy, such persons may temporarily believe they are on the way to "recovery."³⁰ Encouraged and highly motivated, they may even get caught up in the numbing demands of marriage, family, and church, but in time the struggle can wear them down, and old temptations can return in company with that ugly companion, guilt.

Pattison claims that of 300 homosexual clients, only a discouraging 30 were able to develop a satisfactory sexual attraction to women.³¹ Those who married reported that homosexual dreams, fantasies, and impulses did not vanish but merely diminished over time. From the 30 he reports on 11 who made shifts on the Kinsey scale from 4, 5, and 6 to 1 and 2. Only 4 (a little over 1 percent of the 300) went from 6 to 0. He does not say exactly how he used the complex scale nor how permanent the changes were, but he cautions against being too optimistic about change and worries about a later "boomerang effect." Donald Tweedie, a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles who counseled over 300 homosexuals, is more optimistic but does not believe that a "cure" implies a lifestyle free of homosexual temptation. He warns of "miracle cures," saying that when such witnesses fall back, they are too embarrassed to admit it.³² Doug Haldeman concludes from his low change rates that men who reported change were "bisexual to begin with."³³

Lying about or suppressing one's true nature can conjure up feelings of intense frustration, inadequacy, and disgust at being dishonest with oneself. To these Hooker adds "clinical depression, paranoia, or schizoid reactions."³⁴ Compounding this are the terrible dilemma and self-doubts of

28. In Tom Minnery, "Homosexuals Can Change," *Christianity Today* 6 Feb. 1981, reprinted in Cushman, 202.

29. Hooker, Mar. and Apr. 1991.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Cushman, 202.

32. *Ibid.*, 203.

33. Schow et al., 217.

34. Hooker, Mar. and Apr. 1991.

the homosexual's wife or husband, who share the struggle or may not even know what is going on. The entire matter is obviously complex, and there are no guarantees of successful or permanent transference.

For many, believing they are the only ones with same-sex feelings and not knowing where to get qualified help and having no one to talk to, the struggle becomes painfully lonely. Far too many, unable to deal with the heavy guilt and despair of being unable to change or accept what is natural to them, pressured by well-meaning but uninformed family, friends, and vaguely-informed leaders, tragically choose to end their lives. Reinisch reports that 20 percent of homosexual men (others report 30 percent) had attempted suicide in contrast to only 4 percent of heterosexual men.³⁵ A recent television program reported that children as early as sixth grade, aware of their sexual difference, had attempted suicide, pushed over the edge by the rejection and/or buffeting of parents and peers.³⁶ Most heterosexuals have no idea how limiting and destructive their naive but aggressive approach to homosexual issues can be.

Some time ago I was at a dinner party of old school friends. As a group they were intelligent, somewhat liberal, probing thinkers, successful in their fields, and active Mormons. The subject of homosexuality came up. Many ideas were bantered about, and the conclusions they finally drew were that "We believe that most homosexuals did not choose to be that way, and we can accept them. But we cannot justify homosexual acts." They all agreed that young homosexuals in the ward have the same moral obligations as young heterosexuals. After all, missionaries in the field must wait and so must their girlfriends. Standards must be the same for both and adhered to equally. "That," they concluded, "is only fair."

Up to that time I had remained silent but felt I could not stay out of the discussion indefinitely. I agreed that standards should be the same for both but questioned that they are. Young heterosexuals are reared in an environment supportive of their sexual orientation. Society and the media continually reinforce it as normal, thus strengthening feelings of self-worth. The church brings young people together in heterosocial activities such as dances, parties, and outings—boy- or girl-watching and innocent crushes are kindly joked about. Although dating early is discouraged, lessons and talks focus on future pairing. A young couple can hold hands in church, and even an occasional hug is not frowned on. Role models are abundant, and although sex is taboo until marriage, the youth have both to look forward to. Of course there are temptations, but dating, hopes for the future, and plenty of moral support help strengthen their resistance. When they

35. Reinisch, 142.

36. In "ABC News 20/20," 8 May 1992, transcript in my possession.

finally choose a mate, and there is no limit to the over-eager assistance given in that process, they are offered a marriage that allows them physical intimacy, companionship, and the possibility of children to provide further love and fulfillment. And all of this is smiled on not only by an accepting, validating society but, it is believed, by God himself.

Where can one find a situation even closely similar for the homosexual? Young homosexuals, both male and female, belong to a society that is essentially ignorant about and opposed to same-sex feelings which are natural to homosexuals. As young homosexuals become aware of homoerotic feelings, they also learn that such feelings are considered unnatural and sinful—even evil. They therefore learn to suppress basic instincts and in so doing experience low self esteem and even self hatred. Acceptance is usually attained only by acting out a heterosexual role that to them is awkward, uncomfortable, and even repugnant. Unable to share early, exciting stirrings of romantic interest, they must instead keep these new and confusing feelings to themselves and in addition deal with impatient adults who wonder why they are so quiet and withdrawn. If their homosexual feelings are uncovered, family and friends may condemn or even reject them. Parents and others will forbid them to follow any natural inclinations and make them feel “abnormal” and guilty for having “chosen” such feelings in the first place.

Although heterosexuals may struggle over whom they should marry, few if any ever question their sexual orientation. When at last they do find someone—and granted not all do—the typical heterosexual Mormon couple, alive with anticipated desires, devotes a day or two to fasting and prayer about their decision to marry—usually resulting in an affirmative answer. On the other hand, homosexuals may spend years of isolated soul searching, fasting, and intense prayer solely about their sexual orientation—with the ultimate answer being silence. When they do seek counsel, they are told that if they hold out, live solitary lives, and practice abstinence from all physical and sexual involvements in this life, avoiding same-sex ties and close social relationships with people sharing similar challenges, they have the promise in the next life of more of the same or of a heterosexual marriage, which for them is unnatural. No wonder so many become disheartened and withdraw from church activity.

What about the need for companionship? We tell our people that “it is not good that man should be alone” and then tell the homosexuals that they *must* live alone. How ironic that for years homosexuality was believed to be caused by a lack of affectionate bonding in childhood, and now the prescribed remedy is more of the “cause”—isolation. Does it not seem hypocritical for happily married heterosexuals to insist that homosexuals spend their lives on this earth devoid of the deep love and companionship so rewarding and treasured by heterosexuals? True, like heterosexuals they

may also receive non-sexual love and support from family and friends, but a bishop who enjoyed such love and support once told me life would not be worth living if he did not have his sweetheart to go home to and love each night. Should he expect less of homosexuals?

Married heterosexuals in the church often conclude with Eugene England, a professor of English at Brigham Young University, that homosexuals should choose "life-long celibacy" and that a "heroic decision" to live a celibate life—devoted to Jesus Christ "freed from the distractions and difficulties of sexual relationship"—is a positive choice for obtaining the "blessings of the restored gospel."³⁷ But listen to the testimonies of these same people, and you will hear that the greatest blessings of the gospel for them come from having an eternal partner and children. If these people were to rush home from work on a Friday afternoon, as many single people do (both homosexual and heterosexual), and face the empty loneliness of three days and four walls with no one to share their emotional lives with year after year, how devoted to Christ would they feel? Families may be imperfect and distracting, but potential emotional fulfillments in marriage buffer heterosexuals against the despair of isolation. Single people are often debilitated by feelings of loneliness, unworthiness, and emotional hunger. Granted, isolation works for a few, but what about the rest?

Long-term homosexual relationships are seldom publicized and are believed to be non-existent, but I know many homosexuals who have lived in stable, committed, and caring relationships for ten or fifteen years. One LDS couple I know has been together fifty years. They met as young deacons, went to college together, and have a successful professional practice in common. Some gay couples have even adopted children who went on to live normal heterosexual lives. Should these gay couples give up their happy families and live celibate lives to satisfy fulfilled heterosexuals who feel uncomfortable with such arrangements? And to whose benefit? Monogamous pairing of homosexuals, as for heterosexuals, can give purpose, dignity, and stability to their lives and in a life-threatening world of AIDS, helps them avoid promiscuity.

Elder Dallin Oaks when questioned about homosexuality on a CBS television news show stated that it is not sex that is objectionable but sex without marriage. Asked if the church offers the homosexual marriage, he said, no. The conclusions of my friends at the dinner table resounded in my mind—"Standards must be the same for both; it is only fair."

Awareness of my own homosexuality has caused the greatest pain in my life, but it has also been a schoolmaster. Because I was such an absolutist and idealist Mormon, if I had not personally struggled with same-sex

37. In Schow et al., 278-82.

feelings, I would like others probably have pointed the uninformed finger of scorn and told the gay person to get help and straighten up. But life denied me the privilege of being smug. From age three I can recall a strong physical and emotional attraction for males, and for years I anticipated a similar attraction to females—but in vain. Like so many others in my situation, at no time do I recall making a conscious choice about my sexual orientation—where would I have even learned of such an option? If I had had a choice, it would have been, “No.” Why would I deliberately choose something that would isolate me and inflict so much pain, confusion, and feelings of rejection? For my life I only wanted to be an active Mormon with a wife and children. My brother had no use for the church and wanted no children. He had five. We grew up in the same family with the same parents and the same experiences. Why wasn’t *he* homosexual?

Believing my attraction for men was just a passing phase, I suppressed it for years and dated frequently in high school and at BYU. Serving in student government, I was able to date weekly many of the most popular girls on campus. Contrary to stereotypical advice that homosexuals lack positive experiences with women, I liked them very much, socially, and they liked me—I never sat home during a Preference Ball. But in spite of my apparent success with women, I seldom dated the same one often so as not to get too close and reveal that I could not respond romantically. No doubt they felt frustrated with me too, for one young woman said with sarcasm, “Dating you is like dating my big brother—I feel so safe.”

I served a successful LDS mission and afterwards in a branch presidency in the army and in a bishopric. I also taught seminary and Institute, dated often, and felt close to God—but was perplexed by my lack of romantic feelings for women. Spiritual leaders assured me that marriage would change all that. Following well-intentioned encouragement from friends and months of agonizing prayer, fasting, and soul-searching, I finally entered into a temple marriage to a wonderful woman. While marriage was thrilling, natural, and effortless for my newly wed friends, for me it was unfulfilling and frightening. I was terribly despondent over my inability to feel the role of a husband and to respond sexually, but I could not explain the reasons why. My wife and I prayed together, read scriptures, attended church, and sought advice from our bishop and from a general authority. My wife was courageously cheerful and supportive, but with no real insight into the situation, she felt somehow responsible. Although it was not her fault, the marriage was never consummated and out of fairness to both of us eventually ended. She has since remarried and has three children.

In despair I began to probe my feelings to discover why the marriage had failed. At first the problem was not a conscious desire for male companionship but a total lack of romantic or sexual feelings for women. I

assumed it was the result of years of strictly following church teachings to avoid sexual thoughts and involvements. But as I looked more deeply and honestly, I recognized in myself exclusive homosexual feelings. That was devastating. I in turn denied them, fought them, and examined them. Faithful to advice from church leaders, I fasted weekly, prayed, read scriptures, held church callings, dated again, and received therapy from LDS Social Services twice a week for years. I was still naive about the homosexual condition because the *Bishop's Handbook* at that time directed that I should not read about my "problem," not discuss it, and that I should separate myself "from anyone who shared it." In spite of abstinence, an intense desire to change my same-sex feelings, and unwavering faith that I could, the lonely and daily fight along with adverse therapy gradually devoided me not only of sexual feeling but of all feeling. I withdrew from most social contacts and was left with a deep, gnawing hurt that in spite of my years of devotion and service, I felt abandoned by God and the church. I could not understand why romantic interests so natural for others were impossible for me. I was deprived of the goal of the eternal family I had always desired and been schooled in—and had lived to be worthy of. Fortunately I was too fascinated by life to be suicidal.

At one point in despair from feeling rejected because of same-sex feelings and lack of progress to change them, in spite of overwhelming effort and sexual abstinence, I wrote an emotional plea to President Spencer W. Kimball, who wrote back that I should see my current bishop, "a wise and inspired man of God who will tell you what to do." I went to my bishop as advised and was counseled: "I really don't know what to tell you." In disbelief, I went to another bishop, who said, "If God knew how you felt, he would feel so bad." I replied, "If God doesn't know how I feel, we're all in trouble." I then went to a former bishop whose wisdom had often touched me, and he summarily dismissed my dilemma with, "I'm not your bishop anymore, I can't help you." I went away with a heavy heart, thinking, "I know you are not my bishop, but I had thought you were my friend." A similar disappointment waited with the stake president. There was no help where I had always believed there would be. Because of my deep faith and confidence in the church, I suppressed emerging feelings that in my time of greatest need there was no one to help.

Then I received a call from Salt Lake City asking if I would be willing to appear anonymously with several other returned missionaries of homosexual orientation before one of the general authorities who wished first-hand information about this "growing problem" in the church. I was thrilled at the prospect but unable to attend, so I suggested several missionary friends who could. I awaited impatiently for their report and was encouraged by the initial results.

The meeting had begun with prayer, at the request of the former

missionaries, and the general authority had listened for two hours while the eleven men and one woman expressed their feelings. The general authority said little, but following the closing prayer confessed that he had approached the meeting with some feelings of apprehension that the spirit would be negative. Instead, he confessed, he had never felt a more beautiful spirit in any meeting and assured the young people that there would be more meetings with other sympathetic general authorities. The group gave the general authority some questions for the prophet, requesting that in place of giving further opinions, would he petition God's will on this pressing matter.

The high hopes and anticipation of the next meeting and answers to their questions were soon shattered. The young people were told that the president of the church felt homosexuality was not an issue worthy of taking to the Lord. In addition he firmly instructed the general authority to hold no more meetings with the group. Although not surprised, these returned missionaries who had given so much of their lives to the church were deeply disappointed. To discover that church leaders were inadequately informed and hesitant even to investigate an issue that may directly involve nearly a million members of the church (10 percent) and millions more in family members was disturbing. Sadly, out of disillusionment, many of this group have since left church activity.

I too began to feel hopelessness, and although I attended meetings, I found it painful to sit alone and listen to sermons on the "beauty of marriage and eternal family life." I have always loved children, and testimonies on the "joys of raising a posterity" cut deeply. As years passed it also became uncomfortable to continually come up with clever answers to avoid explaining why I was not interested in dating someone's "lovely daughter," then mother, and finally grandmother. Home teachers often "kindly" reminded me that if I did not marry, I could not reach the highest degree. Singles' wards stressed marriage, and priesthood quorum leaders gave undiscerning lessons on "the evils of homosexuality." Eventually my church attendance decreased.

In retrospect I am not bitter. I know that these men did the best they knew how. The problem was simply too complex and beyond their preparation for it. Could anyone really understand the anxieties of being homosexual who has not experienced them? From ecclesiastical encouragement, I had spent years nursing false hopes to repent of that which I could not change and to become that which I never could become. I would not suggest that because I was unable to change, others cannot; each situation is individual. Still I have over the years met dozens of returned missionaries and others whose stories of frustration at sincerely trying to change their sexual nature are similar to my own. Is it any wonder that having struggled intensely for so many years without change, we are weary and unreceptive

to the insensitive and uninformed injunctions to “just repent”? Although I spent the better part of my life trying in vain to become heterosexual, perhaps this searching and zealous effort was a necessary part of self acceptance. I am now content to know that had change been possible for me, I would have. Perhaps God would not allow me to change that which he put within me for some wise purpose.

Unable to find the answers I needed from church leaders or in church literature, I began to study and interview non-Mormon authorities in the field. I also began the slow process of learning to accept who I am and to redirect the energy for change that for years had drained me into pursuits with more promise. I sought ways to create a meaningful, productive life as a person who happened to have homosexual feelings, and in time I came to feel more self sufficient and less dependent upon others. Eventually the heavy cloak of debilitating guilt dropped from me.

My Mormon heritage is still highly treasured, and I will always be grateful for the growth and love I have experienced in the church and for true friends and family who continue their support. I miss the weekly fellowship and “spiritual home” with people who once needed me, but it is difficult to see my role there under current conditions. Still I do what I can and what I feel comfortable with: I still study and pray. In addition to occasional meetings, I find consolation in fine music, literature, the arts, and in the company of up-beat and enlightened people who value my support.

To state simply that I am homosexual is too limiting: I am many things. I am honest, I am responsible, I am creative, I like people, I am a son of God, I have a fulfilling profession, I have same-sex feelings. These feelings are not the galvanizing force in my life, but they are a part, one that has to be understood and dealt with in order to make the rest work. For those who choose it, including myself, celibacy is a viable option. But for others who feel they need a partner, I see nothing morally or socially wrong with responsible and committed same-sex pairing. I do, however, feel, along with most homosexuals I know, that promiscuous, self-indulgent behavior is irresponsible, unfulfilling, and in a world of AIDS even deadly. Still I recognize that not all share this belief, and I choose not to judge the decisions another person has to make about his or her life.

There is little space in this essay to consider ecclesiastical issues raised by homosexuality, but research by John Boswell, a professor of history at Yale University,³⁸ concludes that although early Christians opposed homosexual temple prostitution and pagan idolatry identified with it, they showed little concern over one’s same-sex orientation. Curiously no writ-

38. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), chap. 4.

ings indicate that either Jesus Christ or Joseph Smith ever rejected it. In fact on occasion, both expressed deep affection for men.³⁹

I see the message of Sodom and Gomorrah, so often used against homosexuals, as a denunciation of inhospitality, wanton behavior, and rape of either sex, not a condemnation of loving relationships. The apostle Paul without benefit of the Kinsey scale or research on possible biological origins discouraged indulgence in the "unnatural," which for homosexuals who are 4-6 on the scale would be intimacy with the opposite sex. If homosexuality turns out to be biological—both pre-natal and post-natal, as ABC News reports the "bulk of evidence now suggests"⁴⁰—then it would also be natural and to go against it would be unnatural for homosexuals.

We who are faced with homosexual feelings are not asking for a license to sin but rather for understanding and support while we work out a complex situation placed upon us for some unknown reason. Like families of heterosexual members, we too are working out our salvation, and without the role models given heterosexuals in church leaders, history, or precedent, we need and welcome responsible dialogue. And there are such dialogues. Many cities now have gay and lesbian centers with discussion groups and qualified psychologists to help homosexuals adjust in a world of heterosexual standards. A non-judgmental, non-militant organization called "Affirmation" exists in many large cities for gay and lesbian Mormons who need fellowship and support while they reconstruct their lives. A long overdue publication, *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation*, edited by Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes, presents Mormon lesbians and gays and their families, friends, and counselors speaking out on this issue. They address the complexity and sensitivity of the same-sex condition and offer first-hand experiences and information which can enlighten members and leaders of the church. How I would have welcomed such a volume in my early struggles.

Homosexual issues are not unique to the gay and lesbian communities. Heterosexuals often face a dilemma in trying to determine the proper attitude towards homosexuality. Many choose to ignore it, believing it has nothing to do with them. But when one discovers that one's sexual orientation or that of one's son or daughter—or spouse—is homosexual, one cannot ignore the issue. Although parents are not responsible for their child's homosexual orientation, a censoring or evasive attitude can keep the child in an emotional closet. Then when the child comes out of the closet,

39. See, for example, John 13:23; Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 295; Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1972), 5:361.

40. In "ABC News 20/20," 24 Apr. 1992.

the parents often enter. Knowledge that a son or daughter is homosexual can sometimes be too painful and too threatening to share. Parents too need time and loving support, reliable information, and assistance to face these issues. Organizations such as HELP (Homosexual Education for Latter Day Parents), PLUS (People Like US), People Who Care (basically in Salt Lake City and Provo), and P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) assist in mitigating initial reactions of fear and confusion. And what role is the LDS church taking today to help those of us with homosexual orientations find a more fulfilling life for ourselves?

Although sexual involvement outside of marriage is still held unacceptable and same-sex marriages are not offered, official church awareness of homosexuality and attitudes about dealing with it are changing. The frightening "inquisitional" approach of the 1960s and 1970s in which the church sanctioned entrapment, shock therapy, "cure" marriages, and/or excommunication appears to be over. (Unfortunately, this is not entirely the case yet, as the procedurally-irregular excommunication in early 1993 of a young American gay Mormon in Japan testifies.) Many contemporary church leaders are reportedly concerned about the homosexual issue and how it is to be handled.⁴¹ Increasingly local leaders are listening without judging, and some have taken it upon themselves to educate and enlighten members of their congregations. With this and perhaps increased media coverage, parents are also becoming better informed. The result is that more and more homosexual members are opening up and seeking assistance.

Although there is still no general agreement or official point of view on homosexuality (nor is there in the scientific world), the First Presidency recently issued a booklet⁴² encouraging church leaders to reach out with "love and understanding." Leaders are told to be "compassionate and encouraging," to "listen carefully," and "keep confidential the information given by the [homosexual] member." In addition leaders may encourage members to seek "professional help from qualified therapists who understand and honor gospel principles." Because of unique concerns of persons with homosexual "problems," those members may now go directly to the LDS Social Services for assistance.

LDS Social Services⁴³ has qualified people who, although heterosexual in orientation, seem aware of many of the difficulties homosexuals face. As members of the church themselves, they encourage conformity to church teachings but help troubled homosexual members determine where they are in their sexual orientation and what they want to do about it. Following

41. Bill Evans, LDS Church Media Affairs and Communications, Personal conversation, June 1992.

43. LDS Church booklet, #32250, 20 Apr. 1992.

43. Allen Gundry, LDS Social Services, Personal conversation, May 1992.

church advice,⁴⁴ they assist the member to "develop meaningful, appropriate relationships with members of both sexes." Their ultimate goal is to "help people find peace of mind and a sense of freedom."⁴⁵

Social Services staff reports that many homosexual members have successfully made important changes and now feel more positive about themselves.⁴⁶ The church booklet states that "In some cases, heterosexual feelings emerge, leading to happy, eternal marriage relationships."⁴⁷

This more positive approach is encouraging, and no doubt under the church's offer of love and assistance, many have found greater peace of mind and fulfillment. But still, in honesty and without becoming too naively optimistic, one must ask again: How deeply entrenched in homosexuality were those who changed? Did they already possess some heterosexual feelings and to what degree? What specifically did change? And most important, how lasting were the changes?

Unfortunately we cannot know the answer to many of these questions, for according to Social Services,⁴⁸ these cases are confidential and cannot be discussed. Although staff members are aware of the Kinsey continuum, they do not routinely use it or any other scale to determine where approximately their clients fit, and there is no structured research program of follow-through to discover long-term adjustments—all of which would be helpful.

The statement, "In some cases, heterosexual feelings emerge," whether intended or not, implies that in all other cases such feelings do not emerge, and of course one wonders why they do not. While in practice the church's approach may be that some homosexuals "won't change," the attitude unfortunately seems to be "but they should be able to." Thus many for whom change does not occur continue to feel guilty and unworthy.

Herein lies the main problem, as many of us who have been through the tortuous process of unsuccessfully trying to change sexual orientation view it. Church leaders seem to approach homosexuality in general as a moral issue rather than as in heterosexuality a biological condition with moral aspects sometimes needing behavioral adjustments. The church's recent booklet offers homosexual members an "invitation to come back" when many have never strayed. It treats homosexuality as an "affliction" that needs "healing" when most of us feel perfectly whole.⁴⁹

44. LDS Church booklet, #32250, 20 Apr. 1992, 2.

45. Gundry, Personal conversation.

46. Larry Washburn, LDS Social Services, Personal conversation, June 1992; see also LDS Church booklet, #32250, 20 Apr. 1992, 18.

47. LDS Church booklet, #32250, 20 Apr. 1992, 2.

48. Washburn, Personal conversation.

49. LDS Church booklet, #33250, 20 Apr. 1992, 2.

In 1974, influenced by Hooker's and others' studies on gay men,⁵⁰ the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. They had determined that homosexuality was not a sickness and therefore not in need of a cure. The standard textbook on psychiatry⁵¹ now states that many homosexuals "live emotionally stable, mature, and well-adjusted lives—indistinguishable from well-adjusted heterosexuals, except for their alternative sexual preference." Hooker says jokingly, "What other group of people have a valid affidavit affirming that they are mentally well?" (We might also add "spiritually well.")

Leaders understandably herald the success of those who have managed to shift their sexual status, but they still seem uncomfortable with those of us who have not, suggesting that such persons "choose not to change." Sidestepping recent research which might prove otherwise, they consider it a "mistaken notion" that any person is born "with a homosexual identity that cannot be changed" and insist, without discriminating, that not only for behavior but for sexual orientation "Change is possible."⁵²

Obviously bisexuals, oriented toward both sexes, have a choice of which direction they will go, but others may not. Unfortunately many bishops and other church leaders with little background in this complex area will confidently hold out a blanket offer of change in sexual orientation to all homosexual members who may have already spent years in abstinence, prayer, fasting, and reading scriptures long before they ever sought counsel. Encouragement to try even harder, if ending in renewed failure, will leave the naive and struggling member feeling unworthy. Listening to hundreds of such cases, as one does during years of meeting with support groups, has demonstrated to me that when obedient homosexual members are assured that change in sexual orientation can occur for those who sincerely try and then do everything possible and still feel no change, they lose faith in themselves, then in the promises, and ultimately in the person who promised. Many lose faith in God and in the system as a whole.

It seems that much of this sad situation could be avoided by openly recognizing the spectrum of diversity in sexual orientation at the outset and thus a similar spectrum of success and failure. It seems more honest and certainly more humane to let homosexual members know that while some are able to shift their orientation, others despite heroic efforts are not. Counsel, therapy, and personal efforts will help them discover where they fit in the spectrum, what shifts if any might be possible, and what behavioral adjustments are needed. Those who are then unable to change their

50. A. Freedman and H. Kaplan, eds., *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, Vol. 2 (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1975), 1510.

51. *Ibid.*, 1517.

52. LDS Church booklet, #33250, 20 Apr. 1992, 4.

sexual status should feel welcome in the church as homosexual members—equal with those who are able to change. They should be helped to feel free from guilt, knowing they did all they could. It seems this whole issue could be summed up with, “You may not be responsible for your sexual orientation, but you are responsible for what you do with it.”

After assessing one’s sexual position, what are the options and what are the limitations? As we have seen a few homosexual (bisexual?) members reported developing sufficient heterosexual feelings to successfully marry and have children. Some, lacking heterosexual feelings, report that out of “sheer determination”—and even “fantasizing”—they are able to sustain a married life. A number have sincerely tried marriage without success. Some, unable to deal with heterosexual involvements, still remain active in church and create meaningful, productive lives for themselves. Many others, discouraged over their inability to change sexual orientation—not because they were unwilling or did not try—and out of fear or guilt, or weary of member rejection and misunderstanding, leave the flock.

Once outgoing personalities can become withdrawn and reclusive. Some find organizations that will accept them as they are. Others give up the fight and dive into a potentially destructive lifestyle. A few find stability in a same-sex partner. Some choose to end their lives. To get the remaining members to return, instead of sending “missionaries” to offer more ineffectual “cures,” as my friend suggests in his letter, why not send a message of acceptance and love?

Doors may be opening, for recently the Research Information Division of the LDS church solicited input about personal feelings and experiences from single members. If homosexuals respond, perhaps they will be heard. In southern California a group of returned missionaries with firm homosexual orientations attends various singles’ wards together. Where they once sat alone or stayed away, feeling different and isolated, they are now in company with others like themselves and feel a renewed spirit and fellowship. A fortunate few have found caring support from their bishops and church members.

A glowing example of such acceptance is ex-bishop Stan Roberts, who for years welcomed gays and lesbians into his singles’ ward in San Francisco. There they learned to accept themselves, “come out” to other ward members, and discuss their feelings without censure.⁵³ They have discovered, as many of us have, that being irreversibly homosexual is not, as some would have it, a cross to bear but a cross to wear. And we are learning to wear it with dignity and pride, knowing that in God’s plan is a place for us. As homosexual members we know that one day the church will see that

53. Roberts, “Pastoring the Farside.”

homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is innately neither evil nor righteous but depends on the individual. In an environment of love and understanding, it is possible to seek solutions together.

In physical development resistance creates strength. The painful struggle to reverse one's sexual orientation and the even more painful trial to accept it brings growth and new awareness. One comes to recognize and appreciate a God-given variety of human beings who share life's difficulties and beauties and who show concern without judgment.

The passage in Proverbs 23:7, "As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he," is often quoted to suggest that one should change what is in the heart. But does it not also mean that one should honestly search the heart and accept what one discovers there? To ignore what is basic or to try to change it for something false is to be untrue. Considering the potential of self-discovery and conversely the damage of self-denial reaffirms and expands the admonition of Shakespeare so often quoted by President David O. McKay, "To thine own self be true" and "What 'ere thou art, act well thy part."

I am not so naive as to believe my words will put a stop to prejudice or ignorance: these will continue to surface. It will take time for many people to see in homosexuality much more than mere sexual involvement. My hope is that these observations may somehow serve the small percentage of our people who are dealing with sexual feelings natural to them but different from those of their peers. Perhaps the remarks of one who has dealt with such issues will help them face trials and conflicts which the world will, out of concern but with limited understanding, put upon them.

Those of us who have been through similar struggles encourage emerging homosexuals and their families to seek informed guidance to ease them through these issues and challenging times. Perhaps they will learn more quickly than we that the journey though always perplexing does not have to be a long one. Nor does it have to be lonely. From experience many of us can affirm that there is life after the struggle and it is worthwhile. Once you discover and accept who you are, you can face others and get on with your life. Most of all we want you to know that you are not alone. Many people care, and many people understand. Life for all of its problems is good and awaits your unique contributions.