

HEALING TOGETHER: THE LONELY INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND SEXUALITY

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Content warning: This essay contains a reference to suicidal ideation.

It was a cold, bleak winter Saturday morning in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was working at a psychiatric hospital over the weekend in my last year of training as a psychiatrist. I was expecting a quick day of seeing patients, checking on their safety, making some minor medication changes, and providing therapeutic support for individuals who were struggling.

I knocked on one of the patient's doors and quietly walked into the dark room. Lying on the bed I saw a young man covered in blankets up to his neck. I could only see his head on the pillow and the outline of his still body underneath the blankets. He glanced at me, acknowledging my presence without saying a word. I introduced myself and asked, "How are you feeling today?"

With his eyes closed he responded, "I can't get out of bed. What's the point?"

A feeling of hopelessness exuded from him as he spoke. His mood matched the frigid, gloomy weather outside.

"Do you mind sharing what's been going on lately?" I asked.

"I have demons in me," he responded.

I was not sure if this was delusional or if he was speaking metaphorically, so I waited for him to continue.

“God has abandoned me. I have sinned beyond forgiveness. I am destined to be miserable and go to hell,” he continued. I wondered what he had done to feel so alienated from God.

“My wife has left me because I’m attracted to men. I can’t live with myself for hurting her. God has abandoned me for going against the teachings of the Bible. I don’t deserve to be alive.” His despair was overwhelming.

I had learned over the past several years how to hold compassion for hurting individuals without feeling overwhelmed by their pain. I considered it one of my hard-earned strengths to provide a safe space for others to share their deep personal pain without my own “stuff” getting in the way. But that day, I suddenly felt my own struggles crashing down on me. No amount of training had prepared me for this. My own feeling of brokenness left me wondering if I could help him.

During my training to become a psychiatrist, I decided to start going to therapy so I could understand myself better. After all, I recommended that my patients go to therapy, so why shouldn’t I? I had gone to therapy as a child after my parent’s divorce and for other “issues” that I felt confident were not a big deal anymore . . . until I went back to therapy.

As a child, I was socially anxious and struggled with low self-esteem. I continued to struggle forming meaningful connections with others in adulthood because of my anxiety. This was something I wanted to address as I started back in therapy. During our first session together, my therapist asked me what I thought might be contributing to my difficulty connecting with others. I took a moment to think. I had an idea. But there was no way I was going to say it out loud. I was convinced that it wasn’t the real answer. There had to be a more important reason that I was having trouble thinking of. I sat there frantically searching for other reasons I could possibly give him to explain my difficulty opening up to others. I gave up after what felt like several minutes of silence and finally said, “My sexuality.” *What?!* How did I let that out?

I had told a previous therapist and a Church leader about my attraction to men. I had been counseled that if I followed God's teachings, he would help me overcome this "trial." I felt so ashamed and disgusted with myself for admitting my attraction to boys that I vowed to *never* speak of this with anyone else. This would be my secret forever! No one would ever know, and it would silently disappear. That had not been working as well as I thought. Instead, I had now unleashed a monster: coming to terms with my sexuality.

Over the course of the following months, I was furious with myself. I wished I had never gone to therapy. I wished I had never talked about it. I desperately wanted to be attracted to my wife and live in accordance with cultural expectations I had for myself. I had been so faithful in the Church. I had gone on a mission, married my best friend in the temple, and we had a beautiful family together. I was at the end of my training as a psychiatrist and felt I had almost "made it." I was following the plan that God had for me. Hadn't I proven to God and myself that I wasn't really gay? If God really loved me, wouldn't he "heal me" after I had sacrificed so much for him?

Over the next several months, this secret weighed on me heavily. It consumed all my mental energy, and I had no idea who I was anymore. I felt guilty that I had kept this secret from my most trusted person, my wife. I held on to the hope that this was all a joke, just a phase, and I could pretend it never happened. But that wouldn't really solve my problem. I had been doing that for over a decade and it was not working.

I was exhausted by that nagging feeling and finally got the courage to tell my wife that I am gay. After the kids had gone to bed, I told her I wanted to talk. I ended up sobbing for twenty minutes before I could even utter the words to her.

I wasn't sure what would happen. I was absolutely terrified. What if she left me? Instead, she responded with love and support by listening to me and being there for me. I found out that she had been holding

onto my secret after finding a half-written letter I had written to her several years earlier telling her I was gay. We had been keeping this secret from each other this whole time! My heart broke for her to carry that by herself, but I also felt loved after learning that she was willing to carry that burden with me unknowingly.

The next several months were awfully painful as we processed what this new information meant for us personally and as a couple. What did it mean for my relationship with the Church? Could I continue to be active in a church that had caused me so much pain? Would I feel accepted or welcomed at church if I were to accept myself as a gay man?

It was a little over one year after embarking on this journey of accepting my sexuality that I found myself sitting next to a patient who was going through a situation eerily similar to my current struggle. In some ways, I wondered if I should be there instead of him. I had felt many of those feelings as well. Could I really provide hope when I too was feeling hopeless about my very similar circumstance?

How many times had I cried to God to take away my longing to be with a man? I too wondered why God would ask me not to love someone to whom I was so naturally drawn. My sexual orientation was more than just wanting sexual gratification. It was the way in which I viewed myself, felt connected to others, was able to love and feel loved. I had spent my own dark times contemplating if there was a place for me in the world. Wondering if it would be easier not to be alive. I had been taught for so long that this “affliction” would be removed in the next life. I had been so tempted to skip the suffering by cutting my mortality short to finally be “healed.”

I often felt confused about why God was allowing this to happen. People reassured me that God made me this way. Others told me that that it was a trial that I should persevere through with self-discipline. I did not know whom to trust.

I had told myself for so long that being gay was the “natural man,” and if I just aligned myself with God, I could put off the natural man

and become more like a saint as we are taught in the Book of Mormon. Although heterosexual wasn't listed in the characteristics that follow that verse in Moroni, I was convinced it was an unwritten qualification to being worthy of God's love. I had concluded a long time ago that I just had to suffer through mortality so I could finally be free from my same-sex attraction when I died. It felt God had left me out of his plan of happiness.

I felt an extreme amount of empathy for this man in the hospital and what he was going through. I wanted to cry, "I know! Isn't this all messed up? It's a miserable, hopeless position to be in." Instead, I put aside my own pain and feelings of hopelessness and attempted to offer some comfort, maybe even some hope if possible. Honestly, I had no idea what to say in that moment. It felt like all I could do was validate the awful struggle he was facing and provide hope that there are people surrounding him to help him heal from his despair. I felt honored that he felt safe enough to share his deeply personal struggle with me. While it may not take away the pain, confusion, and heartbreak, I encouraged him to lean on others while he heals his soul and mind.

I found myself wondering if I was offering this for him or for me. I suppose it was for us. I thought I had to be whole myself before I could help others. But maybe I do not have to be completely healed to help others. Perhaps we can heal together. Amid a pandemic, with uncertainty in the world and the uncertainty I face in my own life coming to terms with my sexuality, I can better understand that we are all suffering. And yet in the suffering we are helping one another to heal.

In the end, isn't that what we are all trying to do, strengthen and heal each other from the pain and struggle we face? That's what makes life beautiful. Not being free from all the pain, but joining together to listen, comfort, and support one another.

I continue to feel grief and pain when I learn of how many individuals find themselves in a similar situation to me and my patient. The intersection of faith and sexuality can be an incredibly frightening,

lonely, and a seemingly hopeless place. I do not have the power to heal by changing the Church's doctrines on LGBTQ+ issues. But I do have the power to ease the suffering of others by standing together with them, offering my validation that the journey is painful, and providing hope for the future. Hope that comes not from having the answers, the solutions, or being completely healed. But hope in the form of peace that we find helping one another to heal and knowing we are not alone.

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