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Growing Up in Turbulent Times

I was born and raised during the historic civil rights advance in Birmingham, Alabama, which many consider an epicenter of the movement. When I entered high school, it was the first year of forced desegregation; I'd never attended school with black children. (*One teacher quit rather than teach black kids!*) Later, as Editor of our newspaper, I was invited to be part of an Interracial Harmony Committee, and heard from the displaced black students—their concerns, fears, struggles, and their anger. I listened to the bigotry and misinformation of those opposed to having black students bussed in.

It was my introduction to the civil rights struggle—up-close and personal. Those lessons stayed with me.

A Fundamental Change in My Life

I wasn't raised in church, though we'd go occasionally with my grandparents. In college, I agreed to help a Methodist youth group with a drama presentation. One night, during a performance, I had a quiet, but deeply transformative "conversion" experience. To this day, it's more profound than my ability to assign words or phrases (e.g., "born again," "saved") or explain it. It wasn't empirical, or even rational, so I can't...*won't*...defend or debate it.

Shortly afterwards, I got involved in an **extreme** fundamentalist home Bible study. The essential emphasis was on studying and learning Scripture; it was THE way to know God. (Members would ask one another how much time they'd spend "in the Word" that week, and quiz one another on essential doctrines.) The authority and inerrancy of Scripture was tantamount. The teachings were patriarchal, authoritarian, nationalistic and militaristic.

Personal Note: I could spend hours detailing how exacting it was, and the bizarre "truths" we were taught, but let's just say it took significant effort and time to unspool the tapes they imbedded in my head.

Ministry & Family

Nonetheless, my involvement started me on a life-long relationship to the Bible. I voraciously read, studied, and memorized it. I shared what I was learning with enthusiasm, which led to being asked to speak at local churches and groups, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. People seemed to enjoy hearing me speak, so I determined to pursue ministry as a vocation.

I married during my second year in college. Our son was born just prior to my graduation. Throughout our time in college and seminary, we worked with youth at various churches.

I earned a B.A. in Religion, with double minors in English and Psychology from a Southern Baptist-sponsored University. My graduate training was also at a Southern Baptist-sponsored seminary, where I continued my concentration in applied theology, administration and Biblical languages. As part of my undergraduate and graduate education in biblical studies, my coursework included a total of three years of Greek (New Testament) and four years of Hebrew (Old Testament), hermeneutics (Biblical interpretation), church history and systematic theology.

Clarification: I don't share this to flaunt my education, experience and background. I'm merely trying to preclude that inevitable "*Haven't you read what the Bible says?*" question or the blanket comeback of "*You really need to read your Bible.*"

In other words: I **have** read my Bible. In multiple translations and several languages.

Pastoral Success

During a summer break from seminary, a church in our hometown that was without a pastor asked me to speak. It was supposed to be a one-and-done Sunday morning substitution, but I remained there for nearly 11 years. Our daughter was born during our first year.

By all outward appearance and criteria, we were successful, becoming one of the fastest growing congregations in the state—going from around 100 in attendance to hundreds in multiple services. I was featured in the local newspaper, national Christian publications, and was a guest on national TV programs. I worked with several well-known evangelists, coordinating crusades and training volunteers. I held workshops for the staff of a religious television network.

We had an active, expansive outreach, which included pregnant unwed teenagers and reading programs for inner city children. Our Sunday services drew an unusual (at the time) mixture of people of various races, denominational backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses.

An Unwanted Secret

From a young age, I knew I was "different," though assigning a *name* to it would have been difficult. All of my early sexual experiences had been with other boys. But once I embraced the Christian faith, I quickly learned my attractions were *unacceptable*.

For a while, I think the enthusiasm of my new-found faith, and then my passion for the ministry sublimated these impulses. Yes, at times they would surface, usually in dreams, but I was able to ignore them. As I became increasingly prominent in my hometown, it was important that I overcome—or at least successfully suppress—this hidden side of myself.

My Quest for “Healing”

I sincerely wanted to please God, and was serious about following Christ, so I knew my “unnatural” lusts had to go away. Naively, I was confident I could memorize enough Scripture verses—entire books of the Bible, in fact—to “transform” my mind (cf: *Romans 12:1-2*), and thus eliminate the impulses. I also figured that getting married would “fix” the problem—God’s righteous design would triumph over my unholy desires.

I learned about those who claimed to cure, fix or repair sexual orientation, designated as “unwanted same-sex attraction.”

I heard their compelling testimonies of victory over the sin of homosexuality.

I poured over their persuasive marketing brochures, filled with definitive promises of transformation.

This was my answer!

I went to counseling, attended workshops and read every book on the subject I could acquire. Each new voice, with their fresh insights toward “sexual wholeness,” got my attention. When I came across new information about the (supposed) “root cause” of my urges, I confronted it with ardent hope. Any new “technique” to eradicate the desires—regardless of how irrational it might sound—I was a willing subject. I prayed, fasted and confessed my sins. I even confessed the sins of previous generations, since I was told that my sexual attractions could have been handed down from previous generations. I was anointed with oil, had demons cast out, and went through “inner healing” of past/repressed emotional trauma, including anything that might have occurred to me in my mother’s womb.

Author’s Side Note: It all sounds so asinine in retrospect, but I hope it gives a hint of the desperation...and urgency...I felt.

I also think my experiences (and others like me) reveal a foundational problem with these groups and their programs: they have no idea what *causes* a person to be gay, so finding a “cure” is something akin to “Whack-a-Mole” game at the arcade. There is little agreement on methodology. Most of the leaders are not mental health professionals, there is no science behind their approach (quite the contrary, in fact), nor is there any oversight on the practices or the practitioners. They can do whatever they choose, which can run the gamut from the inane to the bizarre.

*The one thing these groups...and their techniques...share in common: they do **not** work!*

An Unexpected Spotlight

As instructed by the “ex-gay” experts, I used my words to “speak those things that are not as if they are.” (cf: *Hebrews 11:1*) Like some Christian incantation, we spoke what we wanted, not what we felt.

Say it, *then* you’ll see it.

I was believing God to take away my abnormal feelings by *proclaiming*, in faith, the ultimate outcome I was envisioning:

I am healed, in Jesus’ Name.

A new creation in Christ.

Jesus has made me whole.

The old things have passed away.

More than conquerors!

The positive confessions of faith were endless, designed to align our minds with our “true selves,” and therefore overcome the temptations of a false identity imposed on us by the devil or a corrupt culture. We

could speak of behavior, or feelings, but not take on that persona. Our “sin” is not who we are. (i.e., Not: “I’m gay,” but “I have homosexual tendencies.”)

Because I was *saying* the correct thing, people around me assumed it was established fact. They took my confession of faith as an assertion of current reality. Suddenly, I was being touted as an example to others wanting to overcome their same-sex attractions.

Other Christians who were also struggling began to seek me out for counseling. Or they were sent to me by their parents or pastors. This evolved to “Coming Back,” a support ministry to help individuals with (so-called) sexual identity issues. I facilitated our meetings, did individual counseling and wrote the curriculum we used in our workshops.

During that time, churches and conferences throughout the country invited me to relate my experience—my “testimony”—of restoration and healing. I did interviews for popular religious magazines, and radio and TV shows. Several national ministries, as well as local counselors, consulted me as a resource. One well-known televangelist flew me to Chicago to interview for a staff position.

Caught in the Middle

I wanted to help the young people who came to me, but honestly, their struggles...their sometimes graphic stories...was a constant reminder that my own hidden feelings and repressed desires were still there. I consciously pushed down the guilt and shame aside as I directed them to follow the same disciplines I was pursuing.

I truly believed the techniques and principles would work. Imparting them to others would reinforce it in me. Silently, I was pleading: *“Please God. Let it work for me!”*

For strength, inspiration and renewal, I continued to read books, attend conferences, talk with other “ex-gay” leaders, and listen to testimonies of people who proclaimed their victory over this “sin.”

More often than not, instead of instilling me with motivation, it fueled my guilt and shame.

*Why is this working for **them**, but not me?*

*What is wrong with **me**?*

Implosion!

It was a series of events that brought down my “ex-gay” house of cards, including the deaths of two dear (gay) friends, one by suicide and another with AIDS. Both hit me hard. I limped on, disillusioned, until I burned out, emotionally and spiritually. I took a long, *honest* look at myself: the “desires” had not gone away, and resisting the temptations had become more difficult.

It began to affect me emotionally, spiritually and physically.

I ended up in the hospital, exhausted.

I finally admitted—after *years* of extended, strenuous, sincere efforts—that **nothing** had changed.

The process did not work...for me.

Personal Note: I assumed the ones who spoke with confidence about their transformation were better...more dedicated...Christians than I was.

(In the decades since then, I’ve learned most of them had the same conflicts, questions and doubts. Many have also left the “ex-gay” world and come out.)

Rather than live a lie, I resigned as Pastor, and stepped down from my role with *“Coming Back.”* Within a few months, my marriage was over.

I was confused and depressed because the important elements of my life were gone or in shambles—my faith, my family, my home...my ministry. In my mind, I hadn’t just failed. I was a failure.

One night, in the solitude of my studio apartment, I sat with bottle of Bourbon and a pistol, ready to end my life. I screamed into the room: *“I’m done.”*

There’s no way to explain it, but deep within me, a *“still, small voice”* responded: *“I’m not.”* That gave me enough hope to see what could happen next.

My Journey to Reconciliation

A few months later, I moved to Southern California for a new job, and *“came out”* as a gay man.

Fortunately, not long after my relocation, I found a wonderful gathering of loving gay and lesbian Christians. They welcomed me, loved me and nurtured me. They became my family, helping to heal my heart and restore my faith.

While in California, speaking at a national gathering of LGBTQ Christians, I met some people from a newly formed, predominately gay-lesbian congregation in Fort Worth, Texas looking for their first Pastor. They wanted me to *“candidate”* for the position, and the church voted to *“extend a call.”* (*That’s how I got to Texas.*)

I remained in that position for four years.

Confronting the Damage I Caused

I didn’t speak of my *“ex-gay”* past, especially my leadership. One night in a home Bible study, several young men related their stories of trying to change their sexual orientation. I was horrified at what they’d endured at the hands of *“Christian ministries.”* One had numerous attempts to end his life. A few had been kicked out of their homes and churches. Most spoke of the spiritual and emotional trauma it caused, and the lasting scars in their lives.

Had I done that to anyone in my “Coming Back” ministry?

Did I wound them in similar ways?

The thought broke my heart.

More guilt and shame.

I spent that evening in my apartment, crying in remorse.

How could I ever “atone” for my actions?

I met a young man working on his Ph.D. who’d also been in one of these programs, and we talked about our experiences. We became best friends. He helped me express my conflict, and voice the shame at my unsuccessful effort to become a heterosexual. We also talked about the remorse I now felt for my part in harming others.

He helped me to *“come out”* as a former leader, and I shared my own *“ex-gay”* story at a conference.

Even though knowing it would **never** be sufficient, I issued an apology for my involvement in “ex-gay” leadership. I’ve spent 30 years actively working to expose the dangers and damage these programs cause. Numerous publications have featured my “ex-gay” survivor story and continue to seek out my personal insights on this subject.

Writing Born from My Experiences

I’ve been a writer since high school, where the school newspaper published my first “creative writing assignment,” and I later became a feature reporter, then editor. I’ve written many articles, published in local newspapers and national magazines. I continue to be an active blogger: *Brain Bubbles* are my random musings on a variety of topics—movies, books, writing, politics, religion, and of course, the deception of “ex-gay” programs.

I am the cliché example of “*write what you know.*” From reading this magnum opus, you’ll glimpse the origins of the primary themes in my novels.

Life in the NOW

Post-ministry, I built a successful career in Public Relations and Communications.

I’m retired now. I have a wonderful husband; we’ve been together since 1998. We live just outside of Dallas, Texas with our rescue mutt, Brody. Our kids are grown, and we have a beautiful granddaughter.

In 1999, at the age of just 45, we learned I had Prostate Cancer, and was treated. After 12 years, the cancer returned, and later, it metastasized. I’m currently undergoing treatments, and according to my Oncologist, we’re “managing” the disease. The effects of the treatments severely limit my energy levels, and therefore my activities. It’s an adjustment, but I have a loving, patient husband, and the support of a wonderful community of family and friends.

Truly, not much of my life is how I envisioned it.

However I can honestly say: I’m grateful. Sometimes, it’s a choice to “give thanks,” but most of the time, I’m engulfed in a sense of gratitude.

Yes, I have regrets about my past.

There are things I wish I had not done, and things I wish I had done.

People I’ve hurt.

The words of Maya Angelou sum up how I cope: “*Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.*”

Back then, I didn’t know what I didn’t know...until I knew it.

I know better now.

And I’m trying to DO better!