

## Goal: Belonging to the Team

by James Mark Sanks

*A feeling of "not belonging" in the company of other males is a common, if not universal, childhood memory for men who struggle with same-sex attractions.*

*The following is a first-person account by a NARTH member who is personally familiar with the struggle.*

I had never played football before. Not for real. But I did in eighth grade, because I knew in Nebraska that's what it took to be a guy. So when the quarterback called the play that called on me, I was downright scared.

I took the handoff, first dodging a lineman. Two defensive backs closed in—and had me doomed for sure. Adrenalin masked my self-doubt; I darted right, leaving the first opponent crumpled on the ground. The other found himself outpaced in a man-to-man footrace. Then, between the goal line and me: vacant territory!

I have completely forgotten that final sprint. I only know that I suddenly found myself there, alone in the end zone. I just stood there without emotion, puzzled. Acres of parched September turf distanced me from cheering teammates thirty yards back. I literally stared at the blank wall of North Platte's Madison Junior High School.

That couldn't have happened. I don't know how to do *that!* *That wasn't me.*

There in North Platte I had done the "guy-est" thing of all: I made the big play of the opening game that earned me helmet slaps from my teammates, a reluctant post-game acknowledgement from the coach, and the title "Joltin' Jim" for the remainder of the season.

I should have counted that touchdown run as a victory, but I just felt numb. It should have been a defining moment, a rite of passage, but I discounted it out of a sense of lack of entitlement.

### "Not Entitled to My Own Masculinity"

Self-doubt is certainly every adolescent's plague. But in my case, a magnified sense of shame meant I felt I was not entitled to my own masculinity. That sense characterized my homosexual pathology. That sense, in fact, sums up my experiences as I tried to relate in the world of my male peers since I first sought entry into the world of men—at about the time of my short-lived junior-high school football career.

Most of my life had been about the failure to gain admission into that special club: *manhood*. But instead of working toward the goal of joining the "team" of men, I withdrew for more than a decade as I sought my identity in—and even stridently promoted—the homosexual culture. (I was co-chair of the Harvard-Radcliffe Gay and Lesbian Student Association.)

Now, upon reflection, I understand it to be a linguistic problem. The word "homosexual" never described what it was that I was really after. What I wanted was to participate, to be taught the role, initiated into the world of men by a salient father. My own father was somewhat invisible; he was married to an in-charge, strong-willed woman. So I could only learn my role as a man accordingly. Like father, like son.

### The Allure of "False Idols"

I felt invisible when I made that six-point junior-high gridiron sprint. That invisibility has subsequently been a key component of my homosexual pathology. I lived my life through projection; I lived vicariously through the lives of other men. It was as if I would pour myself into containers judged temporarily worthy—one plastic jug after another. I watched as my life took shape in the form of false idols. I sought my idealized "should-be," rather than forging my own ideal "is." It was not a life of participation, but a life as voyeur.

Things are changing now. Now I stand at the cusp of heterosexual awareness. The sensation is unusual. Decent-looking men occasionally catch a glance, but interest is sagging. There is a brooding "So what?" A sense of emptiness ensues.

And a decent-looking woman? "Sexual" is not the first word that comes to mind. "Pleasing"—certainly, for now. A woman nicely dressed turns my head. Sometimes I feel like pausing and saying, "Wow! You sure are pretty." And in the chest—that feeling they call "breathhtaking"—is true. There's true interest now, accompanied by a feeling I've never negotiated before. That hard-to-describe feeling is remarkable: the sense that I'm actually there.

These days, I'm more at home; there's the feeling that now I belong in my body. And football? It's a great sport, but no longer vexing. And my goal—"belonging to the team"—can be achieved without it. ■