

Same-Sex Attraction: A View From The Sidelines

By Janet K. Mackey

The author—a new NARTH supporter who recently came across our web site by chance—reflects on the discrepancy between her personal experience with gay and lesbian friends, and what the research is said to have shown about homosexuality.

Years ago, while living in a big city, I had many contacts with gay men through work and socializing. Some of these contacts were close, and I had the occasion to glimpse something of my friends' mindsets and the dynamics of gay relationships.

You might say I became an observer of the gay community, something not difficult to do in a large, freewheeling city.

Over the years, the friendships I had could not help but lead me to some conclusions. Despite my strong personal feelings of empathy for these men, I came to believe that homosexuality was really a kind of immaturity carried over into adulthood, and a very confused search for a father, for respect from other males, and for self-respect and manhood.

One night, during a particularly candid conversation that has stayed with me for years, a co-worker expressed terrible unhappiness. He told me he was certain his homosexuality had developmental roots in his relationship with his father. He also said he had searched libraries and been to many therapists, but found no help in the direction he perceived was right—to better understand the roots of his attractions, and hopefully, to change. He talked to me about the violence in gay relationships and said he despaired of ever finding stability and lasting love.

In so many such lives, I saw a pattern of instability — promiscuity, alcoholic dissipation, emotional swings, desperate crushes, unbalanced partnerships, playing a "role," and considerable unhappiness. Most especially, I noticed that these men expressed fondness for their mothers, but rarely, if ever, spoke of their fathers — as if their fathers were dead or somehow "missing."

I had another homosexual friend, "Tom," who had a business partnership with "Jack." Jack was the loving father of two children, one of whom was a little boy named Christian. Tom, apparently longing for the same fatherly love he saw the boy receiving, insisted Jack call *him* "Christian" as if he himself were that cherished little son.

There are other times when I saw odd and inappropriate behavior. One Christmas, for example, a gay friend completely surprised me with me a pornographic Christmas card. Now I cared about this friend, so I pretended not to

be ruffled and tried to contact him. But he must have sensed my disapproval, because he never responded to my calls, and he thus let a friendship of many years come to an abrupt end.

Eventually — naively — I myself married a man who, I even realized at the time, was much like my many gay male friends. His name was Peter. We had many mutual interests, and he seemed like a good person. But I soon began to suspect problems. Not long after the wedding, we flew out to visit his parents' home. I could see an obvious emotional estrangement between Peter's parents. There was also a painful silence and lack of common ground between Peter and his father, and a remarkable sympathy between Peter and his mother.

I also noticed that his mother kept a large, old photograph of her son displayed on her desk. The picture showed him as a teenager, play-acting with a few chums. It might have been charming except for the fact that he was wearing his mother's clothing! That photograph, as I came to see, was his mother's "trophy" and defense against her husband, as if she were saying, "Peter's *my* son, not *yours*." I wondered what influence the photo might have had on my husband, who had seen it daily as he was growing up in that household.

Not surprisingly, my husband struggled with homosexual urges throughout our marriage. "I know that nobody is born gay. And no one wants to be gay," he told me. "So, why do I have these attractions to men?"

For years before, Peter had taken refuge in alcohol, and this carried into the marriage. He also attempted suicide several times — once, almost taking me with him. We began attending church regularly and also went to separate, alcohol-related twelve-step meetings. As difficult as this experience was, I'm grateful for the personal growth it forced on *me*.

Peter, on the other hand, continued to drink. Although he had been a convivial part of the city's gay scene before we met, he really didn't want to go back to living as a gay man again. But he had neither the understanding nor the guidance to find his way out. The only relief he knew came through alcohol. Drinking dulled the pain of his life and made him forget. (Our marriage didn't hold, of course.)

At one point I wondered why there were so many homosexuals, and I asked myself if there were anything in the world that could drive me, too, to be gay. I decided to experiment with my thought and imagination — stretch-

ing it as far as possible in forbidden directions. I discerned (at least, I believe I discerned) that in order for me to be a lesbian I would have to feel it terribly unsafe to be a woman. For a woman, it seemed to me, a homosexual partnership would serve as a kind of fortress and weapon against not only men, but all the forces and powers and obstacles of a world both feared and held somewhat in contempt. Well, all this happened years ago...

An Introduction to Lesbianism

After our divorce I moved to southern New England and found myself relieved to be removed, for the while, from the "gayness" of the city. But, as time went by, I saw that New England, too, had its gay community. However, where I had met only men who were homosexual when I lived in the city, here, I encountered homosexual women as well.

One was a woman with whom I worked for several years. When I met her I wasn't sure whether she was a man or a woman, due to her dress and her swagger, her crew cut, and the male identity she seemed to project.

For a while, we had a cooperative and productive work relationship. Eventually she trusted me enough to tell me about her background. Her father had left the family early on, and after that time, she was subjected to the tyranny of a teenage relative. From the age of about six through most of her high school years, she was repeatedly raped by this boy and a group of his friends.

Her mother — a powerless, emotionally overwhelmed and stressed woman — dismissed her daughter's rape reports and her pleas for help. Finally, the girl left home, and she changed her name to seal her separation from her family. When I knew this woman, she was living with a female partner with whom she seemed to have an intense relationship.

My co-worker told me she simply could not trust men as a result of the assaults she had experienced. But it seemed to me she couldn't trust her natural gender as well, and that she fit the image I had gotten in my mind years ago — the impression I had that in order for a woman to be a lesbian, she would have to feel that it was unsafe to be a woman.

On several occasions I became aware that she was viewing me sexually. I loved the work I was doing and wanted to continue doing it, so I made an effort not to react. Sadly, her physical attention cut off the possibility of the friendship I might otherwise have welcomed, for we had enjoyed talking about many things women normally do. We continued to work together for a while. In time, however, her emotional outbursts and personal manipulation of me made it impossible for me to remain at the same job.

Years ago, of course, straight people used to refer to homo-

sexuality as "sick." For many, that was a truly pejorative term for something they didn't understand and from which they instinctively recoiled. Although the term is now out of favor (not the least for its lack of compassion), it may not be so far from the truth after all. The word "sick" also means to be troubled or grieved, and the homosexuals I have known certainly seemed to be troubled and grieved. And, like people who are physically sick and "not quite themselves," they, too, don't seem to be quite themselves.

It seems to me that they are terribly confused — struggling to mature into their natural genders while parodying the opposite gender — and that they are far more cynical and bitter than "gay."

In time, I moved and am now settled in Vermont. Initially, when the issue of civil unions and gay marriage came up in here, I thought, "What of it — why not — if it makes these people feel comfortable... What's it to me? And, besides, there's nothing to be done for them, anyway."

I believe there are many people who concluded thus, for the public has been conditioned in recent times to accept homosexuality as either genetic or resistant to change and, in any case, not to be judged.

Gay-Activist Testimony vs. Personal Observation

The state legislature in Vermont held hearings on civil unions, and I listened to various presenters on local radio broadcasts. What I heard from both sides was mostly vacuous. I was particularly struck by what was said by gay speakers and their supporters: amazingly, it didn't correlate at all with what I knew from experience; and, moreover, it clearly seemed calculated to manipulate the legislators and convince them to back off.

I'm not sure which disturbed me more — the display of dishonesty, or the possibility that my government could be thoroughly fooled.

After two evenings of listening to the broadcasts, I searched the Internet to see if I could find something explicit and authoritative to substantiate (or even, if necessary, discredit!) my own perceptions. That's when I found the NARTH website. I stayed up through the night, reading as much as I could of this thoughtful material. Here, I realized, is the voice that has been missing from the Vermont debate. I wondered if any of the articles might give the Vermont legislators some creative pause in their deliberations. But it was too late to find out. The vote was taken that afternoon, and the rest is American history.

During the Vermont legislative hearings I **did not observe** the myth of "once gay, always gay" **challenged**. It is certainly untrue. I met a man in Chicago **who was able to shift** his sexual orientation from **homosexual to heterosexual**. I

don't know the means of this change, but I do know he was happy with it and was able to sustain it. This happened thirty years ago, and he is still straight. I have read of many such changes.

And, from a more personal standpoint, I can relate a story about a boy who appeared to those in his family to be growing into homosexuality, but who managed not to do so. It illustrates the importance of upbringing and — if I may make a value judgment here — of the right influences on children.

The Little Boy Who *Almost* Grew Up Gay

There was a wonderful little boy I knew named Wally; he was one of several children born to a young couple out West years ago. Like many little boys his age, Wally had his toy soldiers and trucks and construction sets. He enjoyed a good tease, ran about and made plenty of noise, and took a fond note of little girls. Wally also was relaxed, and he especially enjoyed the company of adults. His parents were bright, responsible young people. The father worked very hard to support the family, and the mother spent a great deal of time caring for her children and household.

Despite apparent harmony, there actually were problems from the beginning, and they seemed to originate with the father of this family. Bob was a good, decent fellow in many respects, but he found it very difficult to interact with this particular son. He demonstrated little affection for the boy, avoiding touching, playing, or speaking with him, and he made none of the normal fatherly efforts to guide the boy. I recall Bob's avoiding looking at Wally, but not the other children, when Wally greeted him after a long absence. Although I can't say for certain, I think Bob felt awkward about Wally and couldn't find a ground on which to connect with him.

You see, the two were very different. Where Wally was sensitive to others, sociable, and giving, Bob was self-absorbed, hard driving, and extremely competitive. Wally preferred gentle activities and companionship. Bob, on the other hand, filled his spare time with a variety of intense solo sports, away from his family, sometimes for considerable stretches of time.

His wife, Martha, was left alone most of the time, with many cares and decisions that probably should have been joint affairs. She became very angry and was deeply concerned over the children's need for their much-absent father. Whenever Bob was home, he and Martha argued a great deal in the presence of the children, and when Martha was alone with the children she spoke about Bob with considerable contempt. Even as a youngster, Wally became rather protective of his mother, and she, in turn, brought him into her confidence and activities much as if he were an intimate friend. In a way, Wally took the place of his father in his mother's life, but he became rather girl-

ish in the process.

By the time he had reached the age of three or four, Wally had shown as much interest in playing with dolls and dressing up in the clothes of his mother and other female relatives as he did in his boyish toys. This gender ambivalence continued for a couple of years to one degree or another, though in shifting forms. He did well in school but was rather withdrawn, forming no friendships with other boys and showing no interest in sports.

He became something of a perfectionist about his dress and manner. For a while I thought he was extremely lazy, until I realized he didn't want to attempt anything at which he might seem to fall short or fail. When he was still quite young, he showed a fondness for the arts and other very refined things. The more he grew in these directions, the more difficult it became for father and son to connect. The antipathy was mutual. And for a while, it appeared Wally would some day adopt a homosexual lifestyle.

But that didn't happen. Wally is now a grown man with a willingness to assert himself, take risks, defend what he thinks is right, and compete fiercely but fairly. He has male friends, and he has a fiancée. Qualities that seemed effete in his childhood have morphed into a pleasant masculine sophistication. He has a good time in life, and I think he rather likes himself. In my estimate, this outcome was not coincidental.

Wally had two important factors in his favor. First, he had Uncle Jack, an older man who truly appreciated Wally's sensitive, aesthetic qualities, and this man spent an enormous amount of time with him. Jack listened intently to Wally, and he gave him fatherly advice. When Wally was little, he often sat him on his lap and hugged him. He took this child on camping and fishing outings. Later, he encouraged Wally to play baseball, even though he wasn't very good at it, and Jack went to Wally's games and rooted for the home team. These two had a wonderful, happy relationship, and it seemed to me that Jack took the place of "father" for Wally.

I think that Wally wished for this kind of connection with his real dad, but Jack sustained him, nevertheless, and Wally adored him. Jack's wife was warm and cheerful, always welcoming the boy and his siblings into her home.

The second thing that I believe helped Wally sort things out, was a shift in his mother's attitude. She reached a point of such unhappiness that she knew she either had to leave her husband or take responsibility for change. She chose the latter. (I think Wally was about ten at this time.) Martha stopped belittling Bob and put a certain distance between her and Wally. She made arrangements for the family to take extended vacations together, not just once in a while, but regularly and frequently. She invited friends and relatives into the home for socializing. She joined her

continued

husband on some of his outings and made an effort to understand the work he did. And she mobilized the entire family to take up several of the solo sports that kept her husband preoccupied and away from home, so they could all play — and compete — together as a family.

Later, during several summers, the children worked alongside Bob on construction projects. In short, mother and children interacted with the father in various positive ways that were open to them, and eventually, they grew to appreciate one another on many counts.

Wally and Bob know they are very different, and Bob really hasn't softened much through all this. But a day did come when Bob was able to praise his son for some really worthwhile achievements and tell him he was immensely proud of him. I saw Wally's eyes pop. He was shocked, but so happy to hear this from his father.

Social Policy on Homosexuality: Tolerance, or Affirmation?

Since the time civil unions became law in Vermont, I have become aware of the development, expanse, and clout of gay activism across the country, and I know that it will make a sad difference on people and life in the United States if it runs its course. Regardless of what has been placed on the political table, the *logical* outcome of activist goals would seem to be a society compelled to affirm and nurture homosexuality in *all* its dimensions. This possibility needs to be addressed with common sense, in light of psychological evidence and solid facts.

Some argue that *because homosexuality exists, it must be understood as normal*. It has been called an "alternative life style" — as such, no less valuable to the individual or society than the heterosexual practices of cultures through the

ages. But such an unusual claim **must be examined**. We have the right and the obligation to **challenge the surging** relativism of our times, of **which this is symptomatic**. We surely need to consider that, if there **is no universal** moral good for humankind, there may be **no morality at all** — and no blueprint for healthy living.

The Media's Failure to Tell the Whole Story

The mass media, which is where most people gather their information, has not framed the issues completely and it has failed to be truthful. It hasn't given the public a clear view of gay practices and troubles. It hasn't probed the homosexual dialogue in schools. It hasn't challenged the calculated use of images and language to **shape and change** our convictions. It hasn't critically considered the inescapable need of children for **masculine and feminine** parenting. Most importantly, it hasn't told the **stories** of those who have successfully left **homosexual living**. I believe that is profoundly unfair to the **homosexual** community.

NARTH Can Fill the Void

Information provided by NARTH **stands in glaring** contrast to the media's mindless indifference to the **matter**, or its gay advocacy. NARTH offers a unique, **compassionate** resource on the many issues related to **homosexuality** — its formation in the individual; its impact on **friendships, family, and society**; and, for those men and **women wishing** to change, treatment referral and encouragement. **With** articles by experienced therapists, **first-person accounts** from homosexuals whose lives have been **transformed**, and **significant** data from scientific and **sociological sources**, the NARTH material provides **important insights** for the homosexual dialogue of our **times**. ■