

# Democracy and Psychiatry

## Interview with Joseph Nicolosi

*"In response to social changes taking place on many levels, psychiatry has felt compelled to drop some of the old labels and theoretical concepts."*

**Joseph Nicolosi:** Psychologists today are very concerned about self-esteem. Since ours is a compassionate, egalitarian, and non-judgmental society, we strive to include everyone; to avoid stigmatizing; and to avoid judgmentalism.

**Linda Nicolosi:** Of course, this emphasis on compassion is a good thing.

**JN:** It is. As long as it's kept in balance and doesn't distort our perception or politicize our understanding of the research.

**LN:** But tell us: how did psychology end up so non-judgmental that no one seems to have any real guiding sense, any more, of what is normal?

**JN:** I think it's the end result of falling too much in love with democracy. We're heading toward what's called "hyper-democracy"—a political system which knows no values other than liberty and equality.

When that happens, the consuming drive for ever and ever greater equality creates a "leveling effect," to the point that it begins to seem undemocratic to be a critical thinker.

**LN:** Especially if one's critical thinking entails seeing some lifestyle choices as better than others. That seems to be a threat to the democratic ideal of equality.

**JN:** Right. Ultimately, I think, this leveling instinct is leading us toward a blurring of all the essential distinctions that have made civilized life possible.

**LN:** And of course, the distinctions relating to the gay issue are those that distinguish the genders.

**JN:** Exactly. The deconstruction of gender is a major public issue right now. In law, psychiatry, education...

**LN:** The idea that a male gender identity is natural to a man, and a female gender identity to a woman... "Who's to say what's natural?"

**JN:** That is the question. California has passed legislation that defines gender—in certain circumstances—as "actual or perceived." In defiance of reality, if you are a man but you *feel* like a woman, then you are considered to be a woman... "I can be whoever I *think* I am."

**LN:** That in-your-face defiance of nature... It's a curious turnaround after the '60's, isn't it? During those years, the rallying cry was "back to nature."

**JN:** And we are also seeing the loss of the distinctions between the generations. And between the species... "Is a human being morally equivalent to an animal? Do we have the same rights, are both sacred? Or is neither sacred?"

**LN:** And between life and death... "When does life begin? Is a disabled newborn a human being with rights?"

**JN:** And between good and evil... "What is evil, after all?" All those old dividing lines and distinctions are falling.

**LN:** And the distinction between what is, and what ought to be. Where does one draw the line?

**JN:** Plus, we're losing the whole range of esthetic distinctions... "What is art? How does one define excellence?" No one seems to be able to define art. "Art is... simply *what an artist does.*" This has thrown the art world into the very same chaos we now see in psychiatry.

**LN:** So in response to this social change taking place on many levels, you say psychiatry has felt compelled to drop some of those old labels which made some people feel bad about themselves...

**JN:** Exactly. It's part of that "hyper-democratic" cultural ethos to erase as many hierarchies and distinctions as possible. To wipe out all those civilization-making differences and hierarchies of value. To maximize equality.

But there's been a price to be paid for following this road. Psychology has had to go through all kinds of intellectual contortions and compromises with reality to justify its new ideas about what is normal and natural.

**LN:** What happened to the age-old understanding that there's a natural order?

**JN:** The concept of natural law, the idea that we have a distinctively "human" nature, is falling in favor of the intellectual chaos of deconstructionism. The popular name for deconstructionism is that catch-all, mindless term, "celebration of diversity."

**LN:** And how do you explain the idea of a "law of the uni-

verse," a natural law, to those who just don't see it? That's the problem. The idea that there's a design, a physical law, that means we have to live a certain way or pay a price? Your detractors would like to make this into a narrowly religious issue.

JN: I remember a pastor trying to explain the natural law as it relates to sexuality. He said, "What would you think of a man who was trying to drink through a straw—and to do that, he put the straw in his ear, or up his nose?" Of course, people would say, "There is something wrong with that man." And that was his argument; a simple but *from-the-gut* illustration why same-sex sexuality is not normal.

LN: So, what is taking the place of the old concept of a natural order?

JN: We see a growing interest in inter-subjective psychologies, with their emphasis on the individual's personal, subjective experience as the determiner of psychological health—"whatever works for you."

At the same time, with the growing influence of postmodern philosophy, there's a loss of confidence that we can know very much about objective reality, or psychological normality.

LN: Do you think most psychologists hold to these views?

JN: Most psychologists today are trying to be inclusive and nonjudgmental. "Who am I to judge?" There is a pleasant feeling that communicates itself with this attitude; they want to be people-pleasers. Their first absolute is tolerance—the kind of tolerance that *really* means not just putting up with, but *valuing* all lifestyles and opinions as equivalent. They may believe their job as a psychologist is simply to facilitate the goals and objectives of each individual. This sounds very egalitarian and democratic; it has a strong emotional appeal; but it is intellectually naive. It is more of a *sentiment* than an organized system of thought.

LN: A sentiment?

JN: Yes. Because psychologists who defend homosexuality as normal and natural have still not come up with any plausible, non-deficit-based theoretical model to explain homosexual development. They simply don't have a theory.

LN: Other than the "born that way" fallacy?

JN: Right. They haven't explained how a history of alienation from same-sex peers, gender-disidentification, alienation from the same-sex parent, and so often the feeling of not having been "seen" and understood by one's father or mother could result in a happy and well-functioning man

or woman. But this is the childhood history of a remarkable percentage of homosexual men and women.

Psychologists can't explain how this could be normal, because it doesn't make sense. How could a childhood of deficits, fears, and feelings of alienation and inadequacy be a pathway that we call normal?

LN: So how *do* you think most psychologists explain it?

JN: Some of them say, "Yes, these clients have had a conflictual childhood, and never identified with the same-sex parent. True—there's been a disturbance in gender identity. But who among us has had a 'normal' childhood?" These clients have made a useful adaptation, they say, and have simply directed their erotic attractions to a same-sex person. Many such people are living productive lives—working and loving. And who says one's gender-identity must be consistent with their biological sex? *Why should gender even matter at all?* Therefore, they say, we can't label homosexuality a problem.

LN: And of course, there's a kernel of truth in some of that. We all make adaptations to less-than-ideal circumstances, and some of those adaptations work out pretty well. Obviously there are gay people

who are quite content with their lives.

JN: Which was a major part of psychiatry's rationale when it normalized homosexuality... "If they're happy with their lives, who are we to say otherwise?"

But this is important: there is a *difference* between saying, "He's made the best of his situation that he knew how," and "His condition is normal and healthy." You have a person who has a twisted leg; he may learn how to adapt and how to put his weight on the other foot, or walk on crutches; and when he goes into a restaurant, he takes the crutches and he puts them under the table...he does the best he knows how. *But we still can't deny that it's better to have two good legs.* We have to be honest about that.

LN: Why has there been so little dialogue about the developmental factors in homosexuality?

JN: Psychologists don't want to talk about it. Everybody wants to be the good guy. What these psychologists don't realize is that in order not to make a portion of the population feel bad, what they are doing is making a major compromise with reality. And this attitude is having incredible secondary consequences for our culture. By systematically eroding the conviction that opposite-sex coupling is normative, you are failing to support the many young people who are going through a period of gender-identity and sexual-orientation confusion.

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How do you explain the concept of a "natural order" to those who just don't see it?

LN: So if psychologists were willing to be more honest about what they see...society would be more supportive of healthy development.

JN: Yes, and it has always been the role of society to support and facilitate the transition to heterosexuality. For two reasons: First, heterosexuality is better for society; and second, heterosexuality is healthier for the individual.

LN: Would you explain that?

JN: Let's look at society's attitude toward single parenting. Because we fail to take a stand that single parenting is undesirable, we are getting more and more kids who don't have a father. And through our compassion and eagerness to be nonjudgmental, we are doing children and families a great disservice.

This goes back to what I was saying earlier. Motivated by compassion—and also that democratic “leveling” instinct—our culture is erasing all the old hierarchies of value and the essential distinctions. We just don't want to hurt anyone by pointing out that his family configuration is not the way it's supposed to be....that it is a “make do” adaptation, often to tough circumstances.

LN: Right, because a single mother may be really struggling, doing the best she can.

JN: Of course. It may well represent a *heroic effort* on that mother's part to do the best she can with adverse circumstances. However, it is not the way things ought to be.

LN: But there's a fear that by talking about “what ought to be” will mean limiting people's options, making judgments, setting oneself up as an authority. Makes us really uncomfortable. Seems like a threat to equality.

JN: So we end up, by default, with a social system that endorses every form of personal liberation. But a lot of distortions—even outright untruths—are necessary to shore up that faulty logic.

Family Research Council did a great study awhile back on the distortions in high-school textbooks. Textbook writers are forced to point out the research that shows that single-parent families are *not* the best way to raise kids, and such families actually place kids at a serious developmental disadvantage in many ways, compared to the traditional family. But then, the textbooks conclude, “*All choices of family configuration are valid!*”

The editors just *can't let* the facts lead to a conclusion that might hurt somebody's feelings. They place “tolerance” (which now requires actual *approval*) over honesty. And in so doing, they sadly mislead our children. ■