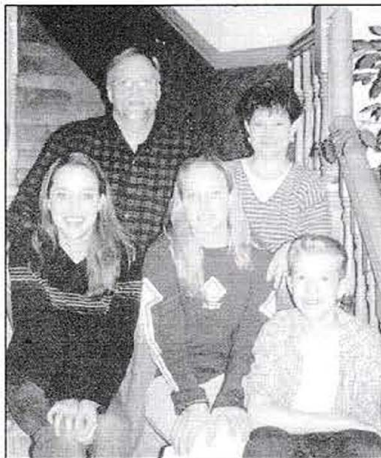


Interview: Gordon Opp

*What can a man expect from the change process?
With disarming candor, Gordon Opp describes the fulfillment he found,
as well as the lessons—sometimes painful—he learned along the way.*

He is interviewed by Joseph Nicolosi.

J.N.: Gordon, thanks very much for offering to share your story. Let's go right ahead and run through the basics of your life. You've been president of the Credit Bureau of Lincoln, Nebraska for 21 years, and married for 20 years now. You're about to complete your master's degree in counseling, and for quite some time, you've run a support group for men transitioning out of homosexuality.



Gordon Opp and Family

When did you first think you might be struggling with homosexuality?

G.O.: I think it was in junior high school that I recognized that I had attractions for the guys instead of the girls, and it gave me a lot of anxiety. There was nobody to talk to in those days, so I just kind of hid it.

J.N.: Back then you didn't have a "Project 10" school counselor who would affirm you as gay, and introduce you to the gay community.

G.O.: Right, and I'm glad for that. At least I wasn't pushed into thinking that it *wasn't* a problem. I was a Christian and I had faith, and I believed in morality. So I kept myself from acting out with another guy until I was 21. In fact, I made it through three years of college without acting out. Then, as with most homosexuals, my first sexual experience was unbelievably... it's like you've been on a desert for two weeks without water, and all of a sudden you come upon an oasis. It's extremely compelling that way.

I dabbled in the gay life from age 21 to 25, and during that time I had a lot of one-night stands. I did the "park scene," and I had a few relationships—maybe three—that lasted a few months. During that time I was extremely depressed, kind of living a double life. Also, I never was satisfied or fulfilled in a relationship for any length of time. Even with men that were many times more attractive than I, I would lose interest after awhile. But I didn't really understand the dynamics at that time.

J.N.: What were the dynamics?

G.O.: Right now looking back, I can see what homosexuality is—especially in my life, although everybody's experience is a little bit different.

J.N.: What is homosexuality in your life?

G.O.: It is a way to meet certain unfulfilled needs with sex.

J.N.: What kinds of needs?

G.O.: Needs for acceptance... feeling like one of the guys... for compassion and understanding from men. In fact it's interesting, even now, the remaining homosexual desires that I have, I realize have so little to do with sex. It's like I look at a guy, and if I go so far as thinking what he would look like without clothes on—at this time in my life, such a thought would be disgusting to me. But it's something else I'm feeling... I wish he would come over and shake my hand and talk to me and give me some kind of attention.

But looking back to when I was a young man, I didn't understand those dynamics. Today, I see that the feelings—and how they transform when I understand them—are very much like a magic act. It's very intriguing when you see somebody perform a magic trick; you want to see it over and over again, so you can figure out how the magician is actually making this thing disappear. But when you fully understand the feelings—that is, you learn what's behind the trick—it takes away all the old excitement. Then the attraction isn't "magic" anymore.

J.N.: What is the analogy with homosexuality?

G.O.: That's the way homosexuality is for me. I will look at a man who is attractive to me and I just can't proceed with pursuing that, because, as you might say, I "know the trick." That is, I know what the fantasy is. I know what's behind the illusion. And I have the logical understanding that it's not going to satisfy—if I did pursue any type of sexual encounter, I know it would have nothing but negative effect on me. But it's more than that, though.

J.N.: Not just a cognitive awareness.

continued

G.O.: It's more than just a cognitive awareness. It's recognizing that the whole experience is counterfeit. It's knowing this, based on my own repeated attempts for four years, to make it work.

In your book, you said Elizabeth Moberly explains that unmet same-sex love needs are the root of the problem, but then you amplified on that a lot. You described that same-sex friendships are helpful to meet those needs. I have found that when I have a close friendship with a straight man who I find attractive, I can get those needs de-sexualized. I can get them met in a satisfying way.

J.N.: A lot of the men tell me this. They say that their homosexual attractions or fantasies diminish, or even disappear.

G.O.: Right, they do. They do in many cases. The problem, though, as Dr. Satinover explains in *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, is when you've already gotten into a habit pattern. The sexual experience is like taking an opium drug. It's soothing, its anesthetizing, and it's a "quick fix." This can make it very difficult to leave homosexuality. When we have sexualized those emotional needs—when we have already learned to get those needs temporarily met in a sexual way—we've taken a normal, legitimate, God-given need and met it with a "drug." Then when you're getting your needs met through a straight relationship with a nice-looking guy, in a very wholesome relationship, it won't have the "zing" that the homosexual encounter does. That's one of the things that I've had to recognize and admit to myself; it wasn't *meant* to have that kind of zing.

J.N.: That's right, because the zing is artificial, and it won't last. And it will only create the desire for another, bigger "zing" from yet another partner. We are beginning to see gay writers admit this, at least indirectly. In *Love Undetectable*, Andrew Sullivan says erotic relationships cannot be trusted to provide enduring love, and it is friends who will be the reliable source of support and affection.

G.O.: The "zing" is artificial, but it is very compelling, and it is what keeps a lot of men in the gay life.

J.N.: Exactly. Jeffrey Satinover talks about the neurological pleasure pathways that get embedded into the brain—actually structurally embedded—and although you may learn new fantasies on top of the old ones, along with better ways of meeting your emotional needs, still, you never completely erase the underlying neurological responsiveness. You can lay new pathways on top of that underlying

one. But many men are having to *really struggle* with an addictive pattern.

G.O.: Right. And unfortunately, getting caught up in that habit pattern like I did, will turn out to be very short-sighted. But the thing that encourages me, thinking about the brain, is that we don't use very much of our brains...and there are so many other "highs" that a person can experience. We get trapped in the idea of thinking that the only way we can enjoy ourselves, or experience any kind of "high" in life, is the unhealthy way we're used to doing it. I try to encourage the men I work with to broaden their perspectives. Even though other experiences might not give them the zing that they're used to, they should go ahead and pursue healthy male relationships, and also

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find something different that they can really put their hearts into.

J.N.: Exactly. And speaking of finding something else to put your heart into...tell me a little bit about your marriage. You're 46 and you've been married now for twenty years.

G.O.: Yes. Like I said, I lived in the gay life for about four years until age 25, but I was very depressed because it just wasn't working for me. I'm from Nebraska, and I decided to move to California. I figured that would be the best place to live a gay life, and if that didn't work, perhaps I would find some help out there.

In California, I met a youth pastor. He was about seven years my senior, married and with a couple of kids; and without ever having knowledge of your book—it just wasn't written then—he worked with me in just the way you suggest. Neither one of us knew what was going on. In fact, he was a nice-looking man who cared about me, and he saw in me somebody who wanted to do the right thing, but just didn't know how. I remember sitting in his office and he said, "You may have an attraction for me, but nothing is ever going to happen, because I am different." He said, "It doesn't make me feel any different toward you; I'm going to love you and care about you anyway." His attitude just totally diffused my attraction. That was the beginning of help for me. I counseled with him for the better part of a year. During that time I met my future wife and we became really good friends. Before I married, I wanted to be out of any kind of sexual activity for at least a year.

J.N.: Was there sexual attraction to her as well?

G.O.: There was no sexual attraction until close to the time

we were to be married. I started thinking, I'm going to be married soon, so I started thinking about my fiancée more in that way. If I could have counseled myself back at age 25, I would have given myself a little more help and direction, but in the end, I would still have encouraged the marriage. I've taken the position that we are all really heterosexuals, so I do encourage men to get married if I believe they will honor their commitment. I don't want them to endanger or disappoint a woman. But if the man takes the commitment seriously and will honor it above any passing temptations, that is a different matter. I myself am somewhat of a disciplined person, so that helped.

J.N.: Of course, the woman should know.

G.O.: Absolutely, the woman should know. I told my wife before we were married. It was a breath of fresh air for her to find someone who would love her as a friend, and not just want her sexually. So I think that was part of the strength of our marriage. Today I'm a grandfather. We have three children—two girls and one son, a 13-year-old boy.

J.N.: What's your family life like now?

G.O.: The first years of my marriage were more a matter of "doing the right thing." However when you spend so much time with somebody and have children together and live together, you can't help but learn to really love that person. Today I love my wife as much, if not more, I believe, than most guys love their wives. The sexual experience may not be exactly like it is for guys who have *never* struggled with homosexual issues, but it is satisfying, and I look forward to it and it is pleasurable. I would be totally devastated if I lost my wife. I must say that I've changed not only my behavior, but also the way I think about myself; I've changed my identity. I'm very comfortable being a husband, father and now a grandfather.

J.N.: Your children know about your background?

G.O.: Yes. My daughters are 19 and 17, and my 19-year-old is engaged to be married in August. My relationship with my daughters is awesome. But I think some of us guys with a homosexual background think maybe we can't be a very good father to a boy.

J.N.: Yes, especially a boy with a lot of anxieties about his masculinity.

G.O.: So the first two children were girls, and I thought, "Well, the Lord gave me girls and that's fine, so I don't have to deal with worrying about being a father to a boy." I tell you, loving little daughters is unbelievably natural for

me. It's one of the most beautiful pleasures in life. It has always been that way, even as they were growing into their teens. Then my wife wanted a third child, so we happened to get a boy and he has been an unbelievable delight. In fact, going into his room at night and tucking him in and telling him a story or patting him on the back, now that he's a little older, ruffling up his hair and being a little bit rough with him, it is almost like having someone do it to me. It's unbelievably constructive—I'm "healing by giving," and I'm so thankful. It's like having a second chance.

J.N.: You are resolving some of your old needs, by fulfilling them for someone else. I think this is true for all fathers.

G.O.: I would think so, because everybody has some unmet needs from their past. I am extremely content in my life. I would not trade my life for any other. Early on—I

have been married twenty years—during the first ten years of marriage I would occasionally lapse into some depression and I would get pretty down and feel like I was missing out on something, but for years now, I haven't struggled with depression at all.

J.N.: Do you know any other ex-gay men who are married? Is there a circle of support friends?

G.O.: For a number of years I have run a support group with eight or ten guys in it. Men would come and go, but there is a handful who have also gotten married and have children, and they are a good support. I can think of one, my friend Bill, who just told me that his wife is pregnant with their second child, and he is excited about that. But you know, as you said in your book, other guys overcoming homosexuality can be good friends, and some of those friendships are extremely valuable, and I would never want to minimize that. But as far as healing is concerned, I get a whole lot more from straight guys.

J.N.: From "ever-straight."

G.O.: Right. There are "ever straights" that I really enjoy being with, and that's terribly helpful. Then there are the few that are particularly attractive, and with those guys, I kind of force myself to get to know them well enough so that they don't intimidate me and give me that feeling of weakness, of being "less than" them, which could trigger an unwanted attraction on my part.

J.N.: Yes, exactly. That's a very good point. People who are trying to overcome homosexuality should know that you have learned to *push against* the intimidation, especially with good-looking straight guys. You have to get to know them, to break down some of the mystique.

It is often a feeling
of inadequacy
and intimidation
that triggers
a male attraction.

G.O.: It's really funny when you do, because like I say, I make myself do that, because somebody will come across my path—maybe I'm on a committee with them, or whatever—and I notice that my old pattern would be to recoil into myself and to feel inadequate, and then to begin to notice them. They're a residual object—an object of attraction from an old way of relating. So instead I try to get to know them, maybe even touch them with a pat on the back, or a healthy handshake or something, and get under their skin just a little, and then all of a sudden I see their weaknesses—this is *just a guy*, and the mystique is broken.

J.N.: What you see is their humanness, you see the common element. You see how you and he really are connected. You break down that tension, and with it, the fantasy.

G.O.: Somehow, that's what I've felt homosexuality for me has been anyway. It's like there's this "mysterious male" out there, what is he like? Why don't I feel like him? And so by getting to know these guys a little more intimately, that takes the mystique away.

J.N.: That's exactly right. Was there a critical time in your life when you had an insight that helped you with this understanding?

G.O.: Yes. Something happened to me happened about ten years ago. I was going through a midlife crisis—I was about 35, 36 years old—and I had three healthy kids, my business was going fine, we had a nice home, I drove new cars, I had "made it." At such times, guys ask themselves, "Is this *it*?" For me the big question was, "Well I've never really experienced that 'thing' in relation to men. Have I been missing something?"

The way I had thought to get "that thing" was homosexuality, and my way of dealing with those remaining feelings in the early years of my marriage had been to protect myself from attractive men by distancing myself. There would be guys in my past who would say, "You know, I was just getting to know Gordon and we were doing things together, and then all of a sudden we just drifted apart. I don't know what happened." Well, I know what happened. I did not want to make them a sexual object. I did not want to have the hassle, so I just withdrew, and there would be a defensive detachment.

Then I had an experience that knocked me out of the depression and broke apart that old illusion. There was a guy—in fact, he is my brother-in-law—and he and I traveled across the country to pick up an antique car. We had to sleep together on the way back, and in the middle of the night—I had been married ten or eleven years, and hadn't

touched a man for all that time in a sexual way—in the middle of the night, I impulsively touched his penis. (He knew about my background but he had just figured, "Well, Gordon is married and the problem is solved.") I was so terribly embarrassed I wanted to die. He woke up and he said, "Are you OK?"

He didn't condemn me at all. So for another thousand-mile drive and another night in a hotel, we talked about it, and we became friends. He would not let me detach from him. He kept me engaged. He just kept at it. He said, "I don't know, I'm no psychologist, but it just seems right for me to continue to engage you." For me it was real difficult because I was embarrassed, I was ashamed, and I was forced to confront what had happened and work through it. Working through that was the peak—the mountain that I crossed over. It took away the depression, it helped me to open up, and it furthered the emotional healing that I'd already experienced intellectually.

J.N.: Today, would you say today you have no homosexual attractions?

G.O.: No, I wouldn't say that. But the feelings are so different. The way I would like to explain it is, in the early days, it was like I wore this sweatshirt that had a great big "H"

on the front. That was who I was: the shirt said, "Homosexual." Now it's kind of like, it's a little business card tucked in my shirt pocket that is somewhat frayed and dog-eared. Once in awhile I find myself sticking my hand in there and pulling out that old card, and it bothers me a little bit, but life goes on beyond that. It's an occasional irritation, but no longer an obsession.

My life, in fact, is very good today.

J.N.: Your experience tells us a lot about the nature of psychological change. Whatever a man's difficulty—drug addiction, overeating, alcoholism, low self-esteem—it is unlikely that change will simply "erase" those old problem areas. You've made a major emotional shift through insight and new experiences. But some sex-feelings will recur, and because you understand what they signify, now they've lost most of their power.

Sometimes, too, a man must simply *make a willful decision* to put aside the lingering remnants of the old, unwanted homosexual self, as you did, and commit himself to moving on and marrying, if that's what he wants in life.

Thanks very much, Gordon, for sharing your life experiences with such eloquence and transparency.

"I've changed not only my behavior, but the way I think about myself. My life is very good today."