

New Friends

Anonymous

The unsigned letter stunned me. It pleaded for help, yet how could I offer anything to an unknown writer. He was male; he said he would contact me. I did not trust that he would. He thrust his pain upon me — pulled me into his anguish, expected me to somehow provide relief, to prevent the suicide he threatened. Yet he would not identify himself.

He described an inner turmoil that prevented him from sleep, estranged him from family, denied him appetite. He had lost so much weight that he lacked strength to work, but work was his only escape. He stayed late at his office, fought the arrival of solitary weekends. He hated himself. As punishment, he refused to eat. He was not worthy to live, he said. He needed to die, wanted to die. He made plans to die — one plan after another.

I tried to set the letter aside reasoning that most people who commit suicide do it confidentially and those who threaten are mainly calling for help. Since he refused to sign the letter, the responsibility would have to remain with him. If he contacted me I would respond, but even then I did not relish the idea of counseling with a homosexual.

Still I was troubled. The fact that he had sought my help seemed a positive sign. Was he a member of my ward — someone I had been called as bishop to lead? Did it really matter whether he lived in the boundaries?

As much as I thought about him, I also feared an encounter. Once years before I had counseled with someone I knew to be gay, face to face. Though I had tried to listen sympathetically, my uneasiness had shown. He read my feelings and did not return.

After that, the issue of homosexuality simply did not present itself to me. Admittedly, I do not go in search of the suffering that slumbers below the surface of appearances — my Christianity does not extend that far. But I had learned a good deal in the decade since my last chance to listen. I had read, sought counsel.

He was right to give me a week to think. This time, I resolved, I would try harder. But then what?

I had no formula for recovery except dramatic repentance. I had seen some real miracles: transformations, forgiveness, spiritual awakening. They dealt with other problems, however. My soul was electrified as I watched people discover the simplicity of the Redemption, finding that they could actually change. They uncovered what had seemed trite but was actually hidden from them: that Christ was available to help pay the debt they could not. Homosexuality seemed tougher, more elusive, but I did not doubt that the Redemption embraced it, too. The theology of repentance and redemption was valid, but the homosexuals I knew found it difficult to use religion as a catalyst for change, and I did not know anyone whose behavioral modification formulas worked very long. So I began to read again, seek more advice, and pray.

The writer did not contact me again. Two months passed. Some days I shrugged it off. Some days I scanned the obituaries. Then I reread his letter carefully with the hunch that he was waiting for a response. Maybe he wanted a signal that I could listen. I found some clues embedded in the text. Putting them together, I had an idea. Immediately I dialed a number.

After two rings he answered.

His voice was all business as he gave the name of the firm.

"Hello, Clarke, I received your letter."

Silence.

"Clarke, the letter is beautiful. It is honest."

Silence.

"Clarke, I've been waiting for your call. I'm ready. Do you want to see me?"

Silence. Then a whispered, "Yes."

"I will be at my office at 10 tonight. Do you know where it is?" (I purposely chose a time when he would be free, when no one would be in the foyer.)

"Yes."

"I'll be waiting. Thank you for writing."

With time to weigh his choices, I wondered if he would come.

He did.

Our first meeting was painful. He shivered. My stomach knotted. He spoke with great difficulty, sometimes gasping, heart pounding. I thought he needed immediate admission to the mental ward.

When he mentioned that he had been in therapy for a year, I was both relieved and bothered. At least I could depend on the psychiatrist to watch for anorexia, borderline personality, schizophrenia, but his emotional pain was more intense than I had ever encountered. I told him I would always be available; but I secretly wondered if he needed more help than I was competent to give. I was most disturbed that he had sought a second counseling relationship. Was he going to bounce from ear to ear, seeking sympathy, instead of acting to eliminate the source of misery? I also wondered if the psychiatrist had ordered a thorough physical examination. Was a chemical deficiency triggering this acute depression? Was the psychiatrist exacerbating Clarke's problem?

I listened to his story. It seemed quite conventional: estrangement from his father (though Clarke was still in touch with the family), secrecy to protect parents and grandparents from what he was sure they could not face. A younger brother had fulfilled the athletic and muscular expectations in the family. Clarke had made excuses, manipulated his parents, and connived to avoid the physical work his father demanded of him. The distance between Clarke and his father had widened. There had been ugly encounters and long weeks of silence. A male cousin had introduced some sexual fondling at age twelve and again at sixteen, this time more pornographic and overt. The encounters had become more frequent. He had felt terrible guilt but had not discouraged his cousin's continuing invitations. But he also had a healthy and fulfilling high school romance with a neighborhood girlfriend.

Clarke had initiated a talk with his bishop, mentioning the homosexual experiments briefly, embarrassing both of them. He then prepared for a mission and entered the field — to the great relief of all concerned. He hoped for a transformation. His parents, who had imagined all sorts of deviancies but who had felt so guilty that they were unable to discuss Clarke's feelings, tried to convince themselves that their worst fears would be quieted. Everyone breathed more easily as weeks stretched into months.

Clarke found missionary work agreeable. Despite constant intimate contact with desirable males, he suppressed his homosexual thoughts. Midway in the mission, Clarke began working more closely with the mission president, whose family became very fond of him. At times Clarke was haunted with the thought, "If they only knew what I am really like." At other times he tilted in the other direction, "That is only part of me. All people have a weak side; but I have a genuine spiritual side, too — and it is winning."

Eventually Clarke built the courage to tell his mission president what his bishop had not really wanted to hear. The president did not act shocked. In fact, he confronted Clarke, extracting an admission that there was more than Clarke had told the bishop. Clarke had no more extended talks with the president, but each day was like a heart-to-heart encounter. Their eyes met. Clarke felt trust and encouragement as the president continued to give him responsibility.

The mission ended on a high, but the flight home was full of panic. At the airport, Clarke could not embrace his father. As time passed, he felt increasingly alone. He had no idea what to do next. His mission euphoria lasted about seven months. His high school girlfriend was unhappily married. He could not force himself to date anyone else. He continued to fantasize about males.

Now he was in my office. Four years of increasing involvement in the gay network had brought him here. He knew its seamy side and its tender side. He had tried a committed partnership, endured its catastrophic collapse, and resorted to the desperation of pickup points — well-established spots where gays go to meet others anonymously for a quick, one-time sexual encounter.

I ventured a blunt question, knowing I could offend him, "What pleasure is there in such a risky and fleeting encounter?"

“It is enough,” he said, “to hope, even if it is only for five minutes, that someone wants me.”

Church meetings exacerbated Clarke’s crisis. Just seeing the sacrament emphasized his hypocrisy. He tried to change his values to meet his behavior. That took him out of Church activity, away from temple commitments, but gave him no relief. He realized he could not discard the Church, did not really want to, but his feelings of unworthiness overpowered him. His psychiatrist told Clarke that he was not really a homosexual — that his gay life was a mere symptom of his self-rejection. He punished himself with homosexual acts because he hated himself, and those acts triggered guilt because he was so intensely religious. The argument impressed me; but it led to no relief, no therapeutic success.

When Clarke left that evening I put my arms on both his shoulders, extending a cautious touch, looking closely in his eyes. I expressed my admiration for the courage it took to come. He warmed also, cautiously. He said his father had never held him so. He was barely able to talk. I worried that he might not be able to negotiate the roads. He insisted he could.

As the days went by, I realized that I did not fear further talks with Clarke. I was not repelled. I was not interested in intimate details. I did not fantasize about homosexuality. I was liberated.

Andy’s way of contacting me was the opposite of Clarke’s. He saw to it that we interacted often on other matters first. Rather naively, I missed the testing that he was putting me through. Then one day he blurted out that he was gay. I knew enough to roll with it. He told me that he had driven past my home night after night, vacillating between stopping or prowling for a contact. He said that one of our other chats had so scared him that he stayed out most of the night trying to calm down. I had been oblivious to it all.

But there it was. It was out.

Andy was so different from Clarke. He did not seem depressed. He was witty, socially skilled, full of humor, at ease everywhere. I suspected that underneath there must be tension that would yet come when he could suppress it no longer, but his easy laughing belied the insecurity that seemed to dominate him behind his well-constructed facade.

He wanted to disassociate himself from the gay scene, but he was deep in the net — gay bars, gay gyms, gay porn. He knew dozens of pickup points and many partners. He had completed a successful mission but now lingered about the edge of the Church. He kept his secret from his family, safely distant in another state, who saw him as an active Mormon.

Andy decided that excommunication was the route for him. He overcame the fear of censure that causes many people to hesitate when the idea of a Church court first arises. He sought forgiveness and felt he could not even start without a court.

He was so different from Clarke. He had had no long sessions of anguish, no intense battle with parents, no expressions about suicide. He withheld his inner self from me, perhaps even from himself. He had many friendships, both heterosexual and homosexual. He dated extensively before his mission and

after; but his numerous homosexual encounters before his mission were repeated after, even though he had abstained completely during his mission. When he came home, he immersed himself in the gay world.

I wondered how Andy coped. I did not want to destroy his defense mechanisms and push him into a depression like Clarke's, but I could not penetrate his defenses. Because he was popular in both homosexual and heterosexual settings, he was not sure he wanted to get beyond his present lifestyle.

The court was held with modest success. There were no hard feelings. He spoke openly with the high council and expressed closeness to the stake president. When the president asked Andy if he could predict a break with the gay world, he said he could only hope. He and I felt we were on a common wavelength, at least as friends. Then he failed to come back for the regular counseling sessions the stake president had prescribed. He settled into the reality of living without the priesthood.

I'm fond of Andy. We trust each other. He has brought me reading material on homosexuality. He has advised me in my counseling with others and wants to help people break out. He says he fully intends to marry and raise a family in the gospel.

I am puzzled.

After Andy, I began to develop a cautious hypothesis about male homosexuality. It is such a taboo that most of us wish to avoid the subject. We are repulsed. We condemn. But underneath, I think we mostly fear homosexuality. We fear that maybe, just maybe, there is some of it in us all. Do we all have some degrees of heterosexuality and some degrees of homosexuality? Perhaps our youthful experiences reinforce one sexual preference over the other. At least when Ned came I found myself able to identify with him past stereotypes or fear. He had had early encounters with homosexuality as childhood experimenting — particularly in Boy Scouts. He certainly was not a confirmed gay before his mission; but he knew the fear of that question, "Am I gay?" He cleared matters with his bishop, then waited for a probation period. Finally he left for the mission field. A few months later he became sexually involved with a companion. Both were sent home for professional help. After a few months, Ned returned and completed his mission. His parents were aware of his "problem." They appeared to be accepting, at least they were not driven with fear as they talked about it openly with me. Ned's mother continued to urge him to date. Though he felt that pressure from family and relatives, he could not get interested in a woman.

Ned was completely convinced that homosexuality was wrong. But he did not feel that he could ever be heterosexual. He avoided the gay world, knew nothing of its systems, and did not want to. Yet about once a year he fell into an encounter he did not seek. He immediately came to me. I supported him and kept in contact with our stake president.

In the interim, Ned carried out Church assignments and was the backbone of many activities. He brought order to his vocation. He participated in community activities. He had dozens of friends, and he kept dating casually.

Ned's condition was in some ways similar to Tad's. Tad came to me with his homosexual experience behind him. It was expiated; he had completed the probation of disfellowshipment and was in total control. But now he could not take the next step. He simply could not feel physical affection for a woman. Was he doomed to celibacy? he asked. He desperately wanted a family but felt he could not use a wife to bear children, and then have no further sexual interest in her. He recoiled from the suggestion of sharing his concern midway through courtship. He doubted that any woman could want him enough to gamble on such a threatening point. Because he is a wonderfully talented, handsome, and winning person, I hope otherwise. Tad has moved away. I miss his wholesome spirit.

My interaction with Antonio was as frustrating as my contact with Tad was uplifting. He made an appointment to see me on the advice of an anonymous friend. (I wondered just how well known I was among gays.) Antonio came to me angrily. He wanted me to explain why he could not be a Mormon and a gay at the same time.

He had joined the Church a year before, after having the missionary lessons. The elders never mentioned homosexuality, so neither did he. His sexual choice became evident shortly after his baptism. I confronted him with the evidence. Antonio did not deny being homosexual. I asked him whether he was prepared to break with his sexual activity. Antonio said he was not, that he did not feel he could or should. He argued that all gay suffering was the fault of a bigoted, rejecting society, that homosexuality was a legitimate choice, that it hurt no one, was for consenting adults, had always been around. It was time the taboo ended. Other churches were coming around. Why not the Mormons? There are thousands of gay Mormons, he argued. Why persecute them? They cannot help being gay; they are made that way.

He and I ended up polarized both in words and feelings. Nothing happened for a few weeks. Then I asked Antonio to come to the office again. I explained to him that homosexual activity was just as serious as fornication and could not be countenanced, that the practice did indeed harm others, was forbidden by God, and was therefore a violation of baptism and sacrament covenants. Antonio would have to make a choice between homosexuality and his membership. I assured him that I would support him if he chose to change his sexual lifestyle and understood that changing could take time. I asked Antonio to think about it and especially to pray about it.

Antonio refused to see me again. I sent him notice to appear before a Church court. He burned the letter. When I sent the second letter, that he had been excommunicated by a bishop's court, he brought it to me, asking how we could be Christians when Christ said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Our chat was not helpful. He wanted to argue. He wanted to dump on me. I could not get through to him. He just kept reading a sentence in the letter about the court's obligation to protect the Church. Then he would fume that no one cared, especially not the people who were supposed to—the priesthood.

That was my last visit with Antonio, but, ironically, he sent me Kirt. Like Clarke, Kirt came in a terrible physical condition. He was using medication to calm his nerves, but the medicine kept him from sleeping. Without the medication he was so nervous that he could not sit down.

Kirt was a farm boy and had grown up with easy experimentation with himself, with other boys, even with animals. A stunning physical specimen, he was sought by older gays. He kept the secret from his father, with whom he worked. He went into the mission field without discussing the matter with his bishop and never talked with his mission president about it. He completed his mission without problems and returned home. His straight friends had either married or gone to college. He did not intend to associate with the old gang; but after a year, he had added drugs to homosexuality. They were his only friends, and he had spent every weekend with them until he and his gay roommate had broken up. Now Kirt determined to break out.

Kirt had an interesting logic. He had asked for excommunication to get the pressure off. Now he was trying to decide whether to use excommunication as a license to stay gay or as a stimulus to make some changes. He was dating a number of women, about which he felt a tenuous hope, but he was still unemployed and unclear about a career. His dependence on medication was diminishing, but the only close friends he had were gay. His was a circle of captives.

Antonio also sent me Curtis, divorced and a life-long, active Mormon. He and Antonio had nothing in common except their message: they were both gay, and they both wanted to be in the Church. Curtis, however, had leveled with bishops all along the way. Like many who try to use missions as a cure, Curtis entered marriage hoping for a change. His wife was aware of the experimental nature of their relationship. They were married long enough to have three children, and then they parted. Curtis's pain had been multiplied manyfold by that marriage. He is counseling regularly with me and the stake president and is moderately active in the Church. He is resigned to permanent bachelorhood and has informed his parents why.

Counseling with lesbians was more difficult for me. Women hesitated to approach me; our discussions did not come as naturally as those with men. We were both uneasy. I realized that it took real conviction on their part to overcome the gender gap. Nonetheless, they came.

Krista and Carla, both returned missionaries, came with both humility and humiliation. Their physical affection had begun as platonic respect for each other. They decided to become roommates out of a longing for friendship, for spiritual support, for a Latter-day Saint lifestyle. Their normal touching had grown gradually into an involvement that did not seem indiscreet initially. They talked themselves into denying that they had passed the border of propriety. Three months later, they had resolved to break what had become a habit. They had abstained for six weeks and then broken their resolve, abstained again, and now were ready to admit that they were fooling themselves. They wanted help, confidential help.

It was hard for them to come to me. They knew I would ask why they did not stop living together, but their friendship was almost all they had. Both came from unsatisfying families. Both were lonely. Both were highly competent professionally. Neither had any previous homosexual experience.

We met regularly but at widening intervals. Then Krista rather suddenly became engaged. A year later Carla, too, married. I continue to observe them both from a distance. They each appear to have acceptable marital relationships. They have moved to different communities and have established new circles of friends.

Dotty is a complete contrast; she has checkmated me. She knows that I know about her homosexuality, and she has entertained the idea of coming to see me — I think. I am not sure whether she resents me personally or whether she is convinced that no one has a right to interfere. I am pretty sure that she hates the homosexuality that encircles her; she is deeply depressed and turns increasingly to alcohol. It is unclear to me which of her defeating behaviors is causal and which is symptomatic. She is explosive, perhaps dangerous.

Dotty moves often, but the moves do not help her find a new beginning. She alternately breaks with her lover and then returns. Similarly, she sees the Church as a point of refuge at times and as her tormentor at other times. She seeks out people who have been excommunicated and convinces herself that a court would be her nemesis. We have never talked about her homosexuality. She will not let me. I'm torn between a destructive intervention and patience that may never produce results.

I believe that other women must also need to discuss their homosexuality but feel unable to. I feel inadequate; I suspect that some women are still bearing guilt about events long abandoned. But they hesitate to confide in me merely because I am a man. I am grateful for the few women therapists to whom I can refer people, but I wish homosexual women would at least give me a try.

Where does all this lead? Certainly these few cases are too limited to generate universal solutions. They have brought me, average Church member that I am, to know that homosexuality exists and has likely always existed — facts I wanted to ignore. Knowing and loving these people has not diminished my conviction that homosexuality is unnatural and unholy. I have seen no positive long-run benefits from its practice. I have read of some moderately successful companionships but have never spoken to someone who has experienced one. Even without considering the spiritual implications, the results of living a homosexual lifestyle seem overwhelmingly negative. I do understand that homosexuality sometimes provides the tenderness and touching that everyone needs but some have been denied. The childlessness of homosexual relationships is only one shortcoming. There are many others: severe guilt, social estrangement, manipulative relationships.

These ideas are not new nor are demands for social justice for gays. However, I also understand that those demands, even if implemented, will not eliminate most of the pain that I see in each person who confides in me.

I have found that we really do not know enough about homosexuality to be dogmatic. The question of whether gay behavior is biologically determined or socially formed has not been answered. Another fifty years might bring us to a realization that both options are inadequate explanations.

If this is actually the case — that we know far too little — then we are in a delicate position when making judgments about homosexuality. Is it an illness? The American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association have officially said no. Yet I know members of each organization who dissent from that stand. I have not seen evidence that contradicts our traditional views based on scriptural sanctions.

Is there a physiological cure awaiting discovery? Will our interventions or judgments hasten suicide? Is homosexuality a learned behavior that can be unlearned or sublimated? Can determined repentance effectively eliminate homosexuality? These are the sacred and secular questions I ponder.

The Church leaders I have worked with are generally cautious on the matter. I sense that they are also searching for answers. The policy of deciding each case separately is wise, especially since clear information is lacking.

For example, Victor Brown, Jr.'s, analysis of homosexuality is insightful in some cases but inadequate in others. He argues three points. First, male homosexuals feel they do not fulfill the gender expectations of their fathers. Furthermore, they lack relationship skills. Finally, they have frequent fantasies of their own sensual activities (Victor Brown, Jr., "Fred's Story," manuscript in author's possession).

Some of the people I have met with fit Brown's description. Some completely defy his analysis. Nonetheless Brown's three ideas are helpful because each suggests preventive actions. Certainly fathers would be well advised to realize their key impact in their sons' lives. Boys need to feel the warmth of their father's physical touch. Sons desperately need their fathers' vocal acceptance, too, even of choices that may not fill a father's hopes. Not all boys can be football players or should be. The need for much cross-generational talk between parents and offspring is well known and is especially important when viewed from the vantage point of homosexuality. The need for deep, lasting friendships within wholesome peer groups is central. A youth busy with many activities and aware of parental support will usually not drift to deviancy.

Brown's prescriptions are helpful as preventions but inadequate as cures. Most adult homosexuals have long histories of pain and addiction that cannot be undone. Some adolescent homosexuality is mere experimentation, but adult homosexuality is most often deeply rooted. My knowledge is too limited. What experts have written or told me is still too limited.

What I do know is that homosexuals are people I can associate with quite normally and with whom other Church members can associate. I did not previously know that. I subconsciously feared they might entice me. They did not; I found no allurements in their histories. I know homosexuals who love the gospel and the Church dearly. I know homosexuals for whom the gospel and the Church are terrible obstacles. Thus far, the most powerful tool I have found to help them is still the idea that change is possible, gradual as it may be.