

I Am Not Gay, but I Might Be a Little Bit Queer

*That fear had been inside him for many years, if it lived with him,
it had been another shadow cast over his own shadow
ever since the night he awoke, shaken by a bad dream,
and realized that that was not only a permanent probability,
as he had always believed, but an immediate reality.*

—GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, *LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA*

I know precisely the moment I became gay. As Cary Grant said in the role of Dr. David Huxley in the 1938 movie *Bringing Up Baby*, “I just went gay all of a sudden!”¹

Of course, my transformation did not occur suddenly. Nothing much about my life had changed, at least not yet. But at the precise moment after I turned forty years old, things shifted inside my head. I went from thinking of myself as straight to knowing that I am gay. Only then did I begin to realize how my gayness had cast a shadow over me my entire life.

On August 28, 2007, after having been arrested for making sexual advances in a men’s bathroom at a Minneapolis airport, US senator Larry Craig stood before the microphones of the national media with his wife, Suzanne, at his side and declared, “I am not gay! I never have been gay!” What he did not say overshadowed what he did say. He did not say “I have never had sex with a man.” Senator Craig’s voting record had earned

him top ratings from social-conservative groups. He had voted in favor of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), and he had supported a federal constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.²

Reactions to Senator Craig's announcement varied. Some gay activists smiled smugly, believing that one more hypocritical, closeted gay man had just been exposed. Religious conservatives, often intolerant of any same-sex behavior, countered that gay activists proved their own hypocrisy; the conservatives said gay people support the separation of a person's public and private lives only when it benefits their community and that gay activists now were viciously smearing someone's private behavior. They claimed that the senator had supported legislation as a matter of public policy and he had not targeted anyone's personal behavior. Other people thought police had wasted their time entrapping otherwise honorable male citizens. Some felt that Senator Craig should resign; as a married man, he had cheated on his wife, lied to his family and constituents, and broke the law.

But a considerable number of men were frightened and thought, "Man, that could have been me!" Countless numbers of ordinary men live with the fear of being exposed and discredited, humiliating themselves and their families, friends, and coworkers. The exposure of the underground sexual activity of celebrities and politicians like Senator Craig briefly generates a commotion in the media, which typically refer to men who are exposed for having sex with other men in public places as gay. However, a significant portion of these men, like Senator Craig, would not define themselves as gay. Many of them are married to women. Why would anyone choose to risk so much and behave in potentially destructive ways?

First of all, does anyone really behave rationally when they are having sex? Sexual desire operates within the primitive levels of our brains, and truthfully the scientific community knows very little about how sexual desire affects our judgment. Perhaps more powerfully, the use of psychological defense mechanisms like denial, repression, and rationalization protects the conscious mind from awareness of unacceptable desires. Sex is not rational, but it is rationalizing. Sexual

desire arises from parts of our brain outside of rational thought, but sometimes we call upon the higher, cortical portions of the brain in an attempt to offer a rational justification for our sometimes-irrational sexual behavior.

Senator Craig's situation became fodder for late-night television comedians until the next scandal bumped it aside. Meanwhile, a much larger issue was emerging: according to a 2006 study of men in New York City published in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, nearly 10 percent of working-class and immigrant men who labeled themselves as heterosexual have sex only with other men. The study also found that almost 10 percent of all married men have had sex with another man in the previous year. *Sex is not rational, but it is rationalizing.*

Although the study describes a limited population in New York City and cannot be generalized to an entire country's population, it suggests that the number of MSM is much greater than most imagine.³

A study of thirty thousand men and women in the United States found that the number of adult men and women having sex with members of their own gender has doubled between 1990 and 2014 as modern culture has begun to embrace same-sex relationships.⁴ It appears likely that more men who label themselves as straight are having sex with other men than are gay men.

MSM come from all communities, all ethnicities, and all socioeconomic levels. Whether single or married, they lead hidden lives. Society colludes to lock these men inside its collective closet by ignoring, denying, or repressing the fact that men have sex with other men.

Several forces operate in our culture to sustain the misperception that men are not having sex with men. Many people believe that same-sex behavior is sinful and undermines traditional family values. They believe the behavior would go away if we returned to the natural and timeless values of 1950s small-town America. Oddly, many older MSM were raised in—and many still live in—these mythic small towns, particularly in the Midwest and the South. They remain there, believing

that if they go away they will be changed in ways that will never allow them to return.

In 2013, the CDC estimated that in the United States, gay, bisexual, and other MSM represented 2 percent of the population but accounted for 55 percent of people living with HIV.⁵ Since many of these men do

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not use condoms, women justifiably fear that MSM serve as a bridge for the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); this fear is supported by CDC statistics.⁶ In the 1980s, the CDC sought to expand its education

to all men at risk for transmitting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and it began using the term *MSM* to incorporate men who are straight-identified but still have sex with men, not just those who are gay-identified. Initially the gay community reacted negatively to the term. Although the position of the gay community has changed in recent years, they originally felt it was too broad and that it rejected their hard-fought, self-affirming label of gay.⁷

Many in both the gay and straight worlds believe that only gay men have sex with men. It turns out, however, that MSM are much more diverse than the gay community. MSM are more diverse as to ethnicity, geography, age, current or prior opposite-sex marital status, and children. Many have discovered their same-sex attractions buried deep within themselves and want to expel themselves from the life they have led thus far. In the survey that I conducted, as well as in conversations and correspondence with other mature men, I found that some experience no sense of shame about their hidden same-sex activities, while others live with significant conflict about their sexuality. Many MSM never consider the possibility of publicly disclosing their same-sex behavior and refuse to identify themselves as gay. In fact, many of these men are repelled by the idea of being called gay and have barricaded themselves in a heterosexual world because they have incorporated an inaccurate and stereotypic view of gay men. Many of them see the

gay community as a radical counterculture defined primarily by sexual behavior, the same way much of the heterosexual community sees it, and these men don't want to be part of such a community.

Some men seek only casual man-on-man sex—an impersonal orgasm such as they might have with a female prostitute—and have no interest in any emotional connection with their sexual partner. They consider it an easy, no-strings way of obtaining sexual gratification, as if their sexual partner is nothing more than a genderless sex organ. They believe that soliciting sex from another man does not make them gay—that only feminine, deviant, and abnormal men who respond to the solicitation are gay. Even though they may be having sex exclusively with men, they do not consider themselves to be gay or bisexual because they claim, and often firmly believe, that their interest in men is secondary to their primary affection-based interest in women. In his response to my survey, one man said, “My wife is a wonderful woman. I love her, but I only want to have sex with men.” These men's behavior may even be overlooked by society if they are meeting the heteronormative masculine responsibilities of being overworked and stressed out. When I first discovered the reality of my sexual attraction to other men, I thought I was doing everything that a heterosexual man was supposed to do.

Although society evolves, sexism persists, and it plays a significant role in men's conflicts about sexual orientation. Successfully competing with other men often defines masculinity more than a relationship with a woman does. Rigid cultural conventions concerning men prescribe that men have a wife and family, aggressively pursue their careers, participate in contests of strength, and demonstrate prowess with women even to the point of objectifying them. Several conservative religious groups demand a dominant role for men over women.

Cultural beliefs about masculinity can affect children from a young age. When I was ten years old, one of my neighbors bought me a gas-powered lawn mower that in the 1950s only a few people had. We agreed that I would mow their lawn and mine, and I could use the lawn mower to mow other people's yards to earn some money for my family. The lawn mower frustrated me considerably. I had a great deal of difficulty

with any machine, and I always had difficulty getting that John Deere lawn mower started. One day it would not start. In frustration, I called my widowed mother at work, crying “Mom, I can’t get the lawn mower started!”

Helpless, she said to me, “Of course you can! You’re a man, aren’t you?” I felt as if one of my testicles had just been torn away. Men start machines. I couldn’t start mine, so I must not be a man. I was feeling like I could have fixed it if only my dad hadn’t died. I desperately wanted someone to teach me to be a man. I needed a counterweight to my mother. Masculinity, I thought, is never nuanced. This feeling of being incompetent at accomplishing manly tasks embedded itself in my brain and penetrated every aspect of my life.

I hadn’t considered that I might be gay; my masculinity was unformed like a child’s stick figure drawing of a man. Call me anything, but do not call me a sissy. I do not remember any reference to homosexuality as a child other than “Don’t wear yellow on Tuesday because it means you’re queer.” We called each other fairy, but we were thinking Tinker Bell, not faggot. Although we derided others with these terms, they had little to do with sexuality—we only knew it was not good to be called one.

The Complexity of Sexuality

Mature men know what arouses them sexually, but why those things arouse them remains foggy. A growing consensus of scientists believe that genetics determines sexual attraction. Research may help to inform the debate about whether or not sexual orientation is innate, environmental, or both, but those who oppose homosexuality use the same research to make same-sex attraction appear pathological. The exact causes of same-sex attraction may be unknowable, but our society’s tendency to describe things in terms of black and white, all or nothing, disallows thoughtful consideration and dialogue.

Nine of the former leaders in the conversion therapy movement have now come out against it with these comments: “We once believed that sexual orientation or gender identity were somehow chosen or could be changed. We know better now. We once thought it was impossible to

embrace our sexual orientation or sexual identity as an intrinsic, healthy part of who we are and who we were created to be. We know better now.”⁸

One young Chinese student wrote me on my *MagneticFire* blog, and he asked, “What am I? For whom and what do I live in this world?” His questions are similar to many I have received. Many men want to know if they are gay or not, how it will impact their lives, and why they prefer one type of man over another. Most men who are attracted to sex with other men are not concerned about an explanation for the attraction they have. If pressed, they almost inevitably say, “I was born this way.” They have a sense of being different from other men, but many of them do not consider themselves to be gay. They profile themselves as masculine and straight-acting, code words for passing in a heterosexual world. They emphasize “No kissing and no anal” when they seek male partners. They believe these self-imposed limits set them apart from being gay. Even though they may desire kissing and anal sex, these are boundaries beyond which they cannot go, or they risk slipping inescapably into the pit of homosexuality.

These barriers allow them to avoid an emotional connection to their sexual partner and maintain their imperfect grasp on being straight. As an indication of their wish to avoid any emotional investment, they often refer to their male partners as fuck buddies or friends with benefits. If they have begun to explore anal sex, by limiting their sexual behavior only to being the inserting partner in the sexual relationship, they can then look at their receptive partner as the feminine one, the weak one, the real queer. They feel they have left their masculinity intact. In *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*, Justin Spring quotes Samuel Steward’s description of one of his regular sex partners: “[I imagine him] standing there, cock uplifted, his hands clasped behind his head (fearful that if he should touch me while I kneel before him, that some of my queerness will rub off on him).”⁹

Straight-identified MSM are from diverse backgrounds—some are raised in the traditions of conservative religions, some are from minority or immigrant cultures and lower socioeconomic groups.

They fear the potential consequences of exposing their behavior. They have made strong commitments to traditional values that they believe belong exclusively to the heterosexual community. They often say they do not want to be a part of the scene. By the scene they are referring to the gay subculture that they perceive to be dominated by the gay stereotype of young men who dance and drink excessively, go to the gym relentlessly, are narcissistically preoccupied with their bodies and physical appearance, and hedonistically spend all of their money on clothes, travel, and restaurants.

As one of the men I interviewed said, “Masculine men are attracted to other masculine men for a reason that is stronger than just sex, a big cock, or a beautiful body.” But these men may marry women—not because of some reductionistic idea that they are using women to cover up their sexuality but because they honestly believe this will resolve all their ambiguities of love and sexual expression. They believe in love, romance, and long-term commitment.

Many straight-identified men have difficulty labeling themselves as gay, although they are not homophobic. Some have experienced crushes on other men in their youth and accept that their emotional desire is for a romantic relationship with another man. Other men may have romantic attachments only to women but primarily have sexual attraction to men. They may have examined coming out, but they do not feel that “the gay life” is a true fit with who they are. Some simply reject society’s restriction on whom they can choose to have as a sexual partner.

John Howard, discussing MSM in *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, wrote:

[Straight-identified MSM] should not be read as essentialized gay men unable to accept it... Male-male sexualities happened within complicated worlds of myriad desires. To experience or act on homoerotic appetites did not necessarily define the person as gay. Male-male desire functioned beside and along with many other forms of desire—all at some times, in some places, privileged,

oppressed, ignored, overlooked, spoken, silenced, written, thought, frustrated, and acted upon.¹⁰

For those who have internalized the cultural constructs of masculinity (strong, heterosexual) and femininity (weak, sissy), life is complex and difficult. They secretly and silently feel different from the masculine ideal. Shame and secrecy, lying, self-blame, and self-hatred inform their sexual activities with other men. Some MSM experience a sense of dissonance because who they think they are isn't the same as who they think they should be, and the greater the disparity, the greater the self-hatred.

Sexuality is far more complex than body parts. It includes sexual fantasy, sexual behavior, sexual preference, sexual orientation, and sexual identity; it also includes emotionality and romance. At times, these forces contradict each other even within the

same individual. One eighty-five-year-old man who responded to my survey told me that he is quite sexually active and considers himself exclusively gay: "My married life for fifty-four years was the most wonderful imaginable. I never had any gay leanings that I was aware of. I can discern incidents in my earlier life that I now see as [red] flags.

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However, I was so happy in my married life that I never gave them a thought. I never even thought about the gay life until age eighty-two." Initially, his story surprised me, but now I have heard many similar stories.

In the rural Nebraska community where I was born in 1943, everyone seemed to have the same values, the same values that some conservatives idealize and to which they think we should return. Conversations about human sexuality rarely occurred, and when they did, they were met with discomfort, embarrassment, and disapproval. Discussions of homosexuality, if they occurred at all, focused on its being

unnatural and an invitation to deviancy. We were not only innocent about sex but innocent about almost everything. We did as we were told, and independent thought was discouraged. The roles for men and women were rigidly defined.

Some of the men from my generation that I interviewed described being the best in their class at playing jacks, jumping rope, and twirling a baton, but their pride in their achievements at the time was diminished by a sense of shame at being the best at something a boy should not want to do at all. That's how I felt. At age fourteen, had I known there was such a thing as being gay, I might have understood my life better.

Many of the young boys in rural Nebraska explored their budding sexuality with each other; I know because I explored it with them. As an old, sexually experienced man, I find it hard to think of those experiences as sex. Although we didn't really talk about what we were doing, I don't believe any of us thought of it as homosexual sex, and it certainly wasn't gay sex because *gay* didn't come into common usage until much later. It all seemed perfectly normal to me, and I presume it seemed normal to my partners as well. As I look back on it now, the only difference I see between me and my friends is that perhaps I didn't want it to end when it did. As I grew older, I noticed that the interests of boys my age were changing. I questioned the tardiness of my own attraction to girls, but as for boys' attraction to girls' tits—the only word we ever used for women's breasts—I just didn't get it.

The “Good Me” and the “Bad Me”

Psychologists and psychiatrists use the term *cognitive dissonance* to describe the anxiety resulting from a person's beliefs being inconsistent with his or her actions. One man wrote to me on my *MagneticFire* blog, “I had always been taught that homosexuality was bad, but as I began to accept that I am gay, I could not make myself believe that I had become a bad person.” Life no longer fit with what he thought he knew, and his actions were no longer consistent with his previously held opinions. Dissonance creates anxiety that varies in intensity depending on the importance of the issue and the degree of the disparity. Becoming aware

of the potential consequences of behavior that departs from traditional expectations only adds to the discomfort. This intense anxiety often drives people to seek a sense of wholeness by changing either their behavior or their beliefs.

Dissonance, when it occurs in those who experience same-sex attraction, is usually attributed in gay literature to *internalized homophobia*—that is, an adoption of the majority culture's fear of or prejudice against LGBTQ people. Self-hatred derives from believing and internalizing those factually unsupported preconceptions about homosexuality. I am not a fan of the term *homophobia*. It seems a bit ironic to detest the word *homosexual* but to cling so tightly to the word *homophobia*. For one thing, it appears double-dealing to be angry about the struggle to replace the term *psychopathic deviants* with *gay* when referring to homosexuals while at the same time labeling the straight community perversely and pathologically homophobic. For another, the term *homophobia* collapses all opposition to homosexuality into one overly simplistic explanation. People are discriminated against because of their language, their religion, their skin color, or anything else that confers on them the status of an outsider. Prejudice is not a uniquely gay experience—all outsiders bleed the same blood when they are wounded by prejudice.

The gay community appropriately promotes coming out as an act that is essential for personal authenticity and social justice. Arguing against that point is hard. In my experience, relationships between straight and openly gay people help remove prejudices. My mother had

Anxiety from believing one thing and doing another increases according to these factors:

- The length of time the beliefs are held
- The importance of the issue
- The degree of inconsistency between beliefs and actions
- The degree of difficulty in reversing a decision
- The higher the anticipation of future problems as a result of the belief

never knowingly met anyone gay until I came out to her. My stepfather was a stern but loving Swede who inhabited his deep, unexamined religious faith and who would never knowingly hurt anyone, but he would say some of the most outrageously insensitive things about others. My parents were not homophobic, but they were homonaïve.

As a young teenager I read muscle magazines that I stole from the Rexall drugstore. I wanted to be like the men pictured in those magazines. Once I ordered a small, white spandex bathing suit from an ad in the back of a muscle magazine. I wore it to the swimming pool to teach swimming lessons, thinking the suit itself would create muscle

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definition, thereby making me appear more masculine. The senior lifeguard, a very handsome young man who had a body like the one I wanted, called me aside and told me the suit was not appropriate to

wear to the pool. He sent me home humiliated. I didn't realize that the suit was semitransparent and meant for posing rather than swimming. I couldn't seem to get anything right about being a man.

Until I was able to afford corrective plastic surgery, I was always ashamed of having gynecomastia, or "man boobs." It was as if the man boobs betrayed a secret about me. Once, my high school football coach shouted at me in front of all my teammates, "Olson, with tits like that, you should wear a bra!" He had just ripped away my other testicle.

Binary reasoning—the idea that only two alternatives exist—dominates contemporary American society, particularly in religion, politics, and advertising. The polar definitions of masculinity and femininity have been ingrained deeply in our psyches. The Marlboro man has become iconic of the tough, muscular man, always ready to get the girl. For the older man, the Viagra man, a little blue pill promises to rescue him from impotence and failure. The pill promises him an adolescent-like erection that with any luck will last just under four hours, right before he needs to call a doctor. A man's movement away from the entrenched image of masculinity can begin a chain reaction of events

that culminates in membership in his being labeled a sissy. Beliefs about masculinity are among the longest and most deeply held. Consequently, they yield to change slowly and only with great difficulty. Men may not know why they feel different, but they do know they cannot talk about it. Saying “I think I might be gay” is like unbridling a mustang. Anyone who says “I think I might be gay” is assumed to be gay; otherwise those thoughts would never enter his mind. It is a remark that does not allow a retraction the following morning.

The schoolboys I grew up with were not the first to call men fairies. In the early 1900s the term *fairy* was applied to effeminate men, and the men who had impersonal sex with these fairies were referred to as trade, the same word prostitutes used to describe their customers. Rough trade referred to trade working or criminal class who were often chosen as sexual partners of middle- and upper-class men. The word *gay* referred to pleasure, not an identity.

In the early twentieth century, MSM were not considered abnormal so long as they abided by gender-conforming characteristics, according to George Chauncey, author of *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940*.¹¹ Interest in same-sex encounters did not preclude interest in heterosexual ones. Achieving orgasm was a more powerful motivator than the gender of one’s partner. What Chauncey seems to be suggesting is that during the period he discussed, the idea of a sexual identity didn’t exist. Sex was only about pleasure.

Prior to the middle of the twentieth century, coming out of the closet did not exist, because the closet did not exist. In the early twentieth century, the world was not divided into gay and straight; men had to be a lot of things, but being heterosexual was not one of them. Having sex with someone of the same gender didn’t come with a value judgment.

In *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America (Sexuality Studies)*, Colin Johnson writes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the field of eugenics took root in rural America largely through land-grant universities like Iowa State University. The core idea was that if you could breed a leaner pig or a prettier tomato, why not apply the

same principles to breeding a better species of man? The idea that sex was for pleasure began to be replaced with the idea that sex was first and foremost about procreation. Pleasure was secondary, and masturbation and homosexuality were considered immoral pleasures. The ideal family was a heteronormative one where boys didn't touch penises—their own or anyone else's—until they were married, and these ideas were promoted through university extension services and the YMCA.¹²

Chauncey traces the increasingly successful challenges to this thinking back to the Stonewall uprising and the beginnings of gay liberation. Chauncey writes:

Whether homosexuality is good or bad, chosen or determined, natural or unnatural, healthy or sick is debated, for such opinions are in the realm of ideology and thus subject to contestation, and we are living in a time when a previously dominant ideological position, that homosexuality is immoral or pathological, faces a powerful and increasingly successful challenge from an alternative ideology, that regards homosexuality as neutral, healthy, or even good.¹³

Once again we are experiencing a cultural shift as young men and women today find the labels of gay, straight, and bisexual far too restrictive. The study of human sexuality has been expanded since the 1990s through the study of queer theory. Whereas gay and lesbian studies explored natural and unnatural behavior with respect to homosexuality, this newer field of study expands the focus of sexuality to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories.

The Stonewall Revolution

Although some resistance to the oppression of homosexuality existed earlier, many believe that the Stonewall riots defined the beginning of the gay liberation movement. Police raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in New York City, on June 27, 1969. The street filled with violent protesters, and people at the bar fought back.

Following Stonewall, homosexual men and women adopted the word *gay* as a form of self-affirmation. They replaced their shame with pride and staked out a place for themselves in the midst of a hostile society. Gay men rejected the effeminate caricature of their sexuality associated with the term *fairies*—at least in public. *Homosexual* is now considered an offensive term because of its earlier clinical history, which suggested that gay people are somehow diseased or psychologically disordered, and its insistent use by those committed to the idea that homosexuality is a choice and can be cured.

Many during the Stonewall era adopted a masculine uniform of flannel shirts, Levi's, and work boots as a means of expressing a new sense of self. They advanced values and identities different from those prescribed by the dominant culture. The Village People became the archetypes of the new gay masculinity. "It's Raining Men" became the anthem of the gay community. Following the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969, more men and women publicly disclosed their sexual orientation, and the word *gay* was adopted by the gay community as a term of self-affirmation. They developed a solidarity, visibility, and mutual support that they did not have before.

Not everyone welcomed the higher visibility of the gay community, and for some people, the radicalized counterculture was too much. As one man said during an online interview—one who chose not to label his sexual orientation although he only has sex with men—"I think the gay community is like a club with exclusive membership. If you don't wear the uniform, you cannot belong. I really don't understand the advantage of belonging, except [gay people] do help each other out."

Baby boomers, those men and women born during the decade following World War II, spent their childhoods in a pre-Stonewall society. Having been so deeply closeted prior to Stonewall, many were hesitant to begin to explore their adult lives in a more tolerant post-Stonewall culture.

The “Not Me”

All of us humans have a fundamental need to repress inner contradictions to bring the “good me,” the “bad me,” and the “not me” into alignment. Powerful psychological defense mechanisms that operate outside the conscious mind prevent unacceptable and intolerable feelings or behaviors from coming into awareness. Not uncommonly, men explain their same-sex indiscretions by saying, for example, “Oh, God, was I drunk! You’ll never believe what I did!” or “All I really wanted was a blow job, and I knew my wife would never give me one.” These rationalizations are used to justify behavior that might otherwise be unacceptable.

The psychological defense mechanism called denial prevents information, ideas, fantasies, or impulses from reaching the conscious mind; repression banishes them in the event they momentarily reach consciousness. Rationalization seeks to justify them in an acceptable way while hoping to make them appear reasonable. Defense mechanisms can be adaptive and allow us to function normally, and they can help control anxiety when our desires are doing battle with our own values. They also can be unhealthy when they are overused in order to avoid dealing with problems.

During my final year of medical school, I took a trip to St. Louis with my brother. We were exploring a gentrifying neighborhood of the city, and I went into an antiques store. My brother remained outside because he was in a wheelchair and the store was not accessible to him. I stood in the musty-smelling store examining a piece of Red Wing stoneware that I would have collected if I’d had any money. The young, attractive man who owned the store approached me. He was obviously intelligent and well-educated, and I enjoyed visiting with him. He asked me a few questions, and I told him I was in medical school in Nebraska and just visiting. As we talked, he had his thumbs hooked inside the pockets of his Levi’s with his fingers extending below. Suddenly, he flared out his fingers and touched my crotch. I thought, “How clumsy of him!” As we continued to speak, he touched me once again, this time a little more assertively.

Psychological defense mechanisms prevent unacceptable thoughts from entering our conscious mind:

- *Denial*—Believing that unacceptable attractions do not really exist
- *Repression*—Pushing back unacceptable thoughts after stealing a look at them
- *Rationalization*—Justifying unacceptable thoughts in an acceptable way

I fled the store and ruminated all day about this encounter. Was it possible to feel violated while at the same time welcoming this man's behavior? Believing I had invited this violation, even in some small way, was completely unacceptable to me on a conscious level. In order to continue affirming my heterosexuality, I had to alter any evidence to the contrary and ignore everything that suggested I might have been accountable for what had happened. Much later, I began to accept that I had unconsciously contributed to what had happened. As long as I could be angry with the proprietor of the antiques shop, I did not have to accept my responsibility. Blaming others for our problems does not transform us. As long as I portrayed myself as the victim and felt anger toward the perpetrator, I was able to continue to use denial, repression, and rationalization to maintain a façade of heterosexuality. As one interviewee said, "We as individuals are responsible for the course of our lives, in bed and out."

Reexamining the "Bad Me"

In 1948, Alfred C. Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which described sexual orientation on a seven-point continuum, from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. He suggested that male sexual behavior was far more diverse than held by tradition. As Justin Spring said in *Secret Historian*, "Through statistics, Kinsey had presented these individuals with a whole new way of understanding the sexual self. Among those with a homosexual orientation, feelings of

guilt, shame, anxiety, and depression could be particularly intense, and so Kinsey's findings were profoundly enlightening—and, by extension, healing—to these people."¹⁴

Viewpoints about Kinsey's research are as diverse as his description of sexuality. Opinions range from elevating him as a pioneering researcher in an age of moral hypocrisy to chastising his work as a pseudointellectual exercise intended on shredding the moral fabric of the nation by wrecking the family. Kinsey's work had an unintended consequence, according to Spring: "Only as society became more conscious of the nature and statistical prevalence of homosexuality within the general population did it become more violently repressive of it."¹⁵

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) reversed its position and took the scientific stance that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. Ultimately, most other professional organizations came to the same decision. The APA joined other professional mental health associations in opposition to reparative therapies, issuing a position statement called *Therapies Focused on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation (Reparative or Conversion Therapies)*. Approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees, it became the official policy of the APA in May 2000. The statement says, in part:

In the past, defining homosexuality as an illness buttressed society's moral opprobrium of same-sex relationships. In the current social climate, claiming homosexuality is a mental disorder stems from efforts to discredit the growing social acceptance of homosexuality as a normal variant of human sexuality. Consequently, the issue of changing sexual orientation has become highly politicized. The integration of gays and lesbians into the mainstream of American society is opposed by those who fear that such an integration is morally wrong and harmful to the social fabric. The political and moral debates surrounding this issue have obscured the scientific data by calling into question the motives and even the character of

individuals on both sides of the issue. This document attempts to shed some light on this heated issue.¹⁶

Conversion therapy, sometimes known as reparative or sexual reorientation therapy, is a psychotherapeutic practice that purports to change a person's sexual orientation, literally converting a person from gay to straight. Those who practice conversion therapy cling to the pre-Stonewall word *homosexual* and avoid using *gay* because by doing so, they attempt to create an image that homosexuality is not an identity that is immutable but rather a behavior that can and should be changed. They base their practices upon psychological theories of the early twentieth century where Freudian thought dominated, when homosexuality was seen as developmental arrest, severe psychopathology, or some combination of both. These practices—which have included nudity and intimate touching—have been discredited by virtually all major American medical, psychiatric, psychological, and professional counseling organizations. The validity, efficacy, and ethics of clinical attempts to change an individual's sexual orientation are now being challenged in court.

In 2012, California passed a law, the first of its kind, prohibiting this form of talk therapy for anyone under the age of eighteen, supporting the position that such efforts have never been proven to work and that the therapy can harm young patients. The law was signed into effect by California governor Jerry Brown, but it went through a series of legal challenges over whether or not it was unjustified infringement on free speech or a valid effort to prevent therapeutic malpractice. In 2013, the United States Supreme Court declined to take up the case, supporting California's ban on gay conversion therapy. Other states are now considering similar laws.¹⁷

To Be or Not to Be Gay

Some MSM feel quite comfortable with Kinsey's nonbinary description of sexuality because they do not see themselves as exclusively homosexual or heterosexual. However, they often express that they

feel more normal and comfortable in their sexual relationships with men than they do in sexual relationships with women. One man in my online correspondence with him commented, "It isn't a matter of who penetrates who. Making love [to a man] is way different than hookup sex or a blow job, although some people think it's the same. It is about passion, something that just happens. No rules or agendas. There must be some kind of mutual feeling."

I have often been asked, "How could you not know you were gay until you were forty?" I have been called a liar and a cheat by heterosexuals, and a gay man once said to me, "You have no balls. You're a liar and a hypocrite. There is no way you could not have known you were gay." However, in a society where binary logic dominates, one can be only good (straight) or evil (gay). Ambiguity, nuance, and moderation on ethical issues do not exist; at least, they did not exist for me. It was not until midlife that I could finally accept that being both gay and good is possible.

I met my first gay lover at the gym at Iowa State University when I was forty. One day, when dressing after my shower, I noticed Roberto, an attractive younger man, staring at me and smiling. I looked away nervously, but when I looked back at him he was still looking at me and smiling. Finally, he nodded toward the hallway door as he left the locker room and walked down the hall. As if his smile were pulling me by a magnetic force, I was unable to resist following him. I was astonished when I later learned that it was a married man that had seduced me. Despite our marriage vows, we met each other regularly over the course of about two years.

In some ways it was more acceptable to me that he was married because we shared this duplicitous life and it placed boundaries on the extent of our relationship. Although Roberto and I had had oral sex, we followed the rules: no kissing, no anal. When he finally kissed me, I loved the kiss for what it represented about our relationship, but I hated it for the ways it might change my life. At that moment, "I just went gay all of a sudden." With a rush of insight, I knew that what was true had

always been true, and a great deal of my life that I had not understood until then suddenly made a great deal of sense.

My relationship with the thirty-two-year-old Roberto was romantic, passionate, and volatile, as many forbidden relationships are. I experienced a range and intensity of loving and erotic feelings I had never before experienced. Although my adolescent friends' captivation with women's breasts had escaped me, the excitement of an erect penis did not.

Once my relationship with Roberto ended, so did the dissonance I felt about my sexual orientation. I began to accept that, for me, loving another man was as normal as loving a woman is for other men. This was no longer about sex but about loving, and the sex was just an expression of that love. As long as I perceived a sexual partner as nothing more than a body part with which I might achieve an impersonal orgasm, it was hard to see myself as anything more than an instrument for sex. But when I discovered that the body part was attached to a person I loved and whom I wanted to love me, everything changed.

At the moment I knew I was gay, truths exploded inside my mind. It immediately became obvious to me that I had found the answers to questions I'd been asking for forty years. I began to reinterpret my past in the context of my new reality. I no longer felt that being a man was contingent upon accepting the cultural definition of masculinity. It was within my power to define it for myself. I could now go to a party with gay men and talk about football, china patterns, or someone's cute butt. I still found my man boobs unattractive, but I no longer felt that they revealed sexual ambiguity. There were other men who couldn't fix machines. My testicles had been restored.

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