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With All Thy Getting, Get Understanding

by Don D. Harryman
 Originally published in [Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation](#)

I was not raised in the church but was introduced to it in high school by friends. Around the same time my parents were divorced and I went to live with a Mormon family who had taken an interest in my life. Not necessarily because of this association but because of my own personal conviction that Mormonism was divine, I was baptized at age sixteen.

In my life prior to baptism, I always had a feeling that I was different, and in my interview for baptism, I was asked about something I always vaguely suspected but never fully understood about myself—that I might be homosexual. The question was moot since I had had no sexual experience of any kind that made me unworthy for baptism, and I dismissed it from my mind.

I had had no previous religious training or involvement before joining the Mormon church, and I embraced my new-found faith with energy. I found great satisfaction in participating in church meetings, youth activities, and early-morning seminary. My intense involvement with church and my lack of sexual experience prior to joining the church precluded me from fully answering the nagging suspicion which surfaced again—indeed, I did not even understand the question, since I was not really sure what a homosexual was. I was relieved when I confessed my fear to my bishop. He assured me that what I needed to do was continue to date girls, participate fully in church activity, and follow the commandments.

With that assurance I poured renewed energy into my church activities, schoolwork, and social life, which included friendships with both boys and girls. Liking or disliking women was not the issue—I liked girls and had many friendships with them in school and church. Probably my best friends were my sisters. Living in the Mormon subculture as I did, the only acceptable social interaction with other boys or girls that I had was non-sexual. It was easy under those circumstances for me to ignore the sexual feelings I had for men and to interpret the friendships I felt for women as sexual attraction.

In the fall of 1969 I graduated with honors from high school, and I set out for BYU, the only university I considered or applied for. It felt right to me—surely it was the best place for me to prepare for the kind of life I wanted, and for that first year, it was. I enjoyed my classes, my social activities, and involvement with my student ward. If I ever thought about any homosexual feelings, it was only fleetingly—I was certain that I would go on a mission, return to BYU, and marry.

My mission call to Japan came in the fall of 1970. During the week I spent in the old mission home in Salt Lake City, we heard among the many inspiring messages given to us by various General Authorities of the church some terrifying ones about the evils of unrepentant sexual sin. The word which I could barely say to myself was repeated several times. Homosexuality, we were warned, was consummate evil, and any unrepentant person was doomed to a mission filled with spiritual darkness and failure. I was certain they were right, and with my heart pounding, I requested to speak to the Mission Home president. Upon hearing my confession, he assured me that I was involved in the darkest of sins. But after questioning me about specific instances and people I had been involved with, he determined that since I had only sexual feelings but no experience, I was clean and worthy to go on my mission. Relieved, I left Salt Lake City for the Language Training Mission in Hawaii determined to be the best missionary that I could be.

I loved my mission. I excelled in the language, enjoyed most of my companions, and developed a real love for the Japanese people and their beautiful and fascinating country. I found some aspects of mission life competitive in a way which seemed more like what I imagined boot camp would be than what a mission should be, and sometimes the endless rules seemed harsh. But my mission was a profound religious and cultural experience.

Still at times terrifying feelings came over me with hot, undeniable certainty. At times I felt intense, compelling, and definitely sexual feelings for some men—especially for certain church members and for certain companions with whom I also had strong emotional ties. Certain nights during the summer stand out in my memory. I awoke from sleep, drenched with sweat from the heat of the stifling Japanese summer, from the erotic dream I was having, and from the passions I felt for my companion who slept next to me. I followed what was by now a familiar pattern and confessed my feelings to my mission president. He listened patiently and seemed unable to comprehend what I was telling him. Then he did the wisest thing a person in his position could do: since I had not acted on my feelings, there could be no punishment. He withheld both judgment and punishment and told me he loved me and appreciated my efforts as a missionary. The love and support of my mission president and his wife helped me to finish my mission.

In November 1972 I finished my mission and returned home to California with a growing certainty that I was homosexual and no one could help me know what to do. After working at home for six months, I decided to return to BYU—I worked in Provo that summer and formulated a plan. My repeated interviews with church leaders had yielded nothing. I knew I had to find another solution.

I decided that for the first time in my life I would talk to a psychiatrist or psychologist. I didn't understand the difference nor did I have any idea what such a person did, but my growing terror forced me to what seemed my only course of action. I thought I was the only person with this problem—I felt completely alone with it. Having read somewhere about the BYU Psychology Clinic, I sought out the anonymity of a telephone booth and, after several tries ending with my hanging up, I completed the call.

The person on the line tried in vain to get me to say what my problem was, but I simply could not say it. In a few weeks the fall semester would begin, I was told, and if I would call back, I could make an appointment to see a counselor. I subsequently made the call—and waited through the following anxious days for the appointment.

In an old "lower campus" building, I sat paralyzed with fear waiting for my appointment and was finally greeted by a pleasant and attractive man. Once in the session, he explained that he was a graduate student in psychology and that counseling experience in the clinic was part of the requirements in his doctoral program. Both in that session and in the following sessions, we talked comfortably on general topics and I gradually overcame some of the resistance I had to talking in detail about my sexual feelings. Hypnosis was used to facilitate this process, and I began to gain some confidence that perhaps I was really going to be helped with what I had always feared, never experienced, and learned to hate so perfectly about myself.

As the sessions progressed, we reached a point where my counselor indicated we had spent enough time in an analysis phase and now needed to move into a treatment phase. My purpose there was to change from a homosexual into a heterosexual. That premise was never discussed as one of many alternatives by my counselor, nor would it have occurred to me that there were other alternatives—like accepting myself as I was. He explained a new treatment called aversion therapy which had shown "promising results" and which involved the use of electric shock and sexually explicit slides. I did not even briefly consider the possibility of emotional, physical, or spiritual damage to myself in the treatment—I was determined to change. Without hesitation I signed the forms which released the Psychology Clinic and BYU from any liability.



Don Harryman

My counselor explained that it would be necessary for me to obtain sexually erotic, preferably nude, photographs of men—the shock would be applied while I was viewing the slides. It was never indicated where I might find such photographs—perhaps he assumed that I knew. Having no car and no one with a car in whom I could confide my secret, I hitchhiked to Salt Lake—it was the only place I figured I could find such photographs. Up and down the streets of Salt Lake I walked, until at length I discovered a bookstore that looked seedy enough to have pornography. I entered, terrified that I might see someone I knew and examined every book and magazine in the store, until I finally made my way to the shelf where pornographic magazines were displayed. I stuffed a few copies of *Playgirl* in between some other magazines I had selected hoping that the *Playgirl* might seem a last minute casual selection for a wife or girlfriend. Purchasing those magazines was not casual by any means, and it was the first time in my life that I had ever seen, let alone purchased, any such publication. I felt out of place, alone and frightened.

My next assignment was to view the photographs and to take the ones I found most erotic to a local camera store, where I was told an arrangement had been made through the Psychology Clinic to have the photographs made into slides. All was approved, I was told, and only the owner of the store knew about the arrangement. Of course I would also have to pay for the slides. I took the photographs in a plain manila envelope to this store and, summoning my courage, went to the counter and stated that I had photographs to be made into slides for a program supervised by a BYU professor. I had been told his name was the key to complete anonymity. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than it seemed the eyes of every employee left their immediate task and stared. It was humiliating and embarrassing. I felt as though all of those strangers knew my most private business.

The actual sessions of aversion therapy began after that, and with the exception of about a two-month break, I had sessions twice a week for the next year. Beginning with the first call to the Psychology Clinic and continuing on with the weekly visits, the trip to Salt Lake and to the camera store, I started to lead a double life. I was secretive about my whereabouts and timed my sessions to precede or follow other activities so that no one would know. I would go to a room in the Smith Family Living Center where an electrode was attached to my arm and I was asked to ruminate or otherwise fantasize about sexual activity with men—no small task since I had never had the experience and was not too sure what two men did with each other. During the viewing, random and painful electric shocks would be sent through my arm. Later the procedure was modified. When shock was being introduced during the viewing of a male slide, I could stop the shock by pressing a plunger, which would cause a slide of a clothed woman to appear on the screen. Even now other details of the therapy are too embarrassing for me to write about. (A detailed description of this therapy can be found in M. F. McBride, "Effect of Visual Stimuli in Electric Shock Therapy," Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1976.) This treatment was augmented by counseling, in which I was encouraged to be "physical" with women, and by more hypnosis, wherein suggestion was made that I would become uncontrollably nauseated if I thought about men in an erotic way.

I cannot say that I ever became nauseated thinking about men—but I certainly became very skilled at looking away and thinking about something else at the first sign of any sexual feelings. Likewise I never became "physical" with women. I liked the women I dated but became even more anxious than I previously had been about holding hands or kissing them. Besides I was never certain how "physical" I was supposed to be.

The counselor with whom I had started my treatment graduated part way through my treatment, and his replacement was another graduate student who was working on the aversion therapy as part of his dissertation. Since I had signed the release at the beginning of the treatment which freed BYU or any person involved with this experiment from any liability for any ill effects that I might suffer, the burns on my arms and the emotional trauma I experienced seemed to me the price that I had to pay for change. The countless talks I had heard about knocking on the door until your hands were bloody rang in my ears, and in my desperation I began to feel that my suffering and hence my being a martyr was additional proof that what I was doing was right.

In the spring of 1975, I finished the treatment. The criteria used by my counselor to determine whether I was cured of homosexuality were not clear to me, but in the final few sessions he talked optimistically about my "progress" and the woman, soon to come into my life, whom I would marry. I also believed that would happen.

The following summer I remained in Provo and worked at my job in the Cannon Center cafeteria. Some women whom I worked with told me about their friend who was coming from Seattle to attend school that fall. Knowing I needed a roommate to share the expenses of my small apartment, they asked me about accepting their friend as a roommate. It seemed perfect.

A week prior to the beginning of the semester in the fall of 1975, I walked across campus to meet my new roommate at Heritage Halls where he was waiting, having driven to Provo with a woman friend. When I first saw him, my heart jumped. He was handsome, and as we walked the distance back to my apartment, I discovered that he had an engaging personality and a quick wit. We talked easily, and after dinner and arranging some of his belongings, we retired.

Small, almost imperceptible things in his conversation had raised a vague suspicion, and in the few moments after I turned out the single light, my new friend reached out and touched my arm. That single, innocent touch was electrically erotic and terrifying. The feelings I had worked so hard to suppress came crazily, uncontrollably to the surface. What I had always feared and hated about myself became searingly and unavoidably a part of my consciousness. I was falling in love.

My carefully constructed defenses crumbling, I lay awake all night, and when the first light of morning began to fill the room, I made a desperate decision. When my friend, whom I will call Steve, awoke, I confronted him with my suspicion that he was homosexual. I could not afford to focus on my own feelings. In self-defense, for what was to be the last time, I declared absolutely that I was not homosexual. Contrary to my expectations, he felt no need to deny my accusation. He had long ago accepted his homosexuality and was still determined to finish his year at BYU and to serve a mission for the church.

In the days and weeks which followed that first day, I began to feel the weight and the terror of my dilemma. I was not cured, nor did the relationship which was developing between Steve and me feel sordid and awful as I had been led to believe it would. Falling in love was a roller coaster mix of emotions I had never experienced. Having once felt them, I knew that I could not and would not ever be the same again. Another new set of emotions grew—a rage that I began to feel towards the church. Why after all that I had been through was I still homosexual? There was never any doubt in my mind and in my heart that I not only had done what I had been told would make me a heterosexual but much, much more. Had I been lied to? Had I lied to myself? My anger grew and grew, and although Steve tried to help me clarify the issues that sometimes flooded my mind and emotions, he also began to feel overwhelmed by my confusion. The most troublesome aspect of my dilemma was that what I had always been told in the church about my sexuality and what I was now learning from my own experience were very, very different.

It was then that I met by telephone Steve's friend, Howard. Howard had been a role model for Steve and was the person who had helped him resolve the crisis that I was now having. An excommunicated Mormon, Howard spent many hours on the phone over the next many months helping me to sort out the complex issues of homosexuality and the church. Many nights I would take long walks in the snow and think and cry.

In the spring of 1976, Steve left for a mission in Europe, and I moved to northern California to Howard's home. Waking up that May morning in Howard's home on the banks of the Russian River among the redwoods was like having been transported to another world. It was in that supportive and loving environment with Howard and the many friends who visited that I began to stabilize. There came interesting people of all kinds—Howard knew everybody. Heterosexual people who were married with children, single heterosexual people, homosexual people in couples, and those who were single came in and out that summer and fall. I began to understand that my homosexuality need not be the only issue in my life. Howard's friends accepted his homosexuality and mine, and they seemed more interested in what I thought and what kind of a human being I was. What also became clear to me was that accepting my homosexuality did not preclude me from having a life filled with useful work and rich, loving friendships. Slowly I could see that I was homophobic and filled with self-hatred and that the key to my happiness was in accepting myself.

Howard gave me back my life. He taught by precept and by example many things which have helped me to develop my own personal framework for sexual morality. These things have become more clear and more valuable to me with the passage of time and with experience. Unlike my relationship with Steve, which was romantic and had a sexual expression, my relationship with Howard was more like a relationship with a parent. I began to see that in any relationship, love was the most important element.

At Howard's insistence, I went back to BYU in January 1977 to finish my degree and to face the problems that I had bolted from the year before. The following June, while standing on the banks of the beautiful river and while playing with his beloved dogs, Howard collapsed and died of a massive heart attack. Back in Provo I was devastated by the news, and several days later after attending the funeral in Springville where Howard was from, I made the long trip across the desert to California and back to Howard's home in Guerneville.

In the days that I spent there and in the following months back in Provo, I was depressed and could not imagine a world without Howard in it. He was my best friend and the greatest man I ever knew. Time has eased the pain of losing him, but I have never stopped missing him or being grateful that he touched my life so significantly.

With Howard gone and Steve still in Europe for another year, I was lonely but felt the comfort of friends and found renewed satisfaction in my school work. Howard had insisted that I come back to finish my degree, and I set about that task with dedication and energy.

Steve completed his mission in 1978. When he returned to Provo, our relationship went the way of so many adolescent loves and ended. He missed Howard terribly and could not endure the oppressive atmosphere which had become the norm for homosexual people at BYU during the 1970s. At the end of that fall semester, he moved to Salt Lake City with a new circle of friends he had made at a newly formed group called Affirmation/Gay and Lesbian Mormons.

I had attended Affirmation a few times with Steve, but Steve's presence there and my own uncertainty about Affirmation made association with the group impossible after Steve moved to Salt Lake. With Howard and now Steve gone, my isolation felt complete. I had many friends but not a single one who knew about my homosexuality. The darkest depression and loneliness I had ever experienced set in.

That Christmas I visited a friend in the San Francisco Bay area. On the last day of my visit, she drove into San Francisco to work, and I decided to spend the day looking for a job. Most of that day I walked the streets, sometimes crying and sometimes just trying to pray in my heart that I might understand what to do. My life in Provo had become unbearable, and I could not face going back. Perhaps I might find a job and come here, I thought, and I actually did a few interviews. At the end of that winter day, I made my last stop the San Francisco City Hall. For a moment I forgot my troubles as I gazed at the rococo splendor of that building and then made my way to the basement personnel office. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was overcome with a feeling of warmth and well-being, and I knew what I was to do. The impression was unmistakable that I was to return to Provo and accept the job I had previously applied for at the Language Training Mission, now called the Missionary Training Center (MTC). I knew my friends in Provo cared about me, the missionaries needed me, and I needed them. That impression proved to be true. My friends did not understand because I could not tell them, but they loved anyway. Also during fourteen months teaching Japanese at the MTC, I was able to share my mission experience and my language expertise with the missionaries. Being able to give of myself was the most important medicine I could take. It helped me through that difficult time.

In the fall of 1979, with one more year left of school, I faced my final crisis at BYU. A former roommate figured out my relationship with Steve and turned me in, because in his words I posed a "danger" to the missionaries I was teaching. That Sunday morning as I faced my bishop, I became nearly hysterical. I knew too well about the lists of suspected homosexuals maintained by BYU security, about the decoys and the possible entrapments. I was terrified.

As I related to him my entire story, my bishop was dumfounded. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, nor could he believe that the person who sat before him was homosexual. I fit none of his stereotypes or preconceptions. His reaction was loving, and he assured me that my situation was between him, the stake president, and me only.

In the days that followed, he and the stake president determined that since it had been so long since my sexual involvement with Steve and since I did not fit into the category of "rebellious homosexual" as defined by the Bishop's Handbook, I could remain at BYU and no action would be taken against my church membership. At first both the bishop and stake president were determined to send me to a counselor. Given my prior experience I was scared. However, during the next several weeks, the bishop seemed to drop that idea and seemed to become more and more confused and concerned. In one of our many interviews, he confessed that he did not know how to help me and that he now had several more cases of homosexuality in his ward to deal with. Furthermore, his desire to go directly to the General Authorities to gain more understanding had been firmly opposed by the stake president.

At that point, I took the first real step towards taking responsibility for my own life. I felt as if everyone was making decisions about my life but me. I made an appointment with the stake president, whom I had not yet met. Our meeting began cordially, but he seemed surprised that I was well-read and conversant on the subject of psychological theory as it related to homosexuality. Indeed, he seemed surprised that I could also be a credible witness for my own experience. My frustration began to grow as did my anger when he confessed that as a professional—he had a Ph.D. in educational psychology—he knew that homosexuality was not a curable or changeable state. But in his position as a church leader, he felt compelled to support the official church position. Besides, he said, the brethren did not really mean that one could be cured, just that a homosexual should not act on his or her feelings.

I was outraged. It was finally clear to me that the church's position on this was not clear-cut. What I had been told previously and what I was now being told were quite different indeed. Finally I knew that I had to get my own answers.

During the previous weeks I had agreed with my bishop to abide by all church and BYU standards during my remaining time there. Now I informed the stake president that I had requirements of my own. The previous year, someone in Affirmation who had heard about my aversion therapy experience had given my name to the public television station in Salt Lake City because they were interested in producing a program on homosexuality at BYU. Although I had declined to be interviewed, I now told the stake president that if I even suspected any harassment from security, I would go public with my story on public television or to the newspapers or anyone who would listen.

The color drained from his face. He stammered that I just couldn't do that. He asked, "What about BYU?" I finally understood that BYU's public image was more important to this man than I was.

I asked, "What about me?" That was it, the end. I was finished. I would complete my degree and leave BYU and Provo. Maybe I would even leave the church. My last interview with my bishop is something I can never forget. With tears in his eyes, he told me that he was sorry that he had failed me and that the church had failed me. My answer to him was and still is that no one could have treated me with greater Christian concern and love than he had. He apologized that his desire to get more understanding directly from the brethren had been blocked by the stake president. I replied that while I felt the stake president's course of action was more an example of administrative expediency than of Christian love, I really did not blame him. In his position I might have done likewise.

And thus I finished my term, got my degree, and left. It was clear to me that I had to find my own life and that I could not find it where I was. I moved in September 1980 to the San Francisco Bay area. In 1983 I reconnected with Affirmation, and although I attended church at first, I eventually became inactive. Perhaps there is greater spiritual safety within the congregation of the Saints, but my choice to leave reflects my desire to live my life free of lies, denial, and self-hatred and my desire to accept responsibility for my own life. Ultimately I cannot and will not go where I am made to feel unworthy or unwanted.

I have found with my friends in Affirmation and with many other friends and family a profound sense of community, and by accepting myself a greater sense of belonging to the human family which includes all people—black and white, male and female, old and young, the righteous and the not-so-righteous, those who believe, those who do not, those who are homosexual, those who are heterosexual, those who fit into the church and into society and those who are merely different.

In June I marched with my Affirmation family in the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade. I felt pride to be there with those who have been my friends and family in our Affirmation group and to be there with that vast and varied throng of humanity—to see the acceptance we have among the community of gay and lesbian people and among the larger community of the San Francisco Bay area and to feel pride in my identity as a homosexual person and in my heritage as a Mormon.

It is to my heritage in the church that I look for my greatest source of strength. It is to the example of Joseph Smith, who as a young boy asked God directly to guide him, that I look for inspiration. It is also to the Latter-day Saints, with whom I sometimes feel enormous frustration, that I look for a better example than I now see. I know that in the Saints there is an enormous reservoir of honesty, Christian love and compassion, understanding, intelligence, and good will.

Finally, I find comfort and understanding in the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon. One particular reference speaks most clearly to me of the Book of Mormon's power as a witness of Jesus Christ because it defines most beautifully and clearly the central message of the gospel: "And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Wherefore my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail. But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him" (Moroni 8:45-47).

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www.affirmation.org
PO Box 898
Anoka, MN 55303