

## **Becoming the Real Me**

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Because I was raised in a highly dysfunctional family, I have blocked out much of my childhood. What I do remember is painful. However, through therapeutic intervention and with G-d's help, I have been able to reconstruct many of the things that happened, the feelings I had, and in the process found a way to heal the wounds such situations created.

By the time I was 6 and in kindergarten, I realized that things were not normal in my house. The apparent peaceful existence I observed in other families was absent in mine. I perceived my dad as being very abusive to my mom, verbally and physically. I became scared of him, fearing he would abuse me as well. He and I were not close. On the other hand, Mom and I were best friends. I loved doing everything with my mom. During this time, however, I was unaware of my mother's alcoholism, how it affected her behavior, and the response of my Dad to her abuse of alcohol.

Both Mom and Dad were previously married and came to their marriage with kids. I was scared of my half- brothers. They were several years older than me and they taunted and physically abused me. They would make me jump off the roof, throw boiling water at me and the worst was when they held a weed whacker to my face. They would also shame my body and teach me about sex when we would have to shower together. My brothers were 13 and 15 when they ran away from the hell in which I grew up.

As a means of burying my emotional pain, I began to secretly eat and became very overweight. I constantly ate. (A pattern that still haunts me. Whenever I am frustrated or emotionally wrought, I eat in order to keep my mind off things. I have struggled with being overweight my entire life.) By eating I was (and am) able to distract myself; I stuff my authentic emotions. I cover up my anger, fear, and sadness with the pleasures of eating. In the process, I bury my ability to feel authentic joy.

My Mom's drinking got out of control and became dangerous. We traveled one night to see my Dad who was working out of town. She was intoxicated and drove across the median and almost hit a car head on. I saw my Mom get arrested that night. That was the beginning of my parents' separation. I was only 9 years old when my parents divorced. I felt as if I had lost my best friend, my Mom.

Even though I resented my Dad and feared him, my Dad got custody. No one asked me what I wanted. Dad remarried a year later and in the process I gained 3 new siblings, one of which was

a step brother my age. The first summer we were together, he taught me about the male body. He taught me how to masturbate, and how to provide him with oral sex. I became his sex slave for 6 years, starting at age 10 and ending at age 16. I was manipulated to believe that I could not tell anyone, that I was special and as a reward could have sex with him. My brain became wired to this behavior.

My mom fled the state and her probation. She moved to Wisconsin. Through my teenage years, her drinking got worse. I talked to her maybe once a month. But she was never sober enough to have a valid conversation with me.

By the time I was about 10/11, I was conditioned into having sex with boys. However, as a person who attended an LDS Church and had religious training, I internalized a religious value structure that led me to believe such behavior was wrong. Engaging in such activity would lead me to hell. I was scared and humiliated. As a believing member of the LDS community, I was taught that sex outside of marriage was a "no-no" and that G-d's plan of creation involved one man and one woman living together in a sanctified relationship. This contradiction weighed upon me. I felt like a sinner during much of my life. I started living my double life: I acted differently on the outside than what I really felt inside.

My Dad and step mom divorced when I was 16. That was when my step-brother left. To replace the sex I had with him, I became very addicted to pornography. It was my escape mechanism. The image of sex replaced the sex I had with my step brother. I craved sex and masturbated to the images on the screen. I literally would look at porn every moment I could. I looked at it so much and of course paid no attention to various viruses than often came in with the porn material. Within the year, I ended up frying the computer because of viruses.

When I graduated from high school, my Dad and I finally had a real falling out. I moved in with a friend from school and began to party it up. I also chose to voluntarily act out with other men for the first time. The first experience was with my boss from work and it happened three times in one month. The conflict of my soul's desire for purity and my body's desire for unhealthy connection was painful. I knew inside that the physical satisfaction was only momentary and was not real. I therefore stopped the affair with my boss as well as the acting out with others and decided it was time to turn my life around. I thought by serving a mission for my church, these homosexual feelings would all vanish.

When speaking with my church leaders, I never admitted my SSA nor the sexual molestation. I told myself that if I was not supposed to go on mission, or if God would punish me for what I did, then He would prevent me from going on mission. But I was selected and went to Virginia to serve my mission. It was a beautiful experience. However, my homosexual feelings continued to be present...which I valiantly tried to repress. I became extremely depressed. Not being able to

deal with this conflict, I came home a year early from mission. I felt negatively judged by the other Church members when I returned. And, I felt like a failure.

After returning home, I was having a meal with my Dad and Uncle that truly upset me. An obviously gay-identified man worked at the place where we were eating and he caught my Dad's attention. Dad commented that if any of his kids choose to live like the guy who was working there, that child would never be welcomed in his house ever again. At that point, I could not contain myself and blurted out not only my homosexual feelings but also the history of molestation that occurred in his household. He became very angry with me and was especially mad that I did not tell him about what was done to me by the other boys in the family. He said I could choose to not identify as gay. Not feeling supported by him nor my uncle, and feeling like an outsider who had failed my Church mission, I moved from New Mexico to Texas. I wanted a fresh start and desired to get away from everyone.

However, my homosexual ideation became worse. Through those first couple of years in Texas, I found myself sexualizing my best friends. To fulfill these longings, I deliberately made myself a victim and was able to persuade several of them to do things that would satisfy me sexually. The internal struggle I felt became most intense because I found myself getting emotionally attached to them even though I believed the behavior was designed to be simply sexual and without any emotional attachments.

Because of my love for food and pastry, I decided to attend Culinary School in Austin. While attending the school, I received a phone call from someone inviting me back to church. I decided to return, partially because I had been doing the "gay thing" for six years and had never met anyone with whom I could really connect on an authentically deep level. At this same time, I tried dating women from within my church but didn't have luck there either. I was still addicted to porn and was very suicidal. I felt that G-d may be punishing me by condemning me to live alone.

But I was wrong. G-d put someone in my life---my roommate in Austin---who saw my pain, understood my fears, and was a sensitive heterosexual person. He suggested that I needed help and suggested that I see some mental health professionals.

The first professional I saw was a psychiatrist. His primary role was providing me with appropriate medications to get my mental state more balanced. It was not easy. I tried several combinations of depression/anxiety meds, as many as ten. My psychiatrist did not engage in a lot of counseling about my sexual identity. Rather, he spoke to me about trying to find peace within myself. I read, "The Way of the Peaceful Warrior", a coming of age themed tale explaining how to become one with your body and senses; it followed a struggling boy's journey. I remember a particular quote from the book, "You must cleanse your body of tension, free your mind of

stagnant knowledge, and open your heart to the energy of true emotion." As I read this story about the primary character who learns about the path of transformation, the novel helped challenge my beliefs about the meaning of masculine power and what success meant.

I was able to realize that to become one with myself, I had to be myself. In various experiential weekends that I had attended, I was able to absorb this teaching. On one of them that I attended, an exercise involved having the participants experience nudity in each other's presence. I was terrified. Before doing that exercise, I would not even want to be seen without my shirt on. But once I accepted myself and found that everyone else accepted me, it was a powerful "aha" moment: I was free.

My psychiatrist also helped me with my sleep patterns. Four years ago, before I started seeing him, I became very suicidal and could not sleep at night. In addition to the meds for depression/anxiety, my psychiatrist prescribed 16 different drug combinations in order to fight my insomnia. If I did not take a med, I did not sleep. Another therapist I saw during that period helped me by providing cognitive behavioral change therapy. He suggested that in order to sleep, I meditate to music at night and focus on one of the sounds.

I also needed to work on my false identify as "gay." I knew I did not want to be that way but had been led to believe by societal messages that nothing could be done about it and that my homosexual feelings were simply not changeable. This belief system led me to contemplate suicide and death.

A therapist in Texas that is part of a network of counselors often recommended by JONAH (Bobby Morgan) worked with me for 6 months during this past year. Through a modality of therapy called Eye Movement, Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Bobby enabled me to overcome traumatic events from my past. By putting me into a rem sleep cycle, he enable me to reframe my interpretation of many painful events. To put me into the rem sleep cycle, he would have me tap my knees back and forth or tap my toes back and forth. Through that process, I was able to reframe, for example, my interpretations of the time when my mother almost killed us, to the times my step brother molested me, and to inform my deceased grandmother about my SSA while also saying good bye to her.

After completing my work with Bobby, I engaged another therapist to teach me other techniques. For example, a breathing technique (inhaling and exhaling focusing on the numbers), the stop sign method (where I stop the situation and walk away to breathe) and the time out method (when I get overly angry, I take a time out until I can re-center myself and thus do not say things I do not mean and nor become rageful.) I am also trying to use the stop sign method to overcome my weight problem.

I realize that no one single therapist has all the answers. Each will contribute a piece of the puzzle that will enable me to realize that I DO have control of a situation. I can STOP and think rather than just act or react. And, I have the ability to go back and take care of old wounds that were not yet healed. To be taught that I have the ability to go back in time and re-teach myself about what I missed, change the interpretation of a situation (and obviously without changing the facts) enabled me to fight back against the demons that haunted me. Such realizations have been life changing.

The work I did with these several mental health professionals enabled me to achieve a life-long dream of normality. After beginning the process of healing the myriad number of wounds I had, I began dating the woman who would become my wife. Early in our relationship (perhaps it was too soon), I informed her about my SSA issues. She was distressed over my admissions and broke up with me. But a few months later, she approached me and suggested we start dating again. As we became emotionally closer and more authentic with each other, we saw how well suited we were for each other. We married the next year.

Three months into our marriage, I got a call from my long time friend, Danielle Mansfield. I knew her as Danielle Palmer for two years before she married Ty Mansfield, a member of my Church and also a therapist who helps men with SSA. Ty invited me to go to an experiential weekend in Texas called Journey into Manhood (JiM). JiM enabled me to bring together many of the therapeutic lessons I had learned from my mental health professionals. It put the pieces together and was the answer I had been waiting for all my life. It literally changed my life.

Here I am today. I still struggle. Given my life story, it is no surprise that I still have problems with depression and have occasional suicidal thoughts but as long as I continue my work and proceed with the journey, those issues will indeed be overcome. I now know I have a greater purpose in life and I recognize that the challenges I faced in childhood and beyond made me into a stronger person today. My life will never be the same. I love this work. I know that my homosexual ideation and my childhood traumas were given to me for a grand purpose.

I have been liberated by going public over the last year and half about my issues; however, I feel betrayed by some members of the gay community who have brought a vicious lawsuit against my friends at JONAH and some of the counselors within their network. If the plaintiffs succeed, the healing that I have achieved will not be available to others who faced similar traumas in their lives and were then falsely led to believe that homosexuality was the answer. It is not.

As a postscript, I think it important to indicate that after going public with my story, my Dad has become closer to me. Not only did he not reject me for my struggles with same-sex attraction, but I've been able to put into practice the lessons I learned from the years of therapy and JiM. Last Thanksgiving, I asked him to hold me. It was the first time in my life that I can attest to

actually being held by my father. As I am now 28 years old, it has been a long time for such holding and connection to occur. What a blessing to be able to reconnect with a man I feared for so many years and to do so in such a meaningful way.

My mother eventually became sober. She has not imbibed alcohol for about 10 years. However, she is not capable of being the Mom I once thought I had. However, she loves me just as I am. My step mom and I maintain a close loving relationship in which I refer to her as mom and she refers to me as her son.

And, my wife has joined me on this journey. She attended the "Wives Healing Weekend" sponsored by People Can Change. We are not only married lovers but also see each other as friends/companions who are striving to be each other's best friend and confidant. I am blessed by her total acceptance of me and my wounds. We are currently trying to have children, an achievement which has always been my greatest hope in life, that is, to be a Dad.

I have not "acted out" in about 10 years. Above all, I thank the Lord for all I have. I know it is He who made the path for my journey. I know I would be nothing without my Savior.

I am so grateful to be a part of a community of men who are in the process of healing. I am a far better person now because of the other men I've met on this journey. Each of us are valuable and good just as we are. And, I thank each of them for seeing my shadows and accepting me, just as I am.

And, finally I need to thank several mentors. I would not be where I am today without people like Rich Wyler, Arthur Goldberg, Thaddeus Heffner, Alan Downing, Tim Timmerman, Ty Mansfield, and Bobby Morgan. I clearly know that without them my life would be nothing and my progress as a man among men would likewise be lacking. These people and organizations like PCC and JONAH give men a CHOICE, a VOICE, and a DECISION. These are powers I did not know I had within me. I wanted to change my sexual orientation. And, it is my right, as a human being created by G-d and as an American in a free society, to choose to do that, ... just like someone has the right to choose whether they want mayo or mustard on their sandwich. It is that damn simple. It is my RIGHT, my CHOICE, and my POWER.