

Change as *Progressive Freedom* from Same-Sex Attractions

by Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

One mystery I've long been pondering is the source of the hesitation of some ex-gay men to tell their story.

Repeated assurance of confidentiality and guarantee of total anonymity—plus their own acknowledgement of the importance of documenting success—nonetheless is met, in many cases, with a deeply entrenched resistance to participate in studies measuring change.

This reluctance remains inarticulate, and is evidenced by familiar clichés such as, "Let me pray about it," "I'll let you know," "I'll have to give it some thought," "Let me see how I'll feel."

Yet it is these same persons who at other times, express their outrage that the mental health profession denies their ability to change—"How dare the APA's fail to recognize *our* reality—that change *has* happened!"

One reason for these persons' hesitation, of course, is distrust of authority, including—perhaps especially—psychiatric investigators. "That would be an 'invasion by surveyors,'" as one man expressed it. They fear a violation of personal boundaries and intrusion into their private world. This continues to be a preoccupation for many people.

And considering the psychiatric profession's declarations against reparative therapy in recent years, no wonder these ex-gay men remain suspicious. They wonder, "Can I expect the 'naysayers' to honestly and objectively evaluate my progress?"

But this "distrust of surveyors" can all too easily be used as justification for the ex-gay community to avoid taking responsibility for a very serious problem: the fact that they *remain* a hidden population.

I believe one answer to "Why won't they tell their story?" lies in residual feelings of shame (the underside of narcissism), unworthiness, and sometimes, difficulty in giving to others.

As a core issue—deeper than homosexuality itself—we see the psychological complex of the "Shamed-Defective Self." This "negative parental introject"—that is, the internalized voice of a parent—is, for some people, what lies at the core of their reluctance to claim the success they have legitimately achieved.

Left unaddressed, this failure to claim one's own success (explained by the person himself as "distrust of others") hinders full maturation and character development. Feelings of intrinsic unworthiness compromise the person's ability to acknowledge his hard-earned accomplishment.

Sadly, some people coming from a homosexual background have spent so many years in self-protection and self-absorption that they have difficulty in self-giving. This withholding of self can continue long after the person's same-sex attractions and behaviors have diminished, or even gone. Difficulty in giving is rooted in a residual self-preoccupation that traces to the early, traumatic experience of gender wounding.

Therefore, I think, the real reason for most people's reluctance to speak up and tell their story is not so much be "distrust of *them*" as a distrust of themselves.

What about the problem of having occasional "gay thoughts"? This can re-stimulate those old incriminating internal messages. "Who am I kidding?" some ex-gay men say to themselves. "Maybe what I've accomplished to change my life is *not* good enough. Could what those gay activists are always saying be true—no matter how we struggle, we're always going to go back to being 'one of them'?"

But should the man who still struggles with some unwanted feelings *really* consider himself unchanged and unworthy? In the most recently publicized study on change, Robert Spitzer speaks of change as occurring on a continuum—not "either/or," "either he did change or he didn't"—but as a diminishing of homosexual feelings and an

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increase in heterosexual attractions. The expectation of complete change (with never again a homosexual feeling) is, Spitzer correctly notes, simply not realistic. Similarly, Love in Action Ministry's June 2001 newsletter points out that we must see change in terms of "progressive freedom" toward a desired goal, not asking simplistically, "Did he change, or didn't he?"

John Paulk made this distinction very clear in a recent interview with the *Charlotte World*. He said,

...I think that when you communicate in a media sound bite, and they ask you, "Have you changed and overcome homosexuality?" it's hard to answer that with a "yes" or "no" because sexuality is not a black-or-white issue. It runs on a continuum. I don't care who you are, there is a continuum to sexuality, sexual struggle, sexual temptation, and behavior.

I think what we have done in our movement is to respond the way the media wanted us to respond, by saying, "Yes, I have changed. It's all washed up,

and I am done with it, and now it's packaged and pretty. Here's my wife and two beautiful children."

But in reality, John explains, many people still lead very satisfying and *victorious* lives while dealing with some persistent remnant of the old struggle that brought them to therapy in the first place. This doesn't mean their claim to change is an illusion. It only means they're human.

So, having been dubbed the "invisible population," ex-gays have, I believe, brought some of this invisibility upon themselves by continuing to perceive themselves as insignificant and unworthy in contrast to "the authorities" who will measure (and therefore "bestow validity") upon their life-changing achievement.

As we mature, we have an increasing obligation to give of ourselves for others. (This is an adult-making exercise in itself). When a man "hides his light under a basket," he has failed to credit himself with what he deserves for his remarkable achievement. I hope that more and more men whose lives have significantly changed will speak up now and allow themselves to be counted. ■