

"Change of Heart: My Two Years in Reparative Therapy"

by "Ben Newman"

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In May 1997, I was in a complete state of crisis as I entered reparative therapy for homosexual sex addiction. My wife had caught me in yet another lie that was supposed to cover up my double life. Surely, this would be the last straw. Surely, this time she would leave me and never come back, taking our two beautiful children with her. I was completely panicked.

Entering the therapist's office for the first time caused me no particular discomfort; my panic over my marriage eclipsed any nervousness I might have had about what might happen in therapy.

I had met my new therapist, "Matt," just six weeks earlier through a self-help group for men who struggle with unwanted homosexual desires. He had impressed me with two things: his youthful attractiveness and masculine appearance — with eyes that seemed to peer into my soul — and the fact that he reported that he had once dealt with homosexual longings himself but had resolved them.

The latter fact gave me great confidence and hope. I had read the writings of people who made the generic claim that "others have come out of homosexuality, so you can too," but nothing I had read actually identified who these so-called former homosexuals were, and for years I had doubted their existence. Matt was the first real live human being I had ever met who said, "I felt gay, and thought I wanted to live my life that way, but I found a way out that gave me more happiness and peace by healing than indulging." I didn't know what that meant, exactly, but I trusted that he, more than anyone else I had ever met, could help me find a way out of the pit I was in.

And a very deep pit it was. I was living a complete double life. Happy husband and father, church-goer and successful professional on the outside, rabid homosexual sex addict on the inside. After 14 years of this pattern, I had surrendered myself to it, convinced that I was going to have to live my life this way, somehow hoping the inside and outside never collided and destroyed my life.

Now, as I entered the therapists' offices, my hidden life

was in fact on a direct collision course with my false front. I could see my life about to fall down around me. Suicide was becoming an increasingly appealing option

The APA's Disclaimer: This Won't Work and Might Hurt

The first order of business on my first visit with Matt was for me to sign a Consent to Treat form. It required by the clinic, as a result of the American Psychological Association's resolutions which discourage this type of treatment. Reparative therapy was unproven, the form said; the APA's official stance was that it didn't believe it was possible to change sexual orientation; attempting to do so might even cause psychological harm.

Yeah, right, I thought, as if the double life I was living was not causing psychological harm enough.

Too, I resented the suggestion that the only "correct" solution (politically correct, anyway) for me was to abandon my wife and children and throw myself into the gay life. That was not what I wanted. I had had the chance to do that before I met Diane and had children with her, when the stakes were much lower — and I realized then that that was not what I wanted. While dating men, adopting a gay identity, and throwing myself into the gay lifestyle had been exhilarating at first, it had soon felt like it was killing my spirit, alienating myself from my goals in life, from God and a sense of higher purpose. I had realized then that I didn't want to be affirmed as gay; I wanted to be affirmed as a man.

But throughout the early years of our marriage, unable to find significant help in dealing with the homosexual struggles that still raged just below the surface, I had resorted to a horrific double life. Until I met Matt, I had given up all hope that I could ever change. Right now, it felt like Matt was my only hope.

In our first session, I blurted out the whole story with a frankness and abandon that was unprecedented for me. Matt was safe to tell. I didn't have to worry about seeking his approval or about there being any consequences in my life for divulging my story to him. He responded with candor: "Your life is a mess." I was surprised at his bluntness, but knew it to be true. "I can help you work through the immediate crisis," he said, "but unless you go a whole lot deeper than that, you'll just go back out there and delay the inevitable recurrence - probably with even greater consequences next time."

I agreed. I had hit bottom. I was ready to do whatever it took to salvage the mess of my life. Over the next several

weeks, I practically ran to Matt's office each Tuesday evening, finding a place of safety and solace where I could get help and guidance with the darkest secrets of my life. I grieved with him over the intense pain I had caused my wife and her very legitimate hurt and rage at me. How relieved I was that, seeing my resolve to work with Matt and with hope in this new resource, she tentatively decided not to leave - at least not yet.

Uncovering the Wounds

My next crisis was to prepare myself to make a full confession to the high priests of my church, where I served as a lay elder. I knew I would never make a permanent change if I continued to hide my secret life from them, and I had committed to Diane that I would do so, as a condition of her staying with me. But coming clean to these men - men of authority, men I feared would reject me - was the most terrifying thing I could imagine. Yet when I did, they responded with kindness and concern. Still, they could not tolerate that kind of sexual behavior from a church elder. They decided to excommunicate me and give me the opportunity to be re-baptized a year later, with a fresh start, as long as I proved myself able to remain faithful to my wife for at least a year and demonstrated a credible commitment to remain faithful to her thereafter.

My excommunication was handled without trying to humiliate me. I was still welcome to attend meetings as an unbaptized guest, and my status as an excommunicant was not publicly known among the general membership of the church. Nevertheless, the whole experience stirred up intense feelings of rejection and shame. The floodgates opened, and in therapy Matt and I explored a lifetime of perceived rejection from men. In successive therapy sessions, I cried and I raged.

To my amazement, Matt encouraged the full expression of this anger in my sessions with him. But I wanted to freeze up instead, paralyzed with fear and shame. Wasn't anger bad? I thought. Wasn't it out of control? Good boys don't get mad. And worst of all, what might I uncover just underneath the paralysis? But Matt taught me it was this hidden anger and shame, in part, that I was turning on myself self-destructively and that was driving me to act out sexually. The anger needed to be expressed legitimately. It needed to be honored.

He tried to teach me how to express it, to feel it in my body. I couldn't get it. I felt like a grade school student grappling with a graduate school problem. What was he pushing me to do? Finally, he explained it in a language I could understand: "It's like phone sex, but with anger instead of sex." Oh! I laughed, why didn't you say that before!

And so the anger spilled out of me: anger at my father for

being emotionally checked out of my life; rage at Mike the Bully for his constant ridicule of me in high school; rage at my mother for shaming me over my maleness; hurt that I had been carrying around inside of me my whole life, where it could continue to attack me from within. With Matt coaching me, I visualized fighting back, ejecting the taunts, shame and rejection from my heart, and then destroying them. Over the months we repeated this process, until at last I could find no more anger stirring within me. At last, having emptied a lifetime of pent-up anger from my wounded soul, I was ready to release and forgive.

At other times, Matt worked with me on my addictive cycles. We explored in depth what seemed to trigger my acting out - stress, anger, fear, almost any uncomfortable emotion caused me to try to seek solace in the arms of men and the drug-like rush of forbidden sexual stimulation. I determined to return to Sexaholics Anonymous, where I had once started to make progress toward breaking my addictive cycles. As I did, and as I processed my emotional life in depth with Matt each week, the cycles first slowed and then tapered off dramatically.

Entering the World of Men

Matt taught me about defensive detachment, and I learned how I had defensively rejected men in order to protect myself from being hurt by them. I pored over a book by Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, called "Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality," and was amazed to find my exact psychological profile, it seemed—complete with defensive

detachment as described in his book.

Matt helped me open my mind and heart to the possibility of finding a heterosexual man or men whom I could turn to for help and support throughout my week. It was terrifying, but I approached Mark, a man at my church about eight years older than I, and asked him to be a spiritual mentor to me. He readily agreed. He knew nothing about homosexuality, but he knew about God, and he knew about pain, and he was more than willing to be there for me. I talked with him at least weekly, sometimes several times a week, baring my soul. I called him when I was tempted to act out. I called him when I stumbled, and he helped lift me back up.

Matt's joy for me in my newfound friendship was palpable. "I wish I could meet him!" he said. "Heck, I wish I could clone him for my other clients!"

This was something I had come to love about Matt - for all his unvarnished candor about my mistakes and self-destructive blunders, I felt his authentic joy in my successes and growth. I was truly coming to love this man as a brother in a way I had never loved a brother in my life.

Still, there were plenty of times I froze in fear at the

"I had to find help to end my double life, or else lose my marriage"

prospect of reaching out to other men in friendship. I was convinced that heterosexual men didn't have friends — didn't even need friends. Their wives or girlfriends were supposed to be enough for them. Certainly, my father never had any friends, and never went anywhere socially without my mother. I could only remember one friend that my three much-older brothers had between them. How could I rely on heterosexual men to be there for me, to be my friends, to meet my needs for male companionship and affirmation? I had always believed the only men who wanted anything to do with other men were gay.

Matt challenged me to open my eyes, to look beyond my engrained perceptions. "Your soul demands male connection, and that desire WILL express itself, one way or another. It WILL come out. Suppressing it will only work for a short while, and then the dam will burst. If you don't experience authentic, intimate male connection platonically, the need will absolutely drive you to find it sexually. One way or another, the need will be met."

The words resonated within me: One way or another, the need will be met. I knew it was true for me. I pushed myself to reach out of my shell. I started observing heterosexual men more. I started to notice men going out to eat together, going to the movies together, going to men's groups, working on cars together. At parties, I noticed the men cluster in groups separate from the women within moments of arriving. They hung out together watching a game on TV as they talked, or playing pool, or some other activity.

I was discovering the world of men as if for the first time. I would come into a therapy session with Matt and share my discoveries with him as I sought to understand and demystify the world of men. We talked about the things that men do, how they are at parties, how they are with each other and with women. I started to understand them, then appreciate them - then, a bit at a time, to feel that I wasn't so different from them.

Matt became my surrogate father, my surrogate brother, my mentor into the world of men. At one point, I remember looking deeply into his dark eyes as long silence passed between us. I felt how much I trusted him, how much I loved him. I felt how much joy he experienced in my growth. Just looking into his eyes I could feel him affirming me as a man, and for the first time, I realized, "I am taking in his masculinity, and feeling him affirming mine, and I am not even touching him, let alone having any sexual feelings for him. I can do it through the eyes! I don't need to do it through my genitals, or even my hands. I can feel his love and connect with his maleness silently, without touching him." It was a joyous moment - a moment when I felt completely male, and completely affirmed as a man.

One of my most frightening steps was to ask a man from my church, Rob, to teach me to play basketball. Matt didn't suggest this to me, but the fear I had around sports was nothing short of phobic, and something inside of me demanded that I face this fear. It was hard enough to approach Rob and ask him to teach me, but to actually show up at the basketball court for my first lesson was even more frightening. I was actually more embarrassed about my ineptness around sports than I was about my homosexual past. So I was making myself completely vulnerable to Rob by revealing to him that I didn't know the first thing about basketball.

Rob coached me every Saturday morning for several weeks, and I reported my successes and fears back to Matt. Finally, I joined Rob for a few pick-up basketball games. The first time was truly traumatic; all the taunts of school bullies came rushing back. But the next week was better, and the next. One time, I e-mailed Matt with pride: "I can do a jump shot! For the first time in my life, I did a jump shot!" He e-mailed back that he was thrilled for me, and he could relate. Who else could have understood the significance of that for a 36-year-old man?

As we continued to work together, Matt told me about a men's organization called New Warriors that did an intensive weekend "initiation" training for at a mountain camp two hours away. I was hesitant the first couple of times he mentioned it, but as my fear of men dissipated, I resolved to go. I practically floated into his office my first session after returning from the weekend in August of 1998. "It was awesome!" I reported. "I discovered MEN!" I was like them; they were like me! I was a man among men. The realization sank into me as never before.

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There were more ups and downs, slips and falls, courage and fear, but now I had many sources of strength - Matt, Mark, Rob, a weekly New Warriors "integration group" in my community, Sexaholics Anonymous and, always, Diane. She stood by me, loved me and encouraged me as she saw real changes in my heart, not just my behavior.

In February 1999, having been faithful to Diane for a year and a half and feeling like I had grown enough and healed enough now to renew my commitments to her and my church, I was baptized in a small and beautiful ceremony. Mark, Rob, and other friends from our church were there. Diane was there with tears in her eyes, glowing with pride and relief that I had "come home." Later, as I shared my feelings about the experience with Matt, he mirrored my joy in the huge step this was in my life and how far I had come.

My Own Man

In the last few months of my therapy with Matt, sensing that my need for professional therapy was coming to an end, I took greater command of the sessions to make sure I dealt with everything I needed his help with: lingering feelings of rejection I needed to release; hurts I needed to forgive. More and more, I was coming in to therapy sessions reporting joy instead of hurt, anger or fear, sharing my increased sense of identity and power as a man, reporting on new friendships I was building and new risks I was taking to test my increased inner strength.

As we prepared to part ways, one time Matt had me lie down on the couch as he played soft music. Sitting behind me, he cradled my head and shoulders in his hands. "You ARE a man," I heard his strong, deep voice affirming. "You are strong. You are powerful. You have broken the power that once tied you to your mother's identity. You have proven yourself as a man among men. Men admire you and affirm you. You are one of them. You are a good and loving husband and father. You are whole. Not perfect, but you're okay not being perfect. You are whole."

Tears rolled down my face. I believed him! It was true, and I finally knew it. I *was* whole! I no longer desired men sexually. I was one of them, not their opposite. I didn't need a man to complete me. Yet the irony is, I felt more bonded and connected to men and manhood than I had all of my life. *THIS* is what I had been seeking all those years from all those men. *THIS* is what I had really wanted all along —

this REAL connection, not the fantasy one. Connection to God. Connection to men. Connection to my own manhood. Wholeness within myself. I felt my heart almost burst out of my chest with joy.

I walked out of Matt's office for the last time on August 25, 1999, 27 months after I had first walked in. I was a different man. Stronger. Happier. More grounded. Whole. I had been "sexually sober" and faithful to my wife for two years - and had found peace and joy in doing so.

As I left the last session, I hugged Matt firmly, burying my head into his chest. "I love you," I told him. "I'll never forget what you've done for me." With tears in his eyes, he said, "I love you too." If only I could keep him as a friend, always. But something inside of me told me: "Friendship is forever. Even if you can't be his friend in this life, you will be in the next. This powerful bond between you will be forever."

And perhaps more important, I would take the gifts he had given me with me into every other relationship from now on. I didn't need Matt as a therapist any more, because now I could be in honest relationships with others. I could make friends. I could ask for help. I could be real.

And more than anything else, I could love. I had learned to give love and receive love from other men as my brothers, and trust them with my heart. In this, I truly had found what I had been looking for all my life. ■

