

Review of Chastity Bono's Book, *Family Outing*

By Jeff Vawter

Chastity Bono's new book *Family Outing* is proclaimed as an instruction manual for coming out as a gay person to oneself, parents, friends, and the world. The author uses her own story and those of a strategic selection of gay men and women who are professionally, racially, and religiously diverse, in an attempt to normalize same-sex attractions and the contributing dysfunctions. Armed with figures from P-FLAG, she teaches that religious beliefs are a narrow-minded burden to be overcome.

Ironically, the book actually provides textbook case studies for the reparative model of treating homosexuality.

Chastity, the daughter of Sonny Bono and Cher, lectures around the country on coming out, and on gay and lesbian portrayals in the media. She is a former entertainment media director for GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation). The goal of her book is "not only to guide gay men and women through the closet door, but also to give the tools with which they can complete the process by bringing their families, especially their parents, along with them." (p. x) The book speaks with assumed authority to closeted homosexuals, parents, pastors, and the general public. Chastity says, "I felt qualified to write a book on the subject because I had personally grown from a scared, closeted lesbian to a happy, openly gay activist in my community." (p.257).

Same-Sex Alienation

The typical characteristics of men and women struggling with homosexuality are a disidentification from the same-sex parent, same-sex peers, and from their own bodies. Chastity recounts every one of these symptoms, expressing them not as contributing factors, but as *results* of being a

gay child. She compares her experience and one of her interviewees: "My experience and Richard's mirror each other in several ways: we both had a distant, disapproving parent, felt alienated from other kids, and were generally uncomfortable with feeling different." (p.16)

Sonny and Cher divorced when Chastity was four years old. She alternated between two homes and describes the commonly-seen, prehomosexual pattern of being emotionally "stuck" between parents:

"In a way, I think I was the son my father never had...When my father encouraged my tomboyishness, my mother would get annoyed. I think in some ways they acted out their frustration with each other through me: my father would aggravate my mother by encouraging my boyish behavior, and my mother became more uncomfortable with me because she saw me mimicking my father." (p. 7)

The first reported conflicts between mother and daughter occurred when Cher noticed her daughter's masculine clothing and lack of female friends. Cher—known for pushing the censorial limits with clothing—encouraged Chastity to wear a skirt to school. She was not happy when her daughter "vowed never to wear anything girlie again," because her male friends called her a sissy (p.6). Most tellingly, she relates:

"I had always been a well-behaved, quiet kid who never gave my mother any trouble, so her anger, which was clearly directed at me, confused me. I began to feel nervous around my mother..." (p.5)

Cher's involvement with her career increased the gulf between herself and Chastity. Cher observes that, "because

I am so preoccupied with my career, and was so preoccupied the whole time you and Elijah were growing up, a lot of times I felt really guilty.” (p.231)

Chastity describes how she first learned to use a tough exterior for emotional protection:

“I also remember the first day of sixth grade. I was starting at a Montessori school and was nervous. Having skipped so much school when I traveled with my mom, I had missed a lot of the fundamentals. As a result, school had become an intimidating place for me. To combat my tenseness, I decided to wear my new black leather jacket as a kind of defense. It worked: I didn’t want the other kids to bother me, and they didn’t.” (p.8).

In seventh grade, Chastity says she “could no longer be one of the boys because my figure was now showing real signs of development. Yet I still felt as if I had nothing in common with the girls, especially those prep school girls, who were obsessed with fashion and boys.” (p.9)

Chastity says she came out to herself at thirteen, and came out to her parents at eighteen.

Cher had worked and socialized with many gay people, and yet she reacted negatively to the discovery that her daughter might be a lesbian: “Most of the people I knew, even though I loved them dearly, were way f—ed up—especially the gay men. Their lifestyle just seemed so much more promiscuous...” (p.226).

Later, Cher changed her mind and became a spokesman in support of the gay movement.

Chastity includes coming-out stories from other gay men and women professing to have found freedom in the gay lifestyle. Yet many give testimonies of childhood loneliness and disappointment. For example, one gay man reports his childhood inability to make same-sex friendships, as well as a deep alienation from his father:

“My father seemed to just avoid me and keep his distance. My mother would always badger him to spend more time with me. I would overhear these conversations and feel humiliated” (p. 13).

Religious Beliefs Can Be “Overcome” by Love

Throughout the book, when Chastity refers to people with religious beliefs, she faithfully attaches adjectives such as

“harsh,” “strict,” “ignorant,” and “prejudiced.” She suggests that Christianity and love cannot coexist without the former altering its standards: “Even the most inflexible religious beliefs can be overcome in response to a parent’s love for his or her child.” (p.215)

She implies that eventually people will come around, but, “Of course, there are situations in which people’s values are so absolute that they will require a much longer, more complicated process to get acceptance; this is often the case in orthodox or fundamentalist religious families.” (p.118)

Chastity and Cher agree that organized religion provides the last barrier to social approval of homosexuality: “Once we take away the moral or religious dimension in viewing homosexuality, there will no longer be a negative value assigned to it.” (p.245)

Chastity reports some statistics from P-FLAG, and attributes these negative lifestyle factors to society, rather than the internal stresses inherent to a gender-identity problem:

“Today gays, lesbians, and bisexuals make up 30 percent of all youth living in the streets of this country; 26 percent of young gays and lesbians are forced to leave home because of conflicts over their sexual identity; and approximately 30 percent of gay youth have alcohol and drug problems (figures taken from P-FLAG). Again, once we begin to redefine what it means to be homosexual, and society and our families don’t respond to outdated, inaccurate definitions, young people will not be forced to run away and endanger their lives.” (p.74)

She also reports from the 1989 U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide that “one in ten youths are gay,” even though this figure has long been widely acknowledged as inaccurate. (About 2% of the population is gay or lesbian.)

By writing this book, Chastity Bono has unwittingly demonstrated the developmental factors associated with homosexuality—particularly, gender confusion and emotional alienation from same-sex peers and the same-sex parent, along with the search for the unavailable parent through homoeroticism.

Chastity says, “No one I have ever spoken to regrets coming out; all point to the strength and joy the process has given them.” (p.70) Apparently, she hasn’t talked with anyone at Exodus International or NARTH.

The author had a distant, disapproving mother and was alienated from female peers.