

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Hoping To Be Straight with a Finger Down His Throat

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My friend Joe Gentilini, an Italian-American Catholic who was told by a priest that he was seriously mentally ill for masturbating, wrote me recently about the progress in his life as a gay man. He didn't find his soul mate, Leo, until he put a finger down his throat to choke at the direction of his therapist. He was supposed to do this every time he thought of oral sex with a man. His therapist also had him take drugs to make it more difficult for him to ejaculate, and taught him to pleasure himself while thinking of a man, but to insert a female image just before he found release. Before he met Leo, he hired the services of a female prostitute. Joe just didn't want to be gay. I asked Joe if I could reprint his e-mail without giving his name. He replied, "Yes, you can, but please use my name. I want people to know that I am a real person who underwent this therapy because society and the Church told me that I needed to be straight in order to save my soul and to be happy."

Reparative therapy, such as is conducted today by Michele Bachmann's husband, has as its goal stopping gay men from having any sexual feelings for other gay men. These therapists now admit they can't successfully turn a gay man into a straight man, but they claim success if the gay man no longer wants to express himself sexually. That's what Joe's therapist tried to do with him, but failed.

"I never thought in 1967 that we would be where we are today," wrote Joe. "In 1967 I entered reparative therapy to change my sexual orientation. It is both painful and joyful to think of those many years long ago. Painful in realizing all of the lost years that were so painful instead of being able to celebrate who I am. Joyful in realizing that I survived the AIDS epidemic, that I changed my therapist on his beliefs regarding reparative therapy, that Leo and I were officially married in DC this past July, and that we will celebrate 30 years in November."

When I came out publicly in 1974, also having tried the desperate trick of slipping a woman into my sexual fantasies, Joe was just ending his practice of putting a finger down his throat to choke. But there were patients of other therapists and ministers who did anything they were told, including shock and chemical "therapy" in order not to be gay. They were so afraid of losing their families, their Church, and their jobs that they put themselves into the hands of people who knew nothing about the immutability of sexual orientation. Those days of horror are over for Joe, but not for a lot of young gay members of fundamentalist religions. They continue to be emotionally and physically tortured with the hope of "curing" them.

October is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History Month. This is the time that we gay people are supposed to become more aware of our own proud journeys to self-fulfillment, and to share those stories with our heterosexual allies. Most of the information we share with others are the heroic lives of our "Rosa Parks" people, such as [Elaine Noble](#), [Harvey Milk](#), [Renee Richards](#), [Barbara Gittings](#), and the beloved and most recently deceased [Frank Kameny](#). Our attention goes to our heroes such as the [Rev. Troy Perry](#), who took on the church, and [Steve Endean](#), who lobbied on

our behalf in the halls of Congress. The stories we forget to tell are those of our brothers and sisters who were lobotomized into a stupor at state-run mental hospitals, such as [Atascadero](#) in California.

Our heterosexual allies are generally shocked when we tell them our horror stories. They have no idea what our lives have been like, or even how they are today. For instance, when they make vacation plans to spend weeks of the winter in the Caribbean, they're unaware of how dangerous those islands can be for us to visit, especially [Jamaica](#). They think we are exaggerating when we describe the state-sanctioned murders that are happening in [Iran](#), [Nigeria](#), and [Uganda](#). And when they read of a lesbian couple being told not to kiss on a Southwest Airlines plane, they imagine the couple must have been doing more than just kissing.

While it's helpful to have our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth, and our heterosexual allies, understand our history, what is most important to me is that we who lived it never forget it.

"After many years I realized therapy wasn't working," Joe wrote, "and the therapist said, 'maybe you want to be homosexual.' I panicked and froze internally for about a year. Finally I had a 'homosexual contact' (this is how we thought of it) and Pandora's Box was opened. I debated for about a year and then met Father Norb Brockman. I went to the Gay Christian Conference where I met you, and then I went back into therapy to learn to be comfortable as gay. For months I had a difficult time even saying the word 'gay' but I did, and I came out with a vengeance!"

That's our gay history—from torture to triumph.