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Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School
Bethesda Maryland

I was involved in reparative therapy and transformational ministries for about 17 years, in various forms, and my life was an ongoing disaster. Since I've left that behind and come out fully, my life has been remarkable stable, and I would dare to say happy. My motivation for involvement in reparative therapy was the deep shame I felt about same-gender attractions, and the therapy and church groups only reinforced that shame.

Let me give you a little background. My parents were not particularly religious: Christmas was about Santa Claus and Easter was about Easter egg hunts. I wasn't baptized myself until I was 34 years old.

When I was just becoming aware of my same-gender attractions, when I was ten, I lived with my grandparents, and attended a conservative Southern Baptist church. There I forged a life-long relationship with God, but also was instructed, in Sunday school, about how shameful and wrong same-gender attractions and relationships were. The Presbyterian Church I attended as a high school student reinforced those lessons.

After my first attempt at a relationship with a man, I was overwhelmed with shame, and sought out pastors and therapists who would help me change to being straight; I wanted desperately not be gay. It's easy to find an ex-gay therapist. All you have to do is ask around, and there are plenty of people who will try to help you change.

In the 17 years I was involved in the ex-gay movement, I saw several therapists and was involved in a number of church groups. I didn't date, I wasn't involved in the gay community at all; I sincerely thought they were a bunch of perverts and sinners, and wanted nothing to do with them. I struggled not to be attracted to men, and to try to form romantic relationships with women. Even after I came out and joined GLSEN, I still kept some connection with the ex-gay movement, through a listserv provided by PFOX.

Here's the hard part to talk about. During those 17 years, my life was a disaster. I was diagnosed with depression, and later bipolar disorder. I was hospitalized 19 times in those 17 years, and there were two serious suicide attempts that leave me with scars and permanent kidney damage. I changed jobs and homes every year or so, dropped out of school twice, and was bankrupted by medical bills. The reparative therapy only made all of this worse. Every time I formed a close friendship with a man, I would be overwhelmed by shame. The reparative therapy only reinforced the notion that there was something fundamentally wrong with me, and that I needed to do something to change myself. I just couldn't figure out how to do it. I thought it was my fault. I felt that I was constantly betraying God because of my same-gender attractions, but at the same time wondered why he had cursed me with this. I was a real mess.

Finally, a Baptist pastor whom I was seeing for reparative therapy said the words that changed my life. After 6 months of listening to me, he said "Robert, God made you the

way you are, and God loves you the way you are.” With that one sentence, he put me on the path to accepting myself, and re-establishing a loving relationship with God.

My last involvement with the ex-gay movement was the PFOX listserv. At one point I considered going to Focus on the Family’s “Love Won Out” conference in Virginia. I couldn’t afford it, so ended up hanging out at the protest outside. Someone saw me there and I was kicked off the PFOX listserv. Fortunate for me. Since I ended my involvement with the ex-gay stuff, I haven’t experienced any severe depressive or manic episodes, nor have I been admitted to a hospital. I’ve worked for the same company for six years, lived in the same city, had the same friends, and formed a solid relationship with my family. I can not express how remarkable this stability is to me. When I was involved in reparative therapy, I thought I was sentenced to bouts of shame and sadness, to unstable relationships, to perennial mental illness. That turns out not to be true.

My experience as a teenager and young adult, with wanting so desperately not to be gay, motivates my volunteer work with GLSEN now. We lobby for change in anti-harassment and nondiscrimination policies in schools to include sexual orientation and gender-identity. We support students in their gay-straight alliances in school, and we encourage lessons in the classroom that give truthful information about being gay.

One last thought: reparative therapy doesn’t work. We would be doing a disservice to students if we told them about this process, and gave false hope to those who, as I did, don’t want to be gay. If I had heard in school that it is OK to be gay, it might have made all the difference in my life.

Thank you for listening.

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Addendum:

A brief description of the therapy itself may be in order. The reparative therapy involved one-to-one talk therapy with counselors, with a focus on my strong desire not to be gay, and a particular interest in my relationships with my parents and same-gender peers during middle school. All the therapists except the last reinforced the idea that being gay was wrong, and maintained that eventual cure was possible. In the church groups, there was less of a focus on cure (most people seemed to believe that even “cured” men continued to have at least some attraction to men) than on avoiding sin and sinful situations; the goal seemed to be more not “falling”, i.e. avoiding gay porn, fitness magazines, sex and masturbation. Celibacy or chastity was the aim.

I did experience some more harsh treatments which I am simply unwilling to discuss in public.