

Curing the common homosexual

by John Gushue
of Canadian University Press

You're young, alone, and confused. You feel depressed, isolated, and insecure. You can't talk with your parents, you're sure your friends won't understand, and your teachers seem hostile in class, let alone in person.

Relatives ostracize you, churches persecute you, governments ignore your rights, and, up until recently, psychiatrists and psychologists have considered you a 'deviant'.

You're also gay, and you don't know where to turn.

Coming out is always difficult, but some environments make the process more painful than others. Forced to cope with a climate that doesn't accept their sexual identity, many lesbians and gay men from small communities or deeply religious backgrounds can come out only to themselves. Lane Mason, 24, had a double burden on his shoulders while growing up as a Jehovah's Witness in rural Nova Scotia.

"I came out to myself when I was 16, but I couldn't come out publicly. I just went along with it. The feelings of being gay were very strong, but I knew that I would have been considered unclean by the congregation if they knew. So for the sake of the people I loved, I kept up this facade."

Although he had lost his faith, Mason didn't loosen any of his ties to the Church. He gave Bible readings, preached door-to-door, and attended Church five times a week. He also kept a well-guarded lid on his homosexuality, knowing how others would react if he told them he was gay. "I would have been excommunicated right away," he says. "You'd be like a living corpse. You'd be destroyed by God... it was something despicable. You have strong feelings of guilt for a long time."

Mason moved to Halifax when he was 21, and found immediate freedom. "I broke all connections and started to express my sexuality." Having come out to himself, Mason needed only to find a group of friends for emotional support,

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and in a large urban area such as Halifax, that wasn't difficult.

"I had complete control of my life. I had the freedom to go to a bar, go to the cinema, buy books that were otherwise banned and read them, and not have to answer to the Church," he says.

Mason said many lesbians and gay men confused about their sexuality consult psychiatrists for assistance. "They're not content with their sexuality, and it's a fairly traditional avenue to follow."

Although many psychiatrists and psychologists are now prepared to work with gay clients, lesbians and gay men would have found a very different reaction in most offices as recently as ten years ago. The American Psychological Association did not clear homosexuality as a mental illness until 1975, thirteen months following a similar decision by the American Psychiatric Association. An official of the Canadian Psychiatric Association said it follows the findings of the APA.

While gay and gay-positive professionals are now easier to locate, homophobic counsellors are still a problem in spite of official rulings by societies. "A gay or lesbian professional will have much more understanding than a heterosexual professional simply because the latter doesn't have the personal experience. Some are quite sympathetic, but they can't speak from the experience. And you're going to find some that still consider homosexuality a mental illness and will go to some lengths to 'cure' us," Mason says.

Attempts to cure homosexuality are perhaps as old as modern psychiatry itself. Many psychiatrists saw homosexuality as a mental disorder, a sickness, or a disease. And like many illnesses, knowledgeable doctors believed they had the cure.

A common cure was aversion therapy, the best known theory developed by famed behavioural science pioneer B.F. Skinner. As a cure, Skinner gave gay men warm, massaging electrical impulses when he showed them photos of nude women, but jolted them with sharp, painful bursts of electricity when he showed them nude men. He continued this process repeatedly, often until the patient claimed he was cured.

Skinner's therapy techniques were eventually discredited by the psychiatric community, although some counsellors still claim a cure is as easy to find as a patient. However, many of these 'professionals' are not psychiatrists or psychologists, but counsellors supported by churches and religious organizations.

Homosexuals Anonymous is the largest, and the fastest growing, of these organizations. A Christian umbrella group founded in 1980 in Reading, Pennsylvania, HA is based on the premise of Alcoholics Anonymous, helping participants find a way out of their problem through group dynamics.

"We help people find freedom from their homosexuality," says Jerry MacKay, a HA organizer in Toronto. There are now chapters in four Canadian cities — Toronto, Barrie, Ontario, Vancouver, and Calgary. MacKay said a second Toronto chapter will soon open, and plans are afoot for cities across the country.

"It's just a matter of finding the people who have the commitment," says MacKay, who was a missionary in Japan when he read about Colin Cook, the former minister who started HA from his Quest Learning Centre in Reading. MacKay was a 'counsellor' at the Centre, and left the Centre to start the

first HA chapter in Canada. He says he was not asked to start the chapter, but did it voluntarily because the HA philosophy appealed to him.

"HA believed people are not born homosexual, but born heterosexual. The identity becomes confused. With appropriate guidance and help, recovery from homosexuality is possible. It's not so much a question of change, but self-discovery," he says.

HA also stresses small working groups and, like AA, the group meets every week and takes a step-by-step approach to full 'recovery'. MacKay says the group he facilitates has been very successful. "Several members of the group have married already," he says, cautioning that HA does not necessarily encourage heterosexual activity among participants.

HA also stresses it is non-denominational, and freely accepts those outside the Christian faith. However, HA literature and advertising indicate fulfillment through the Bible and finding Jesus Christ. Andrew Lesk, a writer for the Toronto-based gay liberation magazine *The Body Politic*, read a HA ad in the *Toronto Star* last July as the organization was forming. Lesk called the number listed, reached Jerry (like AA, participants prefer using first names only), and attended a meeting.

"They're appealing on a fundamental background. They say it's okay to be homosexual, but it's wrong to act on homosexual feelings," Lesk said. He noticed the approach of the group was non-confrontational, unlike many churches that condemn homosexuality as a sin. "There was no abuse, no hell fire. I was very impressed by Jerry — he was a very gentle man."

However, Lesk says the group

exists to eradicate gay and lesbian presence in society. "They hope to get rid of homosexuality altogether. There are a couple of lines in their literature where they put it in a very nice way, but they hope to contribute to the downfall of gay liberation."

Toni Wlasniewski, an employee of the Quest Learning Centre in Reading that started HA and administers the more than 50 chapters of the organization, says there is obviously high demand for HA's services. "Last year our size doubled. This year, we're expecting it to double again. We're having a real mushroom effect," she said.

Both Wlasniewski and MacKay claimed individual chapters are autonomous, and operate mostly on members' donations, as well as help from church groups supporting HA's work. But Lesk thinks outside sources are contributing to fund HA's rapid expansion, its staff, and expenses for services like two toll-free telephone lines.

"I think they're supported by right wing groups, like the Heritage Foundation, but I can't substantiate that," he said.

Lesk said the growing prominence of HA is more of a political than a religious issue. Lesk said the Church still treats its gay flock as badly as it ever did. "I don't think the Church is changing too much. They try to ignore it," he said.

Most large gay organizations in urban centres now offer counselling on a regular basis, both in person and over the telephone. To counteract homophobic counselling from ill-advised or fearful psychiatrists or religious groups like HA, gay men and lesbians are banding together to make the transitions of coming out easier for those starting the process.

Of those organizations that offer counselling, a handful are found on Canadian campuses, where young people often come to terms with their sexual identity. The campus should also be a place to seek support and friendship from peers, says Ian Fairclough of Gays and

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frightened

A woman I once knew who lived in a city which is on a river between two frozen lakes

believes is convinced that her veins bleed fire that her heart pumps a molten liquid blood, that there is in her something that rages, that consumes; who knows that what moves inside her is what we've likened hell to.

She sits alone, on the floor of some dark room, her knees drawn to her breast, her arms tight around her knees, dazzled by her mad incendiary

monsters, envious of the lakes and of their smoothly glazed surface.

the lakes are wide, and covered with a solid crust of ice. The ice is covered with snow, which changes shape and moves like the water below, heedless and heartless. The river between the two is open, smooth; there is a quick taut tension that tells what silences and strengths lie beneath surfaces.

— Michael Berge



photo Tim Helliun