

A Low Attack on Same-Sex Therapy

Written By Jeff Bennion

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Oral arguments started Friday in New Jersey Superior Court in *Ferguson, et. al. v. JONAH, et. al.* — a landmark case in which the Southern Poverty Law Center is trying to shut down JONAH, a Jewish group that helps people with unwanted same-sex attraction live their lives in accord with Torah values.

It's just the opening shot in a massive legal effort to ban help for gay people — a campaign I take personally. I'm one of those people the SPLC is out to harm — by substituting its judgment about what's good for me for my own.

The client's right to determine the course of his own therapy is a touchstone of modern psychotherapy. So the effort to deny people access to this therapy not only infringes on my right to self-determination, it violates the ethical standards of every major mental-health association.

Officially, it's called Sexual Orientation Change Efforts, or SOCE. Therapists using it were a lifeline to my health and happiness.

I first came out to myself about my homosexual feelings at the age of 20, and soon sought out help for dealing with them constructively. I've done individual and group therapy, as well as experiential weekends, all aimed at helping me better manage my homosexual attractions within the context of my value system.

SOCE was a revelation to me. It helped me confront my shame, around not only my homosexual feelings but also many other experiences. It taught me that my feelings were innately good, and a natural response to the circumstances I faced. It motivated me to try to repair important family relationships, and helped me learn how to better relate to other men, whom I'd previously ignored or disdained. It's made me much more accepting of myself and of others.

All of this growth would have been worthwhile on its own terms. But I also found that my sexuality was much more fluid than I'd realized. Under certain circumstances, those feelings were not an issue at all, to the point that they became dormant.

I don't claim that I no longer experience same-sex attraction, but neither do I need to. Through therapy, I gained enough skills that I felt able, in an open and honest way, to explore romantic relationships with women.

Today I have a wife and child, happily married for nine years. To me that is a miracle, something I never would've believed possible for me.

Without the help of SOCE, my relationships wouldn't be as harmonious and nourishing to me as they are. I'd never have been able to experience how fulfilling sexual expression can be for me within the confines of a lifetime commitment to a woman. My life and my marriage are far from perfect, but far more fulfilling and rich than I'd ever have imagined possible.

I advise anyone considering such therapy to make sure they understand that their outcomes may not be mine. Ignore the promoters' promises and the detractors' warnings; look at the kinds of growth you'll be seeking, the kinds of things you'll be working on, then ask yourself if it seems worthwhile. And don't do it solely because of family, social or religious pressure.

My family was supportive of my efforts, but also made it clear that they'd support me if I chose to act on my attractions. In no way did I ever feel from them or my therapists that I had to engage in SOCE because of feelings of shame, cultural, religious or family pressure. In the nearly 20 years in this kind of work, I've always felt that the therapists and counselors respected my autonomy and desires.

While my sexual orientation is an important part of me, so is my faith. If SOCE therapy had been banned, as the SPLC is seeking to do by misusing consumer-fraud laws, I wouldn't have simply chosen to accept my attractions. Instead, I would've remained stuck in shame, isolation and pain. It's ironic that an SPLC victory in this lawsuit would bring about the very effect it claims to be trying to prevent.

I understand that my life may have little appeal to others. You may be surprised that people like me even exist; we have little reason to make an issue of our sexuality, so you seldom find us waving placards in parades or rallies, but there are a lot of us.

Yet the SPLC's attacks on the therapy helped me realize that some of us need to come forward to ensure that it remains an option, and to resist the bullying and intimidation tactics of the SPLC and its allies. I respect the right of others to practice their lives in harmony with their own beliefs; I ask for the same respect in return.

Jeff Bennion is a co-founder of North Star International, a support community for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints who experience same-sex attraction.