

Getting Free

by David

I aspired to manliness, but I was certain that was impossible. I didn't look like a man. I didn't feel like a man. And I didn't behave like a man. Furthermore, I didn't fit in with men. I was scared of men. I was suspicious of men. And I couldn't stop looking at men!

On the other hand, I liked girls, and I'd even been "turned on" by them on a few occasions. But if the girl was attractive, I felt weak and inadequate. And if she wasn't attractive, I liked her friendship but discounted her romantic interest in me. All of this was such a conundrum to me. I wondered about myself, knowing something was wrong.

In the spring of 1984, I resolved the conflict. I finally confessed to myself that my attractions to other men were sexual - something I had denied for years. I was 22 years old. Solemnly and grimly, I explained to myself that -- if I permitted myself to -- I could be homosexual.

But I remained physically -- though not mentally -- faithful to my marriage. My first line of defense against homosexual behavior was fear and ignorance. (Imagine those two traits as a blessing!) I didn't know how to find a homosexual partner, and I was too scared to find out. But my second line of defense was probably more significant. My values and beliefs ran completely counter to homosexuality. I believed in God. I believed in the sanctity of my marriage. I loved my wife and our child. How could homosexuality fit into that?

Even so, I was pretty close to the edge when I met Dan Gray, a clinical social worker who had made a specialty of working with homosexual men. Dan was manly but also gentle, which meant he was attractive but not scary. I could tolerate being open with him. Within a few weeks, my whole vision of myself changed completely.

We worked together for two years, focusing on my building relationships with other men, getting past my incapacitating shame over my body, and developing a strong masculine identity. My first male friendships were with other men I met in "Evergreen," a support group for men who wanted to resolve homosexual feelings in a way that was consistent with their religious faith. There were men at work also. A dozen engineers. And to my utter astonishment, they were tolerable, even likeable. And they liked me too. The "great divide" in my life between me and other men began to close.

I took up the three cardinal sports of American boys: basketball, baseball and football. I'd missed these on my first through adolescence. I began weight lifting with greater earnestness. And I talked almost incessantly with my friends from Evergreen about our lives, our feelings and

our relationships. I talked with my wife also quite honestly about what I was doing, thinking and feeling. I began to change.

Yet erasing the distance between me and the rest of the male world was only part of what I needed to complete my transition into mature heterosexuality. I also had to face my fear of things like anger, intimacy, self-disclosure -- and bombing down-hill on a mountain bike! I had not realized how fear had crippled my life. Years after my "reparative therapy" was complete, I entered "intensive psychotherapy" to resolve this.

When I think carefully about the therapeutic work I did in those years, I see clearly that it wasn't about switching the gender of my sexual preference. It was about escaping the bondage of some deeper problems -- anxiety, shame and fear. For most of my life, I had been overwhelmed by anxiety when I was in the presence of strong and intelligent men. I had been oppressed by intense shame because I felt my body was so inadequate. And I had been crippled by a fear of exposing my deepest emotions.

The work I did in those seven years was to make choices that gradually freed me from the bondage of these deeper problems. Tremendous rewards followed - fulfilling friendships with other men, better health and greater confidence with my body and emotional freedom and power. Yes, my sexual orientation changed too. But in my life today, heterosexuality is like salt in the cookie dough -- it's an important element, but it's not the main ingredient. You see, my struggle hasn't really been about going "straight." It has been about getting free.