

A Letter to Mom and Dad Concerning Childhood Wounds

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[Introduction by a JONAH Co-Director: This powerful and heartfelt letter was read by Stephen to his parents with great trepidation. In preparing to confront his parents about his childhood pain and subsequent same-sex attraction (SSA), Stephen experienced some physical and emotional difficulties. Nevertheless, his strength and courage enabled him to face his fears and explain to his parents where he was at and what he wanted. In that process, he was comforted and encouraged by JONAH's co-director, Arthur Goldberg. When he gave JONAH permission to print his letter, Stephen thanked Arthur for the help and encouragement Arthur had given him on his journey out of unwanted SSA and especially for Arthur's mentoring on how to approach his parents. He also commented that putting together the letter set forth below was "probably the hardest thing I'll ever do in my life."

Stephen's Dad was very stoic as the letter was read to him. But by the next morning, Dad had begun to internalize and recognize the importance of Stephen's efforts to tear down the walls of detachment that separated father and son. Stephen reported that Dad called him to express his deep sorrow about the past, indicating that Dad had truly heard what Stephen was expressing in his letter, and then - for the first time in Stephen's life - expressed an authentic emotion to Stephen. While asking Stephen for forgiveness, Dad's sadness became evident. He cried as he said, "I'm so sorry I treated you this way, and I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you."

Thankfully, the vow of Stephen's Dad to forge a better relationship with his son in whatever form it needs to take, has, to date, been most encouraging and father and son are intensely working together to overcome their mutual past detachment from each other.]

March 10, 2010

Dear Mom and Dad,

I have written a letter that I need to read to you, as it is important for me to tell you about my struggles in life. I believe you may be unaware of some of them. I needed to write this out so I can present it to you in a somewhat organized way.

Please know that I anticipate this being the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and very well may be the hardest thing you've ever had to hear and deal with. I fully expect that you will experience a range of emotions as I read this; you may be sad, angry, or fearful about hearing what I have to say. While I welcome any emotions you need to express, I need to make it clear that I want you both to listen to this entire letter before you actually say anything or attempt to respond. Do I have your word that you will remain quiet and listen until I have finished reading everything I have written?

Dad: this letter is primarily written to you. I know that I have recently expressed to you the deep depression I experienced as a young child and as a teenager; I understand that you have apologized for not recognizing these experiences. However, I believe that you don't fully understand all that I felt and the depth of my pain. To put it simply and bluntly, starting at age 7, I spent just about every day of my life feeling a depth of sadness that I can only compare to what a person feels when they attend a funeral of someone they loved very much. I was desperate to be understood, specifically from the person who was supposed to be my male role model. I needed to know that you were there for me emotionally, something I regrettably never felt.

While I don't remember exactly how much I cried growing up, I do remember fighting back tears just about every moment of my young life. Whenever those tears flowed, it was simply because I could not bottle them up any longer. My sadness needed to be released.

There is an instance that you may not even remember, but it was a very significant moment in my life. It was a turning point, a moment in which I completely stopped trusting you to be there for me in my emotional anguish. You were driving, your mother was sitting next to you, I was in the back seat sitting behind you and Graham was to my

right. We were on our way to one of his baseball games, and it was a particularly hard day for me. I simply could not hold my tears back and they were slowly rolling down my face. I remember you looking at me in the rear-view mirror and very coldly and flatly saying "quit crying you little pussy." You might as well have taken a knife and stabbed me in the gut, because at that very moment a huge part of me died inside. I felt totally emasculated and worthless. I now realize that as a defensive action to avoid such pain in the future, I built up a protective wall around my soul, vowing to never let you hurt me like that again with your words.

Sadly, by numbing myself to your words, every nice thing you have ever said to me since that day has had no effect on me. Over time, my lack of trust for you and my own emotional numbness prevented me from going to you with things I should've been able to come to you about: being taunted by the other guys at school, having them spit on me in class, becoming the laughing stock of gym class, and being called pussy, queer, and fag on a pretty much daily basis. Further, it was really infuriating to me that you didn't seem to even notice that something was drastically wrong with me and my life. As an example, you got two calls from school about my threat to commit suicide. Yet we never talked about it. Other examples: I slept every moment I possibly could, often 12+ hours per day, and I ballooned to 225 pounds using food to try to escape from my pathetic existence. Why didn't you notice these cries for help? Or, if you did indeed notice them, why didn't you communicate your concern to me? To be fair, you were always there for me by providing for my physical needs without any reservation whatsoever. However, you were completely unavailable emotionally! I needed that kind of support the most, and I found its absence to be exceedingly painful.

Ever since my teenage years I have hoped and prayed that I could carry these hurts to my grave and would not have to discuss them with you. However, I now realize I must tell you and at the same time forgive you for your shortcomings. By informing and forgiving you, it will free me to complete my own healing journey. I know that if I hold onto these hurts, the negativity inherent in harboring such resentments will continue to weigh me down and prevent me from moving on with a normal life.

Because I wasn't able to connect with you or with male peers at school, it was much easier for me to connect with mom and with girls. When puberty hit, this desperate unmet need to connect with males led to an envy of other males. And, in turn, this envy became sexualized. The result of these unmet needs were set against my moral compass and in turn led to an internal conflict. I have been fighting a war within me to overcome homosexual feelings since adolescence.

I carried this burden all alone until just four months ago, when I found the courage to tell my therapist in Chicago what I was dealing with. He was not helpful as he encouraged me to come out as "gay" and to fully embrace homosexual fantasies and ultimately homosexual activity. To him, this is who I was. This advice was completely contrary to my values and everything I want out of life. Many teenagers and young adults with same-sex attractions similar to mine attempt to overcome their isolation and shame by connecting sexually with others of their own gender. I'm proud to say that, to the contrary, I have successfully resisted strong urges to have any kind of sexual relationship with other men. I'm still totally pure sexually, never so much as kissing another person as long as I've lived. Even though I know this news is shocking and disappointing, I hope you are proud of my resolve to maintain my purity.

The thing that I really resent, and need to forgive, is that you were the one person that could have prevented these problems from the get-go. If you helped me learn how to trust men rather than envy them, and if you were there for me emotionally, I believe I would not now be struggling with unwanted same-sex attractions. It was your job to recognize what was going on within me as your little seven-year-old boy, your duty to find out what was wrong with me, and to take steps to make it better. It was your job to build up my masculinity, to enable me to trust rather than distrust men and to find things we could do together that would affirm me in my manhood and bring us closer together. Without these efforts, the net effect was my envy of other men and my sexualizing of that envy. Your apparent delegation of hard stuff to Mom --such as telling me about sex, taking me to the doctor when I needed help to get me through mental illness, and moving me into my college dorm -- also contributed to my reduced sense of masculinity and lack of closeness to you.

Most of all and what was most distressing, however, was the environment you created --- an environment where it became absolutely impossible for me to seek your help to overcome my homosexual feelings. I'd like to remind you of some of the things you have said over the years:

1. As a young boy, I remember sitting in a restaurant with you and Graham. Mom was out of town on a business trip. You said to both of us, "if I ever find out either one of you is homosexual, I will put you out of the house."

2. While watching male figure skaters on TV, you were laughing and mocking them, saying "I bet their dads are really proud to have them as sons."

3. You expressed a personal conviction that frightened me: "Having a queer son would be more than I can bear."

4. While helping you clean out filthy trash containers, you colorfully explained that you believe "the only things that are worse than maggots are faggots."

Actually, I don't remember once since adolescence being in the same room with you for more than an hour when you didn't have a demeaning joke or say something nasty about homosexuals. Naturally, I took all of these things personally. In fact, every time you have ever said "I love you" or "I'm proud of you" I would add the phrase within my own mind, "Not if you knew about my problem."

I know I am far from perfect, Dad, and that I have a lot of work to do. But I can proudly say that I have done the very best that I could with the life and circumstances the Lord gave me. I have worked hard, done well in school, earned a great job, and am self-sufficient financially. I've maintained my sexual purity throughout the darkest times of my life, even when it would have been so easy to give in-as our culture constantly preaches. I'm active in my church and doing the best I can to build authentic and healthy relationships with men-relationships I needed all along. I am breaking down the barrier of

distrust toward other men, a distrust that began in early childhood when you flatly stated that I was a pussy for crying out of my intense pain and telling me that I should stop it.

One thing I must insist upon. I will no longer tolerate the innumerable demeaning and incessant jokes about homosexuals. These are men and women who are in pain, just like I am. The difference is that I have the courage to do the necessary work to overcome this emotional adaptation. However, making such comments hurts me as well. This "request" is simply non-negotiable. If you do not stop, we will be unable to have any sort of relationship. For me to continue my progress at overcoming these unwanted attractions while hearing cutting remarks from you about the condition I wish to change makes me feel like my hard work is being completely undermined. I cannot tolerate that.

I do want to say that despite your shortcomings, there are some things that you did exceptionally well, especially given your own upbringing and family circumstances. You were a great provider for my physical needs and I never went without in that sense. I am very grateful for that. However, the level of emotional abandonment I perceived while growing up, especially given my intense and prolonged ordeal with mental illness, has created a nightmare I have struggled for years to overcome. Thankfully, I have now found supportive people that have also sought out and achieved change of sexual orientation and have stabilized their own emotions in a healthy way. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

I'd like to think that we can mend our relationship and that you could be a help to me in my journey toward becoming a new man. However, this choice is totally up to you and I am prepared to move on with my life in the direction of healing regardless of your decision.

Mom: I do not want to complete this letter without addressing you. First and foremost, I want to thank you for your sincerity and kindness in being there and trying to bridge the gaps that Dad did not fill. You did the best you could, but the fact is you were not and cannot be a substitute for the male guidance and support I needed and will continue to need as an adult. We are too enmeshed. What I need

from you now is a clear separation and recognition that I am no longer a little boy. You can no longer protect me and fight my battles for me. I need these boundaries in our relationship so that I am able to grow into the fullness of my masculinity. I am a grown man now and am fully capable of taking care of myself with the help of God and other men in my community. While my love for you remains undiminished, we must create new boundaries, new ways of dealing with each other. This may look like, for example, long stretches of time when we will not talk. I need you to know that "no news is good news." Please understand that I don't love you any less than I ever have. My love for you is deep. However, I need some space to be a man to my full potential.

I hope I have been clear in expressing myself. I thank both of you for not speaking while I read this letter and I am now ready to discuss any of these issues with you.

With all my love,

Your son,

Stephen