

Gay, Sraight, Bi? Social Constructs That Will Deconstruct

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(Posted July 2014)

Forty years ago I was in a sophomore English literature class and was reading a poem that would begin a change in how I see the world that wouldn't come to fruition until this year. It was the epic poem, "In Memoriam" in which Tennyson gives tribute to his fallen friend, Arthur Hallam. I wept with Tennyson for his lost friend and I knew that I and the young men around me were missing something powerful and good. It introduced me to a kind of friendship that I didn't know existed between men, a kind of friendship that rarely if ever exists today.

A century ago a young adolescent who felt a deep loving connection to other boys, who may even have felt some sexual arousal when considering other boys, would not have contemplated whether or not he was gay because the categories of gay straight and bi simply didn't exist for anyone except a few academics. These categories are about 150 years old and are social constructs, as anyone in queer studies on any college campus will tell you.

A social construct is any jointly constructed understanding of the world. It is a social mechanism, phenomenon, perception, idea or category created and developed by society held by a subgroup or the whole society that is 'constructed' through cultural or social practice. It is not something that is "real" in the usual sense of that word, in that it has no existence outside of our agreement that it describes the world. For instance, real property, the ownership of land by an individual, is a social construct that is foreign to many nomadic tribes. Any good sociologist, historian, anthropologist, or for that matter psychologist who looks at the experience of men in history objectively know that at no time in the past and in no place in the past before about 150 years ago did anyone understand themselves and their relationship to the rest of humanity through categories of homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual.

The good news is that although social constructs are powerful and have powerful impacts on us, they are not fundamental unchangeable things or parts of our human nature and thus can be "deconstructed" by the individual not just the culture. The first premise of post modernism is that all social constructs are for the purpose of the oppression of one group or another and thus the duty of the enlightened is to deconstruct all social constructs. Thus the claim that I cannot impact my "gayness" is strangely at odds with the very Catechism of post modern liberation that it is derived from. Virtually all of the functionality of post modern social theory is dependent upon the ability to deconstruct social constructs and liberate myself from them. In fact some in queer theory admit that gayness is a temporary phenomenon because it is merely one social construct replacing a previous one and thus will be deconstructed in its turn.

Now here is the REALLY good news. Social constructs in this setting are attempts at developing categories for understanding human, and thus our own, behavior. Some post modernists believe all we can ever have is social constructs and there is never anything "real" underlying them. I am not a post modernist. Personally I am a Christian and like many people of faith I believe in Natural Law. In addition, in questions of Ethics and philosophy and truth seeking I am a Platonist. I believe there is truth and moral law actually out there to be discovered and

understood. Our attempts to categorize our world through constructs (jointly constructed understandings of the world) are inevitable but these attempts will, to varying degrees, come close to reality or differ from it. Since the categories gay, straight and bi are quite new creations of a few German psychologists of the 19th century and only came into common usage in the West almost 60 years later sometime in the period between the Great Wars, I think it quite reasonable to assume that these constructs are faulty. Even the "gay" community itself struggles with them almost comically adding letters and categories to the rainbow through the years. It is time for a real Gay liberation movement, one in which we liberate ourselves from the confines of these social constructs, a liberation from the categories of gay, straight and bi themselves. The implications of such liberation are multifaceted for both individuals and the culture.

Social constructs are often created by the culture we grow up in and we mainly accept them without much objection or thought, but I invite you to consider that in fact these constructs do not describe reality well, that you need not be bound by them, and that you can deconstruct these categories and release yourself from their grip. This process is something that can do wonders for several issues faced by those with unwanted same sex attractions (SSA).

First, the issue of identity. If I abandon this construct it means I'm not gay. Other people may identify this way, they may like fitting into this kind of construct. In fact most men, particularly those who identify as heterosexual, like the construct because it has conferred status to them and legitimized acts that were not acceptable under the Natural Law. But there is no need for me to see myself as gay or straight or bi anymore. I am a man. I am a man with complex urges and needs but those complex urges and needs do not place me in some faulty category.

Second, the closely related issue of belonging. I am a man. I belong with other men. My biology is not a social construct. It is an undeniable permanent aspect of my personhood. Those who like the social construct "transgendered" may think they can change their sex, but they can't. Neither can I. I belong to the tribe of men. I cannot take myself out of that tribe, that club. In common parlance, I got my man card at conception and nobody can take it from me, not even me.

Third, masculinity. I am masculine. I can't help myself. My masculinity may be different from yours. It may be creative or artistic or musical or graceful or intuitive or intellectual or awkward or shy or boisterous or athletic but all I can be is masculine, because I am a man. Other ideas of masculinity are just social constructs.

Fourth, friendships. I have a deep longing for close intimate friendship. I enjoy affection with my male friends. I like to lean against a friend's shoulder or against his chest as we talk or let him do the same. That is a masculine impulse because it is my impulse. You see that is a perfectly acceptable masculine behavior according to social constructs in much of the world, and with the right safe friends, fear of it is a sad and destructive social construct in the West.

This is the last bit I will leave you with. Fear of physical affection and emotional intimacy combined with the social construct of gay, straight and bi in this culture is, I believe, the reason many many men see themselves as gay and see heterosexual marriage as beyond them and see friendships that would truly meet their deep needs as impossible or even un - Godly. It is tragic and it is an evil in our day.

One of the reasons so few men accept the invitation to step away from the gay life is the perception that the alternative is a life of deep isolation and constant sacrifice. But if you can shed that social construct and begin again to ask the meaning of the very desires that carried you into sexual temptation, you may find that your life is not cursed and that instead what is opening up to you is a life of true liberation and blessing through healthy, deep, nonsexual connection with men.

What follows is not mine. It is however a tremendous essay about friendship that first appeared as a social media post by a Capuchin Friar from Australia in 2009 so the perspective is Christian. He mentions St Aelred who wrote extensively on the beauty of deeply connected friendship and has been labeled by many as gay. The notion is idiotic because it makes about as much sense as labeling him a Republican. It is a concept that would have had no meaning to him. The Friar who wrote this essay remains anonymous but he asks some deep important questions. This essay is a lament in its own way but also an invitation to leave your old social constructs and begin to experience a freedom in how you live your life.

"Once upon a time, there was friendship. Once upon a time, society accepted that the love of friends could be the single most important thing in a person's life, and they did more than just accept, they celebrated the fact. Throughout history, discourses and sermons have been written in praise of friendship. When Alfred Tennyson's friend Arthur Hugh Hallam died tragically young in 1833, he spent the next seventeen years writing the great poem "In Memoriam" as a memorial to his friend; and Hallam is a first name used among the Tennyson family to this day. Looking further back, we can see Damon and Pythias, Pylades and Orestes, David and Jonathan...

Perhaps the change was the fault of Freud and Oscar Wilde; and then again, perhaps not. But today no love is accepted as valid that is not in some way sexual, and even if we set out to reject the sex-obsessed outlook of today's society, we think in those terms despite ourselves. When St Aelred writes of "this most loving youth", we all say to ourselves "oh yes" in a knowing way, sure that we have guessed the smutty truth.

What a waste! What a wicked denial and perversion of love! God has made friendship – did not Christ have his own beloved disciple? – and how dare we corrupt it and deny it! Of course, we must not despise sex: sex is holy, divinely ordained as a way of love and procreation – but it is not the only love. Friendship is not "mere" friendship, not a second-best; still less is it a repressed substitute for erotic love. It is a love in its own right, powerful, holy, overwhelming. A world with Eros but without friendship is a world full of isolated, self-obsessed couples, of love unshared – a sad thing indeed. And we are heading that way.

The denial of friendship is an evil thing and evil in its effects. When my pulse beats faster at the sight of my friend, when his presence feels like a bolt of electricity – is this really sex in disguise? Am I to run away – which would be a tragedy – in order to preserve my chastity, or am I to try to overcome my revulsion and make a pass – which would be worse? Modern society seems to give us nothing but this harsh choice between a cold heart and a hot body. Who knows

how many of the impressionable young are led into ultimately unendurable vices precisely because they cannot face what seems the only available alternative? And when, as is inevitable, they have destroyed friendship by turning it into something it is not, what choice do we give them but to repeat the error, each time more desperately? As if one could see the stars by diving ever deeper into the mud!

Let us accept friendship. Let us accept it as a true and passionate gift of God. Let us accept it in others without reading anything else into it – “repressed” or not. Let us rejoice if it is given to us, be glad if it is given to others. Jonathan loved David not because of what he could get out of him, but because he was David: let us celebrate this motiveless love of the Other, an echo of the pure love of Heaven. We ought to love everyone like that: but one should at least start somewhere.

And if, like Aelred, we have made the mistake of seeking a physical consummation of a love that does not require it, then let us, like St Aelred, not recoil from that love but go forward, transcend that error, until the love becomes a redeemed and radiant thing that others will see and rejoice, giving thanks to God."