

*One angel told me that when she saw how passionately Michael and I embraced upon my return, she realized that, though many angels resented me, this was where I belonged.*

# A GAY MORMON'S TESTIMONY

By John Donald Gustav-Wrathall

I WOULD LOVE TO STAND UP IN TESTIMONY MEETING in my ward. I guess, technically, it's not my ward, though. I was excommunicated in 1986, at my own request. When I made that request, I was humiliated, defeated, and angry. I had almost not survived the summer. I let go of my suicide plans after God spoke to me, reminding me that he knew me from "my inward parts" (Psalm 139, RSV), and that he accepted me and loved me. But my relationship with the Church was fatally wounded. I felt betrayed and abandoned by my LDS leaders. It occurred to me that my almost-suicide would have been what the Church wanted me as a gay man to do all along: just die, disappear, go away. Stop being a problem.

Latter-day Saints are the salt of the earth. They are some of the kindest, most loving, caring, self-sacrificing people in the world. I have warm memories from my teenage years of priesthood service projects where all the men in the ward got together to paint a struggling member's house or worked side by side at the nearby, Church-owned welfare farm. Growing up out east, where church buildings could be quite a distance from home, I received countless rides to seminary, youth activities, and other meetings from members who never thought twice about it, and never even expected thanks. I remember heartfelt priesthood blessings. I remember tasty, warm Relief Society meals prepared for us kids whenever mom was sick. I remember visits to members incarcerated at Attica (I grew up on the outskirts of Rochester, New York) and my dad advocating with the criminal justice system for a member of the ward. If you were really in need, there was nothing a Church member wouldn't do to help you.

The Mormon brand of love is concrete; it manifests in ways you can see and feel and taste. I've never experienced that kind of community in other Christian churches. Non-Mormons are offended by the Church's missionary program, but they don't understand. When the Mormons come a-knocking at your



JOHN DONALD GUSTAV-WRATHALL is the author of *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (University of Chicago Press, 1998). An activist, writer, and public speaker, he lives with his life partner in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

door, it's because they really, truly do care about you.

So how is it that a church so good at loving has so utterly failed its gay and lesbian own? How is it that so many of us are excommunicated, exiled, and silenced? How is it that so many of us have not survived?

Part of the problem, of course, is that there is just no place in the Mormon worldview for gay people. We don't make the least bit of sense in the grand plan of salvation as it was tidily laid out for us on felt boards, missionary flip charts, or those cheesy 8mm movies we used to love to watch about God's plan of happiness. It seems inconceivable that God could allow so many of his children, roughly one in ten (if you believe Kinsey), to be born into this life incapable of fitting happily into the divine institution of eternal marriage. If we are gay, it must be our fault. It must be because we masturbated too much, according to the badly mistitled *Miracle of Forgiveness*. (I've yet to meet a soul who wasn't plunged into a deep depression by that book.) Or because our fathers were too distant. (I was very close to my father, who was just as loving and as actively involved in my upbringing as my mother was.) Or because we're just plain rebellious, sinful, and hateful. Perhaps we are some of Satan's minions who somehow sneaked through the veil.

Of course I grew up being taught the same things about sexual immorality that everyone was: that it is the worst sin one can possibly commit after the denial of the Holy Spirit and murder, and that devout Latter-day Saint parents should prefer to see their son or daughter come home in a casket than defiled by it. But I was made well aware by priesthood leaders that while all sexual sin was bad, homosexuality was clearly ranked as the worst of the sexual sins. The typical rhetoric was consistent with the language used in President Kimball's *Miracle of Forgiveness*, where homosexuality was referred to as "an ugly sin," "repugnant," "unnatural," "abominable," and "hostile to God's purpose."<sup>1</sup> If you were heterosexual growing up to this rhetoric, at least you grew up assured that somewhere, over the rainbow some day, you had the possibility of a fulfilling sexual relationship that enjoyed the Church's blessing. But there was no such possibility or promise if you were homosexual.

Elder Boyd K. Packer's talk in the general priesthood

meeting of October 1976, in which he condoned physical violence against homosexuals, had a huge impact on me. Thirteen at the time, I came away from that talk believing that almost any punishment against homosexuals was justified. And to the mortification of my teacher and fellow classmates, I said so in my liberal, eastern high school health class. I understand that at least through the year 2000, Elder Packer's talk was still being distributed by the Church in pamphlet form, and indeed still may be.<sup>2</sup>

But such pronouncements merely add insult to injury when the believing Latter-day Saint who also happens to be lesbian or gay accepts the teaching that salvation is possible only through marriage. To take this teaching at face value means we must either force ourselves into empty marriages of heartbreak and frustration, or we must abandon hope of salvation. Or in order to hold on to hope, we are driven to reject a church, and a belief system, and ultimately a God who could be so cruel and unjust as to require hetero-sex and hetero-marriage of us in this life in order to be saved, and then equip us so ill for either.

We who are gay and Mormon have spent so many pain-filled hours, days, weeks, and years asking the same questions Church members ask about us. We share your confusion, but obviously at a deeply personal level. *Why do I have these feelings? Why won't they go away no matter how much I pray, fast, study the scriptures, or go to the temple? Why don't they subside even after I served an honorable mission, giving some of my prime years to serve others?* Some of us even marry against our inclinations, trusting that this sacrifice will finally be our Abrahamic moment. Each of us pleads, pleads, pleads with God to be healed.

My failure to change no matter how hard I tried contributed to my sense that not only the Church but also God had abandoned me. It was that, more than anything else, that prodded me toward suicide. If I had just one request to make of my heterosexual brothers and sisters, it would be simply that they acknowledge, in a spirit of true love, the reality of this dilemma and undertake the journey to try to understand what it means, just as we gay Latter-day Saints have. Hear us. Hear our testimonies. If we are your brothers and sisters, why would you leave us to walk this road alone?

**I**N AUGUST 1986, in order to survive, I became an exile. Until that moment, the Church had been my whole existence. It had been my lifelong refuge of love and meaning, my safe harbor. And suddenly I stood on the pier, contemplating the world outside of its embrace, considering casting



*Why would God lead me  
to leave the Church,  
and then twenty years  
later lead me back again?*

myself adrift on the vast ocean of faithlessness. Of course there were other harbors of faith out there, but at the time, I didn't know that, and leaving the Church was one of the most frightening decisions I have ever made.

And yet, deep in my heart, where I had been taught since childhood to hear it, the still, small voice of God whispered: *"Go with my blessing. I am with you now, and I will be with you always. I have a work for you—and while you are accomplishing it, I will take care of your family, and I will take care of you. So go without fear."* So I went.

So here is the first part of my testimony. From childhood, I was blessed to have been taught how to hear and follow the Spirit. It has been the one guiding beacon in my life no matter where I have gone, no matter in what community of faith (or in no community of faith) I have been since. I never would have dreamed, even for a moment, that that still, small voice could prompt me to leave the Church. It was a terrible, Abrahamic leap of faith—following the voice of God in doing what I never believed God could command me to do. At the time, my parents told me I must be confused: it must be the voice of Satan. But now, more than ever, I am convinced the Spirit was leading me. And now the same voice has led me back.

Why would God lead me to leave the Church and then, twenty years later, lead me back again? I don't know, though I have some suspicions. Because members of the Church were harming me without knowing it; because their ignorance and prejudice had so badly wounded me and undermined me spiritually that suicide had come to seem the only option for me. God needed me to get away from all of that in order to survive. There were people whose lives I needed to touch and be a part of that I could not have if I had remained forever within the cozy confines of the Mormon community. One of those people is the man who has become my partner, my lover, my home, my soulmate, and my life companion. Perhaps I have been led to come back because I am like an olive branch that God has cut from the tree of Israel and grafted into the wild tree so that I might be strengthened in preparation for that day when God will graft me back into the tree of Israel to bless it through the life and vitality I gained from the wild roots. So that some day we might all be one.

I have a renewed testimony of the restored gospel. I have come to realize that I am, after all, a Mormon by conviction, if no longer technically by membership. I have heard the unmistakable voice of the Holy Spirit calling me back to the Church. *But why here? Why now?*

Why not? We Mormons believe that God works not *beyond*

but *within* history. There is a reason Joseph Smith was called when and where he was. There was a reason the Lord sent the Saints to Missouri and commanded them to build a temple there, even when, in spite of their best efforts, they were unable to fulfill that commandment then. We Latter-day Saints understand the concept of the fullness of time—that the work of God unfolds slowly but surely, sometimes with setbacks and apostasies, and always requiring pain, sacrifice, and commitment. Life in this world is imperfect, and our knowledge is incomplete, but we are committed to learn, to build the kingdom line upon line, precept upon precept. That means we have many things yet to learn.

The plan we agreed to in the council of heaven committed us to learn the lessons we need to learn under a veil of darkness and forgetfulness. Walking by faith means we don't see clearly, we don't understand everything right now. It seems that the probation required in order for us to become like our Heavenly Father and Mother demands that we frequently learn to feel our way through the moral dilemmas and challenges we face without clear and absolute answers to every question. In a sense, it demands that we develop a kind of cosmic ethical maturity, that we learn to act rightly without the clarity of God's immediate presence and guidance. It is eternal life and the knowledge of good and evil combined that will make us "as gods."

God helps us along as we are ready to take each step. But God does not always move us all at the same pace. The angel appeared to Cornelius the Gentile and commanded him to send a messenger to Peter's house before Peter received the vi-

sion in which God commanded him to partake of the unclean animals (Acts 10). We who are lesbian or gay, who feel the Spirit tugging at our heart, calling us into a fuller fellowship with the Church—perhaps we are today's Corneliuses. Many in the Church may not yet be ready for us. Even the prophet may not yet be ready for us. All the same, the angel commands us to set out on the path, to walk toward Peter's house. Perhaps the canvas has not yet descended from heaven nor the voice of God been heard saying, "What God hath cleansed, do not thou call common." I believe the vision can come only if we gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints obey the commandment to start walking. I believe it *will* come, just before we knock. God will cleanse us and prepare us for the work if we believe now, take heart, sacrifice, and obey the Spirit, even before the Church is ready to embrace us.

We gay folks have not yet had *our* council of Jerusalem. We have not yet had our 1978 priesthood revelation. There has not yet been a single defining moment when the Church has acknowledged us as fully deserving of inclusion in the same sense as every other child of God. In the eyes of the Church, we are still unclean, outsiders, worse than Gentiles. It does not matter. If we know anything from the history of salvation, we know that God rewards faithfulness, even, or especially, among those who have not yet received the promise. It was Abraham's faithfulness that compelled God to bless him and make him a father of nations. Jacob had to wrestle with an angel to receive his gift. If we are faithful, if we take the risk and walk even in darkness, we too will receive the gift. Those who cannot or do not wish to understand cannot detract from that.



*"... and then you and your partner will become ministering angels and serve gods like me!"*

**W**HAT DOES IT mean to be gay and Mormon and faithful? In the mental world of most Latter-day Saints, those things are mutually exclusive. Since the Church refuses to offer us concrete guidance that makes sense, and since we are generally cut off from participating in Church ordinances, gay Latter-day Saints, more than most, will need to discern and be attentive to the whisperings of the Spirit. But at the very least, I strongly believe that being a faithful gay Latter-day Saint includes honoring and being faithful to our same-sex partners in the same way we expect honor and faithfulness between opposite-sex spouses. We must live with integrity and courage, serve others, and seek reconciliation within ourselves and with no expectations of Church support.

As I have sought to do this, I have been surprised by unexpected revelations. I have cried tears of sorrow for my sins: for words spoken or written in anger; for things said and done that have alienated and estranged; for hurts I've caused my parents; for harsh words spoken to my brother; for the times I have failed to honor and love my partner as he deserves; and for holding a twenty-year grudge against God and against the Church. If these were not sins, then I have no way of explaining why, to the extent I have acknowledged them and sought forgiveness, my sense of peace and freedom has increased and my burdens have lightened. I have a renewed testimony of the wisdom in the Word of Wisdom. I have found joy in praying for Church leaders and the missionaries. I have begun to share my joy and my testimony of the gospel with others again.

After I started reading the Book of Mormon again, after I began praying daily again, after I began attending meetings in my local ward, after I had begun to rediscover Mormon piety through SUNSTONE and reconciliations with parents, family and old friends, I had a dream.

In this dream, there was a great homecoming of angels, of which I was one. We were flying back to heaven from earth; millions of angels; the air was thick with us. I was particularly eager to return, so I flew up faster than the rest, though other angels seemed not so happy to see me and were elbowing me and shoving me away. In heaven, I was greeted by Michael, the archangel, with a passionate kiss. It was then I realized I was married to him. I had been exiled for some transgression. While in exile, I had performed low, thankless missions prohibited to members of the heavenly host. But now, I was restored to my old place with Michael. One angel, an elderly, white-haired sister, told me that when she saw how passionately Michael and I embraced upon my return, she realized that, though many angels resented me, this was where I belonged.

I awoke from this dream with a vivid sense that there is a place in the eternities for those of us men who love men, and women who love women. Being married to Michael in my dream could have represented the possibility that there is a divinely ordained role for us and our relationships that hasn't yet been revealed but is valuable. In my dream, it became clear to me that the transgression for which I had been exiled was not being gay. It was my anger at the Church and my alienation from it. Yet even in my exile, God had had something important for me to do. My transgression had been a necessary one. My anger had served a purpose. My calling in life did not take me down the path followed by most other angels. Yet it was an indispensable calling. In the end, my suffering had allowed pieces of God's plan to be realized that could be realized in no other way. My pain made my reconciliation sweeter and my glory greater.

This dream crystallized my sense of the role I feel called to with regard to the Church. My deepening sense of the immovability of God's love for me has allowed me to let go of any expectations in relation to the Church. I attend sacrament meeting and Sunday School, I sing the hymns, and I pray. I cry

during testimony meeting. Sometimes I am so moved by the hymns, I cannot sing. I focus on listening, rather than talking. I don't take the sacrament; I don't want to cause any scandals. I remember that if I do not have *the* priesthood, I still have a priesthood. My priesthood is the priesthood of all believers, the same priesthood I share with my LDS sisters, the one that calls us to service, that calls us to pray for healing, that calls us to live humbly and simply, that calls us to speak words of hope and reconciliation every chance God grants us. I try to magnify that priesthood, trusting that if I do, someday I will enjoy greater priesthoods. I find that by listening and being open, I am learning important things about love, peace, and forgiveness—and learning what my brothers and sisters have to teach me. I love being gathered with the Saints. I hunger to go back every Sunday.

**B**ECAUSE SO MANY gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Saints and their families and loved ones are struggling without hope, it is important to point out that everything we know about the plan of salvation has come to Latter-day Saints in flashes. And it has always come in response to specific questions the Saints have brought to God. When Joseph and Sidney Rigdon received the vision of the glories, they had been inquiring about the seeming injustice of applying the same reward to all who are saved and the same punishment to all who are damned. In response, they received a vision of heaven in which they saw as many glories as there are souls worthy of receiving glory. But the flashes of revelation that have inspired us and given us hope and insight into the eternities are by no means a detailed map of the celestial kingdom. When the map we have fades off into darkness, wouldn't it be wise to admit that we just don't know, and that until we do, we should let compassion guide us?

So far, hasn't every revelation the Latter-day Saints have received about the plan of salvation opened visions of God and an eternity that is based on compassion and fairness? Those who died without a chance to be baptized won't be damned for an ordinance they never had a chance to receive. God does not punish us for the accidents, vicissitudes, and messiness of a mortal existence that is broken by sins of others. Given this history, is it any more logical to think that gay people will be damned for not being able to love members of the opposite sex with the same kind of passion with which we love members of the same sex? What kind of God would make us this way or allow that we be made this way, and then damn us for it? Not the God who has revealed himself to us! Not the God worshiped by the Latter-day Saints!

I do not know what it means in the scheme of eternity that I as a man, with every fiber of my being, love a man. Is that a biological fluke? An accident of birth that will be corrected in the next life? When I wake up in eternity, will I suddenly be drawn to women in the way that in this mortal body I am drawn to men? If so, what will happen to the intense love, the gritty commitment, and the soul passion I share right now with my partner of thirteen, going-on-fourteen, years? Will the lessons we have learned together be wasted? Will the path we

have begun together suddenly end? Everything I know about the world to come says no. If Joseph taught us one thing, it is that our soul commitments do not disappear at death. And this is not a bad thing. The love I feel for my partner tastes every bit as much of eternity as the love my heterosexual parents who were sealed in the temple appear to feel for each other. And I feel in the root of my soul that, as with Abraham, God will make my faith and the love and commitment my partner and I offer each other a blessing to the nations.

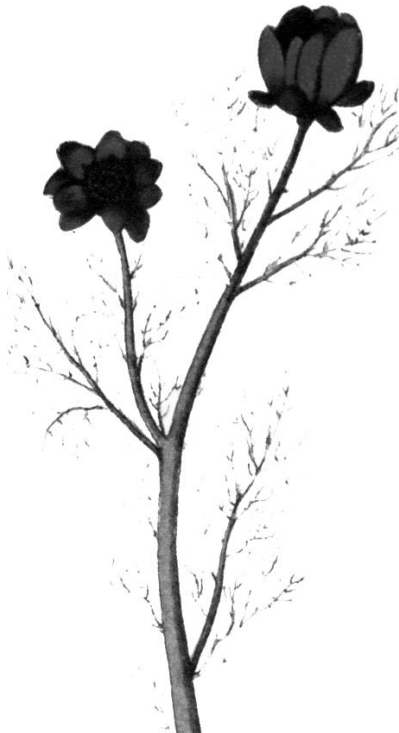
Can Latter-day Saints rule out the possibility that the one in ten of us who love members of the same sex are this way because it is an important and eternal part of who we are? Can we categorically deny that there is not a place of glory in the celestial kingdom reserved for men who love men and women who love women that is every bit as wonderful as the places of glory reserved there for heterosexuals? In the scheme of eternity, might not same-sex families have a role to play in weaving together all our families and the Kingdom of God that is every bit as important as the role heterosexuals play by manufacturing physical bodies for spirit children in this life? Can we be sure that we will be “without increase” in the next life just because we are incapable of creating posterity in this life? Do we have the knowledge of God’s mind to claim we know the ultimate answers in relation to these matters?

In the meantime, emboldened by the suffering of so many gay Latter-day Saints and their families, I dare to plead that we ponder the words of Christ as recorded in Matthew 19:12—that we ask what he meant when he said, “For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.”

And what about these words of Isaiah 56?

For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:4–5)

If Latter-day Saints are so certain that the only path to glory is through heterosexual marriage and offspring, what can these



*Every revelation the Latter-day Saints have received so far has opened visions of God and an eternity that is based on compassion and fairness.*

passages possibly mean? Do they not hold out hope to those of us for whom marriage and having children is impossible, that we too will receive “a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters”? Until we all have received the light we need on this subject, I choose, like Jacob’s wrestling the angel, to demand the blessing described by Isaiah. I choose to live in anticipation of the fulfillment of that promise by keeping God’s sabbaths and taking hold of the covenant.

**C**OMING OUT TO my parents was one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. I knew they would be devastated. When I was still contemplating and praying about how to break the news to them, I had two dreams.

In the first, I was sitting in the living room of the Massachusetts home my parents were living in at the time and talking with my father. I told him I was gay. Without saying a word, he got up and went into the kitchen. When he returned, he had a large kitchen knife, and he chased me out of the house, threatening to kill me.

In the second dream, I was speaking with my mother, and the house was somewhere else. The walls were white, the floor was white, the furniture was white, everything was white except for a bright, blood-red rose in a crystal vase on the end table between me and my mother. From the beautiful white light streaming in through the windows, I realized that we were in the celestial kingdom. I told my mother, “You know, I am gay.” She said, “Yes, I know. I have always known.” Tears came to my eyes, and I said, “Mother, if you knew, why did you never say anything to me about it?”

“I would have,” she said, “But I didn’t know how to bring it up without embarrassing you.” I awoke with tears of gratitude in my eyes.

Those two dreams perfectly symbolized my fears and my hopes in coming out to my parents, to the Church, and to God. I’ve always wondered about the red rose in the second dream; perhaps it symbolized the inevitable pain, even in the most loving, coming-out scenario.

Unfortunately, I only too well understood the meaning of the first dream. I very nearly didn’t survive. Too many gay Mormons haven’t. A long period of alienation ensued from my coming out. Then, as my family came to understand my journey better, it was they who began to experience pain inflicted by thoughtless words spoken from the pulpit or after church, and by the knowledge that given current Church poli-

cies and the state of misunderstanding about the nature of homosexuality, their son and brother might never be reconciled to the church to which they have given their lives.

**I**S THERE A place in the Church, and in families governed by gospel principles, for gay people? I guess it all depends how we as a people bound in covenant to God understand gospel principles. Are we governed by love or by legalism? Which of these we choose first determines how the other fits after it. I have come to believe this lesson is a reason for the passion and pain of gay people in the Church. I believe it is God's way of helping us all—gay and straight—to learn the importance of love over law, not just in this life but in all the eternities.

I have met with my bishop, and he made it clear to me that I could not be re-baptized without a “dramatic lifestyle change” (his words). But he also made it clear to me that he loves me, that he welcomes me to attend and to participate, that he will pray for and with me, and that he is with me in my journey. He's an old-fashioned kind of guy, a bit on the conservative side—not the kind, if you judged him by his exterior, you would expect to understand someone like me. But I love my bishop. I believe he is my friend. I have found other unexpected friends in the ward as well.

This is not an easy place to be, to be denied the status, the priesthood and temple blessings, the roles and callings I once had in the Church. If I felt sorry for myself or held onto some burden of expectations about how the Church ought to change, I could not stand here. If I did not know who I am—a child of God; had I not come to embrace the fearful and wonderful way in which God has made me, a gay man; if I did not have a powerful sense of the mystery and fundamental goodness of the love I share with my partner; if I did not have a palpable sense of the daily presence of the Spirit and an abiding witness of God's deep love for me and promises to me, I could not stand here. But what I can say is that I am only in the first steps of a journey of many miles, and the blessings I have received are already worth a lifetime.

I wish I could bear my testimony in my home ward. It is painful to be “in the ward but not of it.” Those reading this who have hearts to understand, please pray for us. We are part of your family. We cannot be saved without you, neither you without us. ☺

## NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 77–78, 81.

2. D. Michael Quinn, “Prelude to the National ‘Defense of Marriage’ Campaign: Civil Discrimination Against Feared or Despised Minorities,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 1–52.



# LOOKING FOR STORIES

## FROM OR ABOUT GAY MEMBERS OF RELIGIOUS FAMILIES



I am gathering true stories to assist me in writing a new book that will appear late this year. The title is *No More Goodbyes—Embracing our Gay Family and Friends in spite of and because of Our Religions*. My one goal is to assist in healing relationships. I will deal with the tragic and unnecessary goodbyes that arise from

- Family alienation
- Ill-fated marriages based on unrealistic expectations of change
- Suicide

I am looking for true experiences from gay people, parents, siblings, wives/former wives, friends, that involve religion either as a part of the problem or a part of the solution (or both) in terms of the above subjects. To establish the pain of the unnecessary goodbyes, I require stories that show our failures, but I especially want stories that show our successes—families and friends refusing to allow anything, including religion, to come between them and their gay loved ones.

Please email your story to [CLP@CLPEARSON.COM](mailto:CLP@CLPEARSON.COM). Each email will be acknowledged. Neither your name nor your family's name will be used without your permission. Due to my deadlines, these accounts need to be received soon, by **15 JULY 2006** at the latest.

SINCERELY,  
**CAROL LYNN PEARSON**