

Thinking Differently About Same-Sex Attraction

2018 FAIR Mormon Conference

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I appreciate the lack of introduction. I am by profession a marriage and family therapist and for about 25 years much of my practice has been counseling latter day saints who experience same sex attraction. Most of them have been latter day saints who desperately want to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. In preparation for this, my wife and I did some calculating and figured out that at a conservative estimate in the last 25 years I've spent 15 to 20 thousand hours in face to face conversation with young men and women who struggle with same sex attraction. You can learn a lot in that much conversation, especially if you listen carefully; and I've tried to listen carefully.

I also completed a doctoral dissertation in which I did a qualitative study of latter day saint men who reported that they had overcome same sex attraction. So occasionally somebody refers to me as an expert on this topic. Whenever I hear that I think about a Mark Twain quote, a complement that he gave, he said: "The dog is man's best friend. This alone is discouraging." [laughter]. And if you ever hear somebody introduced as an expert in this complex, baffling, and difficult issue, keep that in mind: If they're an expert, this alone is discouraging. I tell my clients that they should not believe anybody who is an expert, that they should ask themselves four questions: Is what I'm hearing logical, does it make sense? Does it match my experience? Does it feel right? And is it compatible with my deeply held spiritual and religious beliefs? This matter is so controversial with so many different voices, each person will need to ask themselves those questions and decide for themselves, does this feel right, is it logical, does it make sense.

Latter day saints who experience same sex attraction often face an overwhelmingly difficult and seemingly unsolvable dilemma: how do I reconcile my strong feelings and attractions and arousal towards my same gender with the devotion and love that I feel towards the gospel of Jesus Christ. For many this dilemma becomes apparent early in their teenage years. It is frequently accompanied by almost unbearably painful emotions; these often include intense guilt, shame, confusion, hopelessness and an overwhelming sense of isolation. I have never forgotten the words of a young client who said to me that he had prayed to his Heavenly Father: please God let me die so I can stop being such a horrible person. If we do not understand this kind of pain, then we do not understand the experience of same sex attraction as it occurs in the lives of many latter day saints.

Over the last 25 years I have spent thousands of hours in these kinds of conversations. The great majority of the individuals I have spoken to are seeking assistance in more fully living the gospel of Jesus Christ, and hoping to be able to do something about these feelings. In all that time, I do not recall a single conversation in which I talked to anyone about changing their sexual orientation. I make it clear to them that regardless of any therapy we do it will not reduce their ability to become aroused to someone of their own gender. Yet in spite of this lack of change in sexual orientation, many of these individuals find their feelings of same sex attraction become much less of an obstruction to living the gospel and moving forward in their lives. How can this be? I tell the people that I work with that the single biggest thing I can do to help them, is to help them to think differently about what they are experiencing about the issue of same sex attraction. In order for them to think differently about it, not only do I *not* talk to them about changing their

sexual orientation, I talk to them about the idea that even thinking in terms of *having* a sexual orientation is not very helpful.

Let me illustrate that point. Suppose for a minute that I hold my pen out and then I let go of it. What will happen to it? It falls. That's easy. But why will it fall? What makes it fall? Most people will answer that question with a single word: gravity. But the fact of the matter is we don't know why it falls. Science has yet to have a complete explanation for gravity. We just know that everything that is unsupported falls, and we call that gravity. And then we do something very interesting. We label it as gravity and then we talk about it as though we have explained it; when all we have really done is label it. "Why do things fall?" "Well because of gravity." "Well, how do you know that it's gravity?" "Well because things fall." "But why do they fall?" "Well because of gravity." You see it simply goes in a circle. Calling it gravity adds no new information to the fact that things fall. It simply makes it more convenient to talk about.

We do the same thing in the social sciences. Take for example the concept of self esteem. Self esteem began as a description of what people were doing. People who said or thought good things about themselves were thought to have high self esteem. People who said or thought bad things about themselves were said to have low self esteem. But what began as a description of what people were doing—thinking or saying good or bad things about themselves—quickly came to be talked about as though it was the reason they were doing it. "So why is that person saying such bad things about himself?" "It's because he has low self esteem." "How do you know he has low self esteem?" "Well because he says such bad things about himself." "But why does he say such bad things about himself?" "Well low self esteem." Again it goes in a circle. This form of reasoning is common in our culture and it permeates and dominates the social sciences. We diagnose, label, categorize, and classify people. And then we explain their behaviors and traits as though they were occurring because of these diagnoses, labels, categories, and classifications. We label and then talk as though we have explained.

In many instances this habit may be relatively harmless and it might occasionally do some good. I fear however that when it comes to the issue of same sex attraction and the way many individuals think about themselves and their feelings, this habit does great harm. "Why is that person sexually attracted to his same gender?" "Well it's because he's gay." "Really? How do you know he's gay?" "Well he's attracted to people of the same gender?" "But what makes him do that?" "He's gay." See again it just goes in a circle. Through our labels and classifications we have created a different kind of person, a different species: the homosexual or gay person. We've identified and labeled something called a sexual orientation and given it power to cause people to have certain kinds of intense feelings and desires.

When I meet with clients, I always ask them this question: If you could get an answer to any question regarding this struggle that you're having, what would your question be? Almost universally, most of them say: "My number one question would be why? Why do I have these feelings?" Much of their confusion, shame, and hopelessness appear to hinge on their not understanding why they have these feelings. Thinking clearly about cause seems central. Not only to decreasing their confusion and shame but also to recognizing what reasonable or credible options might be open to them.

Now most ways of understanding cause when it comes to same sex attraction fall into five main categories. I want to describe each of those to you. And then I want to tell you which one I think contains the most truth, and therefore is in the long run more helpful and hopeful than the others. This is dangerous ground. Because of the overwhelming pain often associated with same sex attraction, many individuals and groups hold strong beliefs regarding its cause and feel threatened, and even angry, if those beliefs are questioned. I don't blame them. Many individuals have wrestled long and hard deciding what they will believe regarding the "why" of their feelings. They often feel that they have finally found understanding peace and directions for their lives based on their answers. But for many others, none of the answers they have considered have brought them peace. It is to those individuals that I offer an invitation to think differently about same sex attraction.

The first explanation that many people have turned to when trying to understand the cause of same sex attraction is that individuals have somehow chosen to have those feelings. In some ways this seems to be a good explanation. It gives the impression of being compatible with our beliefs regarding agency, and it appears to offer a solution. If I am choosing to have these feelings, then I can choose not to. If I just try hard enough to repent I can stop these feelings from occurring. However, the consistent experience of the overwhelming majority of latter day saints who experience same sex attraction is that they have, at least at some point in their life, wanted desperately to be free from these feelings. They have no sense of having chosen them. Many describe praying to the point of exhaustion, pleading with the Lord for the strength to stop thinking and feeling this way. The belief that they have somehow chosen to have these feelings has produced *not* a solution, but instead has contributed to feelings of shame, guilt, self loathing. It has also led many to eventually question their belief, their faith, and their relationship with God.

A second explanation that people have sometimes turned to as they have attempted to understand the cause of these feeling is that same sex attraction is actually a symptom of deeper emotional or psychological problems. These deeper problems are sometimes thought to result from unmet emotional needs in childhood. In this way of thinking same sex attraction is less a matter of morality and more a matter of psychopathology. This would explain why people who experience these attractions have no sense of ever having chosen them. It would also explain why these feelings are so difficult to stop. And here the central solution to the dilemma for same sex attraction shifts from one of repentance to one of therapy and emotional healing. Many people however find this explanation offensive. They do not want to consider themselves to be psychologically or emotionally damaged goods. For many, the results of therapy based on this approach include not change in sexual desires, but only continued shame, now compounded by disappointment, frustration, and a sense of personal failure.

Currently when attempting to understand the cause of same sex attraction most people accept a third explanation: that those who experience same sex attraction were "born that way". According to the popular understanding of this explanation, all sexual and romantic feelings to one's own gender are entirely, biologically determined. This perspective suggests that such feelings are an indication of who a person really is in the most fundamental biological sense. The idea that people are "born that way" does seem to solve several problems caused by the previous two explanations. Unlike the idea that people choose these feelings, it does not imply that same

sex attraction is an indication of moral failing. Therefore, it appears to reduce unnecessary and harmful guilt and shame. Also, unlike the idea that these feelings are a symptom of mental illness, it reduces the probability that individuals will feel psychologically broken or defective. It can also relieve the guilt placed on parents who may believe that it was defective parenting that caused the problem. For many people this explanation also radically shifts the responsibility for a resolution between feelings of same sex attraction and the teachings of the church. It is no longer the individual who can or should change or repent. But it is those who embrace a traditional view of chastity that must reevaluate *their* position.

Notice something interesting about the three approaches that we have talked about so far. Nearly everyone who has ever taken an introductory psychology class is familiar with the idea of nature versus nurture. Nature commonly refers to my physical body, and more specifically to my genetic makeup. Nurture is generally thought of as any and all environmental factors, including culture. In psychology these two factors are thought to explain all of human behavior. They make us who we are. Some people, including those of us who hold strong religious beliefs, add a third factor to the nature/nurture mix. This third factor is agency, or free will. It is interesting that the three approaches to “cause” we have described up to this point reflect these three factors. If we believe that these feelings are chosen, they are a matter of agency. If we believe that they are a symptom of psychological problems caused in childhood, they are a matter of nurture. And if, in fact, people are “born that way”, they are a result of nature. The problem with any one of these approaches is that nearly all of human behavior is now generally understood to be the result of a complex interaction between these various factors, and not simply a result of any one of them.

Now, over time as these three explanations have competed for acceptance, a fourth approach to understanding “cause” has become increasingly popular. This is the idea that understanding the cause of same sex attraction is actually not very important. According to this approach, the important thing is not *why* these feelings occur, but *how* we respond to them. With all of the confusion and contention surrounding the cause of same sex attraction, might it not be best to simply focus on how a person responds to these feelings?

As attractive as this idea can be, there *is* a problem with it. For many individuals I have seen, the single biggest predictor of how they are going to respond when they begin to have these kinds of feelings is what they believe regarding *why* they are feeling them. If every time I look at a guy and I’m attracted to him, I think “I was born this way, this is who I am in a fundamental biological sense”, *that* will affect how I respond to them. If I think, “I’m choosing this. If I was just righteous enough and repented hard enough this would stop”, *that* will affect how I respond. If I think, “boy there is something deeply wrong with me, boy I am broken inside psychologically to have these feelings”, *that* will affect how I respond. So although I have a lot of sympathy with the idea that it is response that matters, yet “cause” still seems to haunt almost all the people I talk to. Of the four approaches we have discussed, this idea that it is not really important, seems to be the most ambiguous when offering solutions. Aside from and ongoing encouragement to live the gospel –and let’s never underestimate how important that is—little clear direction is offered regarding how to deal with these feelings. Each individual is left to find their own unique path. Little specific direction, that might be helpful to everyone, is given. Of course, offering no specific solution may be better than offering solutions, that while well intended, simply have not worked.

So where does that leave us? I suspect that the majority of members of the church, and particularly young adults, have more or less accepted the idea that people are “born that way”. Some have embraced this idea consciously and specifically, while others might hold it simply as a vague notion. Of these four approaches we have discussed, why is this one the most widely accepted? For most people a major reason is simply the fact that this is the one they have heard the most— like name recognition helping a candidate to win an election. If you were to ask many young adults why they believe that people are born gay, they may respond by saying something like this: “Well everyone knows that! Besides, scientists have proven it, haven’t they?” By the way, in case of any of you are unaware, they have not. They have not.

I think there is another reason why so many people in our culture adopt this explanation. The idea that people who are same sex attracted somehow have a mental illness has been largely discounted. Not a lot of people believe that any more. And popular opinion has swung away from the idea that people have chosen it, and rightfully so. So those two possibilities have been eliminated, so with those two possibilities eliminated, for most people it boils down to some variation of this question: Are people born that way or did they choose it? I believe that it would be difficult to even assess or understand the impact that that simple phrase, and the ideas behind it, have had on our culture. This simple dichotomy seems to permeate all conversations and discussions regarding same sex attraction: were they “born that way” or did they choose it. I hear that from PhD college professors and from junior high school students. From gay rights activists and the most conservative Mormons: “were people born that way, or did they choose it?” If ever there was a phrase that deserved the title “false dichotomy”, it would be this phrase.

Let me illustrate that with another thought experiment. If you’ll just participate for a moment in this.... Imagine for just a minute that you have never watched a child learn to speak—never seen that—and nobody ever described that process to you. Wouldn’t the most obvious assumption you could possibly make be that you were born speaking English? Do you remember a time you didn’t speak English? Do you remember choosing to speak English? Do you remember working at it? So here is something that’s very fundamental to your human experience on this earth, the language with which you make sense out of the entire world; the language with which you communicate and establish and maintain the most important relationships of your life, and yet here this fundamental thing about you, you did not choose. And you were not born that way. And it would be very difficult, or impossible, to change. Now, just for the people here who don’t speak a foreign language: think for a minute if I asked you to go sixty seconds without thinking anything in English? Go! Most of us can’t go five or ten seconds. So the idea that this thing is acquired doesn’t mean that we were born that way or that we chose it. And yet it can be a fundamental part of our experience in this life. In a similar way the idea that people were either born gay or that they chose it, on closer examination, also seems to be entirely unreasonable. In my opinion, this idea has been a major factor in misleading and distorting popular opinion regarding the nature of same sex attraction.

So then this leads us to the fifth way, or approach, of understanding the cause of same sex attraction. This fifth approach is the one that I believe. It’s the one that I believe is the most truthful, and therefore ultimately in the long run the most helpful, and the most hopeful. When clients seek help from me saying they want to more fully live the gospel I try to persuade them to

adopt this fifth approach to thinking about “cause”. And I ask them to let it inform their thoughts and feelings regarding what they are experiencing. What I tell clients is... that the fifth approach to cause is simply this: Same sex attraction is *just* something you know how to do. I tell them that I am going to be a human thesaurus. I tell them that same sex attraction is *simply* something you know how to do. It is *merely* something you know how to do. It is *only* something you know how to do. It is *nothing but* something you know how to do. It is not a symptom of biological mandates, mental illness, or evil choices. It is *simply* something you know how to do. Like the language you speak, it is not something you had any choice in. Also just as you were not biologically destined at birth to speak any specific language, it is not something you were biologically hard wired to do. And finally, as with language, it is not something that can, or needs to be, fixed or cured.

At this point it would be important to point out that what I have said about same sex attraction, I also believe about opposite sex attraction, or heterosexuality. I think that all forms of sexuality are acquired. That none of them are hard wired into us. I believe they are acquired in a cultural context that we participate in, but we have little say in. While a person is not born with any specific language hardwired, they are born with a strong propensity to learn language. It's not as though if you worked really hard you could teach a child to speak. They are born with a voracious appetite for language acquisition. In the same way somebody may not be born with any specific, or hardwired with, any specific pattern of sexual attraction, but with a strong propensity to acquire that as their body matures.

In a similar way, I believe that all sexual patterns are acquired. In fact it seems to me that the idea that people are hardwired for opposite sex attraction is one of the major sources of confusion regarding same sex attraction. If heterosexuality is a strong biological imperative, something I was hard wired and programmed for, and if it does not develop in a significant number of people, something really big must have happened. It takes a big cause. It takes something powerful to derail that heterosexual locomotive as it barrels down the biological tracks. But what if all sexuality, like all language, is acquired? What if we're wired to learn it but not learn any specific pattern? Then it may not take nearly as much to get us going in a certain direction.

Now this is, to many people, kind of a radical approach. But I believe that this fifth approach, that same sex attraction is something a person knows how to do, is more congruent and compatible with many observable facts that we know about human sexuality, than any of the other approaches. Like language, it is compatible with the fact that people who experience same sex attraction have no sense of having chosen it. It is compatible with the fact that same sex attraction appears to be difficult to reduce and impossible to eliminate. It is compatible with the fact that most individuals who experience same sex attraction have at least average mental health, and some have *excellent* mental health and still experience that. It is compatible with the fact that if a gay man has an identical twin, and therefore identical genetic makeup, there is a roughly 80% chance that his identical twin will not be gay. It is compatible with the fact that those who are born and raised in large cities are more likely to experience same sex attraction than those who are born and raised in small towns and rural communities. It is compatible with the fact that there appear to be cultures in which same sex attraction does not exist. And also compatible with the fact that in some cultures, at least for men, some form of same sex attraction

appears to have been almost universal; it was the *norm*. All men were sexually attracted and aroused by other men. Ancient Rome, ancient China, Greece, other cultures. It is compatible with the well documented phenomenon of sexual fluidity: the fact that in some individuals sexual attraction does change and morph over time. It is further compatible with the fact that when someone's sexual attractions *do* change, they don't switch from one attraction to another, they expand their repertoire. Like most things we know how to do, we do not forget how to play the piano when we learn to play the guitar. We do not lose old attractions, but we sometimes get new ones. It is compatible with the fact that the great *majority* of those who experience same sex attraction also experience *significant* levels of opposite sex attraction. Well documented. Go to YouTube and look at a video by Lisa Diamond; an astounding, interesting video. People simply do *not* fall into the discreet categories that we have constructed for them. It is compatible with the statement of the American Psychological Association regarding cause: that no single factor has been shown to cause same sex attraction and that many people believe that both nature and nurture play complex roles.

The idea that same sex attraction is something a person knows "how to do" fits comfortably with my experience when I was doing my doctoral dissertation. They were recruiting people for me to interview who said: "I've overcome same sex attraction. I'm happily married to someone of the opposite sex." When I sat and I interviewed these individuals, each one of them said something like this: "I could still do it. I mean I know how. I could easily do it. I just don't feel a desire or need to anymore." And I was, it was 25 years ago, and I remember thinking: "You could still do it!? Oh no, they were going to send me people who had changed! Maybe the next person will really have changed? But again and again: "I could still do it." Their repertoire had expanded, not switched. The idea that sexuality is something a person knows how to do is also fully compatible with the fact that things we know how to do are *always* influenced by our biology.

Let's do another thought experiment: Say for a moment that you took an NBA basketball star and a concert pianist. If you had the ability to look deeply enough into their genetic and biological makeup, do you suppose that we would find genetic or biological factors that correlate with these unique abilities? Without doubt! And yet we would still consider these to simply be things that they know how to do and know how to do very well. We could also be quite certain that while these genetic or biological predispositions might be present, they would not manifest themselves in individuals who were raised in cultures where there were no basketballs or pianos.

Now let me illustrate that. All of the clients I work with, I do a thought experiment with them. I ask them at some point, I say: "I want you to imagine for just a moment that you grew up in the same world that you did grow up in; same church, same family, same parents, siblings, friends, school, neighborhood and you were the same person, everything was exactly the same in the world you grew up in... except this one thing: that in the world that you grew up in there was no such thing as same sex attraction. You had never heard the word homosexual. The word gay only meant happy. Nobody got teased or made fun of, or called gay or a fag or queer on the play ground growing up. There was no gay pornography available anywhere. No gay hookup places, nobody to do anything with, nobody came out of the closet and declared they were gay. Nothing! Nobody whispered about who's gay and who's not, or gossiped about what gay people do. You couldn't wonder or worry: "I wonder if I'm gay?", because there was no category to worry about! Any fantasy you had about another person of the same gender, about sexual activity with

them, you would have to have invented it completely on your own. No gay pornography, nothing on the internet. No gay chat rooms. No discussions about homosexuality in any high school or college classrooms. No gay characters on television shows or movies. No gay celebrities. No discussions about the cause of this. Nothing! No parades. No marches. No arguments. No jokes; didn't exist." And I'll say to them, "If you had grown up in that kind of a world, how much of an issue would you have with same sex attraction?" Now I know that the clients I talk with are not a random sample. We could talk a lot about sampling. But the ones that I talked to, when I asked them that question, over two thirds of them, and most of them quite quickly say: "I would have no problem at all". Because as I go through that list they are going: check, check, check. People made fun of me. I wondered if it was true. I went to the internet. I looked at this. I looked at these people and wondered if I was having those kinds of feelings. I was interpreting my feelings, and on and on. The other less than a third say: "well I might have some of those feelings, but they would be 80 or 90% less than they were." And I tell them: the degree to which that is true, is the degree to which this is a cultural or sociological phenomenon; more than an individual psychological phenomenon. Again... does not mean you had choice, does not mean that it is easy take care of. But it is more like being a democrat or a republican than it is like being black or white or tall or short.

I illustrate that with a metaphor I use... I'm old enough to remember the very first pictures that were taken of the earth from outer space. I can see some of you are too. I was born in 1960. The first good quality pictures from space came back in the mid 1960s with the Mercury and Gemini program, and we were astounded! We'd seen aerial photographs of a few square miles, but now you could see the curvature of the earth, and all of Florida and the whole boot of Italy! You didn't see the whole globe until 1968 when Apollo 8 went all the way to the moon. But I remember when I was a kid seeing those and thinking: where do we live, where do we live? Show me where we live. So somebody showed me a picture of North America and I looked and I could find the Great Salt Lake and I grew up here in Orem so I knew it was a little bit South, right about in there. That's where we live. But I remember distinctly, my first response when I saw that picture of North America from space was *confusion*. Because I thought: "Wait a minute, where are all the States?" Where are all those different shapes and colors? Where's Utah, that big rectangle with the corner taken out? Where are Canada and Mexico? It is just this big brownish greenish blur. Where is all that? Because it had never occurred to me that those lines on the map did not occur as natural phenomena. Every representation I had ever seen of North America had those on it. Now a couple of thoughts about that: the technical word that most of you are familiar with is a "social construct". So a State or a Nation is socially constructed, built up socially.

Now a couple of important points about that: just because something is socially constructed doesn't mean that it's unimportant. People define who they are according to those lines on a map, and people will give their *lives* to defend those lines on a map. The right circumstances, *I* might do that. They are the most important things in our lives, things that are socially constructed. Secondly, things that are socially constructed, it's not that they have no relevance or connection to the natural world. There has to be land to draw those lines on. We don't make States out in outer space or in the ocean. And many of those lines follow coast lines or rivers or mountain ranges. So these lines are a way of interpreting the world, interpreting land.

So the question is, is sexuality in its many different forms and many different labels and many different categories—and most people have become completely confused by the long list of LBGTQPQ... things—are these naturally occurring phenomenon, or are they socially constructed realities? The idea that they are socially constructed is a prominent psychological theory. I'm not just blowing smoke, I didn't make it up! Some of you will be interested in that: I'm going to give you a reference. Probably the most thorough article I have seen that delineates this was in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, January 2015—not a conservative journal—“Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape: Towards an Interpretive Theory of the Development of Sexual Orientation and Identity”; a thorough scholarly discussion about this perspective.

So, while this way of understanding same sex attraction does not offer easy answers or quick fixes, I believe that it does open up a range of possibilities that the other ways—born that way, chose it, mental illness, or doesn't matter—do not offer. Like Buddhism, it follows a middle path. It rejects extreme explanations, which either leave *no* room for moral agency, or which on the other, hand *ignore* the powerful and pervasive influences that our biology and our environment have in shaping and forming (from the Doctrine and Covenants) “that sphere in which God has placed us to act.” It does not ignore that.

This approach decreases shame and guilt. It allows an individual to understand that what they are experiencing is not a matter of bad moral choices. It, never-the-less, opens up the possibility that they may be able to now exercise their agency in pursuit of Chastity. It can be difficult for someone to believe that they can “bridle all of their passions” if they are led to believe that their passions are NOT something they “know how to do”, but are biologically mandated and therefore inescapable. For many of my clients, simply the idea that what they are experiencing is not a symptom of deeper causes... it is just something you “know how to do”, it's not something springing up and manifesting itself—which is the medical model, right? Everything is a symptom of something—this idea in itself is liberating. They grab hold of this. The idea that it is something they know how to do also encourages those who experience some level of same sex attraction not to *discount* their experience of opposite sex attraction. Most of the individuals I talk with experience significant levels of opposite sex attraction (as we've mentioned earlier). Having grown up in a culture that tells them, however, that if they experience ANY same sex attraction they are in fact “gay”, often leads them to discount their experiences of opposite sex attraction. They view them as unimportant anomalies, instead of hopeful indications of future possibility.

There are a number of other ways in which believing that same sex attraction is *just* something you know how to do, that allow individuals to find solutions to many of the dilemmas they face—not perfect solutions and not easy solutions, but at least opens up the *possibility* of solutions. Some of these solutions I point out to clients. Others they discover for themselves, and may be unique. Regardless, nearly all of these solutions are built on the idea that same sex attraction is just, only, merely, simply, nothing but, something you know how to do.

Thank you.

Questions Section

Question:

Are we not hardwired to reproduce?

Answer:

Boy..., that raises a very interesting question. I think that reproduction, I think that there are many ways that our biology directs us in that direction without hardwiring us. We don't have time to describe that in too much detail, but yes there is a natural course, but it's not necessarily hard wired.

Question:

What percent of your patients who diligently follow your recommendation have successfully transitioned to heterosexual feelings versus same sex attraction?

Answer:

The date my own daughter standard... so... People often say... there was a very pro-gay doctor here in Provo who said: "these therapists who think these guys can change"—I hope you don't get the idea of change. I hope I was very clear. They learn to accept themselves, and to accept what's going on—he said: "these therapists, would they want one of these guys marrying their daughter?" And I thought: that is an amazingly fair question, and I thought, yes I've always had clients that could marry one of my daughters; most of them, *no*. That's OK. It's not *most* men in general. So, yeah... [laughter]

Percentage? I couldn't give you a percent, but I will tell you that those who really are devoted to the gospel and who can overcome compulsive sexual behaviors—which is a tough thing for many people—there is a very good success rate.

Question:

What about exo-zeno estogra genes... the thousand environmental chemicals that are changing the sexes of animals, the animal kingdom... changing our biology, can't we help by cleaning the water supply and food?

Answer:

I can answer *clearly*... I have *no* idea.

Question:

How applicable is your experience to males with same sex attraction versus females with same sex attraction?

Answer:

It's interesting, many men struggle, it often occurs earlier in life, and has more to do... it's private and very sexual. For many women, it's more of a relationship orientated thing through which they come to it.

Question:

Are these two statements conflicting: “Gender is an eternal characteristic”, and “all sexual behavior is acquired”.

Answer:

I don’t think so at all. No I don’t think so. I think gender *is* an eternal characteristic, and I think it *is* one of those characteristics that will point us in that direction of opposite sex attraction, without hard wiring it. So I think it definitely influences, this difference in gender is a draw for *most* people. And when that becomes confused in some way, that does create some difficulties, but I don’t think it’s hard wired.

Question:

Could you comment on the controversial issue of gay suicides?

Answer:

Just a minute, and we’ll make this the last question, I promise.

This is an issue that we should take very seriously; the issue of gay suicides. And it is in the News a lot right now; a lot! There is much speculation, passing as almost established fact, that church policies or other things are increasing gay suicide. We simply don’t know if that’s the case or not. We just don’t know. I will make several observations:

- 1) In 25 years of counseling individuals who struggle with same sex attraction, I have not met a single individual who was thrown out of their house or rejected by their family when they came out and talked to their parents or family about this. Not a single one! Now that doesn’t mean that never happens, I clearly don’t have a random sample and I have to believe that does happen, but in 25 years and hundreds clients, not a single one was ever thrown out of their house or harshly rejected. What I have seen are quite a few people who have said to their parents: “Unless you will accept this as an entirely valid kind of relationship and embrace it completely, then you don’t love me.” And parents have said: “We just don’t think we can *do* that” and they will go and tell people: “my family rejected me”. I have seen that. That’s one thought.
- 2) Second thought: We know that suicide is a sociological cultural phenomenon in many ways, as much as an individual psychological phenomenon. Everyone’s familiar with the idea of chain suicides; that one kid will commit suicide in a high school and within a few months several other kids will commit suicide. They come in clumps. It’s interesting that sometimes there are suicide sites, places people go, bridges that they jump off of... there was a bridge in California that was seeing a lot of suicides—huge controversy about the golden gate bridge, which they have not put barriers up on because it would ruin the aesthetics—but they’ve studied that and another bridge—I believe it was in California—lots of suicides and they wanted to put barriers up, and they said: “If you put barriers up there, people will just go commit suicide somewhere else”. Well that’s not what happened. They put barriers up and the suicide rate dropped in that community *significantly*. That “bridge” and its availability was an invitation, it got people thinking sociologically about it; they were reading stories about yet another person jumping.

So take a situation in which you have an impulsive, hurting adolescent. Tell them that their Church and their community are rejecting them. Tell them that science—allow them to believe, even if you don't tell them—allow them to believe that science has clearly established that they were hard wired with these feelings and there is absolutely no hope, even if they have other feelings also, and then tell them that many people in their predicament wind up committing suicide. And I think it's a dangerous mix. I think we should be careful and only speak about what we know for *sure* regarding this. I have great concerns about that. These are individuals who are vulnerable, who are hurting, who did not ask to have these issues, and we should be treating them with tenderness, love and concern, and truth. We should not be allowing them to *believe* that people come in just fixed categories, that any opposite sex attraction they might experience might be just sort of a fluke or an anomaly. That no-one ever changes. That science has shown that people are born that way, and *exaggerate* the level to which these individuals are rejected by their community. And then talk to them about the huge jump in suicide rates. We just don't *know* that's the case. I think we should be careful how we speak; careful how we talk, while taking that issue extremely seriously.