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# GA<sup>Y</sup> *and* Catholic

Accepting My Sexuality, Finding  
Community, Living My Faith

Eve Tushnet

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## Frequently Asked Questions

Advice from strangers is Russian roulette. Most of your personal and family dilemmas can only be addressed by people with deep knowledge of and love for everyone involved. But I do get some recurring questions, and I'll try to say something useful here about how to approach these questions. The first two sections address questions I get from straight people, and the rest address questions from gay/same-sex attracted people.

### How do I talk to my gay friends and family?

This is by far the most common thing straight people ask me.

The answer may depend on your family's "style": Some families are full of happy warriors, who think the dinner table is the best place to discuss politics and religion. But many people feel like their gay friends or relatives are uniquely sensitive about questions of religion and homosexuality. If you are unsure how they'd react to your opening a conversation about what Jesus thinks of the gays, I would strongly suggest *not opening that conversation*. Christians guilt-trip ourselves into being awful toward our friends because we think we need to be "witnesses to the Gospel." I've done that. It ends up becoming "harassment for Jesus." Consider taking a leaf from the AA handbook and focusing on "attraction, not promotion": Don't push God.

I tend to think that conversations about Christianity in general, and its understanding of homosexuality in particular, go best when the non-Christian asks the questions rather than being told what to care about.

**Should I go to my friend's/sister's/someone's gay wedding? In general, how should I treat my friends' or relatives' partners? How can I teach my children the Catholic viewpoint without rejecting those who live an active gay lifestyle?**

My sense is that straight Catholic parents are very aware of the ways that the surrounding culture militates against their attempts to teach their children sexual morality. They may be less focused on the ways our culture militates against the attempt to teach children about mercy, hospitality, and unconditional love. We live in an individualistic culture where obligations to others, especially obligations that weren't chosen, are often subordinated to personal wants. And children, in my experience, have a hard time understanding or accepting unconditional love. They'll often assume that your love is conditional on good behavior unless they see otherwise. So keeping strong, close ties with family members who have left the Church or who are not practicing their faith can be a *good* lesson for kids, albeit a complicated one.

On the one hand, in the Gospel of Luke Jesus tells us, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). Our families can't become reasons to reject God or the Church. But rejecting the bonds of love should be a sacrifice like the sacrifice of one's own life—a last resort. Moreover, morality doesn't start and end with sexual morality. Welcoming and cherishing one's family with humility and patience is also a major part of Christian morality. Don't put the need to protect and educate your children above the need to see and welcome Christ in the form of your gay, partnered sibling.

So I would suggest finding what is good in your sibling's gay marriage or partnership. (This is assuming that you would *not* be equally concerned about the relationship if it were a heterosexual

marriage. Obviously if your sister or brother is in an abusive gay relationship, the issues are very different.) Remember that this person and this love may actually be a part of your sibling's vocation. God may be calling him or her to love this specific partner, even though that love shouldn't be expressed sexually. Ask yourself which actions will be most likely to help your sibling or friend to see your faith as a source of humility, generosity, and tenderness, rather than convincing him or her that Christianity makes even good people bad. You want the people around you to feel safe in coming to you when and if they do have questions about faith. If you've come across as rejecting them in the name of religion or considering their relationships fake, it isn't very likely that they will want to hear more about your God.

I went to an ex-gay conference many years ago where Joe Dallas suggested that parents of gay teens ask themselves, "What is God trying to change in *me* through this relationship?" While I didn't agree with all of Dallas's presentation, this line struck me as a thoughtful way to approach any difficult family situation.

If your friends or family members insist that simply upholding the Catholic beliefs on marriage and sexuality make you hateful or bigoted, that isn't something you can or should compromise on, and they shouldn't ask you to compromise your faith. But if they're simply asking you not to bring up sexual morality at Thanksgiving when they say their partner is coming to dinner, then I'd just thank them for the sweet potatoes.

On the specific subject of attending gay weddings, well, I've been to one, so that's my position. Here are some things to consider: If you don't attend, will you be cutting yourself off from future contact with friends or family? You can't witness to people you never speak to anymore. Would you attend the opposite-sex wedding of a Catholic who had previously been validly married in the Church but divorced? If so, it's worth asking whether this

situation is so different. Does your sibling or friend know that you're an orthodox Catholic? If so, I doubt he or she will assume that you suddenly changed your mind. If not, or if you're unsure what he or she thinks you believe, would it be possible to sit down and talk it out? This will depend *a lot* on your relationship with the person and on both parties' styles of interaction. But you *may* be able to say something like, "Look, by inviting me to attend this ceremony you're asking me to support your relationship. I do support the love and care you show each other, and I always will—that's something I'm prepared to promise. I don't support the sexual side of your relationship; it's a matter of my faith, and it isn't something I am likely to change my mind on. But if support for your love is 'enough,' I'm there." This may open a conversation you two should have had already. But it's a painfully delicate conversation, happening at a time when your interlocutor is under a ton of stress—preparing for a wedding isn't the greatest time for heart-to-heart family talks or intense religious debates. So be aware that it might not be a good idea to even have this conversation at this time, if it might blow up into a fight. I would err on the side of showing support.

In general, people are much more likely to understand and accept your claim that you support them as people, even if you don't support everything they do, if they can *see* the "support" part. Humans tend to exaggerate negatives and forget about positives. So the more real, unarguable support you can give, the better.

I also think of Meredith's decision to attend my Baptism, which I mentioned in chapter 3. I was under no illusions that she suddenly agreed with my decision to enter the Church. In a way, her disagreement with my decision made her attendance all the more moving—it was purely an act of friendship, an act of welcome and love for me as a person.

And finally, it may help to keep in mind that the conflict may reappear in a mirror image from their perspective. They may be having a hard time figuring out how to teach their own children to respect Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary even though they have major, emotionally fraught differences with some of Joe and Mary's beliefs. All of us have a chance to be a good example for others—or a cautionary tale. Which will you be to the gay, non-celibate people who love you?

### Should I come out?

Obviously, there are degrees of being “out”: We often tell our friends before our family, for example. I don't think you necessarily have a responsibility to come out, especially if doing so would cause severe consequences for your family life.

I will say, though, that life in the closet brings many temptations to sin. You're tempted to hold your friends at arm's length. You're pushed into situations where you may end up blurting out a lie because you aren't prepared to admit the truth. You may find yourself tempted to denigrate other gay people, laugh along with homophobic jokes, or focus attention on someone else's homosexuality to distract attention from your own.

Being closeted also may deprive you of the experience of having someone accept who you *are*, not who you appear to be. Many gay/same-sex attracted people have a small, destructive voice that whispers, “They won't love you once they find out.” Proving that voice wrong can be an extraordinarily powerful moment of healing. And if you come out to enough people, it *will* be proved wrong, since even if you're rejected by some people you deeply care about, you'll be accepted and reassured by many others. Coming out often allows us to believe in God's own promises of love in a way we couldn't before.

The opportunity you miss to be loved for who you are, if you stay closeted, is also missed by those around you. They lose the

opportunity to show you that they do love and accept you. You may not be giving them enough credit.

Finally, you miss the opportunity to be a witness to chastity and fidelity—although that “opportunity” comes with a lot of pressure to be perfect, which may be one reason to use caution as you come out, especially if you have perfectionist tendencies already. Be sure that you have some friends you can be real with about your ongoing struggles or sins, whether they're obviously related to sexuality or not, so that you don't feel like you have to be a perfect poster gay.

I think the loneliness and isolation of the closet are usually the biggest sources of pain, but the underestimation of those around you is also draining—you may spend a lot of time reminding yourself of why it isn't a good idea to come out, which means reminding yourself of your own negative judgments of the people around you and their ability to accept you.

Your own situation may not permit you to come out right now, and you may decide that it simply isn't right for you: because your sexuality is complicated, because you're now married and you don't want your spouse to face judgments and criticism; because you never had a particularly strong connection to gay communities and your same-sex attraction isn't a big day-to-day concern for you; because you don't want to lock yourself in to one identity at an early age (although really, it's OK to say you were wrong, or that you used to be more bisexual than you are now); or any other reason. But in every case I can think of among my friends, coming out was overall a positive experience for them. For some it brought family conflict; for others it led to familial acceptance and reconciliation. For *everyone*, though, it deepened friendships and let them be vulnerable and receive support in an area where for years they had been isolated.

### Should I seek therapy to heal my homosexuality?

Two kinds of people ask this question: People who really want to stop being gay, and people who really don't want that—but wonder if they should. For people in the second camp I would say, *Pray*. Pray for acceptance of whatever God chooses to do with this part of your life. Pray so that you can accept it if he heals you in ways you didn't particularly want to be healed. If this question continues to concern you, consider seeking spiritual direction with someone who understands that "reparative therapy" is often based on dubious psychological theories and assumptions. This person should be someone who won't pressure you to stop identifying as gay or seek specific kinds of therapy.

For people in the first camp I would say, *Research*. I mean, you should pray too! But research is hugely important here. One great place to start is *Disputed Mutability*, <http://disputedmutability.wordpress.com>, a blog by a woman who identified as ex-gay for a while and received a lot of help through that approach but also has sharp criticisms of the ex-gay world. You can also look at other blogs and websites by ex-gay and "ex-ex-gay" writers, looking for people who did the kinds of therapy you're most interested in. If you have a specific therapist in mind, look that person up online and read both praise and criticism, if you can find it.

In general, keep in mind that there are three separate categories or layers of therapy here: healing emotional wounds that keep you from leading a full life or living out your vocation; healing emotional wounds specifically related to the formation of your sexuality; and developing a different sexual orientation. So, for example, *even if* a bad relationship with your father contributed to the development of your sexual orientation, you can work on that relationship or its effects on your life without wanting and certainly without experiencing any change in your orientation.

I would argue that the first layer is the most important and the third the least, but even if you disagree with how I rank them, it's worth seeking out a therapist who acknowledges the difference between the layers and accepts your assessment of their ranking.

**How do I deal with crushes? In terms of physical affection, how far can you go?**

Ah, the classic catechism-class question!

This one is even harder to answer in the abstract than most of these questions. I've seen people turn crushes into friendships; I've seen people make that attempt and get disappointed, with the friendship slowly breaking up under the pressure of one-sided attraction; I've seen people start by trying to turn crushes into friendship and end by leaving the Church and becoming sexually active (often not with the person they had the original crush on).

It may help to keep the various alternative futures in mind from the beginning and stay honest about what they would entail. That might help you remember the necessity of putting your relationship with God *first*. That relationship, like every love relationship, may sometimes strengthen your other loves but it may sometimes come into conflict with them. Like every other love relationship, only more so, it will require sacrifices, and there will be times when you have to say no to yourself or to someone else in order to continue saying yes to God and to your relationship with God.

It may also be helpful to remember that you can't control the outcomes here. If you have a crush on someone, and he rejects your friendship and even gets disturbed by the thought that you were attracted to him, that isn't actually your fault—that's a series of feelings and actions on *his* part.

Ask yourself how your spiritual life is affected. When you're around this person are you kind of rapturously grateful to God

for the chance to be with them? Are you able to talk to other people too or do you obsessively focus on this one person? Are you jealous? Are you more charitable than usual (toward everybody) because they make you feel happy and you want to please them? When you're away from this person do you find yourself distracted from prayer by thoughts of them, or do you find yourself less likely to continue your prayer practices—is it harder to motivate yourself to pray and worship? If you go away for a week without them, is there a certain relief and a certain dread at returning to the poignant, suspenseful, exciting state of being near them?

Some of these heady reactions are just part of the emotional roller coaster of a crush. But jealousy, inability to be generous to others, lack of motivation in prayer, and exhausting but addicting drama are all, I think, good signs that you should try taking some serious time away from this person. The harder that sounds, the more useful it might be in clarifying your emotions. See if you can put together a group of people with whom you can continue your preexisting spiritual practices. I don't think this is a great time to add a lot of new practices, but if you find it hard to stay motivated in attending Mass, for example, you can see if any of your (non-crush) friends are free to come with you.

This might be a good concern to bring to spiritual direction. Of course, if your crush seems to be making you *more* charitable and more fervent in prayer and just generally more thrilled with God, you should think about and prepare for what will happen when the crush fades and even if the friendship itself breaks up. We've all seen "evangelization through eros" among our heterosexual brethren: The new head of Students for Christ is so devout! *And so are his cheekbones!* That initial attraction doesn't mean your renewed faith is necessarily insincere, or merely

self-deception masquerading as sublimation. It does mean you shouldn't hang your eternal hopes on this dude's smile.

Some people, myself included, have found it helpful to focus on thanking God for bringing this person into our lives. Specifically, it can be helpful to thank God for her beauty. This allows you to acknowledge that beauty and offer your own heart to the Beauty that created it. It redirects your thoughts toward God and doesn't require you to feel bad for being attracted to someone lovely. There's a lack of judgment there that many people find very spiritually helpful.

This situation is also one reason it's often wise to have several close friends to whom you're open about your sexual orientation—not just one. This is the exact kind of thing you'd want trusted friends' advice on: friends who share or at least respect your religious convictions and who also know what you're like, who can ask questions about what makes you happy these days or point out ways in which your behavior has changed.

In terms of physical affection, I see that as a separate question, although if you're dealing with both at once—a crush with whom you are, or want to be, pretty physically affectionate—you should dial back the handsiness for a while. But most people long for touch even when they're not "in love with" anybody in particular.

Some parts of American culture are more physically affectionate than others, obviously, and unfortunately, men will generally have a much harder time meeting their needs for touch. In 2012, an Arizona high school principal actually used hand-holding as a punishment for two boys who got in a fight. The boys' photos, showing them holding hands while covering their faces, got posted all over social media, and they were teased and humiliated.<sup>1</sup> In other words, hitting a boy is not shameful but holding his hand is. In a culture where boys holding hands

is a humiliating form of punishment, men aren't exactly encouraged to find ways of fulfilling their need for nonsexual forms of physical affection.

Several men have described to me how humiliating it was to have to ask their friends to hug or hold them when they were miserable or just a bit lonely—and yet that was a deeply healing experience for them. This may be an area where you have to go through what Edmund Spenser called “The Gracious Valley of Humiliation” and ask for what you need.

It's also, of course, an area where you need to be honest and aware of your own motivations. But the fact that you *could* deceive yourself by pretending you want to be hugged, when you really want something prohibited by the *Catechism*, isn't actually an argument against hugs. Being physically affectionate with one another is a major way humans give and receive love. It's thoroughly normal to want to hold or be held by people you love.

Actually, of course, what counts as “normal” physical affection varies enormously from culture to culture. A way of interacting with others that reads as bizarrely cold in southern Italy would be totally normal in England (or so period-piece movies have convinced me), and a way of interacting that suggests everyday friendship in one place may come across as overtly sexual in another. If Judas kissed Jesus on the lips today outside a DC coffee shop, my first thought would not be that this was a student greeting his teacher. So one way to think about this question is to ask yourself what you want from physical affection, what *meaning* you want it to have for you, and how you can get that without moving into the realm of gestures you've been raised to consider sexual or tempting.

I've heard that the classic answer to the “How far can you go?” question is, “Use your judgment. But no French kissing.” That answer gets at two important truths. First, the “rules,” such

as they are, exist to serve the virtues of chastity and charity. The point is not to follow the rules but to exercise the virtues. However, man is a rationalizing animal. We're prone to deceiving ourselves and maintaining plausible deniability so that by the time we acknowledge that we're in danger of serious sin, we're already in way over our heads. Most sins aren't spontaneous—we prepare for them by a series of self-comforting, self-indulgent thoughts. If you feel yourself trying to “explain away” your actions, that may be a sign that you're unnecessarily scrupulous, condemning yourself for things that are genuinely innocent. But it may instead mean that you're rationalizing.

Notice that there are two virtues in play here—chastity and charity—and therefore two corresponding vices. The vice that creeps in when we're not practicing chastity is probably obvious. The vice when we're not practicing charity is perhaps less clear and will vary from person to person: a rejection of friendship, a denial of the worth of our own bodies, or a kind of spiritual pride in thinking that we're not so weak that we “need” things like hugs. If we focus solely on protecting our chastity we may more easily fall into these other problems.

**What if following the Church's teaching here is terrible for my mental health?**

You're probably sick of hearing me say, “It depends,” so let me instead suggest that there's a spectrum of responses here, depending on how acute your misery is and what kinds of hope and encouragement you tend to respond to. I'll start at the least-comforting end: sometimes the only response in this situation is, “This is your cross.” This is the place where you're being called to imitate the most devastating and awful parts of the life of Christ.

There's a cultural component to your anguish here, if it helps to point that out. We're trained to think that anguish is always a

sign that something's wrong: that we're doing something wrong. That's often true but not always. Jesus wasn't doing anything wrong in Gethsemane. Imitation of Christ is the task of all Christians, and many of us are not spared the most painful parts of that imitation.

And you're not called to be the picture of bourgeois mental health. Many of the saints exhibit behavior for which we can find diagnoses in the DSM-V. You don't have to feel ashamed of your misery; it doesn't mean you're being a bad Christian; it doesn't mean that God has forgotten you; and it doesn't mean that you aren't working hard enough or loving God enough. Sometimes it means that you are being held very close to Christ, in his sacred wounds.

That said, there's also a middle point on the spectrum, which is: try bringing other areas of your life more deeply in line with God's will for you. Maybe forget about this area for a little while. Don't torture yourself because you're not doing everything all at once.

If you completely put sexual questions aside, and gave yourself entire freedom to act in that sphere, I'm sure there would still be plenty of other areas where your spiritual life is fairly ragged and catwampus. As you begin to bring those areas to God, humbly and prayerfully, you may find that you are slowly becoming more ready to bring sexual questions to him as well. Your overall trust in God and/or the Church may grow to the point that you no longer view the historical Christian understanding of chastity as a psychic death sentence. But even if that doesn't happen, you will still have done well to abandon yourself to God in these other areas of your life. He knows the pain and pressures you face, and he is thrilled by every movement you make toward him. Nothing you do for love of him is insufficient or pointless.

And then, too, the final point on the spectrum, which for some people will be the overwhelmingly important point: God doesn't want you to kill yourself.

**What if I'm already in a long-term, committed partnership, but I am starting to accept (or I'm starting to be troubled by the possibility of accepting) the Christian teaching? What if my same-sex partner and I have gotten married or had a commitment ceremony? What if we're raising children?**

This is a very tough situation where I'm hesitant to say too much. I don't think your vows become meaningless if you change your beliefs about the proper role of sexuality in your relationship. You've still vowed, presumably, to love and cherish this person, and those are unequivocally good things. This person may still be a major part of your vocation. Certainly if you're raising kids then the well-being of those children should be your primary concern, and kids really need a home with stability and the secure knowledge that the adults who raise them are working together as a family unit.

There are some gay couples who have made this transition from a sexually active partnership to a chaste one. In 1999 the *Boston Globe* profiled one such couple, Steven Durost and Mike Howatt. At the time the article was written Durost and Howatt had been living celibately for five years, and were deeply involved in ex-gay religious and therapeutic groups. Reading the *Globe* piece gives you a sense of how tough and how humiliatingly hard to explain this road can be. And many people won't want to (and shouldn't) take the specific ex-gay path Durost and Howatt chose. But a gay couple in which at least one partner wants to move toward chastity isn't actually doing something completely unprecedented, crazy, and unimaginable.

This is a situation where everyone involved needs to be aware of how much they don't control. You can't control how



your partner reacts if you explain your faith or your struggles with faith. It may be helpful to emphasize that you aren't choosing what you believe. You didn't sit down and pick this faith in order to be difficult or because you no longer love your partner. The idea that we "choose" our religious beliefs—or our ethical beliefs—is much more false than true, and you can see that for yourself if you try to *sincerely* choose to see the world from the point of view of an Orthodox Jew, or a Mormon, or an atheist, whatever it is that you know you're not. Your choice is whether to acknowledge what you believe or deny it. Denying it would mean denying your conscience—the very thing your partner relies upon to keep you loving, faithful, honest, and generous. A good partnership can't be based on one person's denial of conscience.

But this is a very hard situation and one in which both partners will face a lot of judgment from others no matter what they end up doing. If you can possibly find a spiritual director whom *both* of you relate to, and who is able to tell the difference between his personal opinion and the demands of the faith, seeing this director both separately and with your partner may be a helpful step. You may find that you can't move toward chastity as fast as you'd like to or think you should—this is an experience painfully familiar to many heterosexual couples—and you need a confessor (if you're Catholic) who will help you be patient with yourself and your partner. You need people in your life, ideally both your confessor and at least one close friend, who will encourage you rather than either condemning you for not living up to your beliefs immediately *or* taking difficulties with chastity or with your relationship as a sign that you shouldn't attempt Christian sexual morality at all.

It may be helpful to go to Mass or other services with your partner, or anywhere else where he or she can see the beauty,

hope, or truth that you find in Christ. The more you can show your partner what the faith *is* to you, in areas unrelated to sexuality, the more he or she may be able to understand why you're willing to change both your own life and theirs so drastically.

But in the end, neither of you need to understand exactly why the other person believes what they do. We love one another without understanding one another all the time.

### *appendix three*

# Making the Church a Place of Welcome for Same-Sex Attracted Christians

Here are seven suggestions for cultural change within the Christian churches. These are only one woman's opinion and only a beginning. You may want to modify my ideas or come up with something better. I can't wait to hear from readers about what I missed! But if you're looking for a practical place to start, consider doing one of these things now.

Actually, wait. Before I make my suggestions, let me offer a caution about motives. I think a lot of the time, Christians are tempted to instrumentalize love—to turn our love and service to others into a form of advertising for Jesus. We ask, "How can we convince gay people that we're not their enemies?" or even, "How can we get gay people to listen to us?" instead of, "How can we love the gay people around us, including those who feel most hostile or excluded?"

Mixed motives aren't the worst things in the world. But they do set you up for a lot of disappointment, if you do the hard work of love and don't get the credit you feel you deserve for it. I've spoken to campus ministers who tried to form alliances with campus LGBT groups only to be told that their views and their presence were unwelcome. Some of that rejection may have occurred because we can sometimes tell when people are only

being nice in order to soften us up for a pitch. But sometimes the rejection happened just because other people aren't under your control. They aren't going to respond the way you want them to, no matter how gentle and loving you are. Going in with the attitude that you're making sacrifices or doing hard work in order to attain respect or other positive responses from other people sets you up for failure—and resentment.

In the '80s, John Cardinal O'Connor of New York opposed laws that would prohibit employers from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation, and opposed condom distribution, saying that condoms had a failure rate "as high as fifty percent." He also did something else, though: He turned St. Clare's Hospital into an impromptu AIDS hospice, and on some nights, the cardinal himself would come into the hospital dressed as your basic priest. Introducing himself as "Father John," he would bathe the patients, clean their bedpans, and do whatever other tasks were needed to minister to their bodies and souls. He made himself available to them and vulnerable to them, at a time when AIDS was as stigmatized as biblical leprosy. And what did he win for this? ACT-UP protested inside St. Patrick's Cathedral and desecrated the Host.

They shouldn't have done that. But at the same time, their actions don't make *his* actions a failure. Cardinal O'Connor's treatment of AIDS patients would have been a failure if he conceived it as a public-relations mission to the gay community. If he conceived it, instead, as service to the particular people whose sheets he changed, then the small acts of caring were their own reward.

The reward for loving gay people better isn't better PR, or even more souls saved, although of course I do hope that happens. The reward for loving gay people better is that you love gay people better. And in them you love Christ.

OK, now that I've gotten that off my chest, here are the suggestions.

**Come out.** This is not something I recommend to everyone regardless of circumstances, as I've said above. However, it's one huge way to change the culture. Right now, very few people even know *of* gay people who try to live chastely—let alone actually knowing any of them personally. That used to be true of gay people in general. The culture changed because people came out. If you let people know that you are gay or same-sex attracted, and you accept the traditional Christian teaching on chastity, that in itself shifts the culture a lot.

It's often uncomfortable and no fun, and you *will* get things wrong. You'll give in to the temptation to be the Voice of a Community. You'll get mad at people who are trying to help you as best they can. You'll get tired and frustrated and sometimes being gay and Christian will seem to take up so much of your time and emotional energy that you almost forget to be a disciple of Christ. (This is not a problem unique to celibate gay people, but a normal problem of witness: the act of witnessing can easily crowd out the One whose witnesses we are.) But if you're able to humbly admit your mistakes and try to extend to others the charity you hope to receive from them, you will do a great, quiet work for God.

**Talk about gay issues with a spirit of welcome.** This is the equivalent of the previous point for straight people. Brent Bailey, at the blog *Old Man Out*, wrote:

As a youth group student and even a freshman in college, I often went weeks or months without hearing Christians mention homosexuality or the gay community, so my ears perked up whenever anyone even vaguely alluded to LGBT issues. Without a doubt, someone's willingness to broach LGBT issues in any sort of positive or empathetic tone is the clearest and most visible indicator they might be prepared to listen to me talk about my sexuality. They may do something as noticeable

as leading a Bible study about homosexuality or as simple as posting a link on Facebook to a story about sexual minorities; but in environments where nontraditional sexuality receives no attention, even the tiniest statement of knowledge or interest can communicate a loud-and-clear message (accurate or not) that this person is the safest person in the room.<sup>1</sup>

Bailey's whole post is worth reading. You don't have to use the exact right lingo or say the perfect thing. Saying *anything* can mean a lot.

Obviously if you're straight, you shouldn't try to speak for gay people—you are not the Lorax, and we are not the trees! You'll make mistakes too and get your ego involved, because that's human nature. But if you speak in a way that suggests that you welcome gay and same-sex attracted people, and you don't assume that we all agree about *anything*, people will be more likely to feel that you're someone they can confide in. They're more likely to feel welcome in your group, whatever that group is.

If your church has a moment when you can add a public prayer, you might pray for God to bless gay, lesbian, and/or same-sex attracted people. Or you could pray that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, will find their vocation as they learn to give and receive love. Similarly, a lot of spiritual topics have some aspect that is especially relevant to gay or same-sex attracted people. If you're talking about "guardianship of the tongue," why not include homophobic slurs as something to avoid along with gossip and jokes at other people's expense? If you're talking about how God the Father can offer a model of fatherhood for those whose earthly fathers aren't too loving, why not include the fathers who reject their gay children? There are countless little ways to indicate that you know that gay and same-sex attracted people are part of the Body of Christ.

**Get books into libraries!** Does your high school, parish, or public library take donations? Why not donate Wesley Hill's book? (Or this one, she said, yanking her light out from under its bushel.) Hill's book is the best for young people, I think, but you could just look at all the books I've praised in Appendix One and choose the one(s) that speak to you. The Internet is great, but nothing can replace a book in a quiet library. A library book won't show up in your search history (especially if you read it there, rather than checking it out), and you can easily run across it without looking for it specifically. That makes library books especially important for the most closeted, scared, or questioning kids.

If the libraries don't want copies, can you talk directly to the guidance counselors and chaplains?

**Practice hospitality.** If you have kids, ask them what the atmosphere is like in their schools for kids who are gay or perceived to be gay. Let your home be a place of welcome for kids who are having trouble with their own families. Be a refuge.

**Support the obligations of friendship in areas you control.** Try to minimize the occasions when single people are treated as if they are alone. To take a fairly trivial example, for several years Meredith would come to our family's Thanksgiving, and my sister would include her in the family portrait. If you ask after another person's best friend, welcome her at social events, and understand that sometimes her needs will be uppermost in her friend's mind—all these things can help to strengthen the friendship itself, by offering social support and praise for loving behavior. If you're an employer, can you let employees know that they won't be penalized for taking time off to care for friends in severe need?

**Make a family.** If it makes sense for you, consider taking a(nother) gay or same-sex attracted Christian into your home.

Can you be brother and sister to someone who needs the shelter of a family home?

That is obviously a huge challenge and not right for everyone. Most people will continue to have families made by blood and marriage, rather than blood and marriage and friendship. But I wonder how many of us have close friends whom we would welcome into our families if we thought to do it or if we had the humility to ask and risk rejection: *You know that you're welcome whenever you want to come here. Here is a key to my place. Have you ever thought about moving in with us, since you're our kids' godfather? This is your Aunt Lisa, she's your mom's best friend.* Again, these options aren't right for everyone. But I think there are many people in our Christian communities—gay or same-sex attracted people, and our married friends—who would do better morally, economically, and spiritually in this way of life. It used to be fairly normal. Many of us grew up with "aunts" and "great-aunts" who were actually the best friend of an aunt or a grandmother. This is a better option than the endless singlehood of "personal watermelons" and chocolate cakes microwaved in coffee mugs.

And last but not least . . .

**Be honest about what you're praying for.** It's easy to say that we want our churches to be places of refuge and welcome for gay and same-sex attracted people. But then somebody takes us seriously! Somebody shows up with her partner and wants to get their kids baptized, or somebody seeks to become a member of the church and wants to have tough conversations about scripture. Maybe the pastor asks your newly welcome churchgoer to give a testimony of how Jesus rescued him from homosexuality, but he points out that that isn't how he sees his life at all.

Everybody wants to take in a shivering kitten. Not everybody wants to deal with a grown-up cat.

If our churches begin to change to welcome gay and same-sex attracted people, the changes won't stop where the churches might predict they will or want them to. The churches won't be exactly the same as before, only with more people. The churches themselves will change: new concepts of vocation, new questions, new challenges. Things will get weird. If you welcome someone, be ready for them to change you. That's part of what love does to a person.

## Notes

### Chapter 2: The Botany Club

1. Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994), 77.
2. The feminist response here is that under patriarchy all women are conditioned to view woman as Other, because we're taught to take the man's viewpoint as normal and the woman's as a deviation from that norm. I agree with that belief to some extent—I've seen countless women respond to the suggestion that they have internalized the "male gaze" with, "Oh my God, is that what that is? That makes so much sense!" and it would be bizarre if patriarchy played no role in how we desire others and how we view ourselves as desiring creatures.

### Chapter 3: Evidence for the Prosecution

1. "[T]here's a special/providence in the fall of a sparrow." William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Act V, sc II. (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott, 1877), 439.
2. G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 2 (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), 31.
3. Thomas Hopko, *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction: Eastern Orthodox Reflections* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2006), 66. I don't recommend the book overall (see Appendix One), but I liked this passage.
4. Catholic.net, "What Child Is This?" <http://catholic.net/index.php?option=dedestac&id=1025> (accessed February 1, 2014).

### Chapter 4: Lather, Rinse, Repeat

1. Robert Andrews, *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 435.
2. Nirvana, "Pennyroyal Tea," by Kurt Cobain, on *In Utero*, released in 1993, DGC Records, compact disc.
3. Alcoholics Anonymous, "The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous," [http://www.aa.org/lang/en/en\\_pdfs/smf-121\\_en.pdf](http://www.aa.org/lang/en/en_pdfs/smf-121_en.pdf) (accessed February 1, 2014).
4. See, for example, Mark E. Pierzyk, "Queer Science," *The New Republic* (October 3, 1994): 10-1.

### Chapter 5: Three Kinds of Diversity in Gay Christian Lives

1. As remembered by the author.