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Agency and Same-Sex Attraction

Ben Schilaty

“Next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct that life is God’s greatest gift to man.”¹

—David O. McKay

I arrived at my parents’ home at eleven o’clock at night after twenty-six hours of driving. The trek from Tucson, Arizona, to Everett, Washington, had been miserable. My life had become unmanageable, and I didn’t know what else to do but go home. I sprawled out on the living room floor, exhausted from the drive and emotionally worn out. I was too tired to pretend to be happy and too sad to do much besides complain. I was thirty years old, and it felt like my life would be perpetually filled with loneliness.

I had come out to my parents seven years before. I didn’t consider myself gay back then. I was “more attracted to men than women.” My parents responded immediately with love and concern, making sure that I knew they loved me. One of the first things my dad said was, “Well, you’re probably better off being single because being married is hard”—a very typical thing for him to say. “Things could be worse, so be grateful for what you’ve got” was frequent advice from him.

After our initial conversation, about once a year my dad would ask, “So how’s that whole ‘same-sex attraction’ thing going?” and I’d reply,

1. David O. McKay, in *One Hundred Twentieth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), 32.

“Good.” My mom would hug me and tell me she loved me, and that was all we ever said about it. I just didn’t feel like opening up to them.

Now, seven years later and at thirty years old, I was sitting on the same couch that I had sat on when I came out to them, and I just spewed seven years of experiences. I couldn’t keep them in anymore. They included the pain of being gay and a Latter-day Saint, wondering what my future would look like, and a hole in my heart that just couldn’t seem to be filled. Church materials used words like *affliction*, *temptation*, *inclination*, and *struggle* to describe experiences like mine. I felt like I had been tried to the point of breaking. I just couldn’t struggle with my “affliction” anymore.

After listening for quite some time, my mom seemed to grasp how hard the last seven years had been for me. She promised, “Ben, we’re not just on your side. We’re with you one hundred percent. If you need to leave the Church and marry a man, you and he will always be part of our family.” My dad nodded his head in agreement. I didn’t know how much I needed to hear that from my mom. I had felt trapped in a doctrine and culture that seemed to have no place for a gay man like me, wedged between wanting to be in a same-sex relationship and wanting to stay in the Church. Hearing my mom tell me that it was okay to leave set me free. She honored my agency just as my Heavenly Parents do. She also reassured me that if I made a choice that was outside of our doctrine, I wouldn’t be outside of our family. I couldn’t do anything that would remove me from my family. My mother gave me life and then gave me the freedom to live it.

The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith, “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself” (D&C 93:30). My mother acted within her sphere of influence, as the matriarch of our family, to let me know that I would always be part of the family. She used her agency to give me a supernal gift.

I journaled a lot during the next few weeks, trying to figure out what to do with my life. After a long conversation with my dad in which we both spilled our guts, I wrote, “What I really appreciate about my dad is that he asks really good questions and he listens. He’s also thought deeply about this stuff. It felt so good to be 100% honest with him and for each of us to just share our feelings and be on the same page.” The next day I wrote, “Went to the temple with my parents which was great. However, my mom spends a little too much time looking at me lovingly.”

I did a lot of hard spiritual work at my parents’ house. I searched the scriptures for answers, and the ones I got often weren’t satisfying. I read

the words of Jesus in Gethsemane: “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). I thought to myself, I don’t want to be gay. I don’t want to have to choose between being in the Church and being with someone I love. The cup I was given felt so incredibly unfair. And yet the Savior acted in his sphere of influence to drink from a cup that he didn’t want. What cup was God offering me?

Then I opened up the Book of Mormon and read: “Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves” (2 Ne. 10:23). It was my choice, and no one else’s. And I should be glad that no one could choose for me. Then the next verse drove me to my knees: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved” (2 Ne. 10:24). I had been focusing so much on my pain, my loneliness, and my desperation that I had failed to really ascertain the will of God regarding my sexuality. I was so intent on changing who I was that I missed out on being who I was.

As I sought his will and turned to Christ, I felt Christ point me to his church. I felt called to keep my covenants. I felt compelled to act within my sphere of influence to choose to live the restored gospel. For the first time in my life, I felt that changing my sexuality was outside of my sphere of influence. God wasn’t asking me to change. He was inviting me to be the person he created me to be. And so, even though it was a bitter decision at the time, I chose to drink in a renewed commitment to a life within the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

After a month of staying with my family, the time came to head back to Arizona and return to real life. But I couldn’t keep doing things the way I had before. It hadn’t worked. My mind and my spirit were both telling me, through the pain I was in, that something wasn’t right. Similar to how our bodies give us hunger pangs to tell us to nourish ourselves, my spirit was telling me that something needed to change.

While keeping my sexuality a secret had been hard on me, the real cancer was the shame it created. What would people think of me if they knew I was gay? Would they hate me like I had hated myself? I couldn’t let fear control me anymore. I couldn’t live with the shame anymore. So over the next six months I came out to every person I was close to in my life. I made a lot of phone calls, had a lot of one-on-one conversations, and wrote a lot of emails. And I sent a few letters.

One of the letters I sent was to the Wrights in Orem, Utah. They had basically adopted me while I was an undergrad at BYU. With my parents and siblings far away in Washington, the Wright family had taken me in long before they knew I was gay and made sure I always had a place to spend holidays and eat Sunday dinners. I sent the letter, wondering how this disclosure was about to change our relationship. A week later I got a letter back from Cyndi, the mom of the family. It said in part: “Thank you so much for your letter. We really appreciate you sharing your story with us. Nothing changes. We still love you as one of our own.” Cyndi used her agency to choose me. She acted within her sphere of influence to let me know that I was family. Some families choose to reject their children and others for being gay. The Wrights chose to keep me close.

The next time I was in Utah, I stayed at the Wrights’ house. Cyndi and I stayed up talking after everyone else had gone to bed. She reiterated what she had said in the letter, that I was family. She told me that if I left the Church, she would always claim me. I had wasted a lot of time worrying what other people would think of me.

Now, I want to be clear at this point that it was my choice to move forward in the Church. I’m not advocating that anyone should simply accept the way I exercise my agency as the way they should. The God-given gift of agency requires all free agents to do their own spiritual work to reconcile themselves with the will of God, whatever that is for them and their lives. As the Lord speaks to us through his authorized servants, through the scriptures, and through the Holy Ghost, we will be led down the right paths. The key is to be connected enough to heaven that we can be guided on how to proceed in our unique circumstances.

To paraphrase David O. McKay, the most precious gift we have been given, next to life itself, is the power to direct that life. “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; *otherwise there is no existence*” (D&C 93:30, emphasis added). Our Heavenly Parents endowed us with life *and* with the gift of agency. If we don’t have agency, we don’t exist. That is, if we cannot act independently of God’s will for us, then we can’t really act upon his will of our own free will either. It must be terrifying even for Heavenly Parents to let their children act for themselves. And yet they enabled us to do so. They gave us existence. They didn’t just create us materially. They gave us power to act for *ourselves*.

I think of them observing me during those weeks I spent with my earthly parents, weeping with me and pleading with me to use my agency wisely. I imagine them cheering for my mom when, like them, she

promised to always honor my agency. I think of them watching Cyndi pen that letter promising to always claim me and of them saying, “We will always claim you, too, Ben.”

I am not able to choose whether to have opposite-sex attractions, but I do have a multitude of other choices. As a gay Latter-day Saint, the choice I make again and again is to seek out God’s will for me and then to do it. I believe that the Lord wants us to honor one another’s agency as he does. We can’t exist without agency. Our relationships can’t thrive without the freedom to choose. I was blessed by my loved ones when they explicitly told me that they wanted me in their families no matter what I chose. Hearing them say those things changed my life. Those affirmations took me from a pit of despair and offered me hope. I doubt my mom or Cyndi or the many other people in my life who said similar things recognized the gift they were offering me in those moments. But I know it now. And our Heavenly Parents knew it all along. Let’s allow others to use the gift of agency, and let’s use our agency to choose each other.

Ben Schilaty is a therapist at LDS Family Services in Provo, Utah. He works with LGBTQ Latter-day Saints and their families. He writes a blog about his experiences as a gay Latter-day Saint and started a support community for LGBTQ Latter-day Saints in Tucson, Arizona, while he was living there. Ben is a lifelong member of the Church and served as a missionary in Chihuahua, Mexico, from 2003 to 2005. He currently serves as Sunday School president in his ward.