



My Journey

By John J. Smid



Psalm 116:1-2

*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live*

Leaving a sexually promiscuous and unhealthy lifestyle was just the first step in finding real freedom from my past.

Young and Married

When I was 19 years old, I married Kristy. We had dated during high school and marriage seemed to be the natural next step in a young man's life. I was oblivious to the unresolved emotional baggage I was carrying into the marriage. I was very naive. I knew very little about my own sexuality, much less about how to deal with a hidden struggle with emotional attractions to other men. I was sexually a virgin before I married so my personal sexuality was something I had not physically explored. I had developed an addictive habit of masturbation and fantasies but that was the extent of my exposure to sexuality.

We were married for six years and had two little daughters when my life's issues caught up with me. With many questions about my attractions to men, I was introduced to homosexuality through a work-mate. I committed homosexual adultery with him and decided to end our marriage through divorce in 1980. Through this person, I found a whole new sub-culture of men just like me, or so I thought. I quickly embraced my new community and found a partner that seemed to fill a void in my life. I was with him for a couple of months when I went on to seek out other relationships. After several sexual relationships and break ups I found that I had a deep seated fear-- so great that I could not stand the thought of being without a "significant other" in my life.

Curiosity Brought Me To Church

One of the men that I had dated had a sister that was a Christian. She invited me to a church service and out of my own curiosity, I went. Lo and behold, I believed that God may have spoken to me! "John, you don't have to live this way any longer," a voice said to me on that night in 1982. I was just 28 years old. Little did I know that such a simple statement during a church service would have a life-changing effect on me.

I had already come to believe that Jesus was my Savior and that the Bible was true and encouraging to explore, but my life was still completely consumed by a frantic search for some kind of completion in a significant relationship. The words I heard that night were not audible, but they were absolutely clear to me. God had just given me the hope that I needed in order to face the next season of my life.

Those next two years were filled with relational bankruptcy and extreme discouragement. By this time in my life, I was quite aware of my salvation but did not really understand how to live my Christian life. I thought that a homosexual relationship with another Christian would work, but no matter how hard I tried, I still had a deep emptiness in my heart that no man could fill. The

unhealthy way I was living ruined that relationship and I feared the most dreaded thing of all: being alone.

A new church that I had found offered something I had never seen before. For the first time in my life, I was relating to men who seemed to be loving, sensitive, and physically and emotionally affirming - all in a nonsexual context. A Christian Singles' retreat offered an opportunity that I had looked for all my life: a social environment with others that was reflective of my Christian faith but did not involve sex, alcohol, or other negative behaviors.

I had been raised in a Catholic home where my father was clearly sold out to God. But I could not seem to find a place for myself where I felt I really belonged. I gave up "religion" when I turned 18 thinking I could now make it on my own.

No Roses but a New Life

On Valentine's week in 1984, I made one of the hardest decisions of my life. Instead of red roses and romance, I began moving away from an unhealthy three-year relationship with another man. I believed it was best and I had to make a choice. I could either choose to go to the weekend retreat, which was quite threatening to my partner, or continue in the pattern I had built.

"How would I fit in at the retreat?" I wondered anxiously. Fear of all fears: I have to share a hotel room with three other guys. What if they knew that I was coming away from a homosexual relationship? During my first night as I shared a double bed with one of them I felt like a mummy wrapped up in a bundle of insecurities. I did not sleep a wink for fear that I might bump into him.

But God was incredibly gracious with me that weekend. I had never experienced so much encouragement and excitement without the guilt of sin in my life. However, after the retreat, things got a little rocky and I felt compelled to call my former partner. As I had done many times in the past, I manipulated him into coming over to my house. As I fell into my old pattern we had a sexual encounter that night.

What would I do now?

I couldn't seem to break the patterns of unhealthy relating. How would my pastor respond if I told him about my homosexuality? I made an appointment with Dennis Franck, the singles' pastor. Sitting in his office I told him the whole truth without mincing any words. With a suspicious mind, I was testing him with my story.

Pastor Dennis spoke to me with compassion and made one statement that still stands out to me: "John, I am not exactly sure what I can do but I will walk alongside you any way I can." There was no judgment, no fear, just commitment. That was all I needed at the time. I wanted so much to be accepted in this strange and mysterious world of "straight" men. His words felt like life-giving water to my parched, thirsty soul.

After that conversation with Dennis, I never went back to the old relationships. I also chose not to go back to the bars or to the negative friends. Within a few weeks, I found a small group of church friends who loved me and it seemed they wanted me in their lives. Finally, I had found the place of belonging I wanted. Within a couple of weeks, Clark, Debbie, Dawna, George, Randy, and others became my life-support system. I told them about my past life with homosexuality and my unhealthy ways and they were stunned at first, but they all stood with me just like my pastor. No one rejected me from what they heard.

A New Culture, New Opportunities

I needed to fit in and I made a commitment to this group. My pastor asked me to serve the ministry by emceeding the weekly singles' meetings. After that I became involved as the coordinator of the entire Thursday night ministry. I felt a new sense of purpose. I had value and gifts! I began to see that others could gain from my life.

My friend, Clark, became a vessel used to bring about a tremendous amount of healing. We would spend one evening each week just talking. Clark was committed to me; he was not afraid of my past or current struggles. He confided in me about his own life with deep vulnerability. Clark could talk about anything without embarrassment and always keeping in line with our faith and mutual pursuit of living a better life. He was confident in his own masculinity so my homosexual struggles did not threaten him.

Hour after hour, I felt secure as I soaked up these new relationship connections. George and I spent time together. George was interested in knowing me. He would ask questions and dig into my life, causing me to process my feelings and thoughts that had built up over the years.

Debbie, Dawna, and other women were refreshing new female friends. They liked me and seemed to enjoy having me around. I was not ridiculed or teased like I had been earlier in my life. This small group of friends became a source of healing for me.

All Was Not Perfect

I would still go to church and get angry, feeling paranoid that I couldn't seek prayer at the altar having homosexuality in the mix. I would not dare to talk about this subject up front. I don't know where that feeling came from, because I had never been rejected by anyone in our church over this issue. But for some reason, the enemy had a stronghold on my desire to seek prayer for my homosexual issues.

Although I wasn't having sex with anyone, I realized that I did not look forward to a life of celibacy. I wanted to find a special person with whom I could spend my life. I wanted to try marriage again, this time from a different perspective. I just didn't want to go back to a same-sex partner. because I believed it was sinful to do that. So I thought I should try to figure out how to find a satisfying relationship with a woman.

A Girls Attention

After getting to know various women, one began paying special attention to me. Vileen would come to my house to watch me do my yard work. How romantic! I finally saw her interest in me and began to get to know her better. The first months of our relationship went very well. We were growing very close.

All of a sudden, an emotionally-paralyzing wall dropped between us. I began to draw away from her. Oh, boy, not again, I thought. I'm hurting someone all over again. I didn't expect this would happen. I thought my life was alright now. I told Vileen that I needed help, that I was feeling frightened.

What would I tell him?

Meanwhile, I met another man who confessed his homosexual struggle to me. I had no answers, other than my own experience. I had now been free from sexual immorality for almost two years, but did not know anyone else who had come from a homosexual background. It was intriguing to meet someone I could relate to so clearly and yet I felt inadequate to really have anything to offer him in terms of helping him to reconcile this struggle with our common faith.

In 1986, I found out about ExGay ministries through the national radio show, Focus On the Family. I thought maybe they could help me find some answers. I subsequently wrote to two of them; Love In Action and Exodus International, seeking advice. Love In Action responded with an invitation to pursue an open position to work with their live-in program. I saw this as a direct answer to my unspoken desires and dreams of finding significance and working for a ministry. I was accepted into the position of House Leader and moved into New Hope House in December of 1986. Because I knew this was a well established ministry, I hoped I could now find out more about my barriers with Vileen and get some answers for other men needing help. I was so excited! I really wanted something new and more rewarding than my thirteen year job in the accounting department with the railroad.

During my time with Love In Action, the road was a rewarding challenge. I have realized the real roots of my struggle. I believed God was setting me free from homosexual compulsion and from many

fears and anxieties about life. After further development in our relationship, I married Vileen in 1988!

Marriage!

This was a whole new project with the Lord! Upon getting married I found another chapter of healing that I needed. Now that I was much more aware of my feelings, being in such a close relationship with a woman brought up many more opposite-sex issues. I didn't know what was going to come next, but the first six months of being married were shockingly tumultuous.

The hurts, rejections, and difficulties of my past relationships with women and men came to a head with my new wife. Soon I realized that I was feeling a deep seated anger toward Vileen that I did not understand. My critical heart toward her was unfounded in anything she had done. She was kind, considerate, loving. She really was not doing anything that would merit my responses.

I began to learn about healing past hurts. I found anger and pain in me stemming from my experiences as a two-year old child. At that age, I spent one year away from my parents due to some family struggles. As a little child I felt so much hurt and pain because I perceived that I had been abandoned by my parents. My temporary home was loving and caring, but where were my mom and dad? My feelings of rejection and abandonment took me into a life filled with disappointments in relationships, especially with women.

This awareness helped me to see where my anger towards Vileen had originated. Healing from a 30 year history of unhealthy relationships takes time. The people God has used in my life are too numerous to count.

After some resolution it seemed our married found a way to a daily sense of routine and less extreme emotional ups and downs. But, I still felt disconnected from her in our intimacy and longed for further changes.

As I prayed, attended conferences, sought counseling and every other thing I could think of I continued to feel anxious and struggled often with unanswered questions about my lack of resolve about being gay and yet married to a woman.

The struggle continued and I experienced an increase in desiring some sort of miracle. Finally in 2010 I began to expose the struggle more honestly with Vileen and other friends. As more things surfaced from inside my heart I began to see that the problems were not something that I could resolve because they stemmed from being gay and living in a mixed orientation marriage.

In 2012 I made the decision to pursue separation from Vileen. It was no longer possible to suppress my life back into an ExGay mold. I had to live life authentically. Our marriage ended amicably in divorce. I feel deeply grieved about the hurt and suffering that came into Vileen's life as a result of my decision, but I do not regret my decision.

Where am I today?

I have a greater sense of integrity and personhood in my relationship with others. Homosexuality is a part of my emotional, physical, and spiritual history and present. It will cannot be erased as though it never existed! I recognize that I am not gay due to anything anyone has done, nor based on life experiences. I accept that I am a gay man who was raised in a straight oriented world. This caused many things in my life to be challenging to work through.

Twenty Years Left

When I turned 50 years old, I asked the Lord to open the doors for a ministry that would serve Him through my "twilight" years of life. I figured I only had a little over 20 years left in this life to serve others.

In 2008 I resigned from Love In Action. I had no plan for what I was going to do. I just told the Lord to surprise me. After several months, Grace Rivers Ministry was born. Based on a heart desire to reach

those who had lost their way, feeling estranged from God and His people, a specific curriculum was written called the Journey of Thomas. Written from my own life lessons and experience it has been my desire to replicate those lessons for others to learn from.

What do I think about homosexuality today?

I have experienced so much of God's grace in my own life that I am motivated to extend grace to all people. I believe we are all on a journey with God. When we accept His grace, we begin a life transformation process that is ordained by Him. I do not believe any man or woman can know the intricate details of the journey that someone else may have with God. Therefore, homosexual relationships may be a part of someone's journey just like they were for me. I want to enter the journey that others may be on right where they are at without any agenda or project outcome goals! People do not fit into boxes. Each are individual and have their own life to live.

I believe in God's unfailing love and His ability to complete the work He has started in our lives. It is not my heart's intention to judge anyone for the choices they make in life or the relationships they hold dear. I have to continue to learn how to accept things as they are, not as I might want them to be and this includes other's lives. I am not the judge and jury of anyone else's morality. I believe it is my calling to love people right where they are at.

How are the kids?

Many people ask me what happened with my children. Well, to be honest, divorcing my first wife and leaving the family deeply wounded my first wife, Kristy as well as my children. They are grown up now, and there are many scars that I see in their lives stemming from my abandonment of them and my life choices. I have spent much time praying diligently that someday I might see a good relationship with them. Over all, they are doing well and have their own children to raise. I am blessed with four grandchildren.

I believe this is why I desire more than anything to be involved in helping others to see deep reconciliation in their lives. God allows me to see Him do this tremendous work each and every day.

John J. Smid is the Executive Director for Grace Rivers Ministry. He and his life partner, Larry McQueen live in the rural community just outside of Paris TX