A recent survey asked San Francisco gay men whether they were born gay. Eleven percent of the men felt they were born gay, while the remaining 89 percent claimed they were “sucked” into it!

That joke is funny only because it’s absurd! Absurd as the idea that anyone can change from a gay to a straight orientation, or vice versa, for that matter. But there exists a body of literature on so-called Reparative Therapy and clinical workers who call themselves Reparative Therapists. I’d call them Extreme Makeover Artists. If you believe their accounts, you could imagine that when their work is done, clients look in the mirror and see themselves as suddenly heterosexual!

The theory behind Reparative Therapy is that homosexuality is a result of a person’s suffering a broken gender identity and a stunted, “stuck” sexual development that’s gone “bad.” Their “repair” work, to help clients regain their heterosexuality, is almost always directed more at males than females. The person—again, usually male—is labeled with “low gender esteem;” the cure—all is to make him “more of a man” and her “more of a woman.”

The problem is not that there are people with a homosexual orientation who want to live heterosexually. That is an individual decision for individuals to make. The problem is, these extreme makeover artists state repeatedly that being gay is wrong and that everyone should be heterosexual and live that way. Who can make that decision for anyone else?

Reparative Therapy never uses the word gay, only the term “homosexual.” As Richard Cohen says in his book, Coming Out Straight, “There is nothing ‘gay’ about the homosexual lifestyle.” True, for some individuals with a homosexual orientation, there is nothing pleasant or appealing about coming out and living affirmatively as a gay or lesbian. These individuals cannot reconcile being gay, which is about being affirmative toward one’s self, living in integrity, honoring one’s sexual and romantic inner life, and living congruently—as heterosexuals do with their sexual and romantic orientation. Some decide they cannot live as a gay or lesbian, so they create and support a life of heterosexually. They do not change their sexual and romantic orientation, simply their behavior!

In my writings and presentations, I talk a great deal about the covert cultural sexual abuse that gays and lesbians undergo these days, with so much homophobia and heterosexism in the media surrounding marriage for gays and lesbians. Reparative Therapy is perhaps one of the biggest assaults out there. Reparative Therapy, in fact, is a most overt form of sexual assault on individuals and is usually inflicted on children.

Sexual abuse can take the form of degrading one’s gender. Reparative Therapy’s inherent abuse is telling those with homosexual desires that they are not “man enough” or “woman enough,” and that they should feel ashamed for being the “kind of” male or female they are. That is gender abuse which is a form of covert sexual abuse.

Probably the worst, most abusive book toward gays and lesbians is Preventing Homosexuality by Joseph Nicolosi. In its veiled way, this book gets around the American Psychological Association’s warning that if you try to help homosexuals to suppress their sexual and romantic desires, they might lead lives of depression. So Nicolosi and his wife wrote a book on preventing “homosexual” orientation in the first place.

Nicolosi and others in his extreme-makeover camp have gotten wise to the criticism of their approach and so have disguised it. They’ve softened their terminology, as in telling parents to correct children but not shame them for playing with opposite-gender toys. If your son plays with a doll, they advise

---

continued
Extreme Makeovers, continued

to take it away and say you are giving it
to a little girl who needs it. To me, this
is abominable. They want men to be
good fathers, but then stop them from
playing with dolls—which is one way
to learn how to parent. Nor will play-
ing with dolls make a boy homosexual
or lead to orientation problems. Taking
toys away, whether you do it nicely or
in a shaming way, will only wound the
child's self-esteem.

Promoting Homosexuality tells moth-
ers to “back off” and turn away from
their sons, giving the example in the
book of a mother who was “disgusted”
by her son's asking to use her makeup.
The only good thing they advise is for
fathers to get more involved. I couldn't
agree more: Fathers have abandoned
their sons, gay and straight alike, caus-
ing much of the anxiety and depres-
sion in men today. More involved
fathers can help their sons become
more mature men, but not make them
straight or gay.

Quite selectively, reparative therapy
promotes antiquated beliefs and theo-
ries about homosexuality and uses out-
dated psychological views. Religious
groups continue to turn out “ex-gays”
and supporting their “extreme make-
overs.” After their “sexual conversion,”
I can just imagine these men and women
looking in a mirror and screaming,
“I never dreamed I could look so . . .
straight!!”

The groups promoting and support-
ing “ex-gays” include Exodus, Courage,
Homosexuals Anonymous (a 12-step
group to help those “powerless” over
their homosexuality). PFOX, Parents
of Ex Gays and Lesbians, is the evil
twin of PFLAG, an affirmative support
group for families of gays and lesbians.
These various groups claim to have
helped hundreds of men and women
“heal their homosexuality.” The most
visible proponents are Joseph Nicolo-
losi, Charles Socarides, and Richard
Cohen.

As a disturbing side note, Socarides
himself—who has written extensively
on how absent, distant fathers contrib-
ute to creating homosexuality in their
boys—has an openly gay son who is
active in politics. And Dr. Laura Sch-
lessinger wrote the foreword to Rich-
ard Cohen’s Coming Out Straight,
published in 2000—during which time
she denied that she was speaking out
against gays and lesbians. How can she
make that claim after contributing the
foreword to a book that’s completely
anti-gay from page one?

Those who review and critique repar-
ative therapy have done extensive work
of their own, uncovering the bigotry
and lies that these extreme makeover
artists spew. These authors include
Martin Duberman, who wrote Cures;
Wayne R. Besen, author of Anything
But Straight; and Jack Drescher, edi-
tor of Sexual Conversion Therapy and
the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psycho-
therapy.

I’d like to expose several myths that
these reparative therapy perpetuate,
along with the misconceptions, sexism,
and cultural sexual abuse inherent in
each one.

10 Smart Things to know about
Homosexuality

Myth #1: Being gay or lesbian results
from stunted, immature sexuality and
gender.

Truth: Gay and lesbian children (and
we adults) are shamed for being the
type of men and women we are. What
is wrong with a boy being effeminate
or a girl being tomboyish? It’s sexist to
insist that certain actions or appearance
define being male or female. Also, this
concept doesn’t explain those hetero-
sexual males or females who are sexu-
ally immature or stunted and in their
gender development.

I attended The New Warrior, a men’s
workshop sponsored by the Man-
kind Project (www.mkp.org), because
I wanted to heal the wounds left by
those who, over my lifetime, tried “to
make a man out of me.” Most of them
were straight men, so my wounds were
around what straight advocates like
Joseph Nicolosi and Richard Cohen
had done to me. The workshop did
not make me straight, but built bridges
with other straight men and made me
a stronger gay man.

Myth #2: Having permission to
explore your sexuality in ways other
than heterosexual can make you gay.

Truth: If someone suddenly comes out
as gay or lesbian, that can make people
think that they can change their orient-
tation, being straight one day and gay
the next. However, if people felt free to
explore sexual and romantic orienta-
tions of any kind, they would then not
have to suppress their innate sexuality
and need to come out later in life.

Myth #3: Being sexually abused as a
child can make you gay.

Truth: Totally false! Sexual abuse can-
not shape someone’s orientation. But it
can shape behavior and confuse indi-
viduals as to what their real sexual orien-
tation is. Adult males who abuse
boys sexually can cause what’s called
homosexual imprinting: The boy can
grow up and re-enact his own sexual
abuse by seeking out sex with other
men. This is not homosexuality, since
it is based only on behavior.

After psychotherapy clears away the
trauma, often the imprinted behav-
ior subsides and the sexual abuse sur-
vivor’s true orientation—either gay
or straight— surfaces. There is a link
between early sexual trauma and later
sexual acting out, which can include
same-sex behavior. But again, the link
explains behavior only, not orientation.

continued
Extreme Makeovers, continued

Myth #4: Homosexuality is just sexual behavior.

Truth: It’s also about attachment and attraction—psychological, emotional, mental, and spiritual—to a member of one’s own gender. For gay and straight alike, behavior follows from one’s orientation. Gayness and lesbianism are sexual and romantic orientations, based on the heart.

Myth #5: Homosexuality can be prevented.

Truth: Totally untrue! By trying to prevent homosexuality in a child, all the parent winds up doing is shaming and abusing the child, causing gender confusion or low self-esteem, no matter how gentle or loving the way they do it is. In my office, countless gay men and lesbians have shed tears remembering how a parent took away their toys or imposed stereotypical male or female behaviors on them as children.

Myth #6: Homosexuality is an “alternative lifestyle.”

Truth: Gay or straight, we are taught since childhood the homonegative belief that being gay is more difficult way to live. Calling homosexuality “alternative” implies that heterosexuality is the standard. But this “straight alternative” of heterosexual living is actually harder for gays and lesbians, and can lead to depression and self-defeating, even self-destructive behavior. For gays and lesbians, homosexuality is an alternative lifestyle!

Myth #7: Homosexuality is caused by a smothering, overprotective mother and an absent, emotionally distant father.

Truth: Very early on, a mother can tell that there’s something different about her child, and may she will be more protective to prevent him or her from being teased and abused for being a gay or lesbian. The father, sensing that his son might be gay, will distance himself but most often, won’t know how to react. Historically, schizophrenic children were believed to be the product of “refrigerator moms.” Later, we learned that schizophrenia is a biological disorder and that the mothers acted cold toward their children after feeling a lack of attachment in return. One day, I believe, we will learn that children are biologically gay or lesbian, and that a parent’s response to their sexual orientation absolutely does not form it.

Myth #8: Anyone can choose to change one’s orientation from homosexual to heterosexual.

Truth: Anyone can choose to live as they wish and be anything they want to be. But orientation is as stable as temperament. Children are born with a definite temperament that can change somewhat as they move into adulthood and learn to adapt, but it stays mostly within the same range. The same is true of homosexuality. People can change their lives to support a heterosexual life style, but do not change their true sexual orientation. Study after study shows that for those who try and change their sexual and romantic orientation, the relapse rate is very high. I suspect that those who’ve been “successful” at changing their orientation were not essentially homosexual to begin with, but were either acting out sexual abuse (acting-out is behavior only), or were bi-attractive, tending more toward woman then men. This is entirely different from changing one’s basic orientation.

Myth #9: Everyone is born straight.

Truth: There is no scientific evidence that people are either born straight or born gay. Anti-gay fundamentalists, and other extreme makeover artists like reparative therapists, assert that no one is born homosexual. That is their viewpoint only, since no scientific data supports any genetic or biologic basis for opposite-sex attractions.

Myth #10: Adolescence offers a second chance at heterosexuality.

Truth: By the time individuals become teenagers, their sexuality is set. We are now seeing more and more adolescents, gay and straight alike, experimenting with same-sex and opposite-sex behavior. They are not magically converting to one orientation over the other, simply playing and experimenting—and ultimately, not afraid to give themselves full permission for self-discovery. I’d say they’re to be admired. They seem to understand that in the end, your orientation is your orientation, whatever that may be.