

# Reflections on a Personal Journey

By David Holkeboer

Ralph invited me to reminisce with you about how I dealt with reconciling my unchosen gay nature with my Christian faith in the context of growing up in a Christian Reformed parsonage, having a gay brother and loving parents who were not exactly prepared to understand how their only two children could turn out that way. I need to begin this reflection with a bit of my parents' background, for the circumstances which led to their meeting bore not insignificantly on the early processing of my sexual orientation.

Dad was born in 1923 in Holland, Michigan. Raised by two ill-matched first- and second-generation Dutch immigrants who were faithful members of 14<sup>th</sup> Street Christian Reformed Church, Dad would later say of his emotionally distant and unhappy father, "I never knew that man." He was educated in Holland's public school system, which in those days differed little from the CRC Christian schools due to the cultural and ethnic homogeneity of the area, and began caddying at the Holland Country Club, becoming a superb golfer himself and a well-rounded athlete in general. He joined the U.S. Navy as a ninety-day wonder, serving in the South Pacific in WWII. On the GI Bill he went Hope College rather than Calvin because he could live at home and subsequently earned an MA in education from the University of Michigan. He began teaching mathematics and coaching basketball at Baxter Christian School in Grand Rapids.

Mother was born in 1921 in Litchfield, a small town in Southeast Michigan to parents who fought constantly and eventually divorced when she was twelve. She often recounted that as a little girl her mother would drop her off at the movies while having an affair with a man my mother loathed. It was known in that small community that both her parents were having affairs. Subsequent taunting from other children ("I wonder if Helen knows who her father really is!") left her with permanent emotional scars. None of her relatives were Christians, but she somehow found her way to the local Congregational church where an interim Presbyterian minister and his wife nurtured her in the faith. She became a committed Christian, eventually leading her own mother to Christ as well. Following the suggestion of that minister, she attended Calvin College and then, with the career goal of becoming a church education director, she enrolled at Moody Bible Institute. Toward the end of her time at Moody, she had fallen in love and become engaged to a fellow student who professed to be bisexual, but who assured her that he could be committed and faithful to her. Upon returning to Chicago after a visit to her mother, she asked some friends, "Where's Clint?" Their reply was that she should ask Ray, a man with whom she knew he had had a relationship. The realization that Clint did not have the will power to be exclusively heterosexual (her understanding of the situation) stunned her. She gave him back the engagement ring, declined an offer of education director at a large Presbyterian church, and fled Chicago. Through the efforts of caring Calvin

professors, she secured a teaching position at Baxter Christian School and there met my dad. I share this because she referred often to Clint and this traumatic incident as we were growing up. Based on what her fiancé had told her, she felt she understood homosexuality: it was a tendency that could be controlled – all evidence to the contrary!

Hardly anyone thought my parents were a good match – Dad was an exceptional athlete while Mother had very little interest in sports. Dad's parents were strongly against the marriage, his mother going so far as to tell her friends that Mom's father had died, rather than have it be known her parents were divorced. Nevertheless, they married and after two miscarriages had me in 1954. Dad was gradually feeling a call to the ministry, and Mother, who had also wanted a career in the church, was most encouraging. With a second child on the way, a friend suggested she tutor reading in their home while Dad attended Calvin seminary. They also took in Calvin students as roomers in their home to make ends meet.

Like most gay men, I came to realize quite young that I was different. Certainly, by age ten I was aware of an attraction to some men, and my parents were deeply concerned about effeminate traits I was manifesting. Unfortunately, I thought of this pull, or fascination, or whatever it was, as an aberration, a distortion, as something warped in my psyche. I had an overwhelming love of romance: I was in love with the idea, the phenomenon if you will, of boys falling in love with girls. No doubt my fascination was directed at the male half of the equation. My touchstone for that awareness at that age was seeing the movie "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" in 1964 and being enthralled with Havre Prenell's singing, physicality and his passion for Debbie Reynolds. It was all so wonderful and beautiful. But for years I did not see my "warped" fascination with some masculine individuals or images as comparable in any way to the ideal of boys and girls falling in love. By that I mean I never thought of boys falling in love with boys. There was just something wrong with me. And even if I had, there were the Bible verses that seemed clear in condemning same sex behavior. During my high school years, the clobber passage that perplexed me the most was Romans 1:26-27. While I unequivocally knew and readily acknowledged I was a sinner saved only by the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, was I really this extra level of evil that had caused God "to give [me] over in the sinful desires of [my] heart"? As troubled as I was by such thoughts, I did not seek out deeper insight at that time. I prayed that God would unwarped my brain, that I would not look at men that way, that I would look at girls the way other guys looked at girls. My sophomore year I had a serious girlfriend about whom I wrote a poem, the title of which were her initials, the first letters of each line spelled her first name. Upon its publication in the school literary magazine, my mother declared I was as good as married to her. On our family trip to Europe before my senior year I bought her souvenir charms for a bracelet. She knit me a scarf. I was a guy in love with love who happened to have something twisted in his brain. Toward the end of our senior year, she dumped me for a football player. On some level I thought, "Who wouldn't?"

Bobby was born eighteen months after me, but we were just one year apart in school. We had some similar interests growing up, started learning the piano about the same time, and were

generally good playmates, though we did fight a lot. I treasure a souvenir black dot at the base of my left hand wherein Bobby, wielding a pencil, attempting to stab me, landed the pencil point, to his horror. As is not uncommon for the firstborn child, I tended to adopt our parents' values, ways of seeing things, whereas Bobby struck out more on his own, tried to distinguish himself as his own person, as different from his older brother. Or so says my inner armchair psychotherapist. He made more of an effort at sports, whereas I shunned them; he loved animals and nature and had collections of white mice, gerbils, guinea pigs and the like for years, whereas I preferred books and music; I was neat, he was messy; I tended to obey, he to disobey. He received far more corporal punishment than I did as a child, but it did not much bend his way of being in the world. I think I was both judgmental of some of his choices and alternately envious of his more adventurous approach to life. When we were teenagers, a parishioner in our church observed to his wife, "I don't know why you are so fond of David - Bob is the interesting one." I couldn't have agreed more.

Dad's ministry was that of church planting – identifying a nucleus of families in an area who wanted to establish a new Christian Reformed congregation. He built churches in Denver, CO, Toledo, OH, and Ft. Wayne, IN, with a year in New Jersey between these last two spent earning a master's degree in pastoral counselling from Union Seminary. (How many wives have put their husbands through seminary *twice*?) While Mother had always been intricately involved in multiple aspects of ministry in the first two churches - teaching Sunday School and catechism, singing solos in worship, leading junior choirs and Vacation Bible School, entertaining in their home - it was as Bob and I entered high school in Ft. Wayne that we also became very involved and loved working in the church. There was very much a sense that our family was committed and involved in that project together, and we loved it – not self-consciously - it was natural, organic; we were all on the same page regarding the church. Which is not to suggest things were perfect.

Just this past year I was celebrating the birthday of a dear friend over dinner when she popped a question out of the blue: "Did you ever feel it was your responsibility to keep your parents together?" It's an issue I had never once discussed with anyone, but it was something I'd been processing after the death of my father five years ago, as I tried to regain my balance and a sense of purpose, now that all my family had gone to Jesus. I was in ninth grade when we began our life in Ft. Wayne. I remember getting up one night, beginning to go downstairs, when I could hear my parents talking in the family room, down and around a corner. I heard my mother say, "We have never been this far apart, and I don't know what we are going to do when the boys are gone." I was stunned, turned to head back up, heard the stairs creak and my father call out, "Dave?" I managed to get back upstairs, crawled into bed, and silently cried my eyes out. In that moment I concluded that my purpose in life was to keep them together. To my constant prayer of "Please take away this attraction to men" was added "Please let my parents love each other".

Bob's freshman year at Calvin College, my sophomore year, we roomed together on campus. The subsequent five years we lived in the third-floor apartment of a large house in the Heritage Hill area of Grand Rapids. While we both had girlfriends, at one point he subtly hinted that he was also seeing the young married man who lived with his wife on the floor below us. I don't remember much of any conversation about it, but it was the first indication of the complexity of his sexual identity. Summers I always spent at our parents' home doing various summer jobs and working at the church, whereas Bob stayed in Grand Rapids. One of those summers Mom went up to visit him. Upon her return, she, Dad and I were standing in the kitchen when she shared with deep concern and compassion that Bob had confided in her that he was worried that he might be homosexual. Dad impulsively and forcefully said, "Impossible!" I no longer remember what was said after that, only the dynamic and tone: he finding such a thing too hard to believe, she trying to wrap her mind around the possibility and empathizing so for her son.

I went to Calvin thinking I wanted to become a church musician, so my freshman year I majored in music with a concentration in organ, but also continued my piano studies. It was an extremely heavy load, as the head of the department had forewarned, and after that first year, I decided I really preferred the piano, dropped the organ, and had a little more time for a social life. About the beginning of my junior year, I began dating a wonderful woman, also a music major, who had (has!) so many sterling qualities. Her character, beauty, sensibility, discipline, and strong Christian conviction fit that romantic ideal of mine in so many ways. One summer Jane came to visit us in Ft. Wayne. I was riding the lawn mower at church when she arrived at our house. Dad came out of his office, drew in the air with his fingers a curvaceous shape and pointed in the direction of our house to indicate Jane had arrived. I remember thinking, "Oh, Dad, if only it were that shape I were drawn to!"

As I was wrapping up my senior year, I really had no musical career ambitions, while my summers working at the church led me to realize there was nothing I enjoyed more than working with my dad in the church. He found his career choice so fulfilling. He once told me he was grateful he had been called to the ministry because it made use of every part of himself. I decided to do an extra year of college to take pre-seminary courses (additional history, two speech classes, several education courses, more philosophy, Greek, etc.), with the view of entering Calvin Seminary, which I did the following year. Speech classes were a disaster – I had never had the ability to speak in public without extreme trembling and a breaking voice. I persevered. But I was beginning to be aware that I was falling out of love with Jane, and more seriously, that she was going to be the last woman with whom I would believe myself to be in love. Maybe I was growing up. Maybe being in love with love wasn't sustainable.

The summer before I entered seminary, took some additional Greek at a Lutheran seminary in Ft. Wayne. That summer a young, Dutch man joined our church, having just come from Cameroon where he had served in the Peace Core. We became quite friendly, went on walks, met for coffee – I really enjoyed his company. He was a very serious man. I wasn't sure I was

attracted to him, because he didn't physically conform to the "type" I found myself typically attracted to, but I was strongly drawn to him. He shared that he had a child with an African woman and another child on the way, and that they would be joining him when he could afford to bring them to this country. The combination of this man's story ("Another life wrecked by sex!" I thought at the time), my being drawn to him in some way I could not articulate to myself, and the disintegrating relationship with Jane all led to a kind of depression which I could not conceal from my observant, sensitive mother. I was feeling bad enough to surreptitiously take half of one of her Valium pills. (Though it momentarily eased some pain, it was my first and last.) "What *is* it?" she would ask. One day she finally said out loud, "I think David is not as attracted to the girls as he thinks he should be."

Psychological testing is part of the first-year seminary student protocol – and none too soon! We were interviewed by a clinical psychologist, then took an extensive written test which was followed up by an interview with a faculty advisor. My first interview went well, but the written portion had several questions which explicitly asked if one were attracted to the opposite sex and conversely if one were attracted to the same sex. I was in agony. I answered with "heterosexual" answers, only to erase them and admit I was attracted to the same sex, only to erase, and lie again. I was tortured as to how to answer – what would be the consequences? I turned in the exam admitting same sex attraction, only to steal into the registrar's office, find my exam and change my answers all back to declaring I was attracted to the opposite sex. To no avail. My follow up interview was conducted by the registrar who was exceedingly kind. He noted many positive observations about my suitability for ministry. Eventually he read, "Though he has not *acted* upon it, David is deeply troubled by a fear he is attracted to men." The registrar tried to minimize the importance of this, since I wasn't acting out. How did they *know* I wasn't? I thanked him for his time, then asked if I might look at the report myself. He hesitated, then said something about wanting to make sure he had covered everything. "Ah, yes, there is a note here that you display effeminate behavioral characteristics." "He said that?" The kindly registrar did his best to minimize its significance. I scheduled a follow up session with the psychologist – in fact, I saw him weekly for a couple of months – and asked how he determined my same-sex attraction when I had answered all the questions as I did. It turned out other questions reveal more, such as when finishing the sentence beginning "Most women . . . ." I had written, "Most women are as intelligent as most men." He told me heterosexual men do not tend to answer that way.

My model for ministry had been my parents working as a team. I was becoming convinced I would never marry, and as a class in sermonizing was imminent, sure to reveal my public speaking inadequacy, I announced I would be withdrawing after the current term. My New Testament professor, Bastiaan Van Elderen, who had tutored my dad in Greek back in the 1950's, summoned me after class to say he'd heard I was leaving, and would I come speak to him. I lacked the courage.

Having developed a love of accompanying singers in art song recitals during my college years, and at the suggestion of a voice teacher that I could consider a career as a professional accompanist, I applied to the University of Illinois to study with a well-known master accompanist. I went off to Champaign-Urbana and Bob returned to Ft. Wayne to work various jobs and finish his dual major in philosophy and English. He had spent so much of his time at Calvin first as a media editor and subsequently editor-in-chief of Chimes, the student newspaper, that he hadn't finished his degree in five years. He met a Frenchman in Ft. Wayne who I believe was his first serious boyfriend, though to our parents he was just a friend. I continued dating women in grad school, though I knew in my heart that none would develop into anything serious. At one point over coffee a fellow student, who I had rather assumed was lesbian (she wasn't), asked me if it bothered me that people thought I was gay.

"They think what?" A gay singer-composer I was accompanying raised the issue with me. He thought we had "had a moment" when I was tying his bow tie before a concert. We saw each other some, but I was too bottled up, and convinced that gay expression was against God's will.

My brother was eager to move to New York City, and my teacher helped me decide that that was the best option for me to begin work as a freelance vocal coach/ accompanist, so in August of 1981, we took the plunge and found an apartment in which I could have a music studio. Once we moved to NYC, Bob became Robert and began dating a lot. We finally had an actual conversation about his being gay during which I felt it my brotherly duty to tell him I thought it was wrong and contrary to God's will for our lives. He calmly, gently, lovingly said he understood why I felt that way.

During her Christmas break our first year in New York, Mother came to stay with us ahead of Dad who would come after his Christmas services. There was no further concealing the fact that Robert was, in fact, gay. I don't remember a big explosion, though I remember feeling sorry for Dad who received the news over the phone. My strongest memory is of Mother being frantic about Robert's dating, because we were beginning to hear about the new "gay disease". I remember her pleading with him to be careful.

Our circle of friends had come to include many of his gay friends with whom we also spent some holiday dinners. There came one Thanksgiving when I determined that I was **not** going to spend another holiday with all those homosexuals. I spent the day going to two sets of double features at movie revival houses, had a solitary dinner in a diner, and finished the day at a screening of "Scarface". How do **you** spell denial?

I finally had a wake-up call concerning dating women. A singer I had been seeing for a while confronted me and asked where this was going because she was "about ready to explode". Scales fell from my eyes. For the first time I realized how grossly unfair it was to be playing at dating when I knew I no longer had the capacity even to imagine myself in love with a woman. I had no thought of coming out of any closet, but I resolved to stop the heterosexual dating charade.

In the summer of 1984, I got a gig as the accompanist of an opera that was being developed on the life of Malcolm X. During a rehearsal I was observing, one of the singers to whom I was inordinately attracted made a kind of pass at me. It was an electric shock to my system. While I did not respond, I thought, "If this man were a possibility for me, I had better figure this out – take a deeper look at whether anyone thinks it's possible to be Christian and gay." I spent the next months reading what I could find. One book contained essays which alternated in perspective between an acceptance and a rejection of gay-Christian integration. I concluded by October that there were serious thinkers on both sides of the debate, and my attraction to James was not going away (we had become friends), so I finally told him I deeply cared for him. He replied that he valued my friendship very much, which meant that whatever he had had in mind a few months prior was no longer pertinent. I fell into a deep depression for weeks which I could not shake. Poor Robert! At one point, in frustration and trying to help, he finally said, "David, he just doesn't want to be with you!" I was stuck on this man. I had the distinct impression of descending into a black hole from which I could not crawl out.

Dad had continued a subscription for us to *The Banner*, the official organ of the CRC. Earlier that year there had been an issue devoted to "the homosexual question" which included the names of some gay religious support groups such as Integrity. In a subsequent issue I happened to notice a letter to the editor expressing appreciation for the listing of those groups. The letter writer added that he wished Evangelicals Concerned had been listed, since he believed that organization might be a better fit for CRC folk. Signed Ralph Blair, Psychotherapist, NYC. I needed help, but I did not want to consult a secular therapist who would tell me my Christianity was the problem. I called this Dr. Blair, told him I was severely depressed, and with calm assurance he replied, "I can help you." Thus began my road to self-acceptance via Ralph's invaluable therapy and, in short order, his Friday night Bible study. I was delighted to share with my parents that I had found a Bible study in New York City (neglecting to mention, of course, that the attendees were gay), led by a most knowledgeable theologian who had attended Bob Jones University, Dallas and Westminster Theological Seminaries, The University of Southern California, and Penn State. They were duly impressed.

That spring Mom came as usual to spend her break with us. It is crucial to bear in mind at this point that she had recently been diagnosed with macular degeneration, had already lost some vision, and so was understandably emotionally fragile. Friday morning she asked what I might like for dinner, and I replied that I usually went out to eat with the group after Bible study. "Are there girls at this Bible study?" A lengthy pause. I held my breath. She knows. She wants to know. If she didn't want to know, she wouldn't have asked. We talked non-stop for the next seven hours. At one point we moved from the living room to the bedroom where she could lie down. We kept talking. In the heat of the moment, I tried to use every newly acquired therapeutic tool I could muster, as well my new-found knowledge of how to interpret the pertinent, critical scripture passages. When Robert came home that night and asked what was wrong, she cried, "Look what I've got!", gesturing toward us. It was going to take a while. The next day while Robert and I were out she tried to raise a heavy window sash to jump from our

eighth-floor apartment. She couldn't lift it, but crushed two vertebrae in the effort, which led to a diagnosis of advanced osteoporosis. Robert came home that evening to find her crouching in a closet. She agreed to go with me to a session with Ralph which helped her enormously. I could viscerally feel the tension ebbing from her as she took in his gently conveyed wisdom that all would be well. When Dad arrived a few days later, I told him how sorry I was that he had to get the same news about his other son long distance, over the phone and isolated, with no one to process the information. To this day I marvel at and cherish his response: "I don't know, Dave. All I understand is that it is going to be a difficult life for you." So loving, empathic, selfless, and yes, despairing.

My dad had been subscribing to journal articles on audiotape to which he could listen while driving in the car as a means of keeping up with current theological issues and points of view. It turned out that some weeks prior to that spring visit, as they were driving, my parents listened to a tape of articles on homosexuality which largely held the negative, evangelical majority viewpoint. Toward the end of the tape a speaker said, "An opposing view [i.e., a viewpoint affirming the integration of homosexual nature and Christian faith] is held by Dr. Ralph Blair, a psychotherapist in New York City, who attended Bob Jones University, Dallas Theological Seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary, and Pennsylvania State University." With the passing of time, it became amusing to consider that Ralph unwittingly played a role in outing me to my folks! God does indeed work in mysterious ways.

They read several of Ralph's publications in which were readily apparent his profound psychological insight and Christian perspective, and his high regard of Scripture. They came to respect the intellectual and theological rigor with which he dealt with the clobber passages. On subsequent holiday visits to New York, they both sat in on Ralph's Bible study. Dad highly respected Ralph's teaching. Mom declared it the best Bible study she had experienced. She eventually attended a connection at Kirkridge and brought Dad the following summer. They were on a road of coming to terms with both their sons being gay, gradually finding a kind of peace with it, and ultimately full acceptance which came to feel through the years perfectly natural. Theirs was a journey of 180 degrees. It could be argued that their love for us was a primary motivation. I am certain, however, that process of acceptance would have been years longer in coming, if it would ever have been as complete or assured, were it not for Ralph's teaching, counselling, testimony, writings, and personal integrity. The other irrefutable factor in the journey to acceptance was the quality of the Christian men and women they met at Bible study and at the conferences. Whatever preconceptions or stereotypes they held about homosexuals, however vaguely formed, were transformed, replaced by overwhelmingly positive impressions of the personal characters and testimonies of the individuals they met through Evangelicals Concerned. For all of this I am forever grateful to God, to Ralph, and to all of you.

