

THE INHERITANCE OF SHAME

*Following a traumatic experience of child sexual abuse, and a strongly religious upbringing, writer **Peter Gajdics** found himself in the hands of an abusive doctor with extreme plans to 'cure' him of his homosexuality. His new memoir, *The Inheritance of Shame*, tells the extraordinary story of the years-long ordeal that followed. Here, he talks to *Gay Times* about why he needed to speak out, and how to stop this horror from happening to others.*

WORDS *Jonathan Shiel*

THE HORRIFIC EFFECTS OF CONVERSION THERAPY ON PETER CAN BE SHOWN IN HIS SERIES OF SELF-PORTRAITS. THE FIRST, TOP LEFT, WAS COMPLETED IN 1988, ONE YEAR BEFORE HIS CONVERSION THERAPY. THE SECOND, TOP RIGHT, WAS COMPLETED IN 1990, ONE YEAR INTO CONVERSION THERAPY. AND THE LAST PICTURE, BOTTOM, WAS COMPLETED ROUGHLY TWO YEARS INTO CONVERSION THERAPY.



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All forms of conversion or reparative therapies start with some version of the same lie – that to be gay is a disease, an error, or the result of sexual abuse. That lie creates an internal logic that carries you down a road that can go for years. Any evidence to the contrary – science, books, movies, doesn't matter – when you believe in that internal logic, you live it.

An unhealthy pattern established itself early in my life – a groove of shame that I walked. Everything related to my body, my sexuality, my childhood sexual abuse, and went back to the fat man in the bathroom who abused me. Every time I had sex, I gravitated towards men that looked like my abuser, or the dynamic felt similar. This compounded my shame, like a repetition compulsion. It was very rare that I would have sex at that point where it felt free, liberating, joyful and blissful.

Like a rippling effect in the ocean, you throw one rock into the ocean of time and it ripples through the years – it seemed to me that the rippling was the gradual development of my homosexuality that stemmed from this one event, my abuse. I was so frightened of myself, because I thought I was the result of abuse. I grew up fearful of what I was, fearful of what I was becoming, and with the ideology that sexual abuse makes homosexuals; that gays are recruited, that if you think you're gay, it's only because of the sexual abuse – the world of the 70s.

I went into conversion therapy with this mindset, which was compounded by my parents' belief, and it was paramount in the media during my formative years. It was also the doctor's logic. After I met him, early in my therapy, the focus was not on the correlation between abuse and being gay, but just expressing my anger. For somebody who was never allowed to raise their voice or express any type of anger, that was hugely cathartic. For years I had been frozen, I couldn't even cry, and suddenly I was crying. But within a matter of months, the doctor was analysing my homosexuality, talking about helping me correct it. He reframed my anger and grief and mourning to my homosexuality: 'You're angry because you think you're a homosexual, you're angry because you were abused – that made you think you're homosexual, but really you're heterosexual.' The medication was traumatic and toxic, and I almost died.

It was after I left the therapy that I could



“Conversion therapy permeates the body, touches on the soul, breaks down every part of you...”

ask myself fundamentally basic questions which would never have been allowed before, like why are straight people who've been sexually abused not gay, or why are there gay people who weren't abused? To see that I was entrenched in so many lies gave me so much freedom. I started working in the gay community, establishing friendships there, and running gay groups.

I still couldn't process what had happened, and I needed to speak the truth of it, and understand why it happened – not just that my doctor had acted abusively, but why had I placed myself in this circumstance? Why had I stayed? Did I learn anything? What did it mean to me? I started to read a lot, to understand as a gay person, the history of this legacy, that it had happened to so many people, that it was continuing to happen, and it just seemed that speaking the truth about it was one way to hopefully prevent it from happening to other people.

The doctor just went on – they didn't take his license away, I don't even think he was fined. This was reprehensible to me – I'd expected some form of legal vindication, and didn't receive it, which was heartbreaking. After being silenced growing up, and silenced in the therapy, I was silenced through the legal process. I decided I was going to speak out by writing my book. I'm not a political activist, but I think writing is a form of political activism.

My goal is to write about what happened, get it into the world, and then hopefully it will make a difference to individuals and politically, and laws will be created. Getting published has been arduous, with comments like 'this type of book won't sell, the message isn't as important today, this doesn't happen anymore,' but I just had to push through – that's been my fight.

I want to make an important caveat: conversion, reparative, whatever you want to call it, is an umbrella term that includes many types of therapies aimed at changing sexual orientation. Through the years we've had the most extreme: decades ago, lobotomies, electric shock, aversive stimuli, and then the more benign talk therapy, and the religious 'pray away the gay' therapies. It's dangerous to get attached

to the label 'conversion therapy', because then you look for something that calls itself that, which is misleading. I'd never heard those words when I was in my therapy.

In my case, it was one-on-one therapy, although there were group sessions. Even though these things are happening in large numbers in groups and gay camps, my fear has always been about the more subversive encounters that happen behind closed doors, one-on-one with a therapist. When you're young, or any age, and you're depressed, and struggling with issues of sexual abuse or confusion, you need help, and you're so vulnerable that you'll almost listen to anything. When an authority figure, a licensed psychiatrist, says 'I can help you stop your pain', you just jump on ship.

It's really important that the tide's turning against this therapy, and I'm pleased to see so much of it being outlawed. In the US, there are bans being passed almost monthly, especially for minors. As they emerge, more stories arise about individuals who have gone through it. In the UK, there's been an outcry in the Church of England. Jayne Ozanne, a high-ranking activist there, who's been through the therapy and suffered the after-effects – trauma, breakdown – has labelled it spiritual abuse. These things permeate the body, they touch on your soul, especially when you go through them over a period of years. They break down every part of you: your spirit, your defences, your morale and your self-confidence, and that is spiritual abuse.

But here in Canada, Ontario passed legislation banning it, and Manitoba has a weak health regulation which basically says that it's a red flag if they see doctors billing for conversion therapy. Well doctors won't do that – my doctor didn't. And that's it – just two provinces. Here in Canada, a lot of people hear the words conversion therapy and they say, 'That doesn't happen here, that's just the States, the Bible belt.' But I don't live in the Bible belt, I'm Canadian, I live in Victoria, and that's where this therapy happened.

A ban on conversion therapy is not a ban on discussions around sexuality. The opposers say we can't ban therapies, because what if somebody needs to talk about their sexuality? But I don't

think those bans infringe on that, they're designed to prevent the abusive relationship where the counsellor tortures the patient into becoming something that they're not through sometimes extreme means. However, you can ban therapies, but the important thing is to change people's hearts, or there will always be somebody else who tries to do this. It's a mindset that says everyone is straight, and if they aren't, they should be.

It still strikes me how heterosexist this world is. When I grew up, it was so pronounced that everybody is, or should be, in an opposite sex relationship, and of course it's better now. But the stuff that doesn't necessarily get written about is the prevalence of this mindset (perhaps even among some gay people) that being gay is the result of abuse. Although I still believe in God, that homophobic attitude is often, sadly, shrouded in religion. It makes me crazy, it's horrendous that these hateful words – to be gay is an illness, that with treatment you could be 'helped' – are in the name of God. You turn on the news, or a religious programme, and they're constantly condemning homosexuals – love the sinner, hate the sin. Not much has changed since I was a kid.

But however hatefully these people may be acting in the name of God, they are not God. ●

Peter's book *The Inheritance of Shame* is out now, inheritanceofshame.com, @hungarianwriter

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