

Kit Kat Essay

2/19/2008

“When Did I Choose?”

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There are approximately 300 million people in the United States of which it is conservatively estimated that 5%, or 15 million people, are gay or lesbian. There are approximately 10 million people in Ohio of whom at least 500,000 are gay or lesbian. There are one million people in Columbus of whom 50,000 are gay or lesbian.

There are five people in the Richards family – one, my youngest son, John, is gay.

About four years ago, I was traveling out of state on business when I received a midnight call at my hotel. Not the time of night that you normally expect a call from your wife that everything is fine at home. She was upset, not hysterical, but clearly upset, as she told me that our son, in a long conversation at home that night, shared with her that he was gay. We talked for quite a while and I said that I would fly home the next day, as I did.

That morning I called from the airport and while waiting for my plane we resumed our conversations about all that had been discussed between my wife and son. We reflected on what he had said and shared – we were concerned that his life would be much different than he expected – than we expected. Not necessarily worse, but much different. We were concerned about hardships, bigotry and even danger that he might encounter – we worried as parents protective of a child.

But what struck me the most about our conversations and which I have never forgotten is what my son told my wife that morning at breakfast. My wife had slept little that evening and waited for my return. She was tired – emotionally and physically.

John looked at her and said, “Mom, that was the best night’s sleep that I have ever had.” He felt that the weight of the world had been lifted. All the fear was gone. Fear that he might be rejected. Fear of not somehow being accepted by those that he loved most.

That simple statement repeated to me by my wife said it all. I knew everything would be fine for our family.

Late that afternoon, the three of us sat down and talked for hours. John shared his feelings as he had come to the realization and acceptance that he was gay. We spoke of his relationships, his friends, the research

and reading that he had done, even some of his academic classes on point. We asked all the questions – when had he started to feel the way he did; had he had traumatic sexual experiences that may have influenced him; with whom had he shared the knowledge and even with whom or how he wanted us to share this fact of his sexuality with family and friends.

One of the most interesting things to come out of that discussion was that he thought that we knew. He thought that we were waiting for him to tell us.

We didn't know. We didn't have the slightest clue.

We didn't live in a bubble or in social isolation from the world. We had a broad spectrum of friends and family and had two older children who were active. We were not naïve to the ways of the world – but we did not see it.

That night was the first of what have been long and frequent conversations regarding homosexuality – conversations between and among our family, friends and even strangers sometimes on the subject.

We quickly have discovered that a person's view on a wide range of social issues, political thoughts, the candidates they support and the legislation which they support can be determined by a simple answer to a

simple question – “When did I choose?” Does a person choose to be gay or straight?

This evening, in my short time, I will attempt to highlight some facts, some opinions, some experiences that will help you answer the question for my son, “When did I choose?”

By way of disclaimer, I am not a doctor, a psychologist, a judge, a politically elected official, a priest, minister or rabbi. There are some among us who are and who have more insight into the issue than me. Many people have spent a lifetime of work and scholarship on my question and I do not mean to gloss over or trivialize their work or research.

My one abiding fear this evening is that I am inadequate in my presentation and do injustice to a viewpoint by not properly presenting the issue as it deserves.

It is my intent to share with you only one family’s experiences in finding answers. One father who loves his son, his gay son, to answer the simple question – when did I choose?

I will touch several areas in my discussion of homosexuality – biological theories, non-biological theories, Western religious thought, and finally current political/social observances.

Theories of homosexuality have been discussed for thousands of years as early as the Greek philosophers. But, the current debate has evolved to one, simply of nature or nurture. Is homosexuality a result of a person's environment and experiences (suggestive of choice or control in the matter) or biology and genetics.

As Ryan D. Johnson, a writer in *All Psych Journal*, wrote, "The debate endures because both sides have the ability to create a scientific environment to support their cause. Charles Darwin, in his discussions of sexual orientations noted, "We do not even in the least know the final cause of sexuality, the whole subject is hidden in darkness."

The first biological research began with Alfred Kinsey at the University of Indiana on human sexuality in the late 1930's – his goals to find out how many adult males engaged in homosexual behavior and to suggest theories about how the behavior came to be. In his research, he found that when asked if someone engaged in homosexual sexual relations a large percent of the population answered no, but when asked if they had engaged in same-sex sexual relations the answer yes doubled. Overall, approximately 30% of the males had engaged in a homosexual act. The research also led to the development of the popularized Kinsey Scale of Sexuality which rates orientation from 100% heterosexual to 100%

homosexual and all degrees in between. Ultimately he established that 10% of adult males reported having sexual relations with a same sex partner. While the research may not have had a huge impact, it is credited with putting the word homosexual into the common language and use.

Of more importance is the work of Karen Hooker who conducted the first psychological test for biological determination in 1957. The study explored the relationship between homosexuality and psychological development and illness. Both homosexual and heterosexual were matched by age, IQ and educational levels. All were subjected to the same three tests. The results of Hooker's experiment yielded no significant difference in the answers concluding a zero correlation between social determination of sexuality.

The significance of this finding resulted in the American Psychological Association (APA) eventually removing from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychological Disorders, homosexuality in 1973. Two years later, the APA released a public statement that homosexuality was not a mental disorder. In 1994, just 14 years ago the APA stated, "Homosexuality is neither a mental illness nor a moral depravity. It is the way a portion of the populations expresses human love and sexuality."

As I stated earlier, theories of sexual biological orientation have a long history. Magnus Hirschfield, a German and early 20th century gay rights pioneer, promoted such theories, but Freudian and behavioral theorists dominated thinking on the topic until the 1980's and 1990's as biological ideas emerged in a significant way. This emergence paralleled the increase in tolerance and acceptance of gays in many Western societies – reflecting the increasing acceptance of and familiarity of gays fostered a belief in biological theories and vice versa.

In *The Biology of Sexual Orientation*, Simon LeVay noted that “sexual orientation is a gendered trait: most men are sexually attracted to women more than they are to men, and most women are sexually attracted to men more than they are to women. Homosexual people are sex-atypical, at least with respect to their sexual orientation. Biological theories of sexual orientation commonly, though not always, include the idea that sexual orientation is embedded within a larger constellation of gendered traits, and that biological factors influence multiple gendered traits simultaneously. Whatever ultimate biological factors influence a person to become homosexual, these factors may promote the development of other characteristics – anatomical, physiological, molecular-genetic, or psychological – that are sex-atypical. Given that the ultimate factors may

not be directly detectable (if they operated during fetal life, for example), the presence of other sex-atypical traits in gay people may be taken as an indicator that those undetectable factors were in fact at work. Still, their presence of sex-atypical traits in gay people doesn't always compel a biological interpretation – it might be that certain life experiences promote both homosexuality and other sex-atypical characteristics.

To give a concrete example: it's been well documented that gay people, on average, display some sex-atypical psychological characteristics during childhood (Bailey and Zucker 1995). Gay men, for example, tend to report that they had less interest in rough-and-tumble sports than other boys. A prospective study showed that the boys who are very strongly gender-nonconformist have a high likelihood of developing into gay or bisexual adults (Green 1987). But this connection between childhood gender-nonconformity and adult homosexuality could arise for genetic reasons (genes promoting a spectrum of gender-nonconformist traits including homosexuality) or for environmental reasons (e.g., parental encouragement these same traits). It's also possible that genes cause childhood gender-nonconformity and that environmental factors (e.g. the hostile reactions of peers) cause gender-nonconformist children to become gay. Thus the fact that there is a correlation between homosexuality and

some other trait doesn't in itself distinguish between different possible causes."

As I noted from the onset, LeVay's discussion suggests the different interpretations of a given set of facts.

There have been a number of studies in the last 10 to 15 years suggesting or concluding that sexual orientation is biological.

- 1) Animal studies in fruit flies suggesting a simple gene as responsible.
- 2) Animal studies observing homosexual behavior in birds and animals.
- 3) Sibling studies that homosexuality has been observed as clustered in families especially siblings' brothers of gay men reported to have a 22% chance of being gay where as brothers of heterosexuals have only a 4% chance of being gay.
- 4) Sisters of lesbians have an increased chance of being lesbians. These clusters are largely sex-specific so the existence of a lesbian in a family has little effect on the chances that her brother will be gay or vice versa.
- 5) Twin studies focused on concordance rates meaning that identical twins should have nearly 100% rates if one is gay both

should be. In fraternal twins the rates are significantly lower as expected. But several studies found approximately 50% of identical twins and 20% of fraternal twins share the same orientation.

- 6) Gene and genomic imprinting.
- 7) Hormone research both prenatal and adult would suggest that differing prenatal levels of hormone can attribute to sexual orientation. While not a complete explanation it could lead to a genetic view with control of hormone levels or an environmental cause, i.e. maternal stress during pregnancy. A third interpretation is that a random development process could be present such as multiple fetuses locating in proximity to each other.
- 8) Prenatal stress and exposure to various drugs have a statistical difference in orientation.
- 9) Anatomy studies ranging from penis size, finger length, and even fingerprints suggested biological factors at work.
- 10) Brain function studying audio systems, sexual arousal, odor responses, and neurotransmitter, suggesting biological differences.

- 11) Cognitive studies including general, visuospatial tasks, verbal fluency, aggressiveness, and handedness. As to handedness studies indicated that there was little or no difference in handedness of heterosexual men and women, most studies found that gay men and/or lesbians are significantly likely to be non-right handed (i.e. left handed or mixed handed) than straight people of the same sex.
- 12) Birth order. A number of studies report that gay men tend to have more older brothers than do straight men. This could be due to antibodies produced in early pregnancies and the development of subsequent male fetuses in a way to increase likelihood of homosexuality.

I have glossed over a tremendous amount of research and again I do not mean to trivialize it. I have also suggested that as in all studies, there are various interpretations. But I do believe there is clear evidence of support for a biological cause for homosexuality.

I hope the vast majority of you do believe in biology and evolution – I realize that a 100 miles or so from here, across the Ohio River there is clearly a different point of view at one museum.

As to non-biological theories.

In the early 20th century, Sigmund Freud postulated that family dynamics influenced a child's sexual orientation. "The suggestion being by example, a dominant close binding mother or an absent distant father might steer a boy to homosexuality by disrupting his exit from the "Oedipal phase" of his psychosexual development. Girls might become lesbian because of unconscious hatred of their mothers, envy of a brother's penis and the like. Some retrospective studies confirm that gay men tend to describe their relationships with their mothers as usually close and their fathers as distant or hostile. Although the retrospective findings don't necessarily mean that parental attitude influence sexual orientation as Freud envisioned. Contemporary American analysis has suggested that parental attitudes to pre-gay children such as father's withdrawal or hostility may be a response to gender-variant traits in the child rather than the cause of them."

Learning theorists have suggested that gendered traits, including sexual orientation, emerge from a conscious or unconscious "training regimen" imposed by parents, teachers, peers and society in general. Most feminists thinkers have attributed the development of gendered traits to socialization. One difficulty with this idea is that heterosexual parents don't seem to inculcate homosexuality or gender-non conformity. In fact, they

attempt to prevent these traits in children who never less become gay. Parents who are gay might tolerate, or even foster, gender variance and homosexuality in their children, but in fact the children of gay parents usually become heterosexual.

There is also a school of thought of social constructionism that proposes that a person's identity as gay, straight, or bisexual is a label imposed by society and internalized by the individual, rather than arising from within.

The final non biological theory dealing with orientation is the effect of early sexual experience (pleasant or traumatic) on a child. A girl who is raped by a man at an early age may be "turned off" to men and become a lesbian, or a boy seduced by a man or molested by an older brother and derives sexual pleasure from the experience may become gay. These suggestions fail to explain how many people whose initial sexual experiences are heterosexual and consensual nevertheless become gay; or children who attended same sex boarding schools where consensual homosexual encounters are common are no more likely to become homosexual adults than children who did not attend such schools.

From the literature I have surveyed there is no one theory or experiment that gives a definitive answer to the questions. While there has

been a gene discovered (Xq28) that some may believe to be the Holy Grail of homosexuality research – the elusive “gay gene” it has not yet been confirmed. Likewise social theories may reveal some, but not all, answers to our questions.

For many Americans, the view points of homosexuality are largely rooted in their religion. My discussion has not dealt with the morality of the issue, but only its causes. There has been probably no issue in recent years that has so divided Americans as homosexuality and religion. As I mentioned earlier, there are several among us who have a far greater knowledge of this issue than I. I don't pretend to be a religious expert or philosopher.

John Finnis, in his Law Review article in 1994 entitled *Law, Morality, and Sexual Orientation*, traces the natural law theories from Plato, through Augustine to modern thought. He discusses the implications of sexuality and gender roles; the Doctrine of Faith, a discussion of natural law, the state, and the U.S. Constitution. The natural law theory dominates the Christian view on this topic.

To over simplify the natural law arguments as it relates to homosexuality, is that all extramarital sex including heterosexual outside of marriage is against the “natural order.” The new natural law theory

valorizes procreative sex with in the companionate male-female marriage. Accordingly, any sexual relationship outside the bounds of marriage not only fail in the ability to procreate; but that only male-female intercourse enables the couple to unite organically to join in “one flesh union” or some say identity of self.

Accordingly, sex that is not procreative, i.e. masturbation, fornication, sodomy, bestiality, contraceptive intercourse, sex with prepubescent children; or that is outside marriage, i.e. fornication adultery and bigamy is not morally acceptable.

Accordingly, the moral consequence should extend into society by rejecting homosexuality – politically, religiously, and even legislatively.

In the West, religious debate cites the Bible to support positions as the debate rages on the role of the church and homosexual.

While the Bible says nothing about sex between women, there are fewer than a dozen verses out of the Bible’s 31,173 verses dealing directly with sex between men. Nine biblical citations are invoked as relating to homosexuality. Four forbid prostitution by men and women. Two are verses that are part of the Holiness Code which does explicitly ban homosexual acts. But, put in to some context the Code also prohibits many now commonly accepted customs and practices.

It also is generous with the penalty of death including not only adult homosexual acts, but brides who are presented as virgins whose status as such is challenged by their husbands. I note this not to diminish the view point, but to remind us that selective quotations of the Bible are often by sound bites, and not within the context of a complete reading which may distort the debate.

The three references from St. Paul frequently cited as condemning homosexuality can be put into the context of his times as secular sensuality that was contrary to his Judeo-Christians spiritual idealism. St. Paul was against lust and sensuality in anyone including heterosexuals who put their interests ahead of God and his thoughts are expressive in this “Natural Law” view.

There is no mention of homosexuality in the four Gospels. What did Jesus say directly about homosexuality? Nothing.

Congregations are torn. By way of example, the Episcopal church has faced schism in dealing with ordained gay clergy and even have Diocese splitting leading to litigation. In America, how homosexuality is dealt with varies from denomination to congregation with an almost Kinsey scale of belief from 100% non-acceptance to 100% acceptance and degrees in between.

The issue will be played out every Sunday and is not going away. It goes to the essence of what each person believes and how they view their own relationship to God and God with the homosexual.

The Rev. Mel White, founder and president of faith-based gay rights group Soulforce, a gay pastor, was once a ghostwriter for the Revs. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Billy Graham – before Pastor White came out in a public sermon in 1993. He has stated that, “Until the church changes, this debate will go on and on. Once the church changes, it’ll be over.”

In summer of 2007, CNN/Opinion Research Corp. reported that 56% of Americans believe that gays and lesbians could not change their sexual orientations even if they wanted to do so. – the first time that a majority has held that belief regarding homosexuality since CNN first asked the question ten years ago.

Six years ago 45% believed that to be the case and in 1998 the number was 36%.

For others reading the poll, it was viewed as myth that gays and lesbians can’t change. Noting that change is difficult but not impossible. 36% of Americans believed that gays and lesbians could change their orientation.

The latest polls affirm a shift in attitude across the country even in the face of state legislation that deny the right to marry or to form civil unions.

The shift in view point is not only in the more socially liberal east and west coast, but as a percent it is greater – in the Mountain, Midwest and Southern states. New Mexico and Colorado now rate as among the gayest states as measured by same sex couples. Utah, where Bush received 70% of the vote in 2004 and predominantly Mormon, moved from 38th in 1990 to 14th in the most recent ratings.

Commentators have suggested that the Mountain states could be a 2008 presidential battleground for the transition of red to purple.

Even in Utah, Salt Lake City approved benefits for gay and lesbian couples; identifying as openly gay no longer is an honor code violation at Brigham Young and the state has three openly gay state legislators – one more than the U.S. congress.

Probably one of the most sensitive and insightful pieces written about contemporary attitude about homosexuality was in October 2007 by Miami Herald columnist, Leonard Pitts, Jr. The column discussed how the writer, J.K. Rowling, revealed to the world that Dumbledore, the Wizard and Headmaster in the popular Harry Potter series, was indeed gay.

The disclosure was condemned by many religious conservatives who already hated the books because of its dealing with the occult. The criticism still was slight as compared to praise of the works generally.

But Pitts' points out that Rowling didn't lead with sexuality of the character. We got to know the "beloved character in fullness of his likes and dislikes, weaknesses and strengths – like anyone else. And the revelation when it comes is only 'extra detail.'"

"Could our boy wizard help a generation learn to look at a gay person and see, neither definition nor destiny, but only detail? That would be the greatest magic trick of all."

I was telling a business associate recently about my essay and he remarked that I was brave in what I was presenting. I was quite surprised by his comment.

My son is brave. A child coming out to his parents or loved ones, not completely sure how they will react, is brave. A child not wanting to live a lie is brave. Loving them is not.

I am proud of my son, but I am also proud of my family, including my parents. My parents were nearly 80 when John said to me, "I want to tell Grandpa and Grandma." My parents are very supportive people, but my dad is John Wayne in a business suit. Some may have said, "Just don't

say anything, they won't understand, they are too old, and why now." But John wanted them to know the man he really is. He told them. Their response, "John, we love you and we are proud of you." I was never so proud of my mom and dad than at that moment.

Many kids have not had the same experiences. We know of kids who have been literally thrown out of the house by their family and disowned by their communities. We know others who haven't told their families because they can't take the rejection, so they live in constant fear of discovery of their secret. There are families who know, but send their kids away as they seem shamed by the fact of their child's homosexuality. These are kids and families that we know.

I suspect my essay may be viewed by some as far too personal. I did not wish to make anyone uncomfortable by doing so. But, I have told my son to make it personal because it is. He is not an issue – a statistic, a quota, a token. I want him to be the man that he is meant to be.

When a vote is taken or an action is commenced affecting gays, lesbians, homosexuals – let the people whom he knows or influences see his face. When they decide whether he can live in a loving legal relationship, or adopt a child – let them see his face, not an issue or a jingly slogan, but him. Let them see our sons and daughters, our brothers and

sisters, our neighbors and friends. All minds won't change, but one at a time will make the difference.

And so Kit Kat members,
my son knows the answer,
I know the answer,
When did I choose, Dad?
You didn't, Son.

Source Materials

“When Did I Choose?”

2/19/2008

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- 3) Eric Marcus. *It is a Choice* (1993).
- 4) Leonard Pitts, Jr. *Author Outs Damledore With Literacy Wizardry*, Miami Herald, Oped 10/25/2007.
- 5) Gary J. Gates. *Gay Demographics Could Reshape Electrical Landscape*, USA Today 11/15/2007.
- 6) Andrea Stone. *Many Troops Openly Gay, Group Says*, USA Today 1/8/2008.
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- 9) Chander Burr. *The Only Question That Matters: Do People Choose Their Sexual Orientation*, 2005.
- 10) John Richards. *Is “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” Constitutional After Lawrence v. Texas*, 2006.
- 11) Taylor Gandossy. *Gay Man, Former Lesbian on Whether They Can Change*, CMM.com/Living 6/29/2007.
- 12) Jordan Robertson. *Diocese Splits from U.S. Episcopal Church*, Associated Press 12/9/2007.
- 13) *The Living Bible, Red Letter Edition, Paraphrased*, Tyndale, 1971.