

This New Pioneer Journey

I don't pay much attention to the television reality show, *Survivor*. But when I read recently that one of the final six contestants in Guatemala was Rafe Judkins, an Ivy League graduate and wilderness guide, I decided to tune in. He had a reputation as the sweetheart of this cutthroat show, playing the game without deceit. He was honest and loyal and even shed tears for a brokenhearted teammate voted out of the game. But the dichotomy that really intrigued me was the fact that Judkins is a gay Mormon.

Half my life—it has often seemed like more—had been spent with gay men, like my former husband, who had been raised Mormon, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Still, it was a novelty to have one of them “out” in a major public way, right there on network television, acknowledging his Mormon-ness and his gayness for the world to see.

Rafe was indeed irresistible as he navigated the difficult physical and psychological terrain of the show. He was smart and charming. Any family would be proud to call him son, brother, cousin, friend. Wouldn't they? Did his? Imagine my smile when I read in the papers that a relative, speaking of their sprawling family of devout Mormons, including more than 50 cousins and 20 aunts and uncles, who learned of Rafe's homosexuality not long before the show aired, admitted that it was a

shock but said to him, “Rafe, we’re circling the wagons around you.”

Writing those words months later still brings a surge of pride. “Circling the wagons.” What a splendid, Mormon thing to say! That early pioneer, crossing-the-plains trek is still in our blood, that awareness of danger, that efficient determination to protect the loved ones. We Mormons do it quite spectacularly and often. But sometimes we fail. Sometimes we don’t quite know how to do it, or even if we should do it, particularly those sometimes when the loved one is a homosexual.

In this we are not unique. Many religious communities today, as they confront homosexuality, find themselves up against one of the most difficult issues they’ve faced in a very long time. The Episcopal Church’s split over homosexuality is getting worldwide attention. A U.S. denomination of about the same size and stature—the Presbyterian Church—is similarly torn. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, and Latter-day Saint leaders signed a petition encouraging a constitutional amendment to prevent gay marriage. The emotion inherent in the discourse around religion and homosexuality can intensify the confusion and distress of families as they strive to find the “right” way to relate to their gay loved ones.

I have seen families in my own church, like Rafe’s family, respond to the challenge of discovering a family member is gay with certitude of love and loyalty. However, I have also seen families, and much of the religious community, circle the wagons around their fears, their beliefs, their judgments and condemnations, leaving the gay person outside the warmth, abandoned to the wolves and the weather.

I have also sometimes seen families gather firmly around their gay loved one, only to discover that the larger community,

often without meaning to, has circled the wagons in a way that places the family outside as well, leaving them in a wilderness of isolation.

I have seen glimpses, too, of gay individuals, their Mormon families, and the larger community together accepting the daunting task of finding new and creative ways to configure the wagons, managing somehow to share the safety and the warmth.

I see pain that rips my heart out. And I see healing.
That is why I wrote this book.



I write primarily of the Mormon experience, but I don't write only *to* Mormons. I write to all who find themselves walking that challenging territory where religion and sexuality collide. We are an interesting bunch, we Latter-day Saints. Politically we hold a significant place on the national scene, and I think we offer a fine microcosm of all conservative religions as they address this unavoidable subject. Everyone can learn a lot from our pain, our confusion, our failures, our learning, and our successes.

I am a fourth-generation Mormon. My own grandmother, Sarah Oakey Serrine, walked across the plains to Utah when she was eight years old, leaving her treasured collection of dolls in Nottingham, England, and settling finally in Dingle Dell, Idaho. My great-great-grandfather, Thomas Morris, in the short-lived war with Mexico in 1847, crossed the country in our nation's longest recorded infantry march, with a group of U.S. soldiers known as the Mormon Battalion. He boiled his leather shirt and ate it to stay alive. Another great-grandfather, George Warren Serrine, holding a pickax, was lowered over the sides of the ship *Brooklyn* to break off the ice so the voyage could continue around Cape Horn and arrive at what would become San Fran-

cisco. He was one of the first vigilantes to bring law and order to that city, later becoming a founder of Mesa, Arizona.

I love my Mormon pioneer ancestors.

And I do not believe our pioneering is finished.



Some of you know me. I wrote a book that was published in 1986, *Goodbye, I Love You*. It was the story of my life with my husband, Gerald, a very dear man who was also a homosexual man. We married in the Salt Lake Mormon temple in 1966, buoyantly determined to create a happy eternal marriage in spite of the challenge his sexual orientation presented. He had repented. He knew and I knew that we would be blessed. Homosexuality wasn't a "real" thing, it was something Gerald fell into because of the temptations of this imperfect world. A good woman who loved him was the answer, along with faithfulness to the gospel, prayer, scripture study, church attendance, and loving the Lord.

Nine years and four children later, we were dealing with a greater anguish than I'd ever believed possible. Gerald was not "cured." Despite his love for me and for our children, despite his rigorous spiritual discipline, he was still a man whose need for intimate love was not with a woman, but with another man. This need, I learned, was far more than sex; it related to every aspect of his personality.

After all the cards were on the table, we struggled for four years—two in Provo, Utah, and two in Walnut Creek, California—trying to find a way to maintain our family. Finally, we ended the marriage and kept the friendship. Gerald relocated to nearby San Francisco to live what he felt was a more authentic life and to find his true love. He never found him. "Oh, Carol Lynn," he said to me more than once, "if I could just find a man

like you, I'd be in seventh heaven." In 1984, Gerald died of AIDS in my home, where I was taking care of him. I read his favorite Walt Whitman poems, I sang accompanied by the three guitar chords that I knew, and I said as I held him, "It's okay, Gerald, you can fly now."

In the twenty years since I shared my story so publicly, I have had the privilege of serving as a safe place where a large number of people, especially Mormons, have been able to bring their stories and their tears. Yesterday morning I received an email from a woman who said, "Thanks for giving a voice to families of gay people. We are aching, and aching to be heard." And today an email from David, a Brigham Young University student, saying, "I do not eat. I do not sleep. I cannot focus. I cannot study. I cannot breathe. Will I ever figure this out?"

Recently in sacrament meeting (Sunday service) in my ward (local congregation), our visiting high councilman, Brother Marostica, spoke about callings. He reminded us that in early Christianity, a calling was something different from the callings we receive today from the bishop to serve as a teacher or work in the nursery or in the Cub Scouts. "That larger kind of calling," he said, "is one you receive directly from God, one you are guided to by the Holy Spirit, designed specifically for you to bless the world."

I have a calling. I don't remember asking for it, but Gerald assured me that I must have. "You know, don't you," he said, "that you've been set up to do something more than write nice little poems. Somehow you and I volunteered to do a really hard project together. I'm sorry it's so painful, but I know you've got an important work to do."

I accept my calling. I don't do it perfectly, but I do it as well as I can, and I do it with reverence. I see myself as one of the ad-

vance scouts who have been assigned to walk a rough landscape and come back to report.

This is my report. We are not yet in the promised land. We cannot proclaim, “This is the right place,” as Brigham Young did in 1847 at the mouth of Emigration Canyon above Salt Lake City. You and I may not agree on what the promised land will look like when and if we finally get there, but let us agree on one thing. We are not yet there.

We—people of all religions and of no religion—are called to be one in love, but very often we trample love in our rush to the familiar comfort of fear and judgment.

We are called to create relationships that are enduring, but we allow our beliefs about homosexuality to bring the most agonizing disruptions. As we circle the wagons around our fears and misunderstandings, with our gay loved ones on the outside, we say too many goodbyes. I report here on three kinds of goodbyes that I see all too often in my culture. I also offer suggestions of a map brought to me in pieces by many courageous families and individuals who share their part in charting the way we must go.

Too many goodbyes are said due to the final, desperate act of suicide.

Too many goodbyes are said due to ill-fated marriages, which are contracted under unrealistic expectations of change and then explode, leaving behind enormous devastation.

Too many goodbyes are said due to families being torn apart by beliefs that seem more important than people.

Paradoxically, and to our great shame, the beliefs that prompt these awful goodbyes are attributed to the will of God.



I want to tell you a few things about my own beliefs and

position on the subject at hand. My favorite description of our Creator is, “God is love.” I enjoy singing the little song in my own church, “*Where love is, there God is also.*” I believe we can learn a great deal from scriptures of the past, but I believe we need to add to them the light of the present, especially the light that comes to each of us from our own godly hearts. I’m reluctant to accept the precision of some as to what God considers an abomination. I note, in the fourteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, it was believed that God considered it an abomination to eat the meat of swine, or rabbit, or shellfish. For lunch today I had a bowl of delicious ham and lentil soup. And in the seventeenth chapter of the same book, I note it was believed that God considered it an abomination to offer an animal sacrifice that contained a blemish. I am comfortable with the thought that we, like the ancients, continue to seek God, continue to stumble in our seeking, continue to find truth that is consistent with the one secure touchstone, “God is love.”

A strong belief of mine is that sexuality is an awesome gift and should be treasured. I am impressed with the words of American publisher Margaret Anderson, who said, “In real love you want the other person’s good. In romantic love you want the other person.” I wholeheartedly believe that intimate access to the body of another person is the most supreme of privileges, that being in love—real love—wanting both the other person and the other person’s highest good—is a breathtaking experience that brings us about the closest we mortals ever get to heaven.

I have several gay friends who have chosen lifelong celibacy. It is not easy. They believe this to be the right choice for them. I respect that choice, and I wish them well.

I have gay friends who have married heterosexual partners.

Most of those marriages have ended in extreme sorrow. A few of the marriages are still intact, with the partners experiencing some satisfaction along with significant difficulty. They believe this is the right choice for them. I respect that choice, and I wish them well.

Most of my gay friends are in gay relationships or are navigating the territory toward establishing them. Many are happy in their relationships. They believe this is the right choice for them. I respect that choice, and I wish them well.

And so our journey begins.