

ARE

YOU

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MY



I'm here, I'm queer, and weirdly, no one will try to brainwash me out of it. *Cosmo* explores a discredited realm in flux.

CONVERSION

THERAPIST?

I think I'd like to try adult conversion therapy.

It was during a romantic after-dinner walk with my new wife that the scheme bobbed to the surface, putrid and captivating. *Let us test the powers of this gay love*, went my thoughts, a deranged cackle rising in my chest. *Let us observe whether a counselor can awaken me to the wonders of a cishet existence.* I squeezed Nat's hand in silent apology for the unhinged experiment to come, another *Cosmo* story idea too ridiculous, too wrong to resist. This could be it, our final moonlit stroll before the whole marriage vanished in a puff of straight pride.

Mind you, no kind of conversion therapy—the pseudoscience of trying to forcibly alter a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity—has ever “worked” on anyone, despite countless extreme tactics: Attempts to eradicate queerness throughout time have included coercion, electroshock, psychedelic drugs, institutionalization, hypnosis, and lobotomy, meted out by faith-based and secular practitioners alike with zero credible evidence of efficacy and overwhelming evidence of harm. Informed by the harrowing accounts of survivors, who today number an estimated 700,000 adults in the U.S., virtually every major medical or scientific organization has denounced the entire concept of conversion therapy (indeed, even the phrase “conversion therapy”) as bunk. Twenty states and counting now ban licensed mental health practitioners from attempting such quackery on kids. But religious groups remain largely exempt from state bans, and for adults, conversion “counseling,” even in accredited mental health care settings, is still legal in all 50 states.

The scene (if you will) is mutating to meet the moment, giving rise to a nouveau ecosystem of “ex-gay” adult care—one seeking to distance itself from yesteryear's torture tactics while holding fast to the conviction that erasing queerness is somehow a valid idea. In 2023, it's rare to find a practitioner who says, “After we surgically disconnect the lesbian's frontal lobe, we shall perform the exorcism.” But it's totally possible to find one who welcomes you with a cozy spiel like, “Our practice is here to support you in your personal journey once you arrive at the decision to work on redirecting your urges and self-perceptions into a healing exploration of identity beyond LGBTQ, which we respectfully view as a healthy and realistic goal. 🌈” So lovely! Maybe *opting in* could make all the therapeutic difference? An absurd hypothesis. And a tempting one, if you're a nihilistic dyke drawn to questionable stunts.

Like most queer people in my life, I've spent the past year flapping in a septic news churn of anti-trans legislation, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes, and a decreasingly niche content vertical of sweaty Karens bellowing gay slurs in fast-casual restaurants. My thought was that going full guinea pig in a conversion therapy pseudo experiment would be a way to squirm out from under the steamroller for two seconds and run loose as a rodeo clown

behind enemy lines, turn some of this gay panic into stoopid content. *Let's go! Try and reprogram me!* I'll be dressed in the devil's pronouns with a thigh tattoo that says FAGGOT BEHAVIOR.



kay, admittedly, I'm drafting this article alone at my desk in New York when I should be unpacking my lesbian tendencies with peers out in southwestern Pennsylvania. That's where a group called Courage International—ministering to Catholics in the throes of unwanted same-sex attraction—is holding its annual spring women's retreat. As we speak! The FOMO is killing me.

As executive director Father Philip Bochanski explains in a jazz-infused YouTube video, Courage International is not an anti-gay group; it is simply pro-chastity (...if gay sex is what you like). So instead of trying to extinguish your fruity desires, you vow to quit your homo behaviors. That means no more fingerbanging brown-eyed strangers in the bathroom of Ginger's Bar, ya hear?! And enough peacocking around as a they/them #futch #zaddy, whatever the hell your TikTok bio says. You are God's creature first and foremost; you must trust that He will fill your holes.

This should not be confused with conversion therapy, Courage International is quick to say; the group is providing *pastoral care*. In fact, none of the people or groups mentioned in this story describe their work as conversion therapy. The vibe is: *Listen, bestie, if you hate yourself and*

feel like a condemned gender pariah, that did NOT come from us! They don't need to instill fear or shame because the convenient presumption is you're showing up with it.

Without shame goggles of my own, all I see is a good ol' gay hootenanny in the Courage retreat promo copy. Attendees can look forward to “group discussions, campfires, a Courage meeting, and an opportunity to develop good, lasting friendships.” Hello, a troupe of hardy women wrestling with sexual tension around a crackling blaze? I am more than qualified for this extremely lesbian task. I am not without Catholic cred either: Misbehaving in church the week before my eighth grade confirmation ceremony, I experienced the full-body thrill of an MBN (muscular butch nun) tossing me out into the parking lot—baby's first taste of competing top energy. The Courage retreat could really bring it full circle.

Father Bochanski doesn't seem to see it this way. He sends me a sweet note and says

unfortunately he cannot allow me to tag along. A reporter would just make it uncomfortable.

figure I might have better luck in a one-on-one setting. My first stop is Joseph Nicolosi Jr., PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist in California whose trademarked trauma and addiction protocol—known as Reintegrative Therapy®—allegedly turns gay clients straight as a spontaneous side effect. That is Not! The goal! However! Any hetero shift is purely a random byproduct, he says. So don't be alarmed if you come in as a perfectly contented lesbian and leave with your loins aching for the clammy touch of a potato-husband named Tyler. Total fluke.

STOCKSY.

Nicolosi's own father, Joseph 1.0, was a clinical psychologist too, the innovator of a strident "ex-gay" conversion movement that made him a regular blowhard on news and talk shows before his death in 2017. The older Nicolosi had a trademarked method of his own—Reparative Therapy®—and authored noxious tomes such as *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, now banned from Amazon for violating the seller's content guidelines.

Don't get it twisted though: Joey Jr. is his own man. Per him, what he does is distinct from the discredited conversion practices his father pioneered. In 2022, Nicolosi the Younger even sued two scientists for defamation when they allegedly equated "reintegrative therapy" (lowercase) with conversion therapy in a published paper. A judge tossed out the suit for lack of personal jurisdiction, and the case is now on appeal. How adorable is Nicolosi's persistence? Everyone has daddy issues.

I contact his media rep and ask if Nicolosi will do a sample RT session with me. He most certainly will *not*, thank you very much. Instead, I'm directed to a collection of videos (all banned from YouTube for violating hate speech rules) and study links on his website. "We strongly suggest you *watch* what the sessions look like and read the published, scientific findings on Reintegrative Therapy®," the spokesperson writes.

I already did, and of course none of this foolishness makes sense. Throughout, the treatment byproduct is given top billing—videos have titles like "This Changed My Sexuality" and "The Science Behind My Sexuality Change." One happy customer says he hardly mentioned his

gay tendencies while undergoing RT, but voilà, here he is today tenderly caressing the rotund belly of a woman he seems to have impregnated.

Meanwhile, a more in-depth video depicts a white male client identified as Greg describing a luscious daydream of being penetrated by a "big guy—beefy, Hispanic, macho, strong." This, we learn, is the "trance" phase of the Reintegrative Protocol™, in which many clients describe a persistent sexual fantasy in hopes of loosening its psychic choke hold. The client's next step is to ID the most salient

emotion the fantasy induces (feeling wanted, in Greg's case). Then the client mentally steps outside himself, peers into his own eyeballs—a maneuver dubbed "gaze inversion"—and tunnels back through time to when the need first went unmet (around age 8 for Greg, when he sensed a lack of affection from his father).

Later in the session, the Reintegrative therapist oscillates two fingers back and forth in front of Greg's eyes—almost as if performing a roadside sobriety test—and encourages him to think of a positive affirmation. This is borrowed from a method known as EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing), which the American Psychological Association *does* conditionally recommend...for the treatment of actual PTSD, not one's spank bank. Nevertheless, by the end of the session, Greg's vision of getting railed by a gorgeous muscle stud is no longer hot, no sirree. "It has no pull; it's not interesting," Greg marvels. In a position statement,

the EMDR International Association, comprising more than 14,000 mental health professionals, unequivocally rejects the notion that LGBTQ+ identities arise from unresolved trauma or pathology—and that EMDR can somehow be used to "treat" them (even as a byproduct, a spokesperson tells *Cosmo*).

Regardless, Nicolosi's site touts a 2021 experiment involving 75 men experiencing same-sex attraction who underwent RT to explore "fluidity" in their desires. After 24 months, many volunteers said they felt happier and less gay. Lol. The results appear in the *Journal of Human Sexuality*, a seldom-cited publication of the Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity, which holds, among other values, that gender-affirming medical care for trans people is hazardous to society.

Emailing through his rep, Nicolosi tells *Cosmo* that Reintegrative Therapy® adheres to a strict ethical code—a code upheld by the Reintegrative Therapy® Association, which is a tax-exempt nonprofit founded by *checks notes* Nicolosi himself. Am I on shrooms? I feel like I'm on shrooms.

"I'm a clinical psychologist, not a moral arbiter. My clients are in the driver's seat," he insists via email. "No one—and no government—should bar access to another person's choice to live consistent with their faith and their values."

I am fast becoming smitten with Nicolosi's pure camp potential. In videos, he's baby-faced and brooding, his statements imbued with a subtle impatience. I get it. I'm Italian too—I also know how to talk in circles while getting testy with everyone around me. And I must admit he is aspirationally hunky. I picture myself as a Nicolosi drag character, dressed in a blue crewneck sweater like his, a five-o'clock shadow stippled on my jaw with a makeup sponge. "I am a heterosexual science man here to make therapeutic liberty," I'd purr to my (appalled) audience. "Look at my peer-reviewed paper." And then I'd empty a city garbage can onto the stage and roll around in greasy Popeyes bags.

No hard feelings, Nicolosi. I move on to a Wisconsin therapist named Joy Buchman, a state-licensed family practitioner who wouldn't be on my radar had she not just filed a federal lawsuit against the city of La Crosse seeking to block its 2022 ban on conversion therapy for minors. Her claim is that the ban is a form of "viewpoint discrimination" and poses an infringement on her First Amendment right to—and here I'm paraphrasing—spout nonsense in a pediatric clinical setting.

The home page for her practice, Kinsman Redeemer Christian Counseling, mentions that Buchman offers a free consult to new clients. Sweet. I reach out over email, and Buchman replies to say she'd love to set up a call.

The feeling is one thousand percent mutual. Judging by online photos, she looks fun in a problematic-aunt way. Fiftysomething, I'd guess, with a sparkly smile, she rocks a leopard-print jacket and a statement necklace, her blonde hair styled in a curly fringed bob. Pics of her office show walls decaled with aphorisms like, "If you stumble, make it part of the dance." Yasss. Tango with me, Joy! She strikes me as more openhearted than her lawsuit lets on, the kind of person who would instantly become an ally if she made even one gay friend. Privately, I vow to convert *her*.

Sadly, her attorneys swoop in and advise her not to do the interview. She's being represented by the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, basically a conservative think tank on steroids. "Based on our litigation, policy output, and ability to move the needle, we might more accurately be called a 'do tank,'" its website quips. Alas, doing *interviews* appears not to be their priority, as they ignore my request for comment. All I wanted was to bond with Joy! I think she'd appreciate my joke that Kinsman Redeemer is the perfect name for a dildo.



STOCKSY.

By the time I purchase Finding You, a \$350 at-home e-course subtitled An Identity-Based Journey Out of Homosexuality and Into All Things New, my gayness is so untreated that I am feral. I need a plan. I need *rigor*. Published in 2022 by a California pastor named Ken Williams, this hefty curriculum—with 47 ministry and teaching videos spanning sexual orientation and gender identity plus a 328-page workbook—seems to fit the bill.

Williams and his on-camera ministry partner, Elizabeth Woning, assure you that they were once just as queer as you are, ya perv. Woning was a proud butch lesbian in an affirming faith community, buzzing her hair off with "masculine" abandon using a #2 clipper guard...but her soul was secretly troubled because she was finding too much fellowship at the gay bar. Williams, meanwhile, spent his homo era masturbating ferociously to the Trinity Broadcasting Network (!) and lusting for the naked flesh of "three or four guys" before laying down his life for the Big Himbo upstairs.

Both married to opposite-sex partners now, Ken and Elizabeth would never shame you for *your* depravity. Just bear in mind—per a casual FYI in the workbook—that "the forces of darkness, under the leadership of Satan, have told us that we are gay, bi-sexual, lesbian, trans, queer, asexual, pansexual, or whatever. He lies to us about our identity and then watches to see if we believe him."

Not to worry though! Williams and Woning claim a successful track record of cockblocking Lucifer. They're cofounders of the Changed Movement, an affinity group for folks who have hung up the rainbow unitards and left the queer community for Christ. Well, except when they're circling back to organize *against* queer causes: In 2019, Williams, Woning, and other "once-gays" of Changed rallied on Capitol Hill to stop the Therapeutic Fraud Prevention Act, a proposed federal ban on conversion therapy. Since then, the bill

hath died and risen and died again in Congress, most recently in January. God bless America.

The unsupervised nature of Finding You quickly brings out a restless delinquency in me. Left to my own devices, I scribble crude drawings of boobs in the notes sections of my workbook and text lively quotes from the course material to my all-dyke group chat. I click from video to video at random just to assess Ken's cute little outfits. (The brown leather bomber jacket: an objective slay.) I cannot simmer down and concentrate. My eyes roll back like a shark's, as when someone tries to teach me the rules of a board game.

Determined to take *something* from the program, I force myself to reflect on their list of major risk factors for same-sex attraction and gender confusion, which include neglect (no), highly critical parents (no), perfectionism (lol), and demonic influence. Sure, you know what? That last one actually resonates. My body is five gay poltergeists in a trench coat, a queer identity more complex, more magnificent, than I ever realized was possible.

Ken, Elizabeth, Joy, Joy's lawyers, Nicolosi past and present, Father B: Thank you for everything. The unholy spirits and I will have to leave you here. I wish you nothing but peace in your alternate reality. I hope you enjoy happiness and a life free of harm. See how simple that is, to let people exist? Join me if you dare. It's fun!

Your LGBTQ+ identity is not a sign of disease or brokenness, and anyone who tells you otherwise is being an ignorant jackass. If you are in crisis and need support, consider calling the Trevor Project at 866-488-7386 or the Trans Lifeline at 877-565-8860.