

Part 2 of 2

To my horror I soon discovered that all of my homosexual fantasies and compulsive masturbation had come with me. Somehow the fresh insecurities I felt as a husband and spiritual leader in our home sent me running for cover. My fears of sub-worthiness as a man knew nothing about walking in the light, in the company of helpful brothers. So, I crawled back to the familiar darkness.

It didn't take long before I began placing Amy in the unenviable position of the all-demanding wife who had to have things her way; It was the same old position I'd put my father in and resented him for. The effect was the same too. My life became a joyless performance of trying to please her. I hadn't the vaguest notion of how to conflict with my wife. In my family of origin there was no conflict. What Dad said was law. End of game. I knew nothing of the possibility of conflict fanning the flame of creativity. Rather, Amy's and my every disagreement became a threat to our relationship.

My performance fears and emotional dependency meant almost no fun in bed. The prospect of sexual intimacy with my wife always carried with it a low grade level of dread: Could I perform? Would I perform well enough? Again, I could not get my mind off myself. The result was I avoided sex, was ashamed of myself and made my wife feel less than beautiful. On the occasions that we would come together, two things would usually follow. First, I was always completely amazed at how satisfyingly wonderful it was, and thought: "Why can't I just get my act together and do this more often?" And second, I would hate myself for dragging in homosexual fantasies to lend me strength.

I sought relief from emotional dependency with Amy in the same way I had in my family of origin: Escape. I would steal away to take care of me. Worn out from playing the slave to Amy's demands, I judged that I had to get alone to carve out a place for my own ideas and get my own way. So, I guarded not only my homosexual secret from my wife, but also my heart. I judged nearly all my feelings as bad, and fearing disappointment, I would only rarely and reluctantly share my true desires.

Just as the boy had failed to identify himself with the masculine strength of his father, at 27 years I was no better off, and in truth, much worse. I was four years married and growing weary of a failed manhood. Yet I had become too good at hunkering down and bearing up under my load. I've come to see the young man that I was as a son bereft of his birthright, cut off from the legacy of his father.

And what was the legacy? To this day, my father, Bruce Alan Mitchell, is the greatest initiator I have ever known. He is the most selfless, confident adventurer I have ever met. He is a faithful and devoted husband, an able provider, and fierce protector of those he loves. In matters of the Spirit and Kingdom of God, my father is a pioneer, an apostolic warrior, and a captain of men. All this I knew at 27, and

yet my old untended wounds became welcome ground to unforgiveness and bitterness.

Huge roots of unforgiveness toward my father sank deep into me, strangling my heart and darkening my mind. The enemy's lies were so insinuated in me that however much I could see my father's strengths, I did not believe they were for me; for my younger brothers perhaps, but not me. This kind of thinking fueled my resentment towards Dad and others under his influence. Unforgiveness bound me, preventing me from receiving what my heavenly Father had always destined in Christ Jesus to be mine. The legacy of my father was to shape and strengthen my manhood to the glory of God. Bitter, defensive and cut off from the truth, what would ripen my heart to yield forgiveness for Dad?

Marriage. Or maybe I should say the great difficulty Amy and I were having in ours. Our immaturity and emotional dependencies—inside and out of the marriage—drove us into counseling. A wise and provocative therapist at Catholic University held up my “father issue” before me and dared me to do something about it. And I did. I knew for the sake of my marriage and my soul it was time to release Dad from all that I had held against him for all the years.

I prepared a very long list of grievances that I had held against my father and arranged to meet him the next time he was in town on business. I knew that Dad did not need to be present for me to surrender my right to requital and allow Jesus on the cross to bear what was killing me. Yet I knew it would help me if my father would listen and receive my forgiveness. Dad agreed. Our meeting opened a great dam of emotion in me that had been building since I was 7 or 8 years old. As I went through each item that I had held against my father, I said, “Dad, I forgive you for...”, and I let it go into the cross. At the end of my long list, my father took me in his arms, and weeping with me, thanked me for forgiving him. That summer day in 1992 was the beginning of my healing journey.

In the following year and a half I completed theological training, moved to Charleston, South Carolina to assist in a congregation, and was ordained to the Episcopal priesthood. My pride and position pressured me into thinking there really wasn't room now, if there ever had been, for me to be screwed up. The problem, of course, was that I was screwed up. Yes, I had forgiven my father. But there were a 1000 steps beckoning beyond the first. Nonetheless, my need to appear well (aka fear and pride) obstructed the way, so I threw myself into the important pastoral work that I was doing for God.

Again, God pounded my pride on the anvil of marriage. Over the course of it, Amy had often cried out angrily at my sexual neglect and rejection of her. But now her youthful hope was dying. On three occasions my wife calmly revealed her deep pain and rejection at my disinterest and avoidance of sex. Each time she said that she was ready to put finally the hope of any sexual intimacy with me behind her, the pain of wanting and of not being wanted was too great to go on with. She reassured me that she would not leave me and suggested that we live as brother and sister.

These three conversations broke me. I became nauseated at the prospect of destroying my bride's dream and living in a farce of a marriage. I concluded that if I didn't love myself enough to get help, I would seek help for the love of Amy. Somewhere much deeper I felt the beginnings of a kind of rage. It was altogether new to me. Before forgiving my father, nearly all my anger was acutely aimed at him. But this anger was duller and more visceral. It was as though I was awakening to something old and chronic. The closest I can come to describing it would be the deep and terrible wrenching one might endure who has at long last stopped denying that he's been defrauded.

God graciously helped me to begin to come present to this truth: I was created for qualities immeasurably higher and truer than I had known or that I could achieve. I began to see the impotency and futility of all my years spent trying to be good and strong as so much mockery of the Lord's true work of me. The Holy Spirit urged me to come with my rage and cry out to the Father. I did. And the more I did, the more I became convinced that the Father must come, reveal, and impart His honor and strength in me or repent of His plans for me. Although His Word convinced me He would never repent, I still had no idea how He would change me. What I could not see then was that He had already begun.

In 1994 a fellow priest invited me to begin a program of healing called Living Waters. For 30 weeks I worshiped and learned, received healing prayer, and poured out my soul to fellow confidants. It is not an overstatement to say that the power of Christ present in that group challenged my basic understanding of what "church" is. Never in my life had I been with other believers who stood so shamelessly transparent with their needs and brokenness, and who so whole-heartedly offered themselves to God and one another for transformation. However small at first, Amy perceived a change in me. Wild horses couldn't have kept her out of Living Waters for herself the following year.

I began to realize this was a River in which to drink and bathe and live. Psalm 46:4 comes to mind: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells." I had joined a program to fix a problem. But now I realized the program was God's way of bringing me into a greater flow of communion with Christ and His people. This was the Body of Christ, His Church as I had never imagined possible but had always been dying for.

As I learned the rhythm of coming into the light and fellowship of my brothers through confession and renunciation of my sin, I received not only forgiveness but one healing after another (1 John 1:7, James 5:16). As brotherhood deepened with these godly men, I became convinced there was no conclusion to this (Ezekiel 47:1-12). What I was experiencing wasn't so much a series of events to memorialize but new creation in me and others. Why would I ever abandon the Life of the River for the old desert wastes of feigning goodness? Like the woman at the well who wasn't good at all, I had tasted the Living Water and I need never go thirsting again.

Are you short on goodness in general or in a particular area of your life? Then here's an invitation to stop the madness of trying to believe that your attempt at goodness is somehow working God's goodness in you. Admit that it is not. Instead, taste and see that the *LORD* is good (Psalm 34:4 italics mine). Neither you nor anyone else will be in doubt when the goodness of God soaks you and overflows from your life. Until you have tasted Living Water in the place that you thirst, you remain parched there. If you find yourself dry, then heed this: "'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:5b-7). Cry out, and keep crying out, to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for mercy. Then keep your eyes open for His followers, His Body. For the Father has willed to transform your life through the Body of His Son. If your reaction to all I've said here is, "But I've done that!", then ask the Lord how you can humble yourself more and do it.

For the last 14 years, my wife Amy and I have had the joy of reaching broken men and women with the good news of what the Almighty has done, and is doing, in our lives. Five years ago (16 years into our marriage), He crowned our lives with children. Then three years later He did it again. Two sets of twins! To God's glory, I am enjoying a solidifying manhood. I am my heavenly Father's beloved son, and growing into my earthly Dad's rich legacy. I am walking in ever increasing wholeness as a man, a brother, a husband and a father. I praise the Lord for growing me up, day by day, into the man He has made me to be. In the words of the psalmist, "I love the LORD, for He heard my voice; He heard my pleas for mercy. Because He inclined His ear to me, I will call on Him as long as I live." And "Oh Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!" (Psalms 116:1; 118:1)