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Can Gay Be Cured? My Psychiatrist Tried . . .

A prominent doctor's recent apology for supporting reparation therapy brought back teenage memories — and a letter I received years later

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In today's politically correct world people are always demanding apologies. So when someone prominent voluntarily apologizes for something he or she said or did, it makes front-page news.

Last month there was a page one story in *The New York Times* ("Psychiatry Giant Sorry for Backing Gay 'Cure'") about Dr. Robert Spitzer, considered by some to be the father of modern-day psychiatry. Eighty years old and suffering from Parkinson's, Dr. Spitzer can barely walk, sit in a chair or hold his head up. Still, on a recent morning at 4 a.m., he

got out of bed in Princeton, N.J., and went to his computer, "knowing there was something he had to do," the *Times* said. He wrote an apology to the gay community.

Dr. Spitzer wanted to publicly recant his study supporting reparation therapy, which is also known as sexual reorientation or conversion therapy. Published in *The Archives of Sexual Behavior* in 2003, his report gave credence to the notion that a gay person can go straight, if he or she really wants to. Dr. Spitzer's research consisted of phone interviews with 200 men and women who claimed to have successfully changed their sexual orientation. The study did not test any particular therapy — only half of its subjects had undergone any treatment at all; others had worked with pastoral counselors or independent Bible study. Some participants were ex-gay advocates who were now politically active.

Although Dr. Spitzer's study did not conclude that being gay was a choice, or that it was possible for someone in therapy to change as a result of the sessions, conservative activist groups cited it as proof that gay people can be "cured."

The gay community felt betrayed by the good doctor.

After all, it was Dr. Spitzer who earlier had fought hard to convince the American Psychiatric Association to drop homosexuality from its field manual of disorders. It was replaced in 1973 with his alternative, "sexual orientation disturbance," to identify people whose sexuality, gay or straight, caused them distress. This was a huge victory for gay rights.

Although Dr. Spitzer doesn't say in the *Times* why he felt compelled to study reparation therapy, colleagues theorize that he always enjoyed disturbing the peace by challenging accepted beliefs. Now, however, Spitzer admits his research was flawed — and for that, he says he's sorry. His apology was issued a few days before the Pan American Health Organization, part of the United Nations' World Health Organization, released a report calling reparation therapy "a serious threat

to the health and well-being — even the lives — of affected people.”

For me, the most interesting part of the article was its penultimate paragraph, in which Dr. Spitzer tells the Times: “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen a scientist write a letter saying that the data were all there but were totally misinterpreted. Who admitted that and who apologized to his readers. That’s something, don’t you think?”

I do indeed, and I’ll tell you why.

When I was a senior in high school in 1966 — seven years before Spitzer first took on the APA — a psychiatrist tried to cure me of my homosexual urges. (Spoiler alert: He didn’t succeed.)

To put that time period in perspective for younger readers, homosexuals back then were considered perverts and criminals. Believe me, I did not attend anything close to *Glee*’s William McKinley High, where same-sex couples regularly hold hands, kiss, sleep together and pledge eternal love to their partners. Who in the 1960s could have seen that coming to prime-time TV? Unlike the kids at McKinley, I did not have forward-thinking teachers or parents; few children who were gay or “different” did — and I grew up in the progressive San Francisco Bay Area.

Appearance-wise, my psychiatrist certainly fit the Dr. Freud stereotype. He wore a dark suit and tie, and sported a graying goatee. His office was in a modular, mid-20th century building that had a waiting room furnished in Danish modern. Floor-to-ceiling windows in his office looked out onto a garden with lush ferns and ivy-trellised oak trees. We sat in black leather chairs facing each other.

During our weekly sessions the doctor tried to convince me that I was simply going through a stage; in time, he said, I would be sexually attracted to women. Every few weeks my parents were brought in to discuss my “progress.” (My parents agreed to send me to the shrink after I came out to our family doctor, who recommended I get help. Our GP thought it was just a phase, too.)

After three months, my visits came to an end — and not because I was cured. At \$30 an hour, my parents couldn’t afford the bill any longer. I remember my last words to the doctor as I happily exited his office on a Wednesday afternoon: “Nothing has changed.”

“But it will,” he said, “You’ll see.” We shook hands and he wished me luck.

Over the years I never told anyone about my therapy or brought it up with my parents; they didn’t discuss it with me either. We edited the experience out of our family album. To the day they died, my sexuality was never mentioned again.

Then one day in the early ’90s, when I was approaching my mid-40s and living in New York City, a memory came rushing back to me. I can’t say why. Sometimes, as Tennessee Williams writes in “The Glass Menagerie,” the past just touches your shoulder. I was walking by myself through Central Park on a hot August afternoon when my mind flashed on a skinny 17-year-old boy sitting in a psychiatrist’s office. Me. I’m told by the doctor to stand up and walk around the room. “You see, you don’t swish,” the doctor says. “You’re not one of them. You are a normal young man.”

The memory made my face burn. Fueled by anger, I went back to my apartment, picked up the phone and called directory assistance. I got the doctor’s address. To my surprise, he was still in practice.

I typed a letter to him.

Dear Dr. —

In 1966 I spent three months under your care. You tried to convince me that I was wrong about my homosexual urges. On our last visit you said that in time they would pass and that I would be normal. “Just wait,” you told me. “You’ll see.” Well, Doctor, I’ve been waiting more than 25 years now and this change still hasn’t happened. I’m writing you to ask: Should I continue to wait? And if so, for how long?

I signed and mailed it.

A week later, there was a letter in my mailbox from the doctor. I wasn’t anticipating a reply.

I took it upstairs, sat down on my bed and nervously opened it. In response to my snotty letter, I half-expected a fist to come flying out at me. As Dr. Spitzer implied in the Times, scientists never think they're wrong.

Dear Mr. Stark,

I don't remember you, but I have had many patients over the years. I'm sure I have given some of them very bad advice, especially back then. Our profession wasn't all that enlightened. I'm truly sorry for any pain I've caused you. Your letter came to me as I'm packing up my office. I've decided to retire, and this is my last day here. Thank you for writing to me. I wish you all the best.

As I sat on my bed, I felt the anger leaving my body, anger I didn't realize I had been carrying with me throughout my adult life. By denying it any light, I thought I had killed it long ago. Holding the letter in my hand, rereading it over and over, I felt I had been given a gift that I hadn't asked for — or even known to ask for. My truth was acknowledged.

Who knew a simple "I'm sorry" could do that?

Maybe Dr. Spitzer.