

WHY ARE WE GAY?

Everybody has an idea: It's **genetics**—we're born that way. It's our mothers and **testosterone** in the womb. It's the **environment** as we were growing up. One thing we know for sure: The possible explanations raise as many questions as they answer, particularly: What would happen if we found the one true answer? and, Would we change if we could?

By Mubarak Dahir

Mark Stoner pins it on the clarinet. Ever since Stoner, a 41-year-old creative director for an advertising agency in Lancaster, Pa., realized that three out of four of his childhood friends who played the clarinet grew up to be gay, he has taken note of who among his adult gay friends once played the instrument. What he calls an "exhaustive but unscientific" survey covering two decades indicates that "there is an extremely high correlation between playing the clarinet and being gay," he says.

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—Neuroscientist Simon LeVay, who found differences in the brain

"My theory is that most boys want to play the trumpet," the former woodwind player says, only partly in jest. "But the more sensitive boys wind up with the clarinet, and we're the ones who turn out gay."

Stoner's theory, of course, is offered tongue-in-cheek. But in the past decade or so, researchers from disparate fields

spanning genetics, audiology, and behavioral science have amassed bits and pieces of evidence that they believe indicate what may determine sexual orientation. If they're right, our sexual orientation may well be fixed long before any maestro blows his first note.

But despite some compelling studies that indicate that the propensity to be gay or lesbian is determined before birth—either genetically or through biological processes in the womb—most researchers today agree a complex combination of genetics, biology, and environmental influences work together to make the determination. Just how much is predetermined by the forces of genes and how much is shaped by influences such as society and culture remain unclear—and hotly debated. So too does the corollary question of whether sexual orientation is somehow an innate trait and thus fixed for life or whether it is malleable and thus changeable over time.

More than scientific curiosity hangs in the balance. For years the gay and lesbian political establishment has leaned, at least to some degree, on the argument that sexual orientation is inborn and permanent and thus should not be a basis for discrimination. The tactic has proved incredibly successful. Polls repeatedly indicate that Americans who believe sexual orientation is either genetic or biological are much more likely to support gay and lesbian civil rights than those

who believe it is determined primarily by environmental influences.

In a Gallup Poll conducted in May, half of those surveyed said they believe homosexuality is genetic, and half said it is environmental. In a 1977 Gallup Poll, respondents pointed to the environment over genetics by more than a 4-to-1 ratio. The poll calls this shift in perception "one of the more significant changes in American public opinion on gay and lesbian issues." It is clearly accompanied by increasing tolerance toward gays and lesbians. In May, 52% of Gallup respondents said homosexuality is an "acceptable alternative lifestyle," compared with 38% in 1977. And a majority, 54%, agreed that "homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal," compared with 43% in 1977.

"The question of whether or not gayness is immutable is rather crucial in the political arena," says Simon LeVay, a neuroscientist who in 1991 found structural differences between the brains of gay men and heterosexual men. "The American public will have a different attitude toward gay rights depending on whether they believe being gay is a matter of choice or not. You can argue all you want that it shouldn't be that way, but that's the fact. If science can show sexual orientation is a deep aspect of a person's being, there is potential for immense good. But it does mean the science gets politicized."

ALL THE SCIENCE SO FAR

Here's what researchers have reported in their search for the "cause"

- Lesbians' ring fingers tend to be longer than their index fingers, whereas straight women's ring fingers tend to be the same length as their index fingers.
- Boys who show "pervasive and persistently" effeminate behavior have about a 75% chance of growing up gay.
- A person with a gay identical twin is at least 10 times more likely to be gay than a person without one.
- There is about a 2% chance that a firstborn male will grow up gay. That chance grows to at least 6% for males with four or more older brothers.
- Gay men and lesbians are more likely to be left-handed.
- Gay men have smaller hypothalamuses than straight men.
- A man is more likely to be gay if there are gay men on his mother's side of the family.
- Lesbians' inner ears tend to react to sounds more like men's inner ears than like straight women's.
- Gay men have more testosterone and larger genitalia than straight men.

IS IT GENETIC?

NICK VELASQUEZ

Stats: Student, 21, California native
Gay relatives: "My dad was gay. He died of AIDS in 1991 at 34 years old. Also on my dad's side I have two distant cousins, both lesbian."
Why are you gay? "I identify as bisexual, actually. I think it's very limiting, the notion that people can't love both [sexes], that it is one way or the other—it's on a continuum. I've always felt different, that there was something that separated me from other people, a different outlook on life; even when I was so young, [it was] in a nonsexual way."

DEBORAH REECE

Stats: Security guard and student, 45, California native

Gay relatives: "I have a gay grandmother, a bisexual aunt, and at least two gay nephews. Half my family is gay!"
Why are you gay? "That's the million-dollar question. And if I knew the answer, I'd be a millionaire! I am who I am. I've known since I was 4. It's natural to me. My mother told me [I was gay]. She used to tell me, 'Don't bother with those guys.'"

DANNY LEMOS

Stats: TV writer, 44, California native
Gay relatives: "Three gay brothers, including my twin, who died of AIDS."
Why are you gay? "Destiny. Some people are meant to be doctors, artists. I was meant to be gay, out, expressive. I served as a role model, especially to my younger brothers. If there's a God,

I think he picks it. If it's science, that's what picks it. I've never had a moment where I didn't know who I was."

KATE NIELSEN

Stats: Writer, 41, Colorado native
Gay relatives: None
Why are you gay? "I think you're born into it, just like some people are born left-handed. It's just what you're dealt. I was 6, I went to see *The Sound of Music*, and I wanted to be Christopher Plummer because I wanted to be with Julie Andrews."

Politics aside, scientists insist there is commanding research to show that sexual orientation is largely influenced by genetics. "There's no debate on that from any reasonable scientist. The evidence for it stands fast," says Dean Hamer, a molecular biologist at the National Insti-

tutes of Health and an early pioneer in research linking sexual orientation to genes. In 1993, Hamer was the first to report finding a specific slice of DNA that could be linked to homosexuality.

He first studied the family histories of 114 gay men and discovered that many

male relatives on the mother's side of the family were also gay. Since men always inherit an X chromosome from their mothers, the study suggested a genetic link between the X chromosome and homosexuality. Hamer then scrutinized the DNA for 40 pairs of gay brothers and found that

ADVOCATE READERS WEIGH IN

We asked out online visitors to tell us *their* stories about why they're gay. Here are some of their responses.

GENETICS

No doubt about it in my family: God made us the way we are—genetically. I suspect that my grandfather was gay for many reasons. His second son, my uncle, came out to the entire family at my parents' 50th wedding anniversary party—he was 70 at the time! His son, my cousin, is gay. I am gay. Pretty sound evidence, considering we were all born in different decades, in different places, and were raised in totally different environments.

W.Z., Indianapolis, Ind.

I don't have a history of abuse, and I didn't just wake up one morning and decide to be lesbian. Also, I don't think it was anything my mom did while she was pregnant with me, as she often laments. I am this way. I must have been born this way. When I was growing up, *The Dukes of Hazard* was popular. I watched it every night, religiously. Daisy stirred something in me that I couldn't explain. I was 8 or 9 then.

T.M., Indiana

I am sure I was born gay. I used to steal dolls and jump ropes from girls then hide them, knowing that I would get into *big* trouble if I didn't like "boy things." Luckily I learned to "pass for a boy," so I didn't get bullied too often, but I did bear witness to the horrors bestowed upon more fey-type males.

A.S., via the Internet

Clearly genetic. No straight person I know can tell me the date, time, and even when they "decided" they were straight—so

this notion of "choice" is pure crap. It can't be a gift—it would be one that most people would return. But to where and to whom? Is there a customer service line for this? It's not a "choice" and it is not a "lifestyle"—it's a genetic "orientation." It was an initially unwelcome visitor... now [it] gives me comfort as well as challenges me every day.

E.B., Chicago, Ill.

ENVIRONMENT

I was raised in the archetypal situation for being a gay man: with a chronically overbearing, fiercely possessive mother; a weak, quiet, completely uncommunicative father; and a thorough disinterest in violent sports! I, like many, many thousands of other gay men of my generation (I was born in 1950, in a tiny town), went through absolute hell growing up "hiding." Growing up "gay" (never liked that word—there's nothing "gay" about being gay!) nearly destroyed my life! Frankly, I wish to God (or whoever or whatever is out there) that I had *never* been homosexual!

M.D., San Francisco, Calif.

I think genes are passed on with neutral sexual orientation. To me, homosexuality or heterosexuality is totally due to the environment in which we are raised. In a nutshell, I believe a male who stays bonded with his mother is usually homosexual. A female who bonds more strongly with the father is usually homosexual. A male and a female who bond about equally with the mother and the father are more likely to be bisexual.

My mother died when I was 8 months old. My father remarried

when I was 1 year old. His new wife did not want him to have much to do with his first children. I had five older brothers and three older sisters. My brothers did not want to have much to do with me. My three sisters adored me, so I spent most of my time with them. The sisters painted my deceased mother as being almost a saint. I think I naturally identified with my sisters' values and the values of my mother, which they told me about in detail. This included their sexual orientation.

We all inherit certain physical characteristics from our parents and we can inherit certain abstract characteristics such as temperament. I do not think that these genetically inherited qualities lead to homosexuality.

J.D., via the Internet

GOD

I personally believe I am gay because God made me such. I believe it is a gift and that he has a special reason for creating me as a lesbian. It doesn't matter if I was created this way biologically or if circumstances in my life molded me; this is who I am meant to be. I am proud to be a lesbian and at peace.

D.S., Poland, Ohio

I embrace the gift God gave me. I believe God chose each and every gay, lesbian, bi, and transgendered individual to teach others about love, tolerance, and acceptance. So I remind all my gay brothers and sisters: Don't worry. God did not make a mistake. He has a plan and a reason for your existence.

A.G., Oxnard, Calif.

Before I met Mary-love and fell in love with her, I never told myself I wanted to be a lesbian. The thought never crossed my mind. After a few bad relationships with guys, I guess falling in love with Mary-love after two years and four months of a friendship was bound to happen—it was a destiny I believe God gave to me.

E.D., via the Internet

IT'S A CHOICE

Although I have been married and have two sons, I was a late bloomer and decided in my late 20s or early 30s that being a lesbian was OK and that, for me, it is a choice.

J.L., via the Internet

As a graduate clinician in speech-language pathology, I find it difficult to deny that there is a genetic propensity to homosexuality, just as there is to stuttering. However, the choice to act upon the drive is entirely a symbol of our humanity. The degree to which we embrace our genetic predisposition is the degree to which we marry our understanding of our physical self and our identity.

T.A., Boston, Mass.

It is always a choice whether to be completely honest with yourself and admit you are not in the majority and are attracted to the same sex. I wasn't able to admit this to myself until a few weeks before my 28th birthday. The *choice* is to live your life as best as you can. The question "Why are you gay or lesbian?" is a small part of a much bigger question: "Why are you You?"

C.F., Louisville, Ky.

33 of them shared a specific region on a portion of the X chromosome.

His work supported earlier evidence pointing to a genetic link to homosexuality.

In 1991, J. Michael Bailey, a psychology professor at Northwestern University, and Richard Pillard, a psychiatrist at Boston University School of Medicine, examined

a group of gay men, 56 of whom had an identical twin, 54 of whom had a fraternal twin brother, and 57 of whom had a brother by adoption. Among those with an identi-

ANNUAL EDITIONS

cal twin, in 52% of the cases the twin was also gay. Among fraternal twin brothers, in 22% of cases both twins were gay. Just 11% of those who had a brother by adoption reported that the brother was gay. Another study by Bailey and Pillard found similar patterns in lesbians.

WAS IT OUR PARENTS?

SUSAN DOST

Stats: Owner of an assisted-living company, 36, Michigan native

Gay relatives: "There seems to be a lineage of women in my family who end up 'single.'"

Why are you gay? "I believe that is the way the universe intended for me [to be]. I don't think I have a choice in the way I am. I think it's biological."

HAINES WILKERSON

Stats: Magazine creative director, 46, California native

Gay relatives: "One, but not out."

Why are you gay? "I didn't have any choice in the matter whatsoever. It's completely genetic. Environment modifies a gay person's behavior, but it doesn't cause it. I tried to impose straight attributes for my life. They never stuck."

CHUCK KIM

Stats: Reporter and comic book writer, 29, New York native

Gay relatives: None

Why are you gay? "I just remember always wanting to be around guys. I think being gay is a combination of environment and genetics—something that may act as a catalyst, activating that potential."

CLAUDIA SANCHEZ

Stats: Educator, personal chef, 26, California native

Gay relatives: None

Why are you gay? "All my physical and emotional attractions have been to women. It wasn't really a choice, just something I've always had. Men just never attracted me. Being a lesbian is my reality."

Overall, a person with a gay identical twin is at least 10 times more likely to be gay. A man with a gay brother is anywhere from three to seven times more likely to also be gay. And a woman with a lesbian sister is anywhere from four to eight times more likely to also be lesbian. "All this shows that sexual orientation is largely genetic," Pillard says.

Hamer says genes provide about 50% of the influence on sexual orientation. Pillard wouldn't give a fixed percentage, although he said he believes it is "substantially" greater than 50%. Other scientists have estimated the genetic contribution could be as high as 70%.

However strong the influence of genes, it is not 100%. "We're never going to find the 'gay gene'" Hamer says. "There's no switch that turns it on or off. It's not that simple."

He and other researchers agree that the remaining influences are a complex mixture of biological developments and environmental stimuli. But how much power each wields is as yet unknown.

Evidence is mounting, however, for the argument that much of the remaining influence comes from prenatal biological phenomena. LeVay, for example, found a size difference between gay men's and straight men's hypothalamuses—a part of the brain believed to affect sexual behavior. His "hunch," he says, is that gay men's brains develop differently than straight men's because they are exposed to higher levels of testosterone during pregnancy.

"There's a growing evidence to support the idea that biological and developmental factors before birth exert a strong influence on sexual orientation," LeVay says.

A host of biological indicators of homosexuality boost the theory. For example, research from the University of Liverpool in England has shown that gay men and lesbians are more likely than straights to be left-handed and that lesbians have hand patterns that resemble a man's more than a straight female's. Dennis McFadden, a scientist at the University of Texas at Austin, has reported that lesbians' auditory systems seem to develop somewhere between what is typical for heterosexual men and women. According to studies done by

Marc Breedlove, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, there is a direct correlation between the lengths of some fingers of the hand and gayness. An what gay man doesn't relish the study that found that gay men tend to be better endowed than their straight counterparts?

BY CHOICE?

JOHN STRAUSS

Stats: Retired motion picture music editor, 81, New York native

Gay relatives: None

Why are you gay? "Because I'm gay. I was an overprotected child, a sissy boy, and felt uncomfortable with my surroundings. My mother was very protective. My first awareness that I had a sexuality at all was when I was 12 or 13. It developed in an instance when I saw my roommate at camp undressed, and there was a voice in my head that said, *Oh, my God, I'm gay.* Only we didn't call it that at the time; we called it *homosexual.*"

TONY ROMAN

Stats: CyberCenter coordinator, Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, 56, New York native

Gay relatives: "I had a gay cousin, who died of AIDS."

Why are you gay? "Nature and God just made me that way. At first I blamed my upbringing for it. I was raised by my mom and stepdad; my father died when I was young. It was a strict Catholic upbringing, [which] had a lot to do with the guilt and suppressing these feelings. I have no kind words for churches. I did a lot of drinking. After I sobered up, I realized I had no one to blame. I am who I am."

—Profiles reported by Alexander Cho

The common thread in many of these findings is the belief that differences in prenatal development are responsible for the variances in anatomy—and in sexual orientation as well. Like LeVay, Breedlove attributes his finding of finger-length differences between gay and straight men to the level of fetal exposure to testosterone. "There is a growing body

WHY ARE WE GAY?

JESSICA MENDIETA

Stats: hairdresser, 31, Ohio native

Gay relatives: "I have a gay nephew and at least four gay cousins."

Why are you gay? "I was born gay. I was always attracted to women. My best friends all through junior high and high school were all women. I had my first lover when I was 19. When I met her it was like, *Bang! I definitely love women.*"

JOSHUA EWING

Stats: Student, 18, California native

Gay relatives: None

Why are you gay? "I think it's most definitely genetics. I grew up with my mom and step-dad, and in high school moved in with my biological father. My dad thinks it's a choice, but I knew all along that I wasn't like the other boys, chasing girls. I was doing it, but more to fit in, to conceal my true identity of being homosexual. There are people out there who say they choose, and that's OK. But I didn't have a choice. Everyone is different."

MICHAEL KING

Stats: Editor-designer, 28, West Virginia native

Gay relatives: "I don't know of any concretely, but there are a few that I suspect."

Why are you gay? "It's just who I am. I grew up in the Bible Belt; I played football. I am the perfect example of why environment *doesn't* cause you to be gay, because being gay in West Virginia is not even an option."

LIONEL FRIEDMAN

Stats: Retired from the entertainment industry, 69, Missouri native

Gay relatives: "My younger brother is gay."

Why are you gay? "It's always been there. I just like men. I absolutely feel like I was born with it. I came out at a very young age, 13. My dad was very supportive. My mother wasn't."

ALEXANDER CHO

Stats: Intern at *The Advocate*, 20, California native

Gay relatives: None

Why are you gay? "I have no clue. I grew up in a conventional home, and [being gay] has been with me as long as I can remember, so I'd probably say I was born with it. It was certainly not a choice, although I did choose to suppress it for a long time. I was filled with a lot of self-hate when I realized [I was gay], and it's something that I'm just now beginning the process of getting over."

MERCEDES SALAS

Stats: Waitress, 24, native of the Dominican Republic

Gay relatives: "I have two bisexual cousins, both female."

Why are you gay? "I just feel it. I feel no sexual attraction to men. Instead, I feel attraction to women. Even when I didn't know the concept, the feeling was always there. It was at age 16, when I was reading about it, I came to know that people were 'gay.' Women weren't as badly treated [as gay men], so that made me feel more comfortable asking questions."

of research to support the theory that different hormone levels can cause the brain to differentiate one way or the other—to be straight or gay," LeVay adds.

"THERE IS A SMALL MINORITY OF PEOPLE IN WHICH SEXUAL ORIENTATION IS MALLEABLE. IT WOULD SEEM THAT REPARATIVE THERAPY IS SOMETIMES SUCCESSFUL. I TALKED TO 200 PEOPLE ON THE PHONE. SOME MAY BE EXAGGERATING THEIR CHANGES, BUT I CAN'T BELIEVE THE WHOLE THING IS JUST MADE UP."

—*Psychiatrist Robert Spitzer, who found that gay people can change their sexual orientation if they are "highly motivated"*

But it remains murky just how much and just how strongly these biological factors shape sexual orientation. "I hon-

estly can't be sure how to interpret the differences I found in brain structure." LeVay says.

Which leaves open the final, and most controversial, possibility: How much is sexual orientation determined by a person's environment?

Even the most ardent geneticists and biologists aren't willing to discount a role for external stimuli. "I certainly wouldn't rule out that life experiences can play a role in sexual orientation," LeVay says.

Historically, determining the "causes" of homosexuality was left entirely to the domain of psychology, which attempted to explain homosexuality with theories of mental maladjustment. Perhaps ironically, today it is often psychologists and psychiatrists who argue most ardently against the environmental influence on gayness.

"I've spent 30 years studying psychology, and I don't see any environmental differences that affect a person's sexual orientation," says Richard Isay, a psychi-

atry professor at Cornell University and author of the book *Becoming Gay*.

Psychiatrist Richard Pillard agrees. "I strongly believe that at birth the wiring in the brain tells us if we are gay or straight," he says.

Isay says that "all the tired old postulations"—that homosexuality is caused by, for instance, an overprotective mother, a distant father, or a sexual molestation or trauma in childhood—have been "completely discredited" by the mental health profession. What the environment affects, he says, is "how you express your sexuality. Very, very few mental health professionals hold on to the notion that environment molds sexual orientation, and there's just no real evidence to support that."

However, numerous researchers point to what LeVay categorizes as the "oodles of data" that sexuality appears to be more fluid in women than in men, suggesting that, for some people at least, sexual orientation may not be genetically or bio-

COMMENTARIES: "WHY?" IS THE WRONG QUESTION

BEING GAY OR LESBIAN IS A BLESSING, SAYS SPIRITUAL WRITER CHRISTIAN DE LA HUERTA. THE BEST USE OF THAT GIFT IS NOT TO SEEK ITS CAUSE OR TRY TO CHANGE IT BUT TO USE IT TO FIND OUR TRUE PURPOSE

Part of me would be fascinated to know what makes me gay. My earliest sexual fantasies—before I knew what sex was—were always about men. Interestingly, my earliest romantic fantasies—those involving kissing, holding hands, etc.—were about women. The heterosexist cultural conditioning had already begun.

Though we may never know for sure, I suspect that gayness results from a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Ultimately, however, does it really matter? Nature or nurture, genetics or the environment, choice or not, so what? Knowing what makes us gay might be interesting, might help take the discussion out of religious and moral arenas, but it won't change who we are or the fact that we are here and always have been.

Clearly, evolution, in its mysterious and inexorable wisdom, would long ago have handled the situation if queer folk did not serve some kind of purpose. It may be more useful, then, to ask a different question: What are we going to do with the reality of our existence? If, in fact, we serve a purpose, what might that be? What contributions do we make? How do we make a difference in the world?

In contrast to what "ex-gay" ad campaigns would have us believe, far from needing to "recover" from homosexuality in order to have spiritual grace, it appears that throughout history and across different cultures queer people have not only been spiritually inclined but have actually been respected and revered for assuming roles of spiritual leadership. Many enact those same roles today. Mediators, scouts of consciousness, keepers of beauty, healers, teachers, caregivers, sacred clowns, shamans, priests—these are roles to which we have gravitated, for which we have exhibited a propensity, and which we have filled in disproportionate numbers.

Our outsider status gives us a special sense of perspective—our ability to see the

forest *and* the trees. Because we stand outside the mainstream in one area, we are not as rigidly bound by its rules in other areas. Although this may be stressful and cause pain, loneliness, and alienation at some points in our lives, it also creates the opportunity to live by our own rules. We are privy to a more honest process of enlightenment than blind acceptance of tired rules handed down to us by past generations.

Countless people have suppressed their sexual feelings—with varying degrees of success and failure—throughout history and continue to do so. But modifying or suppressing sexual behavior is one thing; changing a person's fundamental orientation is quite another. Far from being an effort to be more "natural," the attempt to change such a fundamental characteristic is an *affront* to what is natural.

One year after I came out to my father, a Catholic psychiatrist, I understood what is often meant by *choice*. After kindly reassuring me that I would always be his son and that he and my mother would always love me, my father proceeded to advise that I choose another lifestyle. He said that it is a very difficult life, that he knew because he had treated many homosexuals, even "curing" some. What my father didn't know, however, is that at least two of those he'd "cured" I'd slept with postcure. I know because after we did our thing, they asked if I was related to so-and-so. When I answered that he was my father, they said "Oh, I used to go to him."

Sexuality, like everything else, including matter, is a form of energy. Though it can be transmuted, energy cannot be destroyed. What is suppressed in one place will inevitably surface elsewhere. And when the suppressed energy of sexuality re-emerges elsewhere, it too often does so in ugly and unhealthy forms.

For me, repressing such an intrinsic part of myself was no longer an option. It's been a very long and arduous journey, but I have

come to such a profound place of acceptance that I actually live in a state of gratitude for being gay.

I look forward to the day when sexual orientation will be a nonissue, and perhaps all the energy now spent on trying to figure out why we're here could be redirected toward maximizing our unique potential. More and more people are beginning to realize that queers add value to our collective human existence, and given the desperate state of our world, we need all the help we can get—whatever the source.

Being gay is an advantage. It is a gift, a blessing, a privilege. In many ways it frees us up to discover who we really are. And who we are goes far beyond our sexual practices or the people with whom we tend to make romantic and emotional connections.

Had there been a way to alter my sexual orientation when I was growing up—and barely surviving the long, existential depression of my adolescence—what would I have done? I don't know, but now the answer is clear. To even consider the possibility of changing is ludicrous to me. Sure, life is still much easier for heteros. I still experience self-consciousness—truth be told, fear—in certain situations. Recently, at a national park, the guy I was with reached out and held my hand while a group of tourists approached. I felt tension. I felt fear. I pulled my hand away.

But would I change? Not a chance! I love being who I am and what I am. I love being gay. I love the sense of perspective, the freedom from societal rules, the generally more fun and open outlook on life. These blessings don't tell me *why* I'm gay, but they make me understand that "Why?" is not a question I need to ask.

De la Huerta is the founder of QSpirit and the author of Coming Out Spiritually and Coming Out Spiritually: The Next Step.

logically predetermined but heavily influenced by factors such as culture, customs, politics, and religion.

It's no secret why the long-standing debate over environmental influences is so critical and so contentious: If envi-

ronmental stimuli, can "make" us gay, can't other stimuli then "make" us straight?

COMMENTARIES "WHY?" IS THE WRONG QUESTION: (CONTINUED)

AS A GAY RIGHTS BATTLE CRY, "IT'S NOT OUR FAULT" SHORTCHANGES OUR HUMANITY, ARGUES **REBECCA ISAACS**. WHAT'S MORE, THE FLUIDITY OF SEXUALITY MAKES HARD-AND-FAST DEFINITIONS POOR POLITICAL TOOLS

Whatever we know about the origins of sexual orientation, we know that it is a complex and fascinating topic that will remain unresolved and controversial for the foreseeable future. Many discussions of sexual orientation's causes have subtext of the search for responsibility, even blame. But we need to attach blame only if we accept our opponents' premise that homosexuality is bad. The major point for me as we continue this discussion of the interplay between nature and nurture is that we need to affirm a basic premise: *Gay is good*. As a parent of a 6-year-old daughter, imparting a sense of pride in her family is critical to her well-being. Vanessa, my partner of 11 years, and I want Rachel to know that the most important value of our family is that we love and care for each other. She has learned from an early age about the importance of validating and believing in herself and her family.

From my perspective, the question is not so much "Where does homosexuality come from?" but "Why are we so concerned about knowing the 'cause'?" In the political arena, as in our daily lives, we need to assert the validity of our sexuality and our humanity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people *without* the need for caveats or explanations. After all, there is little discussion about the origins of *heterosexuality*.

It's ironic that while heterosexuality is so entrenched and unquestioned, the right wing continues to paint marriage and heterosexuality as being in a constant state of instability and crisis, with alternative sexualities as a principal threat. Right-wing ideology puts forward the premise that homosexuality is an enticing disease that people will catch if exposed, that it's a choice or temporary mental condition that must be overcome by counseling, prayer, coercion, abstinence, repression or electroshock therapy.

The counterassertion, that sexual orientation is a fixed and immutable characteristic, has also long been a part of the legal and political arguments we make for equal rights. If

sexual orientation is fixed, the argument goes, then we are not responsible for being gay and are therefore worthy of protection from discrimination. Yet a definitive answer to "Why are we gay?"—even if it were found—would not resolve our quest for equal rights, because those who would block our rights would continue to oppose us on other grounds.

I think that most people extrapolate a universal homosexual-origin story from their own personal experience. If they remember feeling different, feeling attraction to the same sex at an early age, they tend to think that sexual orientation is fixed from birth. Yet many people, women in particular, experience sexual orientation as more fluid than fixed. We need to be open to the range of personal, scientific, and social science theories that analyze sexuality in all its manifestations. Sexual orientation is not fixed in the same way for all people.

We know, for example, that there is a range to when people identify their sexual orientation. Many recognize same-sex attraction from an early age, but others come out later in life, in a particular context, with a particular person. Because we must embrace these differences, it also becomes more difficult to embrace a unified theory of sexuality's origins.

It is very hard to know what sexuality would look like freed from the dominance of heterosexuality. What if there were no stigma attached to being gay, lesbian, or bisexual? What if being gay didn't correlate to isolation, violence, rejection, and limited horizons for many teens? What if the strong arm of normative heterosexuality didn't force all of us into a separate and unequal box? What if sexual orientation truly were a part of each person's journey of self-discovery?

In my own experience I came to lesbianism through feminism, both personally and politically. Ti-Grace Atkinson said, "Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice." I truly believed that, and I was in college in the 1970s at a time and in an environment where the heavy curtain of heterosexuality was

momentarily lifted. My friends and I came out during that time of openness. Life after the lesbian nirvana, when we left our created community, was not so open. The pressures of dominant structures like heterosexual marriage reappeared. Today, some of us are still lesbians, some became straight-identified, and some identify as bisexual. I don't believe we each followed our one true, essential path or that there was only one path for each of us. A confluence of societal and personal experiences shaped our identities. Explaining that away with a scientific theory of sexual orientation seems unnecessary and indeed impossible.

I really do believe that for many people, sexuality involves acting on a range of feelings, behaviors, and opportunities. And I also believe that in a society that exacts a toll on people open to same-sex desire, options are more limited than they should be. We have learned from the bisexual movement that there is a range of sexual orientations and that desire is much more complicated than the identity categories we have set up. We box ourselves into a corner when we let others set the agenda and narrow the possibilities of expression.

Those who oppose our equal status politically and socially do so to deny our validity as human beings. Proving a biological or genetic basis will now sway them from that goal. The burden of equal treatment is on a society that discriminates, not on those who experience discrimination, coercion, and physical violence. We must show that the toll on a society that tolerates homophobia is great, that all of us suffer when any one group is targeted for discrimination and harassment. Each of us has a unique origin story that must be embraced. Our rights and freedoms depend not on what causes our sexuality but on our common humanity.

Isaacs is a director of policy and public affairs at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center.

The latest firebomb thrown into this discussion is the now highly contested

report by Columbia University psychiatrist Robert Spitzer, who in May dis-

closed results of a study in which he claimed that 66% of the gay male partic-

It's all about choices

notes from a blond bruce vilanch

You can't blame straight people for being confused. Not only do we want to get married, have children, and serve in the military—three things they would cheerfully be rid of, given the chance—but just when they have decided that we are fundamentally OK, a doctor comes along on CNN and tells them that a lot of us would rather be straight. And it wasn't even Dr. Laura. His name is Spitzer, and he's gotten some mileage recently out of a survey he did that seemed to say it is easy for gays to convert. His subjects turned out mostly to be the product of "ex-gay" ministries, so his entire study would appear to be statistically flawed, but that didn't stop the networks from pouncing on him as catnip for the evening news.

Hot on the heels of this pronouncement, the folks at the Gallup Poll revealed that, at long last, a majority of Americans seem to accept homosexuality as "an alternative lifestyle" and don't register any major disapproval of us per se, even though we appear to register it about ourselves. Gallup probably didn't use the same phone book as Spitzer.

But straight people, who want to know as much about us as they want to know about plumbing, can be forgiven for shaking their heads in disbelief. If a straight majority thinks homosexuality is OK, why are homosexuals turning away from it? If homosexuality is as wicked as it is painted, why are so many gay people at KFC buying the family pack? Why do so many gay men spend so much time making women look pretty? How can people decide their sexuality anyway, and at so many

different times of life? Is the closet we come out of stacked full of discarded ballots with dimpled chads from previous votes when we decided *not* to come out?

Just get me a beer and the remote and let somebody else work on it.

**THAT'S WHEN YOU
BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND
WHAT CHOICE IS ABOUT.
IT'S DENIAL. WE COME
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OUR TRUE NATURES.**

Part of the confusion stems from the notion of choice, of choosing to be gay. Since one thing science won't agree on is the genetic explanation of sexuality and since people keep tromping onto *Jenny and Jerry* and *Oprah* and *Ricki* to announce they have decided they are gay, it's difficult for the unknowing to dismiss the idea of choice.

It always amazes me when people who see me on *Hollywood Squares* ask me if I am really gay, as casually as they ask if I'm really blond. Why would I make this up? I like being blond because I like the look, but that's not why I'm gay. "Well," they say, "it works so well for you. It's your shtick, you know, like Dean Martin was drunk." But guess what? Dean Martin *was* drunk. I drank

with Dean Martin. He didn't knock back a pitcher of lemonade before he staggered onto the stage. It was part of who he was. Cheech and Chong didn't hire a roomful of stoners and take notes. Besides, if I were going to choose a comic shtick, why would I choose one that would leave me open to so much potential hostility? Couldn't I just be a jovial fat guy?

The fact that sexuality is a part of who you are has been a very difficult concept for Americans to swallow, from Kinsey on down. Even prominent black civil rights leaders have had a difficult time when we try to position ourselves as an oppressed minority like theirs. We have a choice, they say. They have to be black, but we can be invisible. And that's when you begin to understand what choice is about. It's denial. We come out when we are finished denying our true natures. When we have had enough of paying the emotional price of passing for, I don't know, call it white. No one suddenly chooses to be gay. Even Anne Heche, at the height of her whirlwind ride on the gay roller coaster, didn't claim to be a lesbian. She just claimed to be in love.

No one chooses to be gay. But they do choose to be straight. They are comfortable enough in their lives, if not in their skin. They choose not to jeopardize their lives and instead do damage to their souls. Eventually, the gnawing within becomes too painful, and they can't stand it. They no longer have a choice. And that, the right wing will tell you, is when we choose to be gay. But we know different. It's when we choose to be free.

ipants and 44% of the lesbians who were "highly motivated" could change not just their sexual behavior but their sexual orientation. The study has come under harsh criticism from psychologists and psychiatrists for its methodology, particularly for relying on data provided solely by phone-interviewed subjects recruited primarily from religiously biased "ex-gay" organizations.

"There's no question in my mind that what Spitzer reported was not a change in sexual orientation but simply a change in sexual behavior," Isay says.

But Spitzer is sticking to his guns. While he admits that "the kinds of changes my subjects reported are highly unlikely to be available to the vast majority" of gay men and lesbians, "there is a small minority of people in which sexual orientation is malleable." He estimates that perhaps 3% of gays and lesbians can change their sexual orientation. "It would seem that reparative therapy is sometimes successful," he says. He brushes aside questions about his methodology of relying too heavily on the self-reporting of obviously self-interested parties. "I talked to 200 people on the phone. Some may be

exaggerating [their changes], but I can't believe the whole thing is just made up."

Spitzer, who was among those who worked to get homosexuality removed as a mental disorder from the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 and who has long been a supporter of gay rights, says his work has come under attack "because it challenges both the mental health professionals and the gay activists on their party line. I would hope my work causes people in both camps to rethink their dogma."

Spitzer also acknowledges that his research is being "twisted by the Christian

Article 20. WHY ARE WE GAY?

right” for political purposes and says that was never the intention of his work. But science, he says, “will always be manipulated by people on both sides of the political debate.”

Spitzer’s study notwithstanding, gay and lesbian activists applaud the mounting scientific evidence regarding the origins of sexual orientation. But even though most results would likely be considered favorable to the gay and lesbian political agenda, activists remain cautious about basing too much political strategy on scientific findings.

“We welcome research that helps us understand who we are,” says David Smith, a spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, a gay lobbying group based in Washington, D.C. “And we’ve seen a growing body of evidence to indicate there are genetic and biological in-

fluences on sexual orientation. But we believe the studies shouldn’t have a bearing on public policy. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people should have equal rights regardless of the origins of sexual orientation.”

And Shannon Minter, a senior staff attorney at the National Center for Lesbian Rights in San Francisco, is “skeptical that science can ever fully answer the questions to something as humanly complex as sexual orientation. Sure, it’s interesting and worth studying, but I’d be careful about jumping to too many conclusions either way.”

Mark Stoner shares Minter’s ambivalence about finding “the answer” and her wariness that human sexuality can be easily tabulated and measured in the lab.

“It’s interesting cocktail chatter, but I don’t particularly care what made me

gay,” says Stoner, who has two older brothers and thus may be a personal example of one theory that links having older brothers with higher levels of prenatal testosterone and thus a greater chance of being gay. “I don’t think we’ll ever be able to boil it down to a finite set of variables. It’s probably genetic and biological and environmental and cultural and social and a whole lot more that we can’t squeeze into comfortable definitions. There are always going to be exceptions to whatever rules the scientists discover.”

As if to underscore his point, Stoner adds a footnote to his clarinet theory: “Over all the years of doing my survey, I did find one gay trumpet player.”

Dahir, who writes for a number of publications, played the clarinet from age 8 to 17.

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