

David Matheson -- Circling the Wagons Keynote

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Why am I here? Why is David Matheson, former Executive Director of Evergreen and Clinical Director of the Center for Gender Wholeness, speaking at Circling the Wagons? I am here because I agree with the Circling the Wagons Shared Values.

But what do I have to offer? I'm not a convert to anybody's camp. I'm not here to renounce anything or to make a public apology for my career. Maybe I'm here because I'm a good case study in challenging stereotypes and prejudices. My story may be interesting both because of the way some of my own stereotypes and prejudices have been challenged, and because what I have to say today may invite you to re-examine some of your prejudices and stereotypes. I hope you find that edifying. If you want to stay comfortable in your current ideology, you may want to tune me out. Otherwise, fasten your seat belt and join me on a journey through my strange life.

The journey has caused me to examine myself carefully. It's been a type of examination I wish all people could experience. It can be summarized with three questions:

- How well do I handle ambiguity? What do I do when the pieces don't fit? When I'm faced with opposites that both seem true? When my beliefs are contradicted by data or opinion.
- How aptly do I encompass diversity? How do I interact with people who are different from me? How do I treat the worldviews of those I disagree with? This becomes more difficult the closer to home it is.
- How do I respond to the unknown? What do I feel when I'm faced with things I don't understand, with mystery and perplexity? What do I do when there is no answer to my question? Do I respond out of fear? Contrition? Humility? Do I run, destroy, or embrace?

OPPOSITES

The great teacher, Lao Tsu, wrote, in the *Tao Te Ching*:

“When people see things as beautiful, ugliness is created. When people see things as good, evil is created. Being and non-being produce each other. Difficult and ease complement each other. Long and short define each other. High and low oppose each other. Fore and aft follow each other.”

Lehi said essentially the same thing in these words: “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things...” “And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man... it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter.” (2 Nephi 2: 11, 15)

The forbidden fruit, or the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, is a representation of the opposition I've referred to. According to Mormon belief, the knowledge it imparts makes us like God, knowing opposites like good and evil.

I would add that opposites become more or less extreme in response to one another. Extreme beauty contrasts with extreme ugliness. Extreme highs correspond with extreme lows, etc. And the further apart the elements become, the greater will be the tension between them.

I would also add that in reality, we don't just have simple opposites, but an endless array of opposites, which creates astounding diversity. We don't just have black and white; we also have orange and auburn, purple and lavender.

Opposites and diversity make life rich with ambiguity and mystery. Mormons occasionally mention the "mysteries of God," which has come to connote some distant, esoteric heavenly secret. But perhaps the mysteries are closer at hand than Kolob. Are we not gathered here in response to a profound mystery? Is not God's purpose in creating or allowing homosexuality a mystery? How do we handle that mystery? How do we encompass the diversity inherent in it? How do we respond to all the unknowns it entails?

This is background for the journey I'm inviting you on: my ambiguous, diverse, perplexing journey. You'll understand me better if you can mentally cross an imaginary bridge into "Dave Land." It might be like your own land in some ways, but it might be very different in others. Some of the "laws" of Dave Land may operate differently from the laws in your own land.

To set the stage for the journey, it would help you to know a few things about my life in the present. First, I don't see myself anywhere on the rainbow flag. I'm not L, G, B, T, or Q. I'm some other color. I think I'm ultra-violet: the invisible frequency at the far edge of the rainbow that nobody sees.

Second, I just want to follow God and conform completely to his way of being. I want to radiate love in the purest way possible. I want to wield faith with great power and equal meekness. I want to remove from my life everything that is unlike Christ so that I can enjoy an ever more real and personal intimacy with him. Nothing in this world is of more value to me than preparing in all ways to receive the inheritance God has offered me. So my presence here is because I'm trying to be more like Christ. I'm trying to be more loving, more meek, more teachable, more open, more inclusive, and more willing to help.

This will be intensely personal. And I could feel scared. But I don't—not because I necessarily trust you—I don't know most of you. But because I love myself, and I'm at peace with where I am now. So I invite you to see my life through a series of contradictory vignettes.

DEVELOPMENT

At age 8 I was baptized and confirmed a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I felt the Holy Ghost enter my body very distinctly. It was an undeniable phenomenon—tangible evidence that affected me physically and mentally.

At age 16 the Holy Spirit revealed to me that the Book of Mormon is exactly what it claims to be. This was again an intense, palpable, physical experience that impacted me physically, intellectually, and also emotionally to the point that for a few minutes I couldn't stand or walk. This revelation brought a profound sense of God's love for me and mine for him.

During this same childhood I felt different from and inferior to other boys and antipathy toward my father. I developed strong fear and envy toward males. Out of the envy developed attractions toward men's bodies, which gradually became sexual. But I also dated girls with some genuine enjoyment of it.

It wasn't until age 23 that I admitted to myself that, given the feelings I had toward other males, I could be homosexual if I wanted to. It's interesting to note the way that concept formed in my mind. I never believed it was obligatory. I believed I could decide which path I would take. Given what I'd learned and felt by that age about the nature of God and my relationship to him, being homosexual was not a path I wanted.

Take a moment now to breathe, and to let ME own what I've just said. This is MY truth. It doesn't have to be your truth. And I'm not imposing it on you. But I've decided to be completely honest here, so I have to speak authentically.

Not long after this private "coming out," I met a woman I was attracted to in my mildly heterosexual way and we married and created a family with three children. These four people became an even stronger anchor for me in the "not homosexual" world.

RELATIONSHIPS

I have wrestled greatly at times in my life with intense yearnings for sexual intimacy with other men. I engaged in a couple of relationships that most people would probably consider homosexual. I told myself the story that it was just intense brotherhood because we didn't have sex.

The second of those relationships was extremely fulfilling and comforting. It felt so completely right that I had only fleeting doubts about the goodness of what I was doing during that time of my life. And I still felt the presence of God and the Spirit in my life. I gained much that is good from that relationship.

Now, many years later, I look back on those experiences from a completely different perspective. I feel I violated my covenants with God and was at the very least emotionally unfaithful to my wife. But it took me many years before I recognized that. I have, in recent times, felt overwhelmed with shame and remorse for my actions in those relationships. I have felt shocked at how I lived during that time. And yet, I still can't deny the extreme psychological benefits of that second relationship. During that time, my heterosexuality was higher than ever before. Yes, my *heterosexuality* was intensified by that relationship. Also, my relationship with my wife was strong. And I felt that my thirst for male connection was being fulfilled.

This experience is rife with contradiction and unknowns. Why did my heterosexuality increase from a same-sex relationship? Why did I feel no guilt at the time? Why did remorse not come for many years? And if it was so wrong, why was it also so healing? Through lots of introspection, I have come to understand most of this, but it would be difficult to explain.

MY DAUGHTER

Sometime in her late teens, my daughter decided there was no God. The months after she told me about her loss of belief were really painful for my wife and me. I experienced such conflicting feelings: sorrow, love, guilt, anger, retribution, and acceptance. Eventually, it was the love that won my heart. That is the feeling I've chosen to make the center of my continued relationship with her.

As a therapist, I have worked with many non-Mormons. And because of my involvement in People Can Change, I have many friends from other religions. So when my daughter left the faith, I knew I had the capacity to love someone who didn't share my beliefs. But we have different expectations for our children than we do for friends. Those expectations can block love and acceptance that might otherwise flow freely. So I realized that I had to adopt new expectations of her and our relationship. It took some time to really move into those expectations.

I still plead with God multiple times daily to bring her back and I am exercising all the faith I can generate to that end. But I'm very conscious to keep my interactions with her non-judgmental and respectful. We occasionally have open conversations about religion. She introduced me to MormonThink.com and we sometimes talk about our differing thoughts and feelings about the Church. I've been able to join her in that conversation without compromising my own faith or manipulating her.

It's very possible that she will eventually hear the podcast of this session. So I want to tell her that when I say, "I love you" on the phone, I mean that very sincerely. I mean that I regard you with deep affection, respect, and admiration. My love for you encompasses the diversity in our paths. And when I pray for you, it's because there is a depth of joy and clarity in my life now that, out of love, I wish for you to also experience. And I accept that maybe you don't want that.

Nonetheless, I'm so thankful that God, in his omniscience and unfathomable wisdom, wove together the path he knew she would take with my path, so that I could learn new things about love and acceptance from my relationship with her.

CAREER

During the first several years of my career, I considered myself a reparative therapist. I was a psychological assistant for Joseph Nicolosi who coined the term. I was quite adamant that people could entirely change their sexual orientation. I remember being disturbed when people questioned that possibility. I worked hard to develop therapeutic interventions that would bring about complete change.

But I never found a silver bullet. I did find a lot of interventions that relieve emotional distress, diminish shame, foster self-acceptance, and create meaningful shifts in sexual feelings for some people. I've worked with people who have changed dramatically. And I've worked with people whose sexuality didn't change at all, even if many other things did change in their lives.

The process of shifting my therapeutic approach has also been a journey of many years. From the beginning, I made a simple, and not even completely conscious choice to be honest about what I

observed in my office. With an honest eye I could see early on that what Dr. Nicolosi was teaching me was incomplete. It didn't fit everyone. It was spot on for some, but it completely distorted other people. So I kept listening and asking questions and theorizing and writing and asking more questions. Every time a client broke my paradigm I had to think through things more carefully and broaden the paradigm.

The theoretical and clinical framework I've arrived at would probably aggravate a lot of people in this room because the world looks very different to you. *That's okay.* Let's not hate each other just because I, in my blindness, found the elephant's trunk and think it's a snake while you, in your blindness, have found his leg and believe it's a tree. One of the amazing things about the Group of Eight is the opportunity to compare our diverse experiences with the elephant.

In days past I would have felt a need to prove to you that I'm right. Now it doesn't matter to me. In hindsight, I recognize that when I was younger I needed to hold onto a dogmatic insistence that total change was possible because I was insecure about myself. Probably, I was afraid of the ambiguity, diversity, and unknowns in my own life. Being far more at peace with the utter messiness of life, I no longer have to be right. I would rather be helpful, even if that means being wrong sometimes.

So how have I changed? I don't want to be known as a reparative therapist. I'm just a therapist, albeit one with a particular understanding of the semi-plasticity of human sexuality, long experience with the struggles of those whose sexuality conflicts with other values, and a sensitivity to the vulnerability of that population. That description of me is a lousy sound bite, which means I'll keep getting pigeon holed into something I'm really not. Maybe at least you'll know better.

PRIVILEGE

I want to say something here about the idea of "privilege." People like me are seen as privileged because we are part of the dominant culture. Here in Utah that includes being on the inside with the LDS Church as well as the mainstream heterosexual culture. But the view from inside "Dave Land" is quite different. People like me actually experience our selves as being on the margins of the fringe. We feel that we have no voice within the LDS Church—we seem to have a harder time getting the Church's attention than do gay advocates. We also have no voice in the mental health community and we can rarely get our story told accurately to society in general. We feel hounded and hated. Recent legislation and lawsuits leave us fearing for our freedom to live and work according to our conscience. As gays once were, we have become. To us the slogan, "celebrate diversity," is an expression of oppression and tyranny because "diversity" usually means everyone but us. We are all ultra-violet.

CONTRADICTION, DIVERSITY, PERPLEXITY

As you may have noticed, my life is full of contradictions. How do I handle so much ambiguity? How do I encompass such diverse realities? How do I respond to all these things I don't understand? Commonly, we humans respond to untenable contradiction by splitting,

compartmentalizing, and excusing. I've done much of that. We as a whole community of people experiencing homosexuality have done much of that.

Adam and Eve experienced contradiction in the Garden of Eden. They had to disobey God in order to fulfill his purpose. Adam (being characteristically male) saw things in simple terms and refused to partake. Eve (being more characteristically female) saw things in more complex terms and partook. It was she who had the foresight and courage to do what had to be done. But she was also beguiled. President Packer said Eve was wise and should be praised for her decision. How could she be both wise and beguiled? Another contradiction. (Speaking of contradiction, did I just quote President Packer praising a woman for disobeying God?)

And how can I be glad for my past and mortified by it? Were my decisions wise? Should I be praised for what I've done? It was through my experiences that I have learned much that has since benefited me. The diversity and contradictions of my life have brought me a keen knowledge of opposites with the benefits inherent in that knowledge. I have partaken of the fruit of the Tree Of Knowledge. And I've slowly learned. But I have little desire in me now to partake of that fruit—I would much rather partake of the Tree of Life. And it is very clear to me now that the more I draw close to God, the more moderate my opposites become, the more sense my life makes, and the more joy I experience.

CHOICE AND CHANGE

Over the years, I've gradually experienced tremendous changes in myself. I've lost much of the shame I grew up with. I've become identified with the male gender. I've become far more capable of relating with other men, my envy of them has lessened substantially, and my attraction to them has become essentially non-sexual and far less charged. My sexual behaviors and desires have shifted dramatically. I've discontinued everything homosexual. I'm much more sexually attracted toward women and I enjoy heterosexual sex immensely. And I've developed a straight identity. So, I'm living proof of what Lisa Diamond has written about—that sexuality is fluid. In my case, it was because I consciously caused it. I'm very happy and confident with where I am. *And*, I checked out a guy with a really awesome body at a restaurant the other night. And that's okay.

Notice what you're thinking to yourself right now. You could be thinking, "Wow, good for him. I'm so happy he's at peace." You might be thinking, "What a liar. How stupid does he think I am?" Maybe you're thinking, "I'm a piece of crap because I can't do that." Or maybe, "I know I'm supposed to want that, but I don't"? You might even be thinking, "I wish he didn't exist."

How are *you* handling these contradictions? How aptly are *you* encompassing this diversity? How are *you* responding to things you don't understand?

FROM OPPOSITION TO CONNECTION

About one year ago, I was stewing because of the persecution that seemed to be raging toward people like me. The three "L's" of radical gay activism had all been turned on us: legislation,

litigation, and libel. I decided it was time we started hitting back. I was dreaming of counter-suits and defamation. But then I got this strange impression to ask Jerry Buie, the director of Pride Counseling, to lunch. A little backstory on my connection with Jerry is important. I'd met Jerry several months earlier at the gym we both go to. When we realized who each other were, I awkwardly said, "Well, we're kind of on opposite sides of the fence." What Jerry said next changed everything for me. He said, "We don't have to be." His graciousness was disarming. Flash forward several months and I asked him to join me for lunch.

One of the first things out of his mouth at that lunch was a question like, "How can you ethically do what you do?" I stammered a bit and replied something like, "I don't care as much about professional ethics as I do about relieving people's pain." Talk about contradictions! Ethics versus people's wellbeing. But that's how the world had been drawn for me. I knew that my work relieved distress in a certain population and I wasn't going to let anything—even my professional ethics code—get in the way of doing that. Just as up creates down, a skewed ethics code creates dissention.

I was undeterred by Jerry's hard questions. We met again and he introduced me to Jim Struve, which led to me attending the "Building Bridges" workshop last March. There I met several people who I previously had considered to be "the other side"—Lee Beckstead, Adam White, and Kendal Wilcox. These meetings resulted in several meaningful conversations, the gist of which can be summarized by an interchange that happened in a conversation between Adam and me. Jim Struve asked us how we were experiencing each other. We both said essentially the same thing: we realized the other wasn't as scary or dangerous as we had previously imagined.

Conversations in our Group of Eight meetings have shown me a world I'd never seen. Looking through their eyes, I saw gay advocacy in a different light. Issues like housing discrimination and same-sex marriage became more complex. The Church's approach to homosexual people became even more disturbing that it had seemed before. I found myself having to rethink some important things.

I experienced fear during this time. It wasn't a rational fear. I eventually realized I was afraid on some deep level of losing some aspect of my identity if I were to encompass the degree of diversity I was being introduced to. I felt a vague fear that something would go terribly wrong if I were to accept gay marriage as necessary, or even appropriate, within a free society—even if I still don't believe it's part of God's plan.

I experienced something else unexpected: my new friends wanted the same things I wanted. They wanted people who were conflicted about their homosexuality to be protected from harm, to have access to appropriate help, and to have the opportunity for self-determination.

I'm sure some people must be asking the question, "How can they work with each other when they have such divergent perspectives and values?" I can work with them because of what I respect about them and because of what we have in common. They are people of high integrity. They are intellectually honest. And they want to protect and help people as much as I do. That is a lot to have in common and it greatly outweighs the divergence in our perspectives.

But beyond those commonalities, I find them to be gracious and kind and I would have it known that I don't just respect my former adversaries—I love them with great affection. And I'm grateful to them for their kindness, forgiveness, and graciousness toward me.

IN CONCLUSION

The issues with which we must wrestle as Mormons regarding homosexuality are very difficult. There is so much ambiguity and diversity, and so many unknowns. It is understandable that we have broken into factions over these issues. But we can't afford to turn a blind eye to the difficulty. Doing so would make us like the priest and the Levite who passed the injured man on the road to Jericho. To be a Good Samaritan means to take on a great burden, to get involved in sticky things.

A few core principles have become very clear to me through the experiences I've described. First, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." God alone has the power and the right to judge. To me it is forbidden by commandment. Second, agency is central to God's plan. Lucifer tried to interfere with that agency and was cast out of heaven. I don't want to be like that. And third, charity is the most highly praised attribute in scripture to which we can aspire. Charity is Christlike love for every being. That is a trait I want to perfect in my life because, above all, I want to be like Christ.

As I consider the wide range of my homosexual brothers and sisters, I need to remember those three principles. I can't possibly know what is in your heart, what you have been through, what motivates your actions, or how God will look upon your life. To presume that I do know those things is both arrogant and contrary to the teachings of Christ. I close with the words of one of my favorite hymns:

Who am I to judge another
When I walk imperfectly?
In the quiet heart is hidden
Sorrow that the eye can't see.
Who am I do judge another?
Lord, I would follow thee.

Lord, I would Follow Thee, Hymns, 220