

My Journey Into Manhood

Undercover at a Gay Conversion Camp

TED COX

© 2010 TED M. COX, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
PUBLISHED BY STINQUE.COM, APRIL 2010.

I DON'T REMEMBER exactly when I felt his erection pressing into my back. It might have been while he whispered in my ear, “Long ago, you were the Golden Child. But, somehow, that Golden Child was hurt, and you put up a wall to protect yourself.” Or it might have been when other men in the room broke out in song:

*How could anyone ever tell you
That you're anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you
That you're less than whole?*

I sat on the floor between the outstretched legs of a camp guide, my head leaning back against his shoulder. The guide sat behind me, his arms wrapped around my chest. This hold was called “The Motorcycle.” Five men surrounded the two of us, their hands resting gently on my arms, legs and chest.

There were about ten other groups like this sitting on the floor in the darkened room: one guide giving “healing-touch therapy” while the surrounding men rested their hands on the receiver. Some men were held in the Motorcycle position. Others were turned towards their guide, cradled the way a parent would hold a sobbing child who had just scraped her knee on the sidewalk.

In one corner of the room, a portable stereo played Shaina Noll's song. At one point, the staff members all sang out in unison, their voices filling the high walls of the camp lodge. Somewhere in the room, a man sobbed over the sound of the music.

IT WAS THE FIRST NIGHT of “Journey into Manhood,” a 48-hour weekend retreat designed to help gay men become straight. In that room, about fifty men — some thirty “Journeymen” and fifteen staff members — sat on the carpeted floor of a ranch lodge two hours outside of Phoenix, Arizona. Most of the men, except for a few of the staff members, struggled to overcome their attraction to other men.

Sometime during all that holding and touching and singing, while I was cradled in the Motorcycle position, I felt it: the unmistakable bulge pressing through his tight jeans. It was the first time in my life I had a felt another man's erection.

WHAT THE STAFF MEMBERS and other Journeymen didn't know was that I was attending the weekend undercover. I'm straight. I'm also an atheist. By that February evening, I had been undercover in the so-called "ex-gay" movement for just over a year. Before signing up for the \$650 JiM weekend, I had attended weekly support-group meetings and weekend conferences geared towards Christian men and women desperately trying to overcome their same-sex attractions. I am currently writing a book about my experiences posing as a same-sex attracted Christian man — "SSA man," in the lingo.

My motivation for undertaking this wild project stems from several factors. First, I was raised in the Mormon church, which has taken the lead against equal marriage rights for gays and lesbians. It's been ten years since I left Mormonism, and I feel a particular need to stand up against the church's well-funded opposition to marriage equality. (I wonder what Mormonism's polygamous founder, Joseph Smith, Jr., and his successor, Brigham Young, would say about the "Marriage = 1 Man + 1 Woman" bumper stickers slapped on so many Mormon minivans.)

Second, while the ex-gay movement has publicly declared that they can bring "freedom from homosexuality," there's no evidence that someone can change his or her orientation through these religiously motivated programs. Rather than turning straight, the men and women that I met throughout this project dealt with a cycle of repression, backsliding into sin, then shame, guilt, and repentance. These programs collect hundreds of thousands of dollars each year on a promise they can't deliver.

Third, these programs are dangerous. Ex-gay watchdog groups document the stories of men who, after years of failed attempts to become straight, resort to suicide. Later I'll introduce you to Eric, a fellow JiM attendee who would hook up with men on Craigslist and then go home to his unsuspecting wife. For many men in ex-gay programs, often their wives, friends, family, and church members have no idea they struggle with SSA.

What I saw and experienced at JiM both enraged and disturbed me. I had trouble staying in character as I watched one man, as part of his therapy, act out beating his father to death with a baseball bat — just one of several "Are you kidding?" moments. How anyone could believe that a JiM weekend could turn a man straight still baffles me.

TO BE FAIR, I had several positive experiences that weekend. I saw several men, some for the first time in their lives, lose the anxiety they feel about their sexual orientation. Up until that weekend, some of them had never told anyone about their struggle with SSA. In the course of the retreat, they would relax around other men who struggled the same way they did.

Journey into Manhood co-founder and "Certified Life Coach" Rich Wyler goes to great lengths to keep his techniques hidden from public scrutiny. Only after I had booked my non-refundable flight, and paid the non-refundable retreat deposit, was I informed that all Journeymen are required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Last year, when I attempted to write an article for *Salt Lake City Weekly* to run the week that Journey into Manhood arrived in Salt Lake City, Wyler complained to the paper, citing the confidentiality agreement I signed.

While the article idea I pitched to *SLC Weekly* would discuss only publicly available information about Wyler and Journey into Manhood, *SLC Weekly* — citing insufficient time to run the piece past their legal department — pulled the article and interviewed me instead.

After that interview, I discussed the confidentiality agreement with attorneys, editors, journalists, and gay-rights activists. As a result of those discussions, I have decided to discuss in detail several aspects of the JiM weekend. The decision was not easy. But given what I experienced, the pain that many of these men feel, and the money that Wyler's organization takes from them, I feel obligated to speak out.

THIS ARTICLE will not disclose the identities of my fellow Journeymen. With one significant exception, the names and stories of the characters have been substantially altered to protect their identities. In some cases, the order and details of some events have been altered, again to protect anonymity.

While I did bring a notebook with me to take notes during the weekend, it wasn't possible to record all conversations and retreat events as they occurred. What follows is my attempt to recreate, as accurately as my notes and memory will allow, an intense, emotionally draining, physically challenging, 48-hour experience.

Ultimately, by the end of the weekend, Journey into Manhood

would force me to question ideas regarding masculinity, sexuality, and what exactly it means to be a man.

GETTING THERE

MY UNDERCOVER ADVENTURES into ex-gay ministries started in weekly support groups. These groups are religious in nature: They advocate a surrender of sexual desires and temptations to Jesus. Take away the goal of changing someone's sexual orientation, and these groups would look like any other Christian ministry. They use prayer, Bible-reading, workbooks, and hymns to help members either become heterosexual — or, much more likely, to find the strength to live chaste Christian lives.

But soon after I started attending ex-gay programs, I heard about retreats: weekend forest getaways that provide a sort of kick-start for men who make little progress into heterosexuality through prayer and scripture.

Any given weekend, dozens of these retreats take place across the country, many of them organized quietly by a local ex-gay ministry, and open only to ministry members.

To outsiders, the idea of several heterosexually-challenged men hauling off to the woods for intense “healing” work seems, well, counter-productive to their goals. Here's how my friend Pauline, a chiropractor and self-described “fag hag,” put it: “Wouldn't it be better to go to a strip club and get lap dances from chicks?”

Maybe Pauline was right. But the make-you-straight programs operate under a conservative religious moral code. Those who read the Sodom and Gomorrah story literally would also frown on a night at the local bikini bar.

But there's another reason why lap dances aren't part of ex-gay field trips: According to prominent ex-gay groups, homosexuality isn't really a sexual issue.

Let me explain. The (scientifically unsubstantiated) theory put forward by ex-gay programs is that a man's homosexual attraction is caused by a deficit in his masculinity. This deficit begins in childhood: A boy who doesn't properly identify with his father, or some other masculine figure,

grows up filling that masculine void through sex with other men.

To cure the so-called “father wound,” ex-gay programs supposedly help men create healthy, non-sexual relationships with other men — the idea being that once these emotional needs are met, same-sex attractions evaporate. In other words, homosexuality is merely a symptom of deeper emotional trauma. But these wounds run deep. Often, prayer and Bible verses fail to root out the issues.

Enter the intense weekend retreats.

Call it a twisted taste for adventure, or maybe just low regard for my own safety, but I knew I had to attend at least one retreat. The question was, which one?

I SET OUT on a Google search.

“Adventure in Manhood” bills itself as an outdoor, activity-based retreat that facilitates “teamwork, bonding, education, and adventure” between a same-sex attracted man and a male mentor. But to attend that retreat, I would need to bring another man, and I knew I wouldn't be able to keep a straight face if any of my secular liberal buddies joined me. So, that was out.

There was the “New Warrior's Training Adventure,” which a few prominent ex-gay organizations endorsed. But when NWT's parent organization, the ManKind Project, got wind that men hoping to overcome same-sex attraction were showing up at their retreats, MKP drafted a statement stating, in part, “We do not, and will not, attempt to change a man's sexual orientation.” So, New Warrior's didn't seem appropriate.

Soon, though, one program stood out: Journey into Manhood, a retreat that meets in secret locations near major cities around the country several times a year.

JiM is featured on the website of the National Organization for Research and Therapy of Homosexuals (NARTH), which “upholds the rights of individuals with unwanted homosexual attraction to receive effective psychological care.” JiM is also recommended by the organization Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays.

In a NARTH website interview, JiM co-founder Rich Wyler (who at the time was going by the online pseudonym Ben Newman) described the retreat as a “48-hour immersion in intensive recovery and

emotional-healing work and self-examination, all in a very supportive yet challenging group setting.”

And JiM boasts results: According to a press release headlined “Turning straight” (Wyler majored in public relations at Mormon church-run Brigham Young University), four out of five past JiM participants reported a “decrease in unwanted homosexual attractions.”

JiM better produce good results — at \$650 per person, the weekend isn’t cheap. And that raised a question: What kind of man is desperate enough to fork over that kind of money to become straight?

I had found the right retreat. With a mixture of fear and excitement, I signed up.

ONE THING concerned me, though: Beyond some vague online references to “healing touch,” details about the weekend were scarce. I’m pretty good at Internet searches (a practice honed by Google-stalking ex-girlfriends), but the Web yielded no information about what I could expect during the weekend.

It wasn’t until after I had paid the non-refundable retreat deposit that I found out why: JiM requires all participants to sign a confidentiality agreement. A staffer at People Can Change (PCC), the organization that puts on JiM weekends, emailed me the agreement along with a liability waiver. All men are required to sign a copy of both documents at the retreat before they can participate.

Here’s part of the agreement:

“I also agree to keep confidential specifics about the actual processes and activities used in the course of the training. This is to preserve the confidentiality of the training for others who may participate in the future, so that it may have the greatest possible impact on their lives.”

Shoot. As a writer, it’s never good to learn you can’t write about something. But I had already put down a \$150 deposit and paid more than \$200 for non-refundable airfare.

What would Hunter S. Thompson do?

After consulting with a First Amendment attorney and a few

journalist friends, I decided to attend. Even if I couldn’t write about the weekend, at the very least I could add it to my ever-expanding list of life-time lunatic adventures. (Think: cocaine-fueled all-night Tijuana romps, and donning a bear suit to report on a furry convention.)

THE FRIDAY MORNING of the retreat, I double-checked my bags to make sure I didn’t pack anything that might divulge my true identity or my secular tendencies. Stricken from the usual weekend-getaway packing list: My iPod, for the Rage Against the Machine and Immortal Technique albums, and my current reading list — Karen Armstrong’s *The Bible: A Biography*, and Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

Before flying out of my hometown of Sacramento, I sent the camp location and phone number to a handful of friends. I told them that if they didn’t hear from me by Sunday night, they should contact the authorities. I did fear a bit for my safety: I worried what would happen if I was, well, outed.

The flight stopped over at LAX, where a blinking cockpit light forced passengers to switch planes. So by the time I touched down in Phoenix, I was almost an hour late. I rushed through the baggage claim looking for Robert, my carpool driver.

In the days leading up to the retreat, PCC arranged for men driving from close locations or arriving at the airport at close times to ride together to camp. Since I paid almost \$900 in camp fees and airfare, my wallet was happy to avoid renting a car for the weekend.

I’M RIDING with three other men. Two of them sit in those slouchy leather airport chairs. The third guy’s plane should touch down soon.

Robert is a quiet, pudgy, middle-aged man from California. He’s married with children, has attended ex-gay programs for several years, and signed up for JiM on the recommendation of one of his ministry leaders.

Dave is a young father from Texas. He’s a lifelong Mormon and works a corporate job. Before attending JiM, he took part in the NWTM weekend.

Tony finally de-planes. As we climb into Robert’s rental car, Tony shares his story: He’s single, in his 30s, and hails from Texas, where he

works as a biologist. He tells us that this is his second time attending JiM. I'm surprised: Doesn't the effectiveness of the JiM weekend depend on us not knowing what happens beforehand? Isn't that the reason we have to keep JiM techniques secret?

I prod Tony to divulge information about what to expect, but he won't budge. Plus, he attended a few years ago, and he thinks the program may have changed since then.

As the city gives way to dry rolling desert hills, we talk about our lives.

Dave talks about life with his boys. Robert and his wife have been struggling financially, but they seem to be doing OK. Tony loves his work in the science field.

For the most part, I dodge the group's questions. But when pressed, I try to answer their questions with as much truth as possible.

I use the same cover story since I began attending ex-gay programs: From a young age, I was attracted to other guys (*false*); I was raised in the Mormon church (*true*), and served a mission (*true*); I married in my early 20s (*true*), but the marriage fell apart (*true*) after I fell in love with my best friend, Brian (*false*). After my younger brother's suicide in 2003 (*true*), I reevaluated my life (*true*) and had a religious reversion (*false*). I recently joined ex-gay ministries in 2007 (*true*), even though I still haven't found a new faith (*false*).

Yes, I'm lying to them. And I feel horrible for it. It doesn't help that from our long conversation during the ride to camp, I learn that these guys are good men, the kind of people you hope to have as neighbors.

AFTER AN HOUR in the car and a late lunch stop at In-N-Out (sorry, East Coast readers, but you haven't eaten a real burger until you've scarfed an In-N-Out Double-Double), we finally turn off the Interstate and onto a windy dirt road. The mood in the car grows tense with anticipation as we travel the last few twisty miles to the white ranch gates. Outside the window, the desert stretches out in all directions. We're in the middle of nowhere.

As Robert pulls the car into the dirt parking lot, I panic: What happens if my cover is blown? Or if I decide I want to leave the weekend early? The carpool saved me some cash, but on the other hand, I can't really

leave unless Robert drives me out. Or would I have to walk the dusty dirt road to the highway? And then what? Hitchhike back to the airport?

It feels like no matter what happens, I'm stuck here for the weekend.

Robert shuts off the engine. Per the instructions PCC emailed us before the weekend, I collect everyone's cellphones and close them up in the glove compartment. There will be no contact with the outside world until Sunday afternoon.

The four of us step out of the car and pull our bags out of the trunk.

JACK GETS HIS MAGIC SEEDS

THINGS GET REAL WEIRD real fast.

First, a staffer standing next to one of the wooden cabins tells us to leave our luggage, while other staff members haul our bags into our assigned sleeping cabins. He directs us inside the cabin, where I pay the remaining \$500 balance, show my legal ID ("to help ensure that all participants are at least 18 years old and that no one is attending under false pretenses"), and sign hard copies of the confidentiality agreement and liability release. My signature acknowledges that the potential risks for the weekend include:

"Emotional stress or trauma; strenuous and vigorous physical, mental, emotional and intellectual activity; the possibility of slips and falls; bruises, sprains, lacerations, fractures, animal bites or stings, concussions or even more severe life-threatening hazards, including death."

About a dozen other Journeyers stand around in the registration cabin. I'm speaking to one of them when a staff member approaches me and, his voice barely above a whisper, asks if I have finished check-in. When I nod my head, he asks me to follow him back outside. I notice my luggage is gone.

WE CIRCLE AROUND the back of the cabin. He motions me toward a man standing fifty feet away, dressed in all black and grasping a

gnarled wooden staff. I slowly walk towards the man in black.

I stop a couple of feet away from him. He eyeballs me, shows no emotion, and stays silent for several uncomfortable moments.

Finally, he takes in a deep breath and asks, “What is a man?”

I don’t remember my answer. In fact, I don’t remember if that’s the exact question he asked, because once I muster some half-assed answer, he points to another man several feet behind him, also dressed in black and holding a staff, and sends me on my way.

There are about five of these men, standing fifty feet away from each other in a long curved line, leading from the registration cabin toward a large lodge.

Each staff man follows the act of the first. They say nothing for a few seconds. Once I’m feeling completely awkward, the question comes, open-ended and something to do with men or masculinity, or my reason for attending: What makes a man? How do you know you’re a man? Why are you here?

After the second man, I flash back to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and suddenly feel like King Arthur answering the bridgekeeper’s questions: “What is your name? What is your quest?” An uncontrollable smile creeps across my face.

Once I answer the last man’s question, I’m directed to enter the lodge. It’s a wooden structure that looks exactly like you’d expect an outdoorsy camp lodge to look: spacious main hall, high ceiling, large stone fireplace. Inside, metal folding chairs sit in a circle. They’re half-filled with Journeyers who entered before me. On the floor in the middle of the circle, a single candle burns on top of a square rug. Native American flute music plays. Every few minutes, another Journeyer enters the room, looks around, and takes a seat in an empty chair.

After a brief welcome from yet another staff member — I count around fifteen total — and the first of many reminders about our signed confidentiality agreements, we’re briefly introduced to the staff.

There are two levels of staffing at JiM. “Guides” are men who lead the exercises and take a major part in the instruction. Guides have more experience with the JiM program. Many of them struggle with SSA, some do not. “Men of Service” have less or no experience at a previous JiM weekend, and are there to assist the Guides.

PCC made it clear before the weekend that JiM staff “are not professional therapists or counselors, or are not working as professional therapists or counselors in the course of the weekend.”

AS I WAIT for the program to begin, I think back to one of the documents PCC emailed me in the days before the retreat: a twelve-page article titled “Four principles of growth,” written by David Matheson. Matheson is a Licensed Professional Counselor based out of Salt Lake City and, together with Wyler, co-founded the JiM weekend. Matheson writes:

“Many men seeking to overcome homosexuality become frustrated and discouraged when they find that their feelings and attractions don’t change as quickly or substantially as they had hoped. I believe that the reason these men become frustrated is because their efforts at change are not broad enough. By this I mean that their work, however intense and sincere, has not covered enough areas of life to bring about real change.”

The solution, writes Matheson, is to address four “broad, overlapping areas”: masculinity, authenticity, need-fulfillment, and surrender. Using an easy-to-remember acronym, he calls the process of addressing these areas “a M.A.N.S. journey.”

Each exercise during the weekend is intended to address at least one of those areas. I guess that the line of staff-wielding men outside the cabin was supposed to get me to think about what defines masculinity. But as the first afternoon at JiM progresses, I feel like I’m participating in some bizarre fraternity initiation.

WHICH, I SUPPOSE, is the point. Take, for example, how early in the evening, staff members reenact the classic children’s tale Jack and the Beanstalk, with different staff members playing the different roles.

The story, a narrator explains, is loaded with coming-of-age symbolism. Fatherless Jack has lived in the safe, feminine world under his mother’s care; the old man in the village represents ancient tribal elders

who help boys transition into manhood; the seeds given to Jack represent both his sperm and the masculine potential for creation. Like most women, Jack's mother doesn't understand the importance of the seeds, so she chucks them out the window. The reenactment ends with Jack sent to bed without supper. After all, he screwed up his masculine duty to provide food for his family.

Much like Jack's adventure, Journey into Manhood is the initiation into the mysterious world of heterosexual masculinity that has supposedly eluded us for so long. But as I look at the men filling in seats around the lodge room, especially the men who appear to be in their late 50s, I wonder: Have they never felt like men?

WE WASTE NO TIME jumping into the exercises.

First, we stand up and form two parallel lines. We stand with our lines facing each other, each man mere inches away from the man in front of him. I'm staring at a blond guy barely into his 20s.

A voice from somewhere in the lodge barks instructions to us: "What stories do you tell yourself about this man?"

I want to participate in the retreat exercises as fully as possible, so I follow the instructions and, just by his appearance, try to piece together this man's story.

He's dressed like he looted an Old Navy store. Short, spiky, blond hair. Clean-shaven. I guess that he's a college student.

Then, after several awkward moments, a staffer bangs a drum. At that signal, every man in the room takes one step to the left. If you were to look down on us from above, the two lines would rotate like a bicycle chain.

Now I'm facing another man in front of me; this time he appears in his late 30s. The voice booms through the lodge: "Look into his heart."

The drums echo again, and I take another step to the left.

I can never know what it's like for these men, trying desperately to change their orientation. But to try to see it from their perspective, I imagine the exercise as if I was staring into the eyes of a woman mere inches away. The only time I've stared someone in the face like this is at the end of a really good first date. You know: the shaky, heart-thumping moments spent mustering the courage to go in for a first kiss.

In another exercise, one Journeyer stands at the center of the room

while a Guide asks other Journeyers to raise their hands and give examples of mental blocks or excuses that keep us from effecting real change away from homosexuality. After each man gives an example — "rationalization," "justification," "intellectualizing" — he stands up and presses against the other standing in the middle of the room. Soon it's a mass of male bodies smushed together.

In one of the final exercises for the night, we form another circle in the middle of the room. (We end up doing this circle thing a lot.) Staff members pass out black cloth blindfolds, which we tie around our eyes. With the blindfolds in place, staff men squeak their sneakers and bounce basketballs on the hard floor, recreating the sounds from a busy high-school gym class.

They yell out the the kind of shit-talk typical of high-school kids:

"C'mon, take the shot!"

"You suck!"

"How did you miss that?"

"Why are you always picked last?"

"OK, let's hit the showers."

When we remove our blindfolds, I see that many of the Journeyers are shaken up. The exercise has awoken some terrible adolescent memories. With tears streaming down some of our faces, we follow staff members into an adjoining, smaller, carpeted room. We sit in a large circle along the edges of the wall.

"For this next exercise," says one of the staff, "Try to keep an open mind."

THREE STAFF MEMBERS take a seat in the middle of the room. They demonstrate three different "healing touch" techniques.

First: Side-by-side, where two men sit shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the same direction, their legs outstretched in front of them. The man giving the Healing Touch puts one arm around the receiver.

Second: The Cohen Hold, named after "certified sexual re-orientation coach" and Healing Touch pioneer Richard Cohen. For this position, the receiver sits between the legs of the giver, their chests perpendicular, the receiver's head resting on the giver's shoulder. The giver encircles his arms around the receiver.

Third: The Motorcycle. The receiver again sits between the legs of the giver; this time, the receiver leans his back up against the chest of the giver. Again, the giver wraps his arms around the receiver.

The idea behind Healing Touch is to recreate the father-son bond that apparently we missed as children. In this twisted, neo-Freudian theory on the cause of homosexuality, men who didn't get appropriate touch from their fathers sexualize their need for a "healthy" non-sexual masculine connection. Healing Touch techniques recreate a loving, father-son bond, and are completely non-sexual.

Well, that's what they tell us.

STAFF DIVIDE US UP into groups of six or seven men, about two staff members and four Journeymen per group.

With the groups spread out around the floor of the darkened room, one Guide in our group — a thin man in his early 50s with short dark hair and thin metal-frame glasses — asks who wants to go first. Nobody speaks up for several moments.

Since I started this entire undercover project, literally thousands of times I have asked myself: Why? Could it be that I'm a deeply closeted gay man? Is it because I'm pissed off at the religious right, and I want to do everything in my power to bring it down? Or is it an unbalanced addiction to seeking out the strange and unusual this world has to offer? Or something else?

These questions again run through my head as I reluctantly raise my hand.

The Guide asks which hold I want. I pick the Motorcycle. I've come this far; might as well go all the way.

The Guide leans back and opens up his legs. I scoot between his thighs, turn away from his face, and lean back while he wraps his arms around me. I flash back to a night months before, when a then-girlfriend held me the same way. She lit candles. We drank wine and later had sex.

At the Guide's direction, the other men from the group place their hands on my arms, legs, and chest. This is so they can impart their healing masculine energy to me.

Then the music starts.

*How could anyone ever tell you
That you're anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you
That you're less than whole?*

The Guide whispers in my ear how I used to be the Golden Child, how everything was wonderful before someone hurt me, how I put up walls to protect myself, and now it was time for those walls to come down.

Like so many times that night, I'm trying not to crack up. To use another children's tale, I feel like the little kid in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Except this time, instead of pointing out that the emperor is parading down the street in his birthday suit, I want to stand up and scream, "Are you fucking kidding?"

I DON'T REMEMBER exactly when I felt the staff member's member, but it was definitely there, that bulge pressing out of his jeans into my back. When the CD lyrics start up for the second time, he sings them, along with the other staff members:

*How could anyone fail to notice
That your loving is a miracle
How deeply you're connected to my soul?*

The song ends, and he gives me a last reassuring squeeze before letting go. I move out from between his legs while the next Journeyman moves into position. When it's time, I place my hand on his arm, along with the other Journeymen in our group. This time, I sing too.

As the night wears on and each Journeyman gets time for Healing Touch, I look around the room. Some Journeymen appear wide-eyed and incredulous. Others seem relaxed. Off somewhere I hear a man sobbing.

At the end of night, we are dismissed to our cabins. Dave, the Mormon father from my carpool, is assigned to my cabin. He finds me through the crowd of men and throws his arm around my shoulder. He's in a good mood.

“What do you think?” I ask as we walk through the dark towards the cabin.

He takes a deep, excited breath before answering.

“It was good, man. Good.”

THE SHADOW

SATURDAY MORNING comes too quickly.

Groggy from little sleep, and worried there might be a mad rush to the showers, I grab my clothes and trudge out into the chilly Arizona air.

But I’m too late. Inside the bathroom, five men wait their turn.

The showers are three separate stalls, each with a curtain for a door.

The men joke about the inch-thick bunk mattresses that, judging by how well I slept, might as well have been carved from solid plywood.

My cabinmates kept me up late last night, too. After the Healing Touch session, we headed to the cabin, claimed our bunks, and unpacked our bags.

The Old Navy kid from the face-to-face exercise sat Indian-style on his top bunk, and jabbered on about anything that came to mind:

“Did you know that Jesus was crucified on his birthday?”

“Did you know in some Middle Eastern countries, it’s OK for men to hold hands in the street?”

“Can you believe all the protests outside the Mormon temples after [Proposition] 8?”

The rest of us in the cabin nodded our heads and tuned him out. I was busy scribbling notes. JiM provided a journal to each Journeyer, and since many of them were also writing, I didn’t look weird.

See, I’m worried I’ll blow my cover. During the carpool ride to camp, while my carmates discussed the War on Terror and lamented the tanking economy, I blurted out a simplistic liberal solution: “Maybe we can stop buying bombs to blow up brown people.”

Stupid, I know.

Or after the gym class reenactment, when we’re asked to share our feelings, I raise my hand and ask if anyone had positive memories of P.E. (I remember a few good days: One semester, my best friend and I

dominated the class ping pong tournament.) Only one Journeyer raised his hand.

So when I’m done showering and step outside the stall with a towel wrapped around my waist, I’m suddenly aware of the two very large, very visible tattoos etched into my shoulders. Am I crazy, or are fellow Journeyers eyeballing the very thick, very black, very not-Christian designs?

It’s not that I’m worried about appearing straight; my concern is appearing non-Christian. I’ve attended ex-gay programs long enough to meet many men who don’t set off gaydar. But a secular heathen? Big red flag. Manly-man Burt Reynolds could march into these programs without arousing suspicion — as long he had a Bible tucked under his arm.

AFTER I DRESS, the group meets up outside the main lodge — yes, in a big circle — where staffers make sure everyone is present and accounted for. Then it’s time to eat.

The breakfast line gives me a chance to talk to other Journeyers. I’m standing behind Sam, a dark-haired, clean-shaven guy in his early 20s, who studies at a prestigious East Coast university. He tells me fellow students give him strange looks when he tells them he’s Christian.

“Conservatives get the bad rap of being uneducated or brainwashed, you know?” he says while we pick up our plates. “People are surprised when they find out I’m a Christian.”

Sam brings up an important point. As I talked to men last night between exercises or during dinner, they revealed a long list of occupations requiring a good chunk of brain matter: a university professor, plenty of university students, a biologist, a nurse. Sam’s right: These guys aren’t dumb, even though some secular liberals often characterize them that way.

After grabbing my cafeteria-grade food, I take a seat at one of the round tables set up on the north side of the main lodge room. After a couple of minutes of solo eating, I’m approached by Eric, a man whom I’ve noticed as being a bit of a loner. While most of the men chat with each other while moving from one exercise to the next, Eric sits quietly with his hands folded.

Eric and I start out with the usual jobs and family conversation

— he’s Catholic, married with two kids — before talking about how we got to JiM. Eric says one of the counselors from his weekly support group recommended it to him.

“And I really needed to come here,” he sighs.

“Why’s that?” I ask, trying to play the journalist without looking like one.

“Well, you know how hard this issue is,” he replies.

I nod.

“Well, you know, the Internet just makes things so tough these days.”

“Like, pornography?” I ask. I may not be attracted to men, but I can single-handedly vouch for the ubiquity of online porn.

“Well, yeah,” he says. “But I mean with other stuff, like Craigslist.”

I chew my food, waiting for Eric to explain himself.

“It’s just so easy to start chatting with men. And before you know it, you’re driving out to meet them somewhere,” he says.

I take slow drinks of orange juice. I feel my heart pounding.

Eric describes, with little detail, how he meets men in bars or public restrooms. The encounters lead to sex, and nothing else. His wife has no idea.

I stare at my plate. I don’t say anything as Eric goes on about how the Internet “makes things so darn easy.”

I don’t know why Eric revealed this information to me. Was he hoping for compassion? Empathy? The relief and absolution that comes through confession?

He wouldn’t get those from me. I might fake gay, but I can’t pretend that his behavior is OK. After a few minutes with Eric, I finish my plate and excuse myself from the table.

ERIC’S CONFESSION marks a turning point in the weekend. Up until that morning, I had been amused by the camp’s homoerotic exercises. But Eric’s confession is a sucker punch: This whole conversion-therapy movement is a life-or-death issue. Sure, Eric is choosing voluntarily to participate in these programs and become straight. But what about the health and safety of his wife? Eric has come here because he believes the camp will help him become straight. What happens if the camp fails?

AFTER BREAKFAST, we learn a conflict-resolution model called Clearing. It works like this:

First, we identify the person to confront and invite him to participate in the Clearing. Then we stand facing each other, grasping one of the Guide’s gnarled wooden walking sticks, and verbally work out the issues we have with each other. To finally resolve the conflict, staffers encourage us to arrange later one-on-one time to speak with our fellow Clear. It’s not like we have a lot of free time that weekend, so most men can’t hold back the embarrassed grin as they ask, “Would you have lunch with me today?”

I don’t have an issue with any particular attendee. Many men choose to Clear with the lumberjack-type Journeyer who, solely by virtue of his muscular build and Billy Mays beard, intimidates many of the, well, “queenier” attendees.

But Clearing gives me the opportunity to meet with one of the more interesting staff members: a man of service named Caleb Lee Brundidge.

BRUNDIDGE was the only African-American man attending that weekend. Dreadlocks fell loosely around his face, and his rolled-up shirt sleeves revealed several faded tattoos. In a sea of pasty white faces and ink-free arms, Brundidge stood out.

Brundidge agreed when I invited him to lunch.

OK, there was a personal reason for speaking to him. Remember those large tattoos on my shoulders? When I had them done, I intentionally kept them high enough on my arm to keep them hidden under short-sleeve shirts. The reason? I was freaked out about future employers.

I met with Brundidge later that afternoon. He told me that what other people think doesn’t really matter. What’s important is that God sees what’s in our hearts.

It turns out that Brundidge is a former homosexual. He’s a staff member for Cohen’s International Healing Foundation. He’s also a worship leader for Phoenix-based Extreme Prophetic Ministries, where he throws bass-heavy raves-for-Jesus and travels to mortuaries and funeral homes, attempting to raise the dead through prayer. And this weekend wouldn’t be the last I would hear of him.

THE GROUP CONTINUES with the exercises when we arrange ourselves in a circle in the main lodge room. Similar to when we first entered the lodge last night, a candle burns in the middle of the room.

One-by-one, Journeyers or staff members walk to the middle of the room, their right hands extended towards the flame. They confess to some transgression, saying, “If you’re like me and have [*insert transgression here*], walk with me.” Each man who has shared in the speaker’s shame steps toward the candle, extends his right hand, walks a slow counter-clockwise circle around the candle, then returns to his original spot in the circle.

The confessions break my heart. Men fess up to cheating on their wives, seducing their best friends, suffering from pornography addiction. One man is ashamed of his penis. So as to not look strange, I step out and walk for a couple of the confessions. After all, I have slept with a best (female) friend, and I am a regular masturbator.

Then Dave steps forward and extends his hand towards the candle. I feel my eyes go wide as I wait for him to speak. Dave is such a good guy; what could he have done?

“If you’re like me and are worried you’ll pass this problem on to your son, walk with me.”

I admit I’ve only known him for a few hours, but Dave strikes me as one of those guys who does a damn good job raising his kids. Why? In the car ride over to the ranch, Dave told me how busy he is with his sons’ lives. He’s doesn’t seem like one of those pushy mega-jock dads, either.

And yet, Dave’s line of thinking is exactly what you’d expect from the emotional-wound theory put forward by the ex-gay movement. He has enough to worry about with his own issues — surely he doesn’t need the added worry about turning his own sons gay.

Dave’s concern for his sons highlights the tragedy of the ex-gay movement: It makes good people feel evil.

AFTER WHAT I CALL the Circle of Shame, the Jack and the Beanstalk crew continue their script. Upon waking, Jack spots the beanstalk — a phallic symbol, we’re told — and can’t resist the urge to scurry up its branches. Jack has left the safe, feminine confines of his mother’s house and, like his father did, embarks upon a masculine journey.

Once atop the beanstalk, Jack explores inside the majestic castle. He snatches the goose laying golden eggs. Jack is about to return home when he hears the giant — the same that killed Jack’s father years ago — plodding through the castle halls. Frightened, Jack hides deep in the castle.

The giant is Jack’s “shadow”: the dark force that haunts and threatens him. Jack hides now, but he can’t become a man until he confronts that shadow.

Here, the staff divides the Journeyers into groups of about seven men. Three staff members accompany my group as we walk outside the lodge and toward one of the cabins. Like Jack, it’s time to confront our own shadows.

PSYCHODRAMA

EX-GAY PROGRAMS largely reject the idea of a biological, genetic, or other “born-that-way” explanation for homosexuality. At first, they cite a lack of scientific evidence supporting the idea that anyone is born gay. But the underlying resistance to the nature-not-nuture hypothesis is religious, not scientific. Their argument, put simply: God doesn’t make people gay.

Ruling out the idea that God creates gay people, they claim the underlying cause of a man’s homosexuality is connected to how he was raised. The Father Wound is the most-cited reason. Sometime during a boy’s life, they say, he didn’t properly identify or safely attach with his father or another male role model. Of course, this isn’t the boy’s fault: If Dad had done his job, Junior wouldn’t be attracted to other men.

Since going undercover in ex-gay programs, I’ve learned that Dad can inflict the Father Wound by being a super-jock, or emasculated; by excessively touching his children, or not being affectionate enough; by being too religious, or not religious at all.

And now, at the JiM weekend, I learn another way a father can turn his son gay: by reading the newspaper.

ONE-BY-ONE, the Journeyers in our small group take turns reenacting painful childhood memories. Jason, a baby-faced, barely-out-of-

college guy, struggles for a minute to come up with something. Then, finally, he half-heartedly recounts the time he tried to get his dad's attention. But Dad rebuffed him, saying that he was busy reading the newspaper.

"So what message did you internalize from your dad that day?" prods the Guide.

Again, Jason struggles. "That he wanted to read the paper?" We chuckle.

The Guide fills in the blanks. "He was telling you that the newspaper was more important than his son."

The Guide instructs Jason to reconstruct the scene. Jason picks men from our group to play his young self and his dad. Dad grabs a scrap of paper sitting in the sunny cabin, takes a seat in one of the folding metal chairs, and buries his face in the paper. Young Jason approaches Dad, trying to get him to play. Dad brushes him off: "I'm busy."

Young Jason and Dad play out the scene over and over again, while the Guide and Jason stand off to the side.

"You were a boy who needed his father's attention. And do you know what you got instead?" asks the Guide. "He told you you were worthless. He didn't have time for you."

Dad picks up on the Guide's words and incorporates them into the dialogue. "I don't have time for you. You're worthless. Leave me alone." For the fifteenth time, young Jason approaches Dad seated in his cold metal chair, and Dad rejects him. Young Jason skulks away.

Much like Jason had trouble coming up with a traumatic memory, he draws a blank when the Guide asks him what he can do to change the situation. Each Journeyer, after recreating his memory, must step into the role of his younger self and take control to change the memory.

This final step is vital to the process, and it varies based on the memory. When Charles, a young evangelical minister from Oregon, recreated the day his father beat his mother because she wanted to buy Charles designer jeans, the Guide told Charles that to take control of his memory he had to remove his abusive father. What ensued was a four-minute wrestling match, where Charles struggled to drag the Guide out the cabin and slam the door shut.

With few exceptions, most Journeyers took control of their memories

the same way. Whether one of the three Guides played a father sneering about the "faggot" behind a fast-food counter or the high school locker-room bully, Journeyers dragged the offending character out of the cabin and slammed the door shut.

The Guides put up a good fight. When Charles the minister didn't completely close the door to the cabin, the Guide pushed his way back in. "Are you kidding me?" panted Charles when he was told he had to start all over again.

My resolution was different. I recounted the time in fifth grade my father stormed into my bedroom when he heard me fighting with my little brother, punched us to the ground, then walked out. I played the part of my younger self. While I lay on the floor of the cabin, the Journeyer playing my brother lying two feet away, the Guide pulled out a blanket and draped it over me.

"You never got up from the bedroom floor, did you?" he asked. "You've been lying there all your life."

He had the other men in the room kneel around me, their knees pinning the blanket so that I was wrapped tight like a taquito. Only my head poked out from an opening.

My resolution was to finally, for the first time in my life, get up from the floor where my father had left me physically and emotionally bruised all those years ago. On the Guide's mark, I struggled to push myself up, but the weight of the men kept me pinned. Sweaty and exhausted after several futile minutes, I switched strategies: Wriggling like a worm out of an apple, I freed myself out of the topside of the blanket. My shoes were pulled off in the effort. I think my feet stank.

But for Jason and his newspaper-reading father, the solution took a violent approach. First, the Guide playing Jason's father rises from the metal chair to stand in front of him, repeating the lines about Jason being worthless. Next, Jason is handed a baseball bat and told to kneel on the floor. A punching bag is placed between him and the father.

"What you need is a new father," the Guide says, moving another Guide to stand behind the first. "But this old father is standing in your way. You need to get rid of him."

Jason looks wide-eyed at the man standing in front of him. The Guide who has been leading Jason through the exercise makes an over-the-head

swinging motion. Jason grips the bat, lifts it up behind his head, and swings it down, the bat thudding on the punching bag.

“Again!” yells the Guide.

Jason obeys. He swings over and over again.

“Yell! Let it out!” commands the Guide.

His yells are weak at first, but with each swing, they grow deep and primal. Every few swings, Jason’s old father buckles a little, clutching his body as though wounded.

Another Guide motions for the rest of us to encourage Jason.

“Yeah, man!”

“Do it!”

“C’mon!”

I’m horrified by what I see — Jason beating his dad to death in effigy — but I join in the growing roar of voices. Jason seems like such a nice kid, the kind of guy whose biggest regret was the day he forgot to do his algebra homework.

After several minutes, Old Father crouches close to the floor. Jason wails away, his timidity fleeing with his wide-eyed, belly-deep screams.

“Finish him!” commands the Guide. A few more swings, and it’s over. Old Father lies motionless on the ground.

The room is silent, except for the New Father, who stands with his arms open, repeating the lines that have been covered by the thudding and screaming: “I love you, son. I care about you.”

Jason drops the bat, stands, and approaches New Father, who wraps his arms around his son.

Many of the other scenarios end the same way: the Journeyer is held by the Guide playing his father, who tells him how much he loves his son. I’ll admit feeling a twinge every time I see it. What son doesn’t crave his father’s love?

AFTER OUR GROUP has finished the exercises, we walk from our cabin to the carpeted lodge room. Inside, the lights are low. While the different cabins slowly file in, two staff members off to the side of the room sit in the Motorcycle position. The man in back gives the other a back rub.

Once all the men have assembled, a Guide speaks briefly about the

work we did with our father issues. He then instructs us to take out our pens and notebooks. We are instructed to write the letter that we wish our ideal father, the Golden Father, would write to us. After a few minutes, Guides take their places for another holding session. When my turn comes, I opt for the side-by-side hold. I don’t need to feel another erection in my back.

While the Guide reads me my letter, I think about the beatings and bruises and black eyes my dad gave my brother and me. Mom was the breadwinner most of my childhood years; I think Dad took out on us his frustration over feeling emasculated. In the patriarchal Mormon faith, a stay-at-home dad never fully lives up to his manly obligations. Dad and I haven’t spoken much in the ten years since I left the Mormon church; in fact, I haven’t heard from him at all in three years. And yet, despite being raised by an abusive, spiritually castrated father, I have a strong preference for women.

When each man has been held, we adjourn to our cabins.

Just a few hours left. I want to go home.

JACK CHOPS DOWN HIS BEANSTALK

SUNDAY MORNING. Dave joins me out on the patio outside our sleeping cabin.

“So, can I ask you something?” he says after we take in the brisk air for a few moments. It sounds like he’s been thinking about this.

Sure, I say.

“So, I take it you don’t go to church anymore,” he says quietly.

Shit. Cover blown?

“No, man,” I muster. I’ve talked about my mission during the weekend, hoping that my Mormon background would give me enough of a cover without having to divulge much more information. But have I given myself away? Was it the tattoos? Did I slip and say that I liked watching football? Or do I stand out because, unlike my fellow Journeyers, I haven’t been sneaking glances at the other guys?

“I stopped going a couple of years after my mission.” Not exactly the truth. I didn’t just fall off the Mormon radar. I went so far as to threaten

legal action when my Bishop ignored my repeated requests to permanently delete my name from Mormon Church records.

“So, what are you now?” asks Dave.

I lie. “None of the above, I guess.” Really, I’m an apathetic atheist, which is sort of like being a Sacramento Kings fan: You identify with the team, but, deep down, you don’t really care if they win or lose.

“So, why come here?” Dave asks.

Dave isn’t just asking why I want to overcome my same-sex attraction. He’s asking why, if I’m not a religious conservative, would I try to change my orientation? Unless I believe fire rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah just as literally as water falls on Seattle, where’s the motivation?

“Because I know this lifestyle isn’t healthy,” I say. I don’t think I sound very convincing. As I would learn a week later, I wasn’t.

We walk back to the main lodge.

THE GROUP starts Sunday morning with an emotion check-in. Seated around the edges of the Cuddle Room — my name for the carpeted space where we experienced Healing Touch the past two nights — each man gives a one-word answer to the question, “How do you feel?”

I look around the room as Journeyers and Guides give their answers. Several pairs of men have their arms thrown around each other’s shoulders. Some sit in the Motorcycle position. The responses mirror their smiles and cheerful faces:

“Happy.”

“Excited.”

“Hopeful.”

All of the men I have spoken to express positive experiences — not so much at the intense emotional work from the day before, but from the sense of community that has developed over the past two days.

Some of these men have never “outed” themselves to friends or family members. And for all of them, JiM is a place to relax and let down their guard.

One older man even expresses jealousy. While looking at a group of twenty-something Journeyers chatting between exercises, gray-haired Don tells me, “I wish I had something like this when I was their age.”

There’s not a lot of time to sit and chat. With just a few hours left before we head off to catch our flights home, there’s a number of exercises to complete. In the Cuddle Room, Guide Al — I call him that because his curly hair and thick glasses remind me of childhood idol Weird Al Yankovic — passes out papers containing advice for life after the retreat.

There have been few classroom-like discussions like this over the weekend. Most of those involved Al leading us in brainstorming exercises. The first night, we were prompted to finish sentences like, “I feel masculine when...” or “I lose my sense of masculinity when...”

This time, though, Al is giving parting words of advice. He urges us to participate in masculine activities.

“One of my friends had his SSA clear up after joining a golf league,” says Al.

Sports have been mentioned before as a way of becoming more manly — and, subsequently, straight. After my lunch date with Brundidge Saturday, the camp took a break from the memory reenactments to play a game of modified touch football. We were split up into two teams. At the sound of the whistle, each team had to get the ball — a Journeyer — past the opposing team’s goal line. And while it was supposed to be touch football, there was plenty of tackling.

Al goes over the sheet with guidelines for safe Healing Touch: being held by non-SSA men, holding with three or more men present, holding in non-sexual positions.

Occasionally, he tosses out observations on our “condition.”

“We are all attracted to the opposite sex,” says Al. “Some of us are just confused by which is the opposite sex.”

ON THE WAY to breakfast, Dave finds me. And he’s worked up about something.

“Did you hear what happened last night?” he asks, keeping his voice low.

I shake my head.

“Apparently some of the guys in one cabin threw their mattresses into the middle of the room and had an all-night holding session,” Dave says.

Seriously?

“Yeah, I just heard about it,” says Dave, his face twisting into a wide-eyed, “how-weird-is-that?” look.

A Guide has slept in our cabin both nights; I assume Guides must guard each of the other cabins, too. If the goal of the weekend is to become straight, doesn't all-night holding strike the Guides like a really bad idea?

AFTER BREAKFAST, Guides act out the final scenes from Jack's beanstalk adventure in the main lodge room. After hiding from the giant — the Shadow that left Jack fatherless — Jack finds a magic harp and the beautiful, yet trapped, maiden. It's up to Jack to rescue her. Fleeing from the castle with the goose, harp, and girl, Jack scurries down the beanstalk and yells to his mother to bring his ax. Jack takes the ax to the beanstalk, killing the giant, and in doing so, finally becomes a man. With his ax, Jack builds himself a house for his new wife, the rescued maiden, and another house for his mother — in a place far away.

With Jack's story completed, we Journeymen circle up. Guides pass out blindfolds again. This time, Guides yell out words associated with women:

“Mother.”

“Girlfriend.”

“Princess.”

“Bitch.”

“Cunt.”

“Wife.”

“Woman.”

When we remove the blindfolds, scores of women's products are littered on the floor inside the circle: bras, nail polish, tampons, maxi pads, underwear, scarves. On a Guide's mark, we pick up one item, and, one at a time, explain to the group what we picked and what it means to us. It feels like an exercise in bullshitting, not unlike a high school Honors English class. Most men have trouble explaining what the item meant to them. I don't even remember what I picked up.

As Jack had to assert himself to his mother by ordering her to bring his ax — his masculine power — we must take control of the women in our lives and create healthy emotional separation from them. Like the

previous day with the father exercises, we again separate into small groups and adjourn to the cabins for more emotional work.

But this close to the end of the weekend, there's not enough time for everyone to participate, so only a few men bring up issues they have with the women in their lives. Only one Journeyer's exercise stands out.

ANTONIO, a dark-haired, middle-aged man with an Italian accent, says the women in his life fall into two categories: whiners and controllers.

“They're either needy and constantly asking me to fix their problems,” Antonio explains, “or they're trying to control me, make me do what they want.”

The pudgy Guide whom I saw getting a back rub yesterday tells Antonio to select two Journeyers to play the role of the women. He picks a balding older man to play the needy woman. I'm picked as the controlling one. (Was it something I said?)

We two Journeyers stand on opposite sides of Antonio, reciting the lines given to us by the Guide.

I say: “I own you. I control you. You're nothing without me.”

The balding man: “I need you. Please, help me. Please.”

The Guide instructs Antonio on taking control of the situation. Antonio takes turns telling off the two of us. He turns to the whiny balding man and unloads.

“You! You don't need me!” he yells.

Antonio turns back towards me and unloads some more.

“You do not control me!” he barks. “I am my own man!”

He switches back and forth between the two of us. I get his spittle on my face three times before he's had enough.

“How does that feel?” asks the Guide.

“I know what I need to do now,” Antonio says.

Like all of the exercises this weekend, I still don't see how yelling at women will help make Antonio, or anyone, more straight — it might instead alienate him from the women in his life. And if Antonio began dating women, what self-respecting woman would date a man who asserts himself through screaming, anyway?

Nothing I've seen this weekend — the cuddling, the blindfolds, the Jack and The Beanstalk drama — strikes me as anything that would make

someone straight. The JiM survey results that I found before attending claimed four out of five past attendees felt less same-sex-attracted. If anything, after two nights of Healing Touch, I feel gayer. And everything has felt so disjointed, as if JiM founders threw together a jumble of completely unrelated exercises into this Frankenstein weekend.

But maybe I'm jumping to conclusions. Maybe the key lies in the upcoming closing ceremonies. Some kicker that finally pushes us into elusive realm of heterosexual masculinity?

I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE wondering how the weekend will end.

As we walk back to the lodge for lunch, one younger Journeyer with glasses tells me, "I heard the last thing we do is some weird naked sauna thing."

I hadn't heard the same rumor. But honestly, a naked conclusion wouldn't surprise me. Before the weekend, I read a *Houston Press* piece about the New Warrior Training Adventure, a secretive men's-only retreat that Rich Wyler staffed before founding JiM. New Warrior weekends feature naked men dancing in circles and beating cooked chickens with hammers. No, really.

But even if the retreat ends with everyone dry and fully clothed, maybe the closing can at least tie together this mishmash of exercises?

After all, the weekend has, at best, felt uneven. In one exercise, we're brainstorming ideas about growing up and becoming real men. Next, we're being cuddled like little children. One man resolves his father issues with a baseball bat. The next man resolves his by popping a balloon wedged between his chest and a Guide's, like that teenager hugging party game.

Wyler's past explains the uneven feel of the retreat. Before creating JiM, Wyler attended Sexaholics Anonymous, staffed at New Warrior weekends, and trained as a sexual-reorientation counselor under infamous Healing Touch proponent Richard Cohen. I'm starting to think Wyler merely borrowed heavily from each of those programs when he started JiM.

After lunch, the Guides instruct the Journeyers to pack up our belongings and to haul our bags out to the cars. We won't return to the cabins after closing ceremonies.

AS A MAN AMONG MEN

UP UNTIL THIS POINT in the weekend, sporadic references to a deity are wrapped in the sanitary, generic cover of a "Higher Power." Except for one Jewish man, everyone I have met at the retreat prefers some flavor of Christianity. So why no specific mention of God or Jesus? Possibly two factors are at play: Wyler's history with the deity-generic Sexaholics Anonymous, and a desire to appeal to as many SSA-men as possible. By keeping religious ideas at a minimum, more men from more religious backgrounds can attend, without the particulars of their faith being offended.

So I'm a little surprised when, gathering us around the lodge fireplace, a Guide tells us that our journey requires us to surrender ourselves to that higher power. He instructs us to grab our journals and to write three things on a sheet of paper: Things we have already surrendered, things we now surrender, and things we must surrender in the future. Then, as we're ready, we take that paper and toss it into the big fire. It's like an eleventh-hour push to include God in the going-straight process.

This leads us to the closing: the Honoring Ceremony.

JOURNEYERS form a U-shape near the fireplace. At the mouth of the U stands a Guide, holding one of the gnarled wooden staffs. Behind and just to the right of him stand two more Guides, hoisting another staff on their shoulders. Hanging from the staff appear to be dozens of necklaces.

One at a time, Journeyers step forward from their spot in the U, grasp the staff, and repeat their personal affirmation and a "stretch."

When it's my turn, I step forward, grab the staff, and repeat my affirmation: "As a man among men, I am alive."

We each picked our affirmation after our individual father-issues work the day before. Before forcing my way out of the blanket burrito, the Guide hinted that since the day my father had knocked me to the ground, I had been dead inside. Now, the Guide wanted me to know that, for the first time in years, I was alive.

The "stretch," or the way we would challenge ourselves for the next two weeks, came when the full-bearded Guide, who played the pan flute as background music during many of the large group exercises, led me

outside the cabin and had me sit down in a metal folding chair under the chilly moonlit night.

There, freezing in the dark, I came up with an affirmation that, although corny, felt genuine: “I will look at the moon and feel the cold, instead of feeling numb.”

I’VE FELT NUMB since my little brother’s suicide in 2003. I was living in San Diego that horrible day when Mom called from Sacramento to say, “Teddy, are you sitting down? It’s bad.”

I hopped onto my motorcycle and raced home, tears streaming down my cheeks as I yelled Jared’s name over and over into my helmet. It was stupid — I was in no shape to pilot a motorcycle down a freeway. But I wasn’t thinking straight.

After my roommate dropped me off at the airport, I was all business. Landing in Sacramento and being dropped off at Mom’s house, I put on a stone face and got to work: writing the obituary, planning the viewing and funeral, crafting the eulogy. I had to be strong, or everyone else would fall apart.

In that cabin with all those men watching, recreating the day when my dad knocked Jared and me to the ground, the exercise got to me. I didn’t want it to. I tried to stay emotionally distant. But I couldn’t. And after the memories of my brother came rushing back, I confronted the fact that, yes, I had closed myself off emotionally to Jared’s death.

The Guide nodded his head as I explained all this.

Suddenly the cabin door exploded open, and a Journeyer and a Guide, both shirtless, struggled as the Journeyer tried to force the Guide outside the cabin and to slam the door shut.

“What the hell?” I burst out, losing my Christian cover.

“They’re recreating a locker-room scene, I think,” explained the Guide.

BACK IN THE LODGE ROOM, the Guide grasping the staff with me turns toward the Guides to his left, and removes a necklace. He drapes it over my neck, and has me turn around to face the other Journeyers in the U.

When I get back to my place in the horseshoe, I look down at the

necklace and see that a small leather pouch hangs from the leather string. Using both hands, I tug open the cinched leather pouch, reach in, and pull out — *beans?*

Oh, I get it: Jack’s seeds. But wait: Don’t the seeds represent Jack’s sperm?

I jerk my head back up and scan around the room — I’m not exaggerating here — looking for the hidden camera. Is this some kind of joke?

I mean, *this is it?* After the cuddling and the touch football and the wrestling, did the Guide just hang a tiny scrotum around my neck? This is how we get welcomed into manhood?

I look at the Guides, scanning their somber faces. Likewise, the Journeyers seem very intent. Am I the only one who sees a problem here?

One Journeyer doesn’t feel like participating in the Honoring Ceremony. The Guide holding the staff badgers him. “Look, man, I know it’s pretty tough, but I invite you to participate in this part of the journey.”

That word — “invite” — is the way the staff have corralled us all weekend. We’ve been invited to stand up, invited to sit down, invited to gather in a circle. We’re never really instructed to do anything, just passively “invited.” It gives the impression that we do everything out of free will. But watching the Guide taunt this Journeyer in front of all of us, I’m not sure how free we have been this weekend. Finally, the Guide gives up.

Several Journeyers pick a “stretch” to tell someone they know back home that they struggle with same-sex attraction. After each Journeyer has stated his affirmation and stretch and received his leather pouch, we go through the same face-to-face exercise as the beginning of the retreat: The Journeyer at the far end of the U snakes around to face the man to his left. That way we all end up staring each other in the face.

Their faces reveal the intensity of the weekend. Tears flow freely. I smile at the men I’ve come close to.

The line snakes outside the lodge building, where the same Guides that interrogated us at the beginning of the weekend are lined up on the way to the parking lot. They ask the same questions they greeted us with just two days earlier: What is a man? How do you know you’re a man?

While waiting my turn, a Journeyer a few steps ahead collapses. Like when a guy was slammed in the touch-football game, there is no First Aid staff to attend to him. Instead, a veterinarian crouches over him until, like

during the football game, the Journeyer eventually recovers and struggles to his feet.

Finally past the last of the Guides, I gather with the rest of the newly graduated Journeyers. They spend half an hour chatting, hugging, exchanging phone numbers. I just want to go home.

MY CARPOOL piles into our vehicle and we cruise away down the road that, thanks to the rain, is slowly turning into slop. I turn on my cellphone, and as soon as I can get a signal, text friends and family that I am alive, safe, and headed for the airport.

“How was it?” they ask. The medium limits me to 140-character messages. I really don’t know how to respond.

I should be asking the guys in my carpool what they thought of the weekend. I should be asking them what they experienced, and how it affected them. But I’m too tired to think about that. I haven’t slept in two days.

What am I supposed to do with this experience? I signed a confidentiality agreement before participating, but how can anyone keep quiet about something this intense? How can I not tell my friends or family members what I saw or did? And what about the married men? How could they not tell their wives what they were doing all weekend?

I turn around to ask Tony, the guy who had attended JiM years earlier, how the weekend was different this time around. He says that it was “pretty much” the same as he remembered, just a couple of minor differences.

Is the confidentiality agreement really about making the weekend more effective for Journeyers? I doubt it. Included in the information packet is a page urging us to return for a second or third weekend. “Sometimes a price discount is available for men who are going through the JiM weekend a second time,” reads the flier.

We stop for dinner at the In-N-Out. Dave notices that I’ve become withdrawn from the conversation as I try to answer the barrage of text messages from my friends.

“I’m just tired, you know?” I respond.

“Yeah, man, me too.” He smiles and puts an arm around me as we walk back out the car for the final leg toward the airport.

And then there’s Dave. We have become friends during the weekend. I’m feeling guilty for lying to him, for betraying his trust.

At the curb of the terminal, I grab my bags and hug the guys. I worry about them and what will happen when they return home. If they’re hoping they’ll end up straight, I can’t help but think they’re in for a major disappointment.

Finally back in Sacramento, my friend Pauline, the self-described fag hag, picks me up from the airport and drives me to her favorite bar.

I spill my guts over a much-needed beer. “Oh my God,” she says, over and over again between drags on her cigarette.

COMING OUT

MY PHONE BUZZES. Looking at the caller ID, I sigh, tell my friend it’s the call I’m expecting, and walk outside the coffee shop.

It’s Dave. I’m not looking forward to this.

A week has passed since returning home from JiM. Several Journeyers have tried contacting me in the days since. Before leaving the retreat, Guides handed out thick packets of information, which besides promoting two more of Wyler’s retreats and his telephone coaching service, urged us Journeyers to keep in touch with each other. There was also a check-in conference call, and an invitation to join a Yahoo! group. I decided not to participate in either of those. I felt like I had intruded enough into their lives.

I had also ignored all the calls and emails from the other Journeyers. Most of the men stopped after the first few tries. Dave, however, didn’t give up.

He eventually emailed me: “Dude, I miss you... I hope you’re doing well. I called you a couple of times. If I’m harassing you just let me know.”

I wrote back: “I’m OK. I miss you, too. The thing is, I have something to tell you, and you’re probably not going to like it. We should talk over the phone.”

So now Dave was calling me, and this time I answered.

WHILE PACING BACK AND FORTH on the shop sidewalk, I tell Dave everything: how I'm a straight writer, how I was at JiM undercover.

"I knew it!" he says. "I knew something was off!" Apparently my explanation at JiM about my faith proved less than convincing. It seems, though, that Dave was suspicious of my religion, not my sexual orientation.

But that doesn't matter now: Dave is upset. He has every right to be.

"This is why I have this issue!" he groans. "I've had trouble trusting men. Now here we go again!"

I may have lied about my involvement, but I wasn't about to let him pin his issues on me. I go on the attack.

"C'mon, do you really think straight men go off into the woods and hold each other?" I demand. "What about that all-night holding session you told me about? Does that sound like something straight guys do?"

Surely he would see the absurdity of it all.

Silence on his end for a moment. Then, quietly: "I don't know, man. I don't know."

We end the call, and I walk back inside. I'm worried about how this will affect Dave. Dave is a stable guy, but what if word spreads among the Journeyers? How will they take it?

WHAT DAVE AND I didn't know at the time was that the next month, Caleb Lee Brundidge, the tattooed man whom I asked out for lunch, would travel to Uganda, where he would share his personal story about leaving homosexuality. He would speak at churches. He would appear on the radio and be interviewed by newspapers. He would address Parliament.

Then, the month after Brundidge's visit, Ugandan legislators would begin drafting the "Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009." If passed, the bill would execute HIV-positive men caught having sex, imprison people for three years for not reporting homosexual activity, and lock them up for seven years for supporting gay rights or providing services to gays and lesbians.

BUT I WOULDN'T LEARN about Brundidge's trip for several months. In the meantime, Dave calls back after a couple of hours. He is more

composed, but he wants to know more about my motivation, about my stance on homosexuality.

I tell him that I think he's normal, and that professional, reputable psychological organizations agree. I tell him that biologists have observed homosexual behavior in hundreds of species. I doubt I get through to him. How much does science really matter when God has spoken?

And there's more to consider than just Dave's feelings. "What do you want me to do?" he asks. "Leave my wife? Leave my kids? Just go live with some guy?"

There's no easy choice for Dave. Either way, he loses something. Leaving a religious philosophy like Mormonism isn't as simple as changing underwear brands. Often your friends stop calling, and your family members stop inviting you to dinner. Sure, Dave could finally live out and proud, but at what cost?

"I don't know, man," was all I could say. "I don't know."