

Related Essay II

This material is posted here as an appendix to *Sexual Fulfillment for Single and Married, Straight and Gay, Young and Old* by Herbert W. Chilstrom and Lowell O. Erdahl. This article first appeared as “Heterosexism and Colorism” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, vol. 35, no. 4, and appears here with permission. Readers will find a discussion question based on this article on page 161.

This article presents a slice of the author’s journey toward understanding and is included as an illustration of how information and reflection can change our minds. We hope that it will be helpful not only to heterosexist heterosexuals but also to heterosexist, homophobic homosexuals who find it difficult to accept themselves and who can sometimes be among the most judgmental of gays and lesbians.

Jung and Smith, who are quoted in this article, affirm left-handedness as a better analogy to homosexual orientation than is colorblindness, but we also know that some regard homosexuality as analogous to alcoholism, or even cannibalism, and believe that for them to come to see it as comparable to colorblindness would be a very significant step in the right direction.

“Learning About Sex From Sacks”

By Lowell O. Erdahl

I am a heterosexual. Although I didn’t have a word for it at the time, I’ve been aware of that fact since adolescence when I discovered that there was something interesting about girls that I hadn’t thought of when I was six. I didn’t choose to be heterosexual. I discovered it in my adolescent sexual awakening and have learned from gay and lesbian people that they made a similar discovery of their orientation.

I am also a heterosexist and didn’t know that until I read *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* by Patti Jung and Ralph Smith.¹ They define “Heterosexism as a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation. It denotes prejudice in favor of heterosexual people and connotes prejudice against bisexual and, especially, homosexual people.” They go on to state: “Heterocentrism leads to the conviction that heterosexuality is *the* normative form of human sexuality. It is the measure by which all other sexual orientations are judged. All sexual authority, value, and power are centered in heterosexuality.” Jung and Smith make a sharp distinction between “heterosexism” and “homophobia” and state that “heterosexism is analogous to racism and sexism.

Homophobia finds appropriate analogies in racial bigotry and misogyny.”

After years of acquaintance with gay and lesbian Christians, I consider myself to be relatively free of homophobia. I don't see homosexual orientation as either a sin or sickness but have thought of it as an involuntary condition like colorblindness. Being against all sin I affirm chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage but also wonder if Robert Benne may be correct in saying that since:

“some Christians who are homosexual by orientation will engage in sexual relations with members of their own sex . . . the church should discreetly support those who try to maintain the bonds of fidelity. Such behavior is certainly a lesser evil than the promiscuity practiced by part of the homosexual community. The church accepts many less-than-ideal arrangements among its members — divorced clergy for example — and can certainly accept and affirm those homosexual Christians who take the difficult road of fidelity. This should be done with all discretion and taste so that neither the normative tradition of the church nor the persons involved are compromised.”ⁱⁱ

When I shared these “progressive” perspectives with gay and lesbian friends I was surprised that some found them demeaning. They also rejected my use of colorblindness as analogous to homosexual orientation. From their perspective, colorblindness was a disorder — a visual defect — while homosexual orientation was, like left handedness, a minority variant within normative humanity. I was especially troubled by some homosexual Christians who told me that “gay is good” and that they had no desire to change their orientation even if it were possible to do so. From my heterosexual perspective, I found this impossible to comprehend. I assumed that a colorblind person would obviously wish to see the beauty of a full color world and that homosexual persons would certainly prefer the splendid fullness of heterosexual sexuality.

Then I read the first chapter of Oliver Sacks' *An Anthropologist on Mars*.ⁱⁱⁱ This chapter is not about sex: it's about colorblindness. Sacks presents “The Case of the Colorblind Painter” and with “Sackian” vividness tells of how an artist named Jonathan I. became absolutely and totally colorblind as a result of a concussion. He not only lost all sense of color, but also all memory of color. As a successful artist just past 65 years of age, this was a devastating experience. His life and his paintings had abounded with vivid color; now his entire world was black, white and gray:

“It was not just that colors were missing, but that what he did see had a distasteful, ‘dirty’ look, the whites glaring, yet discolored and off white, the blacks cavernous — everything, unnatural, stained, and impure.

“Mr. I. could hardly bear the changed appearances of people (‘like animated, gray statues’) any more than he could bear his own appearance in the mirror; he shunned social intercourse and found sexual intercourse impossible. He saw people’s flesh, his wife’s flesh, his own flesh, as an abhorrent grey; ‘flesh-colored’ now appeared ‘rat-colored’ to him. This was so even when he closed his eyes, for his vivid visual imagery was preserved but was now without color as well.

“The ‘wrongness’ of everything was disturbing, even disgusting, and applied to every circumstance of daily life. He found foods disgusting due to their greyish, dead appearance and had to close his eyes to eat. But this did not help very much, for the mental image of a tomato was as black as its appearance. Thus, unable to rectify even the inner image, the idea, of various foods, he turned increasingly to black and white foods — to black olives and white rice, black coffee and yogurt. These at least appeared relatively normal, whereas most foods, normally colored, now appeared horribly abnormal. His own brown dog looked so strange to him that he even considered getting a Dalmatian.”^{iv}

Reading of this horrible experience none of us is surprised to learn that Mr. I. desperately yearned to have his color vision restored. How could it be otherwise?

But time passes and the story unfolds in a surprising and remarkable way. Mr. I. discovers that he is now seeing things that he had never seen before and that his depression has given way to gratitude.

“Most interesting of all, the sense of profound loss, and the sense of unpleasantness and abnormality, so severe in the first months following his head injury, seemed to disappear, or even reverse. Although Mr. I. does not deny his loss, and at some level still mourns it, he has come to feel that his vision has become ‘highly refined,’ ‘privileged,’ and he sees a world of pure form, uncluttered by color. Subtle textures and patterns, normally obscured for the rest of us because of their imbedding in color, now stand out for him. He feels he has been given ‘a whole new world,’ which the rest of us, distracted by color, are insensitive to. He no longer thinks of color, pines for it, grieves its loss. He has almost come to see his achromatopsia as a strange gift, one that has used him into a new state of sensibility and being . . .

“Once, about three years after his injury, an intriguing suggestion was made (by Israel Rosenfield) that Mr. I. try to regain his color vision . . . What was striking was Mr. I.’s response to this suggestion. In the first months after his injury, he said, he would have

embraced such a suggestion, done everything to be 'cured.' But now that he conceived the world in different terms, and again found it coherent and complete, he thought the suggestion unintelligible, and repugnant. Now that color had lost its former associations, its sense, he could no longer imagine what its restoration would be like. Its reintroduction would be grossly confusing, he thought, might force a welter of irrelevant sensations on him, and disrupt the now-reestablished visual order of his world. He had been for a while in a sort of limbo; now he had settled - neurologically and psychologically - for the world of achromatopia."^v

When I shared this story with a lesbian friend and confessed to wondering if Mr. I.'s experience was analogous to that of homosexual persons who were at first appalled at the discovery of their orientation but who later came to believe that 'gay is good' and to have no desire to change, she responded affirmatively and encouraged me to share it with others.

I am still not ready to call Mr. I.'s vision normative and am therefore probably a "colorist." But at the same time I can hardly think of it, or certainly of him, as less than fully human. His testimony compels me to ask, "Is there really 'a whole new world' of colorless vision that is no less human than mine? Does he now see things that I don't see? Is his vision a 'strange gift' for which he is rightly thankful? Is he to be affirmed in his refusal to seek change and to be encouraged to rejoice in the blessings his sight provides?"

Then as a heterosexist I also ask "Is there a homosexual world no less human than mine? Is homosexual orientation a 'strange gift' that enables persons to see and experience dimensions of life that are different, but as human as mine? Can it be that for them 'gay is good' and that they are to be affirmed in their refusal to seek change and to be encouraged to received blessings from God through the gift they have been given?"

I hear some answering "Yes" to these questions. But I hear others shouting an emphatic "No!" I hear them saying that Mr. I.'s accommodation to his colorblindness and gay and lesbian persons' affirmation of their homosexuality as akin to alcoholics and drug addicts rejoicing in their addiction. They see such people as having been "naturalized to the unnatural" and their self-affirmation as demonic deception. To which I can only reply, "maybe?" but also "maybe not!" (**Today, five years after writing this article, I would reply "I think not!"**) I think, for example, of how humanity has been enriched by the intellectual and artistic contributions of gay and lesbian people and wonder if their "strange gift" may have helped them see, feel and express realities that are beyond most of us.

Perhaps all of us need to be cured not only of racism and sexism but also of colorism and heterosexism. Maybe Jung and Smith are correct in asserting that homosexual orientation is within the norm of human sexuality. Or, even if not normative, their orientation, like Mr. I.'s colorblindness, may be a "strange gift" for which thanks are rightly given and from which blessings are rightly received. Might it even be among the many, and sometimes strange, things of which it can be said, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's work and by prayer." (1Timothy 4:4-5 NRSV)?

I don't comprehend the fullness of either human vision or human sexuality and am probably still a colorist and a heterosexist. But at the same time, I am grateful to Oliver Sacks for teaching me some things about both seeing and sex that I had failed to understand and I invite you to join me in pondering them further.

ⁱ Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith. *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993, 13-14.

ⁱⁱ Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, 151-52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oliver Sacks: *An Anthropologist on Mars*. NY: Knopf, 1995, 3-4.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 7-8.

^v *Ibid*, 38-39.