



Reaching Out

In the familiar Aesop's fable, "The Fox and the Grapes," the fox desperately jumps up, over and over again, in an effort to reach a cluster of grapes that hangs overhead — just out of his reach. Finally, he gives up, and in disgust exclaims, "They probably were sour grapes anyhow!"

No doubt you heard that story times as a child, probably perched attentively on the knees of your mother, your father or a loving grandparent.

I can't think of a better story to illustrate the struggle with gender identity that defined my early childhood years.

The "grapes" in my story were a pretty important cluster of personality factors — male bonding, male acceptance and male inclusion. Oh, how I wanted to be one of the guys! To belong. To have a macho male personality. And a physique to match.

When, finally, I determined that I just couldn't reach that "bunch" of male friendship and personality traits, I exclaimed in disgust, like the fox, "Who needs them! They're just stupid boys, anyhow. Sour grapes!"

In my personality make-up, homosexuality was not about a problem with

*Through the bondage of homosexuality...
To freedom in Christ...*

God Never Let Go

By Jerry Armelli

relating to the opposite gender. It was about my inability to relate to the same gender. Other males intimidated me. Sports just weren't my thing. The prevailing male stereotype said that I should be competitive and aggressive. By nature, I was sensitive, relational and social. I just didn't fit.

Early on I became interested in theatre and dance, which were foreign concepts to most of my male peers, including the males in my family. My interest in dance and the arts just widened the gulf that separated me from other males.

Naturally, the more I moved away from males to avoid feelings of inadequacy and rejection, the more I gravitated toward females. And the more time that I spent with my girl buddies during those critical developmental years, the more I acted like them.

Before long, I became angry at males

and completely quit trying to fit in.

After high school, I joined a dance company and seriously began training to become a professional ballet dancer. Ironically, this was tremendously affirming to my masculinity due to the rigorous physical demands of dance and the clearly defined roles of men and women. Dance was empowering and affirming.

A CRISIS MOMENT...

At the age of 23 and out of college, something happened that was both traumatic and defining. Another male in one of our productions began to direct a lot of attention toward me. Craving connection and community, I found myself receptive to this man's advances.

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God Never Let Go

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Meet Jerry Armelli



An experienced, trained and compassionate counselor, Jerry Armelli also is an engaging public speaker. To schedule Jerry to address your church or civic

group, contact him at (513) 861-0011 or through the Web site, www.Prodigoal-Ministries.com.

Making assumptions about the factors contributing to any one individual's homosexuality can be demeaning and destructive.

After all those years of struggling in loneliness...all those years of riding an emotional seesaw between shame and fear...suddenly I was forced to confront the critical question that I had refused to address head on until that point in my life: ***Was I homosexual?***

And the honest answer that flowed spontaneously from my subconscious mind was...yes.

Yes, I was homosexual.

Freed, or so I thought, by that admission, I then set out to explore the gay scene. There, surely, I could escape the internal struggle that plagued me. There, surely, I could find the male acceptance for which I so longed. With anticipation, I dedicated myself to a continuous cycle of gay bars, gay parties, and gay organizations.

But the companionship, the love, and the freedom, which the gay scene promised, proved to be a shallow façade, a bitter illusion.

For me, the gay scene became a road to more intense loneliness and overwhelming depression. Depression, to the point of despair.

More than once during that dark period of hopelessness thoughts of suicide plagued me.

Denying my gayness had brought misery. Pursuing my gayness led nowhere. If happiness could not be found in either direction, why continue to exist?

OUT OF DARKNESS, INTO LIGHT...

Then, by God's grace, a caring deacon/friend encouraged me to join a group of young Christians who simply met weekly to follow Jesus together, to share their life struggles, and to pray with and for each other.

The Christian faith — as a solution to my struggle — was not a new concept to me. Raised by loving, Catholic parents, Christian morals and values had been had been a part of who I was since my early childhood years.

During many of those early years I had pleaded with Christ to free me from my same-gender attraction, and

religiously tried to do all the "right" things so that He would answer my prayers. But the Divine ears seemed deaf to my pleas. Wholeness and peace seemed to inch farther and farther out of reach.

Willing now to try anything — but doubtful of any positive outcome — I showed up at this group's weekly gathering.

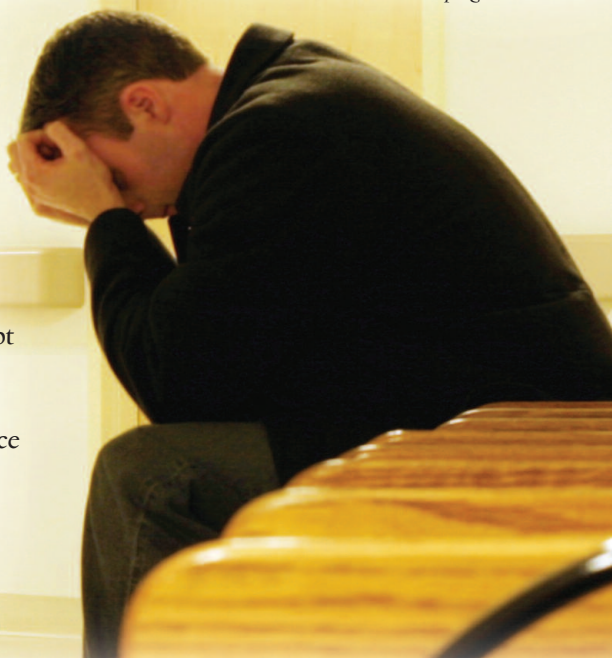
There, in spite of my defeatist predisposition, something wonderful happened.

As I sat in the presence of those men and women, sharing their hearts to the One Whom they had honestly come to know as "Lord" and to each other, I sensed something that was overwhelmingly attractive. I sensed within them an inner peace and joy that transcended all the struggles and harsh circumstances that these people were experiencing in their own lives. And above all, I sensed the love of Christ reaching out through these strangers to me — without reason, without reservation and without conditions.

A NECESSARY FIRST STEP...

It was then, for the first time in my "Christian" life, that I made it my goal — not to rid myself of an unwanted same-gender attraction. I already had proved that I was incapable of doing that in my own strength. No, I made it my goal simply to know and to follow Jesus the way that these new friends

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The lead article in this special edition of *Reaching Out* tells the story of Jerry Armelli's journey out of same-gender attraction. Intriguing on many levels, at its core Jerry's story is a testimony to Christ's unconditional love and

the transformation that He accomplishes in all who are willing to deny self and follow Him.

We hope that you were encouraged and strengthened in

your own walk by Jerry's unique story and that you will find ways to share his story with others.

Through Christ-centered ministries such as Prodigal, Exodus International and its many other affiliates, tens of thousands of men and women who once struggled with same-gender attraction have found freedom and restoration and now, like Jerry, enjoy healthy heterosexual identities.

Unlike Jerry, though, the vast majority of those set free from same-gender attraction through the power of Christ do not devote themselves to a career in counseling as Jerry has. Most pursue or continue careers that are unrelated to their former struggle.

How is it, we wondered, that Jerry was led to a career in this specialized area of professional counseling? So we asked him, and thought that you might be interested in hearing "the rest of the story."

Editor – The personal journey that you chronicled in "God Never Let Go" ends with your being freed from same-gender attraction. You must have been in your mid-twenties then. Did you immediately have a desire to pursue a career in counseling?

JA – No, in fact, not at all. At the time I was between my junior and senior years at CCM (University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music) and was focused on two related goals – first, completing my degree, a bachelor of fine arts in dance, and then, landing a job with a major metropolitan ballet company.

Ed. – I'm intrigued. Keep going. Professional ballet and counseling seem to be pretty unrelated career paths. What precipitated the transition?

JA – Whereas a career in counseling had never entered my mind, reaching out to other individuals trapped in an unwanted same-gender attraction was a personal passion. Through Christ's grace and power I had just been freed from a 15-year struggle with homosexuality. By surrendering myself to Him, I was experiencing a joy – in every aspect of my life – unlike anything that I had ever even imagined. A joy that I couldn't keep to myself! I felt a desire, and a debt, to share my story.

Ed. – "Desire" I understand. Elaborate on "debt."

JA – A double debt, actually. During that period of my life when I was going to gay parties, gay bars and gay organizations, I met hundreds of young men and women who were suffering in the same way that I had suffered – acquiescing to an identity and a lifestyle in which they felt trapped. I felt a debt, an obligation, to communicate with these fellow human beings, to tell them that there was a better life, a way that led to Joy and Peace. And I felt a debt to my Lord and Savior, Who loved those men and women as much as He loved me.

Through mutual friends to whom I had shared my story, I soon met two other men who had found freedom from homosexuality through their relationship to Christ. Like myself, these two men were eager to share their stories with other individuals who felt trapped in a same-gender identity.

Before long, God gave all three of us a vision to form a support group where

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Jerry, with wife Mia and their daughter, Croin.

The Rest of the Story

From freedom in Christ,
to freedom fighter...

From professional dancer,
to professional counselor...

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The Rest of the Story

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men and women could come to speak openly about their same-gender struggles, and where we could share the love of Christ with them.

Ed. – So the three of you had a vision. That's great. Lots of people have visions that never get beyond the vision stage. How did you get your vision to materialize?

JA – That's the amazing part. Looking back, it's clear that our common vision was a "God thing." God just started opening doors for us. With a very uncharacteristic boldness, we approached a very welcoming church in the Clifton area, Faith Christian Assembly (FCA), and asked them to let us use a room in their facility for our meetings. And praise God, they agreed. We distributed a few hand-made fliers around the campus neighborhood and in a matter of weeks we were meeting in a room at FCA, listening to and sharing our experiences with a group of twenty or so men who felt trapped in a same-gender identity.

Ed. – And that was the official beginning of Prodigal Ministries?

JA – No. That was the unofficial beginning. The official beginning came about 18 months later. As we continued to meet and word of our support groups continued to grow, the three of us felt a need for some organizational support. A group of Christian men and women – mostly from FCA – who had been praying for us agreed to serve as our board of directors. With their guidance, we submitted an application to the IRS to form a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation. That was mid-1988, and that was the official beginning of Prodigal Ministries.

Ed. – At that point, were you still pursuing a career in ballet?

JA – You bet! By that time I had completed my degree and was traveling to audition for every major ballet company

that posted an opening. To pay the bills, I took a job in the hospitality industry – bellman, valet, whatever. And meanwhile, I was spending several nights each week leading support groups for Prodigal.

About a year after our official beginning, one of our supportive board members approached me with this novel idea – an idea that I did not immediately buy into. Feeling that I had a "gift" for communicating with people struggling with same-gender attraction and desiring to see our ministry expand, he suggested that I pursue a master's degree in counseling and obtain state licensure.

Ed. – Initially, you said, you didn't buy into the idea. Why? And what caused you to change your mind?

JA – Dance was still my passion. A major ballet company was still my goal. And further, the idea of returning to the classroom for 90 credit hours – two-plus years – just didn't appeal to me.

But I couldn't shake the idea. God kept tugging at me. And by the fall of '90 there I was, working toward my Master of Education in Agency and Community Counseling by day, meeting clients for Prodigal by night, and doing what I could to keep up my dance technique – whenever! I completed my course work in the spring of '93, and shortly afterwards took the state test to become a Licensed Professional Counselor in Ohio.

Ed. – Looking back on that experience, are you glad that you pursued the degree and licensure?

JA – Yes. I'm absolutely sure that this was God's direction. Many of the clients whom He sends to us have backgrounds and experiences to which I could not relate on a personal basis. They have deep wounds from abuse, rejection, neglect, alcohol and drug abuse – none of which apply to my personal struggle. The counseling coursework as well as the continuing education required for

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I thank God every day for the way that He has worked in my life...even for those agonizing years when I struggled with same-gender feelings.



God Never Let Go

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were following Him. Wherever that led. Whatever that meant.

Don't get me wrong! God did not immediately reward my new commitment to obedience and surrender by freeing me of my same-gender feelings.

This was just the beginning of a transparent, honest relationship with Jesus and the beginning of a life-long journey of transformation. And if He had not graciously kept caring friends by my side to encourage me, it was a journey from which I would have turned back many times.

Once I had committed to that journey, God began to expose countless other areas of my life in which I had been living for myself. Slowly, and

some-times painfully, I began to understand what a life of surrender to Him really meant.

Slowly, but wondrously, I began to experience a peace and a joy in my own life that far outweighed the pain of letting go.

FIRST ANGER... THEN SURRENDER...

To be sure, my feeling of attraction to the same sex proved to be the most difficult obstacle to real surrender and joy. In prayer, I expressed my anger at God. I understood that sexual relationships with same-gender partners were outside of His creative intent and His will for me. I knew that.

"Why, then," I cried out, "will You not remove these feelings, Jesus?"

At long last, on my knees with those caring, Christian friends, I let go.

"Whether You choose to remove those feelings or not, Jesus, I want to be obedient to You."

...FINALLY, JOY!

And that is the point at which I began to feel real freedom in Him at last. True joy. I had been holding back complete surrender and obedience until He answered my selfish request to remove those unwanted feelings. He deserved complete obedience from me — not because He would answer my selfish requests today — but simply because He was worthy, and because of

the incredible love for me that He expressed on the Cross.

In time — His perfect time — He began to address all my needs. As I focused on obedience to Him

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and began to more fully understand my new identity in Him, Jesus graciously met all my real needs. In time, He not only granted me sexual wholeness, but also dissolved those same-gender attractions and led me to a beautiful relationship with a loving Christian wife.

So that pretty much concludes the story of my personal journey out of homosexuality. I hope that telling my story helps you understand better my heart for the ministry, which God led me to establish so many years ago. And I hope that you will feel free to share my story with others who might benefit from hearing it.

UNIQUELY MINE...

Before signing off, however, I do want to add one very important "disclaimer" to my story.

It is simply this: my story is my story.

I feel that I must add that disclaimer, because I do not want any of

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you to make the mistake of trying to force others who may be struggling with same-gender attraction into the mold of my story.

Over the course of these many years, I have met with and developed client/friend relationships with thousands of men and women struggling with same-gender attraction. And each one of those persons had a unique, personal story.

Many, complex and varied are the experiences and personality factors that

can contribute to homosexuality. And making assumptions about the factors contributing to any one individual's homosexuality can be both demeaning and also destructive to building a relationship with that individual.

Further, I want to reiterate that although the roads leading to homosexuality are many and varied, ultimately there is but one road leading out. And that is the narrow but exciting road of complete surrender to a Savior Who loved us enough to suffer and die for us just as we were.

Finally, let me emphasize that in both my personal and my professional

experience I have found that one element critical to keeping a person on that narrow road is maintaining close relationships to fellow Christians who have experienced — and who can share — Christ's unconditional love. Therein lies the key to the mission and the method of Prodigal Ministries.

That does it.

That completes the story of my personal journey out of bondage to homosexuality and into the freedom that can only come through complete surrender to a Savior Who loves me so much. The story, and the journey, that are the foundation of Prodigal Ministries.

The Rest of the Story

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certification have enabled me to identify and respond to these situations and to relate to their needs.

Ed. — So that was the end of your dance career, I assume?

JA — No! God gave me the gift of dance and I remained confident that he would use that gift to His glory. Just how, I wasn't sure. But I kept working on my technique and even continued to audition.

Then in '92 a good friend who was a Christian songwriter asked if I would work with his sister, Mia, who also was a dancer, to choreograph a song that he had written. Never having met his sister, I was a little reluctant at first.

Choreographing is like composing, a very personal expression. Clearly, though, God was in the details again. It was an instrumental piece entitled, *The Atonement*, and working with Mia on that project was a thrilling experience. That choreographing partnership

marked the beginning of a relationship that has never ended — and never will. Mia and I were married in '94!

Ed. — So that was the end of your dance career?

JA — Wrong again. Mia was working as an instructor at a ballet studio for children. A year after we were married the owner retired and we were able to purchase the studio. Mia continues to run the studio and I am able to work part-time as an instructor. Without that income to supplement my Prodigal salary, I'm afraid that there would have been



times when we could not have made ends meet. The dance studio has been a huge blessing in many ways.

Ed. — Is there anything else that you would like to add to your story?

JA — Nothing to add to the story, except to say I'm glad that God knew — and planned — my whole story long ago. I just wake up each morning eager to let him reveal the next chapter. I thank Him every day for the way that He has worked in my life. And this may surprise you: I

thank Him even for those agonizing years when I struggled with same-gender feelings. I thank Him because it was through that struggle that He drew me into this joyful — and eternal — relationship with Him that I now have.

I'm amazed, also, at how He has used my story to reach out to others. But I must admit that lately I have been somewhat overwhelmed by the conviction that He wants to reach so many more. For the past several years our staff — that's me plus two dedicated, devoted part-time counselors — has been maxed out at around 550 clients per year. Research tells us that at any given time, in the greater Cincinnati area alone, there are at least 4,000 persons who feel hopelessly trapped in a same-gender identity. That's 3,500 additional persons who need to hear about the freeing power of Christ's unconditional love and to understand God's beautiful plan for their sexuality. We're only scratching the surface. I simply want to ask that anyone reading my story will honestly ask God whether helping Prodigal Ministries financially might be a part of their story.

Ed. — Thanks, Jerry, for being faithful to His calling, and for letting us in on the rest of your amazing story.

JA — It's my pleasure!