

Trans-Calgary: a Perspective

By E. Peel, Rainbow Elders Calgary

A friend invited me to listen in on the marathon of opinions heard by Calgary City Council via tele-conference on May 13 and 14, 2020 regarding the practices of “conversion therapy” (so-called) and whether we should ban companies/institutions/societies that purport to be able to convert members of our LGBTQ2S+ community toward a more homogeneous state of being; one shared by the majority of the population: that of straight, cisgender men and women.

I heard numerous divergent opinions, statistics and prayers, and a great many folk who saw fit to present evidence from personal experience allegedly showing that conversion (gay/lesbian to straight) was indeed possible, and almost to a person it was religion that was the catalyst for change. When pressed however, most either stated, inferred or by their awkward silence admitted that they were still gay or lesbian and that their taking of Jesus Christ into their hearts only made them strong enough to be capable of repressing their desires and living celibate lives. Fantastic I thought and good for you that your willpower is such that you can deny your own heart. What are we humans not capable of? Self-induced chastity is not that unusual – monks and nuns have done it for centuries – giving their chastity to the lord, I believe is the word. Still, the act does merit awe.

It must also have been very difficult for most of them to provide glimpses into their personal lives for all to see. I know it was certainly not easy for me to speak since I too have a past that still requires a conscious effort to keep myself from being confronted by it every day. Yes, I too have been subjected to the manipulation, the bullying, the guilt and shame with accompanying self-loathing involved with the practice of “conversion therapy”. At least, that is what it used to be. I remember being forced to sit in the middle of circle of church elders and priests and being made to admit that I was a sinner and therefore not loved by god. They made me pray endlessly, beseeching god to remove my demons. It scared the hell out of me, and what I really remember is that I cried a lot and how, when I did, they turned their faces from me without an ounce of compassion and their voices held no sympathy. In fact, my crying actually emboldened them with a fervor to increase their admonitions and prayers. From believable testimony given by Calgary's own clergy (several denominations) at this 2-day Council hearing, I've learned that these types of practices are no longer perpetrated on parishioners; present day clergy favouring a more conciliatory approach when engaging in what is now best described as religious conversion counselling. To be clear, they cannot cure, but teach gay and lesbian folk how to repress their innate sexual desires... through Jesus Christ.

There is a natural human condition that perhaps goes even deeper than sexual orientation and thus, nearly impossible to repress. I'm speaking of our community's transgender members whose very sense of self, the innate core identity that we were all born with and become aware of by age 3 or 4, has been and still is thought by many to be ephemeral and malleable to the same extent that certain authorities have made sexual orientation appear to be. In truth, neither gender identity nor sexual orientation have been scientifically proven to be the least bit changeable or yielding to conversion.

I'm a transgender woman living and working in Calgary, and I speak from my own experiences with conversion practices as a transgender woman.