Letter From A Straight Man To A Straight Man

To Whom It May Concern,

It was recently brought to my attention that you have indicted homosexuality…and that, consequently, you don't endorse affording all civil rights to gay men.That is, you are reluctant to afford certain civil rights to gay men that are afforded to those of us who are straight.For simplicity's sake, let's assume that such a mindset stems from something we'll call "homophobia" (even though you may respond that no "fear" is involved in the position that you take).

At the risk of being ironical, I write this letter in an attempt to persuade you that homophobia is a queer condition, and that being gay is not.Bear with me.I merely aim to understand your reasoning so that you can understand mine.

A point of departure is to ask certain basic questions:What has sexuality to do with probity?What do modes of copulation between consenting adults have to do with ethics?What does the use of one's genitals have to do with being a good person?It seems that those who are homophobic answer such questions in an odd way.An important question, then, is: How does one come to be homophobic? On what basis would one have contempt for gay men?

Let's take what are arguably the six most important thinkers of the 20th century: Albert Einstein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alan Turing, John Maynard Keynes, Noam Chomsky, and John Rawls.Half of them (Wittgenstein, Turing, and Keynes) were gay…while the other three supported gay rights.This single statistic speaks volumes.

Three of the men who instigated the Enlightenment (Bacon, Spinoza, and Leibniz) were most likely gay.Leonardo da Vinci, the greatest mind of the Renaissance, was gay.In addition to Wittgenstein, Turing, and Keynes, some of the greatest minds of the last century (e.g. Michel Foucault, Gore Vidal, and Anthony Appiah) were gay. After Martin Luther King, the most important civil rights activist of the century was Bayard Rustin. He was gay.

What about athletes? One of the best professional boxers in the world, Orlando Cruz, is gay. Esera Tuaolo, one of the top NFL rookies his first year, is gay. Wade Davis, another NFL star player, is gay. Offensive lineman for the Superbowl XVIII Washington Redskins, Roy Simmons, is gay. TEN of the athletes who won medals in the 2012 Olympics were openly gay. (There were over a dozen other openly gay Olympians that year). What about basketball? NBA center John Amaechi is gay. None other than Charles Barkley has pointed out that every NBA player has probably played with gay teammates…and that sexuality is irrelevant to their merit as professional athletes.

Many of the great artists of history (Michelangelo and van Gogh) were gay.

Many of the great writers of history (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, Herman Melville, Thomas Mann, W.H. Auden, David Sedaris, etc.) were gay.

Many of the great actors have been gay: Nigel Hawthorne, James Dean, Alec Guinness, Kevin Spacey, etc.

Many of the great musicians have been gay: Tchaikovsky, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Cole Porter, Freddie Mercury, Elton John, etc.

There can be no other reasonable reaction to all this than: Thank god for homosexuals.

Now, this is of course not to say that the greatness of these men can be attributed to their sexuality. Nevertheless, the fact remains that their sexuality certainly did not detract from their greatness…and was an undeniable part of who they were. So I can’t help but wonder: Why on Earth would anyone have something against homosexuality?

Homophobia can be defined—in general terms—as follows: Having contempt for another person based on what that person likes or does that is—logistically—none of anybody else’s concern.

Having contempt for another human being for this reason, I’m suggesting, is indicative of a grave dysfunction.If one is homophobic, this kind of strange preoccupation seems to be one’s problem.There is no other explanation for this peculiar mindset than that one is in some profound state of confusion.

Normally, when one indicts another person, it is due to some perceived sleight.If I have undertaken a campaign to demean a group of people based on a certain attribute they exhibit, I implicitly claim that THAT attribute—entailing what it entails—is somehow imposing a burden on (or harming) unwilling bystanders.To make such a claim about sexuality per se is, it seems, to embark on an outlandish excursion.For to do so, one has to concoct an alleged burden or harm that is—invariably—chimerical.In other words: one would be indicting someone for no good reason.(Shall I indict tall men for being tall—as if tall-ness were somehow deleterious to society? Of course not.Why?Simply because their height imposes no burden on their neighbors—nor does it cause any harm to others.Their height need not be any of my concern—so it is NOT my concern.)

Indeed, asserting that homosexuality imposes some sort of burden on me (or hurts me in some way) requires a flagrant venture into the neurotic.The notion that YOUR sexual attractions / activities impact MY life in a significant way is nothing short of bizarre.How could this be so?Shall I also concern myself with whether you pee standing up versus sitting down?

A gay man no more chooses his sexuality than a straight man chooses his.Therefore, a gay man should be no more ashamed of his sexuality than a straight man of his.Think about it: A gay man's sexual proclivities are no more a concern to his neighbors than are the sexual proclivities of a straight man.Sexuality of ANY kind is an irrelevant factor in assessing the merit or probity of a human being.So why all the fuss?Does how one is aroused determine one's good will?

We typically look down on those who cave into social pressures—those who only do things in order to conform.Why, then, would we demand that a gay man betray his nature in order to conform to what others deem "appropriate"?Is this not hypocritical?"Be true to yourself!" I might say, "…except if who you are doesn't comport with the conventions I've designated for you.In that case, I insist that you DENY who you really are."Do I really want to make such demands on my fellow man?

Are we to indict a gay man for his sexuality as though he were adhering to some dogmatic system of which we don't approve?Consider condemning left-handers for being left-handed—as if they'd made the decision to subscribe to some sacred doctrine of left-hand-ness.Only by such contorted reasoning could we consider

condemning left-handers for making such an inappropriate “choice”.(How noble of us right-handers to have so wisely chosen to be right-handed!) And what would we say to someone who proudly patted himself on the back for not being left-handed?

Or, if we grant that handedness is not a choice, shall we say, then: “Well, you see, it’s not that you’re left-handed; it’s that you choose to ACT on it.”(What you SHOULD do, presumably, is force yourself to write with your RIGHT hand.)Are we to suppose that the RIGHT hand is the “correct” hand with which to do things? After all, right-handedness just seems so much more “natural”! How DARE left-handed people act upon their inherent penchant by using the left hand to write?

Left-handedness IS deviant, is it not.

What of “deviance”?Indeed, writing with one’s left hand **deviates from** the “normal” way.Is something that strays from the perceived norm automatically immoral?Is **probity** equivalent to “that which is most familiar”?Does my neighbor writing with his left hand harm me any more than my neighbor sleeping with another man?Is either issue really a moral concern?

The prospect of gay sex is disgusting to you, you say?

Noted.But how is that anyone else’s concern?Frankly, I think the prospect of eating liver is kinda gross.Yuck. Shall I therefore condemn all those who eat liver?What does MY strident distaste for liver have to do with THEIR prerogative to enjoy it?That they enjoy doing something I wouldn’t be interested in ever doing has no bearing on me…or on them.They may consume liver ‘til their hearts’ content…and my world is not turned upside-down. It’s none of my concern.

Heck.I may even consider someone who eats liver to baby-sit my children, become principle of my community’s school, be chief of police, or even become my best friend.He knows I have no taste for liver, so he’ll never cook me any for dinner. (Perhaps he’s not even interested in cooking me ANY dinner.)

If I find out that you love Brussels sprouts when I think they’re gross, I will not conclude from THAT that there is something “wrong” with you.If I think eating Brussels sprouts is gross, shall I condemn those who eat them?Can a man like Brussels sprouts and maintain his dignity?Of course, you eating Brussels sprouts doesn’t burden me, so why should I care? I’D never do it; but what does that have to do with my esteem for you?

Here’s the point. Somehow, we’re able to separate our culinary disparity from our willingness to have mutual respect.My friend thinks no less of me because of my aversion to liver-eating, and I think no less of him for doing something I find quite unpalatable.Our friendship is not contingent on what he does in the kitchen. To be honest, I couldn’t care less what he does in his own kitchen. It’s none of my concern. It would be rather odd of me to concern myself with his dietary habits…unless, perhaps, he was actually going to HURT himself.

I must profess: I have no interest in having anal sex with a girl.Shall I accuse all the straight men who engage in such an act of immoral conduct?Indeed, such sexual activity isn’t conducive to making babies any more than is gay sex.Should that fact be a source of indictment?(If so, there goes oral sex!)Why do I not chide straight men I know who love doing things to their female lovers’ anus?Frankly, I refrain from chiding them because it’s none of my concern.The matter has nothing to do with my esteem for them in relevant contexts.If I condemned such straight men for enjoying that deed, surely they’d view me as unstable…or downright obnoxious.

I find watching golf to be tremendously grueling.Does that entail that I should not tolerate people who are interested in watching golf?Should I condemn those who regularly eat **liver** with their **left** hand while watching **golf**?

What would Jesus do?

Anal sex with my girlfriend after snacking on Brussels sprouts?Not for me.Shall I demean those who enjoy such things?I’m not sure I can find any relevance.

Personally, I may think that the world would be a much better place if all men abstained from ever eating liver or Brussels sprouts ever again…and never wrote with their left hand ever again…and ceased watching golf altogether.I also think all men peeing while sitting down may even be unhealthy for society.And, of course, only vaginal sex with your girlfriends is morally acceptable!Should I not, then, demand that all men abide by my proscriptions?Shall I have contempt for those people who endorse those activities?Shall I demean those who engage in such activities because I personally find such activities unappealing?

Are gay men “pansies” or “fairies”…or just wimps? Tell that to Alexander the Great, perhaps the greatest conquerer in history. “Gay means wimpy” is a myth: the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. (I have known two former U.S. Special

Forces, both gay.) There have been esteemed military generals and amazing athletes who happen to be attracted to the same gender. This is not suprising, as sexual attraction–it turns out–has nothing to do with how much of a “man” a man is.

For us straight men, gay love is something we can’t relate to.Admittedly, we are suspicious of—or even frightened of—things that are foreign to us.When we encounter something unfamiliar—or hear about something that doesn’t comport with what we know—it is a normal reaction to be either afraid of it…or to go on the offensive against it.**Different** is often misconstrued as **threatening**.But we must always take pause.If we react in a knee-jerk way without any critical reflection, this “gut response” can lead to outright hostility.Hostility to those who are different from us (simply because they are different) is never a good idea…as history has demonstrated for us in many ways.

We assess the probity and merit of our fellow man by taking into account certain factors—factors that we deem salient.What has probity to do with what kind of thing makes a man erect?If I opt to be sensual with those who have the same anatomy as my own, does this impact the way I should be judged as a plumber?As an engineer, a chef, an army general, a Senator, a school teacher, a father, a son, a brother? Would a male President of the United States who liked to perform fellatio be inferior to a male President of the United States that preferred cunnilingus?What an odd barometer for merit!

It is not the gay man who should feel bad about his sexuality.The man who should feel ashamed, I contend, is the straight man who creates an environment in which the gay man is made to feel bad about who he his.

Doesn’t human connection transcend the logistics of hormonal activity?I hope so… lest genuine human solidarity be tied to our endocrine systems.Is humanity itself a function of libidinal proclivities?Shall we lose sight of our shared humanity in an effort to scrutinize bedroom activities that needn’t concern us?

In order to endorse the propositions on which homophobic positions are predicated, one must hold that the genuine love between two human beings is immoral if the libidinal impulses of those two human beings are of a certain kind.In other words, the love is deemed immoral simply based on the anatomy and physiology of the parties involved.To insist that genuine love between two human beings can be immoral **for that reason** perverts the very concept of love. Is not love supposed to transcend such things?

To understand love is to grasp that it is a condition that **categorically transcends** physical attributes—including the sexual preferences with which people are equipped.

Ask yourself these questions: Are we to suppose that gay men have different sorts of souls than straight men?Is their love somehow inferior to the love of heterosexuals? Whether I love a woman or another man, am I not loving a fellow human being?It would seem, then, that sensuality CAN transcend anatomical considerations—that the credence of human-to-human love can't be reduced to gender.

Here's a bit of logic to reflect on:

To concern oneself with the kinds of things that another man does in his bedroom can only indicate that one has a vested interest in what that man is doing sexually with others.(What else would motivate one to be concerned with such a matter?)There is no other reason for ME to have a vested interest in how YOU like to "get off" than that I see YOUR getting off as somehow potentially involving ME.Short of concerning myself with it, it WON'T involve me.So why would I take measures that would DEMAND that it involve me?

The only explanation for this: I WANT it to involve me.

This is based on a simple axiom: If I'm a sane person, I will have no reason to concern myself with anything a stranger likes or does that logistically doesn't involve me—or ANY bystanders—in any way…assuming, that is, that I don't want to become personally involved in the activity.(This is how we know that a Salifist's concern for other men shaving is indicative of a kind of insanity.He makes it HIS concern whether or not ANOTHER man shaves his chin…as if another man's facial hair were a relevant factor in everyone's life.The same goes for circumcision, eating habits, musical tastes, clothing styles, etc.)

Homophobia, then, is irrational in the same way that condemning others for eating foods one finds unpalatable.Imagine asking someone who is castigating another man, "Why do you demean him?" and the person replied: "Because he likes to eat a food that I don't like to eat!"

Here's the bottom line: We should be no more concerned about a person's sexuality when assessing his worthiness for an institution than we'd take into account left- vs. right-handedness, skin color, whether he is vegetarian or carnivorous, or what his favorite position for coitus may happen to be.

To ask whether a public figure is gay is essentially to ask what arouses him (or her).Imagine a tabloid posing such a question to a candidate for public office: “What gives you an erection, sir?”

So why should we tolerate such adolescent fixations in our public discourse?Does such an inquiry make sense when evaluating a person in the relevant context?And what if we discover that UNICORNS make him ejaculate?What of it?If I’m level-headed, I simply won’t care either way.If I’m reasonable, all that matters to me are qualities that are relevant to the task at hand.Factors for assessing merit (in the relevant context) are clearly defined…which is precisely why we would never say: “Even though he’s the best plumber in town, I refuse to hire him because he eats Brussels sprouts.”

Making the case that gay love is morally wrong would be analogous to making the case that eating Brussels sprouts is morally wrong.My aversion for liver would not prevent me from voting for a liver-eater for President of the United States for the same reason that my heterosexuality wouldn’t prevent me from voting for a gay man for President of the United States.

Think of it this way. Shall we suppose that we should vote for a candidate for public office BECAUSE it is the opposite gender that happens to turn him on?Of course not. Why, then would we abstain from voting for a man **of the same qualifications** in the event that he is turned on by his own gender?Were Alan Turing and Ludwig Wittgenstein lesser minds, John Maynard Keynes less of an economist, Elton John less of a musician, Anderson Cooper less of a news-caster, Kevin Spacey less of an actor, Alexander The Great less of a conqueror, because of their homosexuality?Was Ben Franklin a greater man due to the fact that his insatiable lust for woman involved a hankering for FEMALES per se? His sexual activities seemed to be a moot point when assessing his greatness.

If we discovered that Abraham Lincoln had been attracted to other men (and had acted on that attraction), should we think differently about him than we currently do?How?Why?I’m confused.Would the Gettysburg Address be seen differently?Would we assign his deeds a different patina of nobility?

The raison d’etre of marriage is for procreation, you say?Does this mean that infertile women and impotent men shouldn’t be allowed to marry?The sole point of sex is procreation, you say?Certainly, you’ve engaged in sexual activity without the express purpose of producing offspring.(If not, would you concede that anyone who has done so is not being immoral?)

For marriage or for sex, surely you recognize that an element of either is some sort of **human connection**, an emotional bond of some kind. That connection involves something…SOMETHING…that transcends whether or not two gametes will ever join to yield a zygote.If the sine qua non of sex or marriage is egg-fertilization, then we have reduced both activities to something that involves nothing more than a pair of animals mating.(So much for making love!)Shall sex become forbidden once a woman undergoes menopause?Why not?Sex is, indeed, about more than procreation.

I’ll close this letter by making this final point:

To indict a person for his sexuality is to disregard his humanity—and thus to demean mankind itself.If we are all god’s creation, then harboring contempt for homosexuality, it seems, is to hold our Creator in contempt.In order to propose that being gay is immoral, one must indulge in a primitive superstition that no reasonable adult would take seriously: that we control our sexuality.

For me to say that YOUR gay sex harms ME is to reveal some glaring insecurity that I am harboring. “What turns YOU on matters very much to ME,” is a statement I would say to you **only** in the event that I’m interested in wooing you.Otherwise, I’m merely being **weird**. By concerning myself with such personal matters, I’m revealing things about myself that perhaps I have not yet come to terms with.Indeed, there is nothing else to say about homophobia than that it is utterly queer.

Who, then, is really being queer: a gay man or those who would hold his sexuality against him?