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Comments at the LGBT-RAN Annual Dinner
June 16, 2012

Thank you for this wonderful honor, for the trip to California to receive it, and for including us in this lovely dinner. I am delighted to be a co-recipient of the LGBT-RAN History Award this year. My work has focused on the history of marriage, sexuality, and religion in the United States, but the chapter for which I'm being recognized tonight was the result of a happy archival accident.

During my first year of graduate school, in a course on religion in American history, we read a speculative but ultimately, I thought, disappointing article about how one might bring a focus on sexuality into the history of American religion. Baiting me, it turns out, into a career, the professor suggested that perhaps there *wasn't* a way to talk about these two topics simultaneously. "Of course there is!" I insisted, full of passion and utterly uninformed. "Marriage! Marriage is about gender, and religion, and sex!" For the next five years, as I pursued my PhD in American history, I tried to make good on that declaration, researching the history of marital counseling and guidance programs.

Among the first places I looked were the pastoral counseling journals and manuals that proliferated in the 1940s and 1950s, as growing numbers of liberal Protestant and Reform Jewish clergy tried to professionalize their practices of counseling and guidance. What I found surprised me: homosexuality was a nearly ubiquitous subtopic in how-to articles for clergy who wanted to offer premarital counseling and in guidebooks for marriage counseling. The more I searched in religious and secular sources—in the records of pastoral counseling organizations, case records from social work agencies, the papers of clergy known for their pastoral counseling expertise—the more I found discussions of homosexuality in the literature on marriage. These folks weren't talking about counseling same-sex couples. Rather, they were trying to apply psychoanalytic theories about psychosexual development to understand sexual desires and gendered identities that did not conform to contemporary norms.

Trying to understand why American marriage counselors focused so much time and energy on homosexuality became a driving question in my research. The result was a dissertation—and subsequently, a book¹—about the history of marriage counseling in the United States as a concerted project to build heterosexual identities and to anchor community values to heterosexual norms. My book chronicles the efforts of social workers, clergy, Catholic couples' retreats and evangelical women's marital guidance groups, psychiatrists, physicians, and, more recently, politicians, to define, construct, and improve heterosexual relationships. (By the 1970s, progressive mental health professionals and clergy had begun to talk about couples counseling as a practice that might encompass same-sex, opposite sex, and group marriages.)

¹ Rebecca L. Davis, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

But back to that archival accident. In 2004 I traveled to Syracuse University's Special Collections department to look at the papers of the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale. He had made his name as the expositor of "positive thinking," a theory of channeling God's infinite energy to attain exalted spiritual power—and personal success. Peale promised that positive thinking and prayer would yield promotions at work, happier marriages, and fewer juvenile delinquents. Best known for his book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, he also co-founded the American Foundation of Religion and Psychiatry, a clinic in New York City that employed psychiatrists and ministers trained in pastoral psychology. I went to Syracuse to see how counselors at the clinic had approached premarital and marital counseling.

I found almost nothing about premarital counseling at Peale's clinic. Instead, I opened a file folder blandly titled "Clinic Corr. 1957," and began to leaf through a stash of astonishing letters. In them, men and women confessed to same-sex desires and pleaded with Peale for help. Why did they turn to him for advice? I learned that Peale had been writing an advice column for *Look* magazine—"Norman Vincent Peale Answers Your Questions"—and had included the following query from a reader in his column for December 11, 1956:

I am homosexually inclined. I want to be like other boys. I have tried hard to be like them, but there is just something missing. I simply can't get interested in girls, but I can in boys. I am 19 now and will be a sophomore in college this fall. This problem has been bothering me for a long time. Now that I am getting older, I want to know what I can do about it. I hate being this way and want to do something about my problem if I can.²

Peale responded:

If you want to get over your trouble and [if you] have the will to follow directions, I feel sure you can become a normal person. You are suffering from an emotional sickness. Incidentally, I have received many letters through this page relative to this problem. Depth psychology has worked out effective methods of treatment for such trouble. Consult a good psychiatrist. If you prefer, the American Foundation of Religion and Psychiatry in New York, where psychiatrists and ministers work together, will be glad to help you, or any reader of *Look*, regarding any personal problems free of charge.³

Peale published his column every two weeks in *Look* between June 1954 and March 1959, each week printing between four and eleven questions and answers. Out of over 800 total questions and answers, this December 1956 exchange was the only one that mentioned homosexuality. After reading and coding all of the question and responses from his column, I also discovered that it was one of only three times in the history of the column in which he did not include a dose of positive thinking along with a prescription for mental health counseling.

² "Norman Vincent Peale Answers Your Questions," *Look* (Dec. 11, 1956): 132.

³ *Ibid.*

The 130 letters that I found in that folder of correspondence were responses from men and women in the U.S. and Canada to that published exchange. (I found no evidence that Peale responded to these letters.) They wrote letters detailing social alienation, emotional anguish, spiritual crisis, and stifled desires. Repeatedly, they told Peale that they needed the treatment he had described in his column because unless they could marry someone of the opposite sex, they would never be happy.

I interpret the driving need for a “normal” marriage among the men and women who asked Peale to help as a response to the cultural dynamics of the 1950s, when the domestic ideal, family togetherness, suburban conformity, and the Baby Boom resulted in the twentieth-century’s highest marriage and birth rates. Another question lingered: Why had Peale recommend psychiatric care—but not also suggested positive thinking and prayer, as he nearly always did?

What I came to understand—and what I argue in the article—was that Peale’s ideal of human happiness—the apotheosis of positive thinking—was a middle-class (or upper-middle-class) consumerist, heterosexual, Christian, marital norm. For people like the 19-year-old whose question made it into Peale’s column, no amount of prayer or positive visualization could help until a psychiatrist had reoriented his sexual desires to make marriage possible. Unlike the ex-gay ministries that have flourished in the United States since the 1970s, Peale and other liberal Protestant clergy of the 1950s did not see homosexuality as a religiously transgressive practice, the result of a corrupt, hedonistic secular culture. Instead, Peale and others narrowly defined same-sex desires as mental health problems. In the 1950s, when the nuclear family reigned supreme in American culture, no one was yet arguing that homosexuality might in any way “threaten” “traditional” marriage. But we see ample evidence here that the cult of domesticity led many gay men and women to despair of ever finding happiness unless they found a way to be heterosexual. Norman Vincent Peale was only too willing to help them.