

Discussed: Stephen Haskell, missionary parents, Pakistan, Bible study, prayer, Adventist ideals, *Little Women*, tomboy, sexual abuse, clean start, isolation, loneliness, clarinet practice, absolute truth

# Spinning the Coin of Truth

By Sherri Babcock

I need to start with a disclaimer. My story does not come close to the heart-wrenching tales that many homosexual people have. Many young Adventist homosexuals have been thrown out of their homes and estranged from their families, but that is not my story. Both Jill, my partner, and I have been blessed with parents who believe in unconditionally loving their children, and our family is treated no differently than the families of our siblings.

Many Adventist homosexuals have been refused baptism, removed from personal ministry positions, or disfellowshipped, leaving them without a spiritual community. But that is not my story. Jill and I are actively engaged in our local Adventist church.

Many Adventist homosexuals have lost jobs, careers, and the credibility of their entire life work when their orientation has become known, but that is not my story. In our places of employment, Jill and I have been able to be open about our family, and we have experienced very little harassment and discrimination.

So why listen to my story over the hundreds of others that could be told?

Maybe my story needs to be told specifically because it is less heart wrenching. In spite of periods where I have struggled and been in pain, my story provides generous glimpses into what a Christian attitude toward homosexuality might look like.

## Early Years

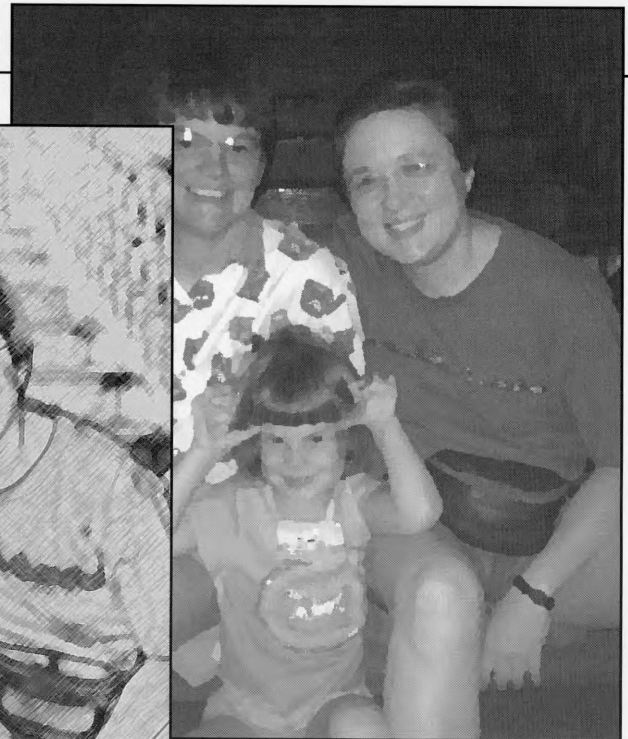
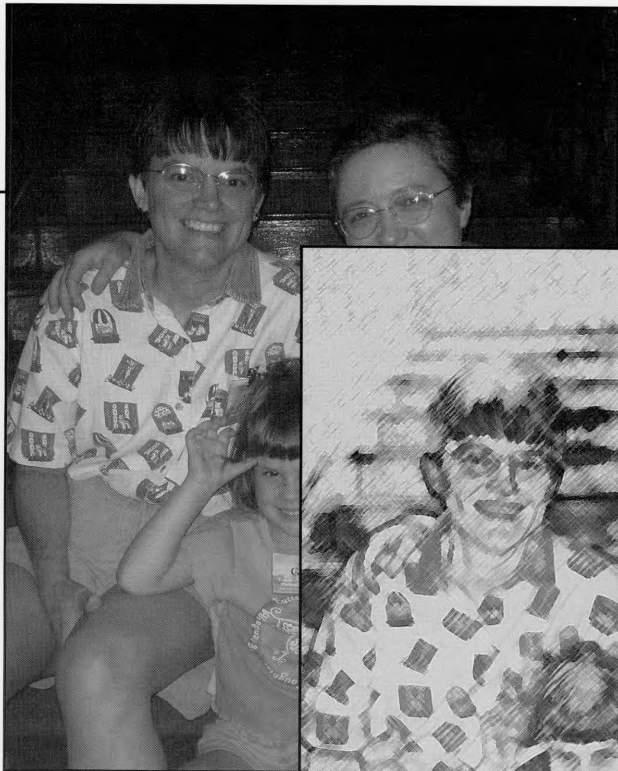
My story starts within the context provided by my Adventist ancestors. My great-great-grandfather, D. A. Robinson, cofounded Atlantic Union College in 1881 along with Adventist pioneer Stephen Haskell. He later became the first male Adventist missionary to India, following behind nurse Georgia

Burrus. My great-grandparents and my grandparents were missionaries to Africa. My parents are both Adventist educators, my father being the current president of Atlantic Union College, and they were missionaries in Pakistan when my conscious childhood memories began.

With this rich family heritage, my childhood was filled with stories of church history, miraculous mission stories, Bible stories, Pathfinder activities, and relationships with student missionaries. I experienced firsthand

both sides of the truth coin. On one side, I learned the importance of "absolute truth": how possession of the truth defined the Seventh-day Adventist Church and qualified it as remnant. I learned the importance of knowing right from wrong, along with what things were right and what things were wrong.

On the other side, I learned about the importance of "present truth": how early Adventists redefined their beliefs through Bible study, prayer, and divine revela-



the thrill, adventure, and responsibility related to serving God and God's remnant church. I assumed that God's plan for my life included attending Seventh-day Adventist schools through college, taking a year off to be a student missionary, getting married, working for the Adventist Church, becoming a fully credentialed missionary, and spreading the "truth" throughout the world so Jesus could return.

In Sabbath School and Bible classes, I was taught

tion; how they were led by the Holy Spirit to cast their message in the light of what was important for the present day. I was taught that Adventists were expected to study for themselves and know why they believed the way they did. I learned that God held people





accountable only for living up to the amount of light they had been given, and that God took an individual's history, culture, and abilities into consideration.

In the midst of all this traditional Adventism, I was discovering that parts of me did not fit the traditional Adventist ideals. My father was constantly reminding me to "act like a lady." I preferred playing with my brother's cars, trucks, and Legos, rather than with my own dollhouse and Barbies. I wanted to climb trees, excel in school, wrestle, and fight kites, rather than read *Little Women* and learn how to sew.

By the age of eight, I had completely claimed the "Tomboy" label already given to me. I often wondered why God had made me a girl, when boys had so much more fun, freedom, and adventure. I frequently asked God to make me into a boy.

In spite of my tomboy identity, I was flattered when a missionary kid from another town, who was four years older than me, asked me to be his "girl-friend." Little did I know that his idea of having a girl-friend meant having sex. When I realized what he wanted and tried to back out, he overpowered me.

Confused and ashamed, I was afraid to tell my parents, so the sexual abuse continued until he went away to boarding academy two years later. At that point, I segmented my short life and promptly erased my memory of almost everything from the previous two years. I needed a clean start.

As I entered my preteen years and the boys I considered my best friends started to show an interest in dating me, I began to feel that I was someone else living inside a girl's body. That someone else was eventually given the name Sandy Smith. Sandy represented some-

one totally androgynous (which perfectly described how I felt) and Smith was totally anonymous (not the college president's daughter).

I would spend long hours in the evenings pacing the parapets around our flat-roofed house, talking to God and pretending to be Sandy, someone who was strong and independent and didn't fit a traditional label. Although I couldn't name it, I knew something was wrong with me. The emotional isolation and loneliness were unbearable, and I felt I would never be able to be my true self.

One night, while in the persona of Sandy Smith, I came perilously close to committing suicide by jumping off the parapet. Just as my center of gravity went over the edge of the roof, a college girl, whom I considered to be my adopted big sister, appeared on the sidewalk below. Not wanting to land on her or for her to witness my death, I twisted around, caught the parapet, and scrambled back to safety. That suicide intervention was so providential that it stopped me from ever seriously considering suicide again.

## Teenage Years

My circle of friends expanded in the eighth grade, when my parents returned to the United States. My unique accent and life perspective made me intriguing to the American boys. I suddenly realized that I could date any boy I wanted, and my girlfriends all thought I was crazy for not taking advantage of it. So my first few years in the United States were marked by dating the most sought-after boys and enjoying the attention it brought me from the girlfriends that I had crushes on.

During my junior year in academy, my roommate had a falling-out with her boyfriend of four years. She was heartbroken and would cry herself to sleep every night. One night, she asked me to come down to the bottom bunk and hold her until she fell asleep. During the next week, I would hold her spoon fashion until she drifted off. Then, I would climb back up to my bunk and go to sleep.

The second week, I started to realize that I didn't want to go back to my bunk. I wanted to shelter her from the pain and be there for her on a more long-term basis. I didn't understand my feelings, but I had a sense that they would get me into trouble. I prayed that the feelings would go away, and I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was going on with me.

One day, while I was agonizing on the way to clarinet

practice, I silently cried out, "God, what is WRONG with me?" I immediately got my only audible response, as I heard a voice booming through the hallway, "Sherri, you are a homosexual." I spun around to see who had spoken, and if anyone else had heard, but the hall was empty.

I started to cry and ran out of the building screaming "No, God, anything but that! I'd rather die!" After running through the woods and fields around the school for an hour, I ended up on a large rock in the middle of a pond. I was exhausted and still crying as it began to rain.

After regaining my composure, I reminded myself of what I had learned about "absolute truth." Since I was clearly taught that homosexuality was wrong, I decided that this must be my cross to bear. I had to overcome this temptation and allow God to change me. Although I was already the junior class pastorette, I spent even more time leading out in spiritual activities.

I buried myself in schoolwork, and I started to date boys who were not necessarily the most popular, but who were good solid Christians and my close friends. I graduated from academy as senior class president and valedictorian.

## Young Adult Years

During my sophomore year in college, I realized that spontaneous attractions to women were still occurring, in spite of my dedication to change. Dreaded and unbidden, those feelings would pop up at the most startling moments. I was trying everything to bury myself in studies, church activities, and other distractions, but it wasn't enough. Thinking that I must need to dedicate my life to God more deeply, I continued the original life plan and took a year off to be a student missionary.

Although being a student missionary was definitely an enriching, life-changing experience, I realized during that year that even while I was living a life totally dedicated to God's service, my feelings were not changing. In desperation, I came out to my parents and asked for help. Although my parents assured me of their unconditional love and support, they obviously could not make my decisions.

By the end of that year, I started to understand that for some unknown reason, this was not something that God was going to change. In spite of that realization, I still could not accept being a homosexual.

After returning to college, I decided either to live a single, celibate life or to see again if I could fall in love with boys with whom I was friends. I dated sporadical-

ly, but the struggle, isolation, and loneliness almost resulted in an emotional breakdown. At that point, I finally threw my salvation on God's mercy and started trying to find another woman to develop a relationship with. I had to find out if I really was a homosexual. If I were, I figured I could be of more use to God as a "less-than-perfect" woman than as an insane one.

By mid-year, I had discovered my first love. The comfort level and lack of emotional angst that I felt when with her were liberating. I experienced for the first time being totally myself. I felt whole and realized that several facets of my life had finally become integrated. Along with this wonderful new experience came the constant fear of being publicly exposed and getting kicked out of school.

At the end of the year, I transferred to Walla Walla College to finish my engineering degree. It soon became clear that the distance and social pressures to "get married and have children" were more than our relationship could bear. Heartbroken, I started to date men again, but I felt that I was lying to them at best and driving myself insane at worst.

I worried that if I got married, I would ultimately end up breaking a good man's heart and ruining both of our lives. I got severely depressed and decided to drop out of school, even though I had only one quarter left and I had just been selected Outstanding Engineering Student of the Year. I needed to find out who I was and locate people with whom I could be myself. I decided to go to San Francisco and start a new life.

## Coming Out and Healing Years

When I called my educator parents to tell them of my decision, they were adamantly against the idea of me not finishing my degree. On discovering that I was serious about pursuing such a disastrous course, they promised to find me a contact number for SDA Kinship if I would promise to stay in school and graduate.

I gave them my promise and contacted Kinship the week before spring break, asking if I could meet some of its women members in southern California during the break. They not only welcomed my impromptu visit, but let me stay in their homes, took me out to eat,



spent long hours sharing their own life stories, and introduced me to the gay and lesbian community.

One night after telling them my life story, I asked, "But, how can God love me if I am a homosexual?"

Marge didn't miss a beat. She said, "Sherri, if someone had just told you their life story, and it was similar to the one you have just told us, would you be judgmental or offer them your love and understanding?"

I replied, "I'd understand, of course, I know the struggle they've been going through."

Then Marge looked me right in the eye and said, "Sherri, do you honestly believe that you are more loving than God?" At that moment, I realized that God's grace was big enough to love me, even if I had turned out to be a lesbian.

On the long drive back to school, I processed every-

came to believe that God expected me to live my life according to biblical ideals, but within the context of my sexual orientation.

When our relationship fell apart, I started processing the childhood sexual abuse. As I let my inner child tell her story, I relived the experiences mentally and emotionally. For several months, it was all I could do to keep going to work every day. Many areas of my life went on hold as I dealt with this new crisis. Through counseling and education, I learned how to nurture and protect my inner child. I joined a twelve-step program for abuse survivors and gained healing from sharing stories with others.

As I became more open about both the abuse and my sexuality, I discovered that many people tried to link these two aspects of my life in a cause-and-effect

## "Sherri, do you honestly believe that you are more loving than God?"

thing I had learned and the people I had met in California. I realized that, like any community, the gay and lesbian contains both healthy and unhealthy people, activities, and social scenes. I determined to sift out the bad and keep the good. I was finally ready to start looking at the other side of the truth coin: to study and find out what my "present truth" was, and why I believed it.

During my final quarter at Walla Walla, I connected with more Kinship members and the local gay community. Out of loneliness, I quickly fell into a mismatched relationship with an Adventist woman, and then stayed in it out of a sense of obligation. She then moved to Ohio with me after I graduated and both of us got jobs at Worthington Foods.

Living with her, I soon discovered that she was definitely not my type of Adventist. She didn't like to attend church, and she drank, smoked, and liked to go to bars regularly. During our two-year relationship, we attended church only sporadically, and I discovered that our relationship frequently cut me off from my hobbies, interests, and support networks.

Since we worked different shifts, I frequently had free time, but she jealously forbade me to go out with friends. As a result, I spent a good part of those two years cross-stitching, serving on the SDA Kinship Board, and continuing my study of the Bible references used against homosexuality. I learned to understand the context and original language translations. I finally

relationship. It became frustrating for me to explain repeatedly that sexual abuse does not necessarily affect sexual orientation, as evidenced by the multitudes of straight women who survive abuse. I eventually realized that people who need a reason for homosexuality will find one regardless of its relevance. As for myself, I believe I would have been a lesbian with or without a history of sexual abuse.

As my healing progressed, I entered a handful of brief relationships. Although some of those lasted a couple months, most never got past the initial dating stage. I discovered that I didn't trust my own emotions and judgment. Even though I wanted someone to share my life with, I was not emotionally ready. So I chose to be celibate for one year. I took that year to rediscover who I was as a person, to broaden my base of friends, and to develop a basic comfort level with myself.

## Growth and Family Years

Halfway through my year of celibacy, I met Jill through mutual friends at a gay-friendly ecumenical church. She respected my celibacy commitment, and we started a slow-moving friendship that eventually transitioned to dating. Early on, I invited Jill to visit the Adventist church, and she readily accepted.

The first Sabbath I took her to church, I could tell it



was not going to be a normal service. The chairs were arranged in a circle two rows deep. We selected some chairs on the second row on the right side and the service started. I soon discovered that the guest speaker was the assistant to the president of the General Conference. I was familiar with him, since I had worked at the General Conference several summers during college.

I remembered my parents mentioning that the appearance of my picture and name in *Kinship's Connection* had recently caused quite a stir over the General Conference grapevine. However, since I had never worked closely with him and had not even seen him in several years, I doubted he would remember me by sight.

As the sermon started, he settled into several stories of how the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia was growing by leaps and bounds. He was a virtual encyclopedia of miraculous opened doors and opportunities to spread the gospel. In the middle of this grandiose presentation, he suddenly remembered who I was, stopped talking about Russia in mid-thought, walked over to stand in front of Jill and me, and launched into a diatribe about the evils of homosexuality.

I was shocked and humiliated. How could this happen the first time that I brought Jill to my beloved church? I don't know how long it continued, but at some point, he turned around and continued his sermon on Russia as though he had never stopped. On the way home, I stumbled all over myself apologizing to Jill.

In spite of that introductory experience, Jill agreed to attend church with me again. As our relationship deepened, I struggled with the idea of being "unequally yoked" with a non-Adventist. But God pointed out with some humor that being yoked with a spiritually equal

Methodist was a whole lot better than being yoked with a spiritually unequal Adventist! So, after my year of celibacy was over, I asked Jill to enter into a long-term relationship with me.

We solidified our relationship two years later at a Celebration of Covenant, held at a local metropolitan park. We decided to tap into an old Quaker tradition and selected six couples to serve as our sponsors. Our sponsors were people with experience who could mentor us in relationship building. We were both incredibly blessed to have our parents serving as two of those six couples. The wedding weekend was perfect, and more than eighty friends and family members from across the country attended. As a helicopter whisked us away from the reception, I knew that I had never been happier in my life.

About three years after our wedding, Jill let me know that she really wanted to have a child. I, on the other hand, was quite content with our life and didn't even want to imagine the challenges presented to gay parents. Because of my reluctance, our discussions about parenting continued for another two years. When I finally realized how deeply ingrained her feelings were, I agreed to coparent. We selected a donor that the child would be able to meet at the age of eighteen, and Jill got pregnant on the first try.

Grace was born on her due date exactly nine months later. We chose the name *Grace* not only because it was the name of my great-grandmother, but also because we had recently finished reading *What's So Amazing about Grace?* by Philip Yancy. We felt that this little gift of a baby perfectly symbolized the undeserved and unexpected ways that God moved in our lives.

It didn't take me long to fall in love. As I learned to care for this little girl, I began to get surprising insights into the meaning behind biblical parenting metaphors for God. My spiritual relationship was incredibly enriched by becoming a parent myself. I became more loving toward those around me as I experienced the fragility and worth of such a tiny human life. As Grace gets older, I am continually challenged to find new and creative ways to explain God and how God works in the world. I am constantly amazed at the strength of her childlike faith and her own uncomplicated relationship with God.

Shortly before Grace was born, my twelve years of

employment with Worthington Foods came to an end. Due to the acquisition by Kellogg, my plant engineer position overseeing the Worthington and Zanesville facilities was eliminated. Kellogg generously offered me the only available engineering manager position—a transfer to their headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan.

After interviewing with my new employer, I realized that Kellogg required seventy to eighty hours of work each week, mandatory committee meetings on Sabbath, and three weeks of travel every month. So, after much prayer, I declined the transfer offer and decided to start my own consulting practice in the Columbus area. It was a huge leap of faith to go from a regular paycheck to what turned out to be very little income for the next nine months.

Just as Jill's maternity leave came to an end, I finally landed a long-term project management contract. The work was steady enough, so Jill was able to make the choice to stay home and parent Grace on a full-time basis. For five years, we have received extremely good care. Now that contract is ending, and the future is again unclear as I approach the birth of our second child. However, if there is one thing I learned from my previous experience, it is that God's timing is far superior to anything I might plan, even if I did have complete foreknowledge.

## Church Involvement

During the first eight years of our relationship, Jill and I attended an assortment of churches in the Columbus area: a couple different Seventh-day Adventist churches, Spirit of the Rivers Ecumenical Church, and the First Baptist Church, where we learned about social justice, built a Habitat for Humanity House, and had our daughter, Grace, dedicated.

Shortly after Grace's dedication, we decided to attend another Seventh-day Adventist Church because of the wonderful children's program and because I deeply missed worshipping on Sabbath. Although we have never officially joined the church, we have been attending there for five years now.

We try to attend church quietly, avoid confrontations, and testify to God's working in our lives as a family. We are constantly amazed by the grace, love, and acceptance we have received from many of the members. The other parents in cradle roll and kindergarten treat us as a family. The church school staff has approached Jill and me to encourage us to

send Grace to their school.

Jill is expecting our second child in April, and some of the church members are already asking if they can host a baby shower for us. I recently accepted an invitation to serve as the chair of the Church Facilities Committee.

In spite of the many wonderful relationships we have at church, we often feel that we have still not found our true spiritual home. We still feel the need to keep our opinions and spiritual insights to ourselves during Sabbath School discussions. We still occasionally endure Sabbath School diatribes from a few members against the evils and threats to Christianity that homosexuals, homosexual marriages, and homosexual families pose. And we keep waiting for some vigilante to decide that it's time to "clean house" and get rid of us.

Maybe our true spiritual home cannot be experienced this side of heaven, but we occasionally get glimpses of the promise that keeps us seeking new ways to nurture our relationship with God. We feel blessed by the members who present a more loving Christlike approach, and that our relationship includes being a part of a church family.

## Conclusion

Although my story is far from finished, I currently find myself using both sides of the truth coin to provide guidance in my life. Instead of focusing on one side at a time, I am learning to spin it on its edge.

On one hand, I am constantly trying to identify and distinguish right from wrong, sift out the bad, and cling to the good. On the other side, the varied church communities that we have been involved with have expanded my definition of God's church, God's work, and God's people.

I now understand "truth" as concepts, metaphors, and guiding principles instead of black-and-white commands and literal stories. I have discovered that truth, understood in this way, is immediately applicable to my daily life, and it calls me to greater commitment, greater faith, and greater action.

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Sherri Babcock has enjoyed a loving, stable relationship with her partner, Jill Babcock, for more than thirteen years. They live in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, with their five-year-old daughter, Grace.