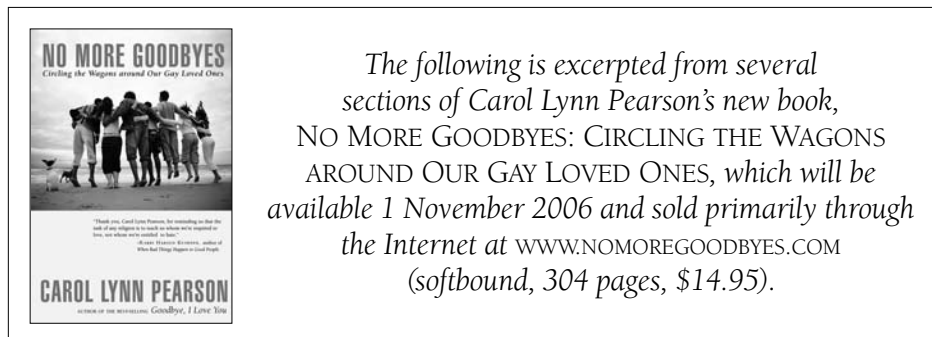


BOOK EXCERPT

ALL OUR SONS

By Carol Lynn Pearson



The following is excerpted from several sections of Carol Lynn Pearson's new book, *NO MORE GOODBYES: CIRCLING THE WAGONS AROUND OUR GAY LOVED ONES*, which will be available 1 November 2006 and sold primarily through the Internet at WWW.NOMOREGOODBYES.COM (softbound, 304 pages, \$14.95).

RON (not his real name), a Mormon gay man who just recently emailed me his story, ended it with, "I intend to take my life within the next few weeks." He gave me a phone number and said to call him if I wanted to hear more. I called, and we talked for an hour. Ron had married, had four children, had occasionally acted on his on-going homosexual impulses, had been thrown out of the house by his wife, who had begun divorce proceedings, had been told by his children not to contact them or show up at their school functions, and had been excommunicated from the Church. "I'm a monster," he said. "My children look at me, and they see a monster."

I got sympathetic, and then I got mad.

"You don't get to do this, Ron," I said. "You don't get to drop off the team and make me carry the load you're supposed to be carrying. I and plenty of others are working as hard as we can to help us understand all this sexuality stuff better, to make the world and the Church safer for people like you to work things out. You have an assignment from life—from God—from whatever—and you've got to take that assignment and do your homework and learn whatever you're supposed to learn and maybe even be able to help teach. Don't you dare drop off the team and make me carry your part of the load! And what about your family, Ron? What would your killing yourself accomplish for them?"

He thought a moment. "I guess it would show them that I'm accepting the worst possible punishment."

"You're crazy," I said. "It would just underline their belief that their dad's a loser. It would give each of your kids ten more years of therapy. You know what your family really needs from you, Ron?"

"What?"

"They need you to become a man who is healed and whole. They need to see you become someone who will surprise the heck out of them by becoming the guy you're supposed to be. Don't you dare drop out. Your therapist is on your team. Your brother's on your team. I'm on your team. God's on your team. Choose life, and you know what? Even if your children truly never want to see you again—and that's highly unlikely—they will know. They will feel it in the air. They will sense that something has changed about their dad. That's what your family needs from you, Ron."

He was silent. "And in conclusion, Ron, you don't get to 'move toward the light'—not over there, like people who've been there come back to tell us about it. Not now. You get to 'move toward the light' right here."

I happened to be planning a trip to Utah for the following week, and I asked Ron if he would go for a walk with me. So on a chill March day when the sun was out between snowstorms, we walked for an hour and a half in suburban Sandy, where I was staying

with my brother and his family.

Ron is a large man in his late forties, and I had to hustle to keep up with his pace. "So what have you been thinking about since our phone conversation?" I asked.

"Well," he said matter-of-factly, "I still think I'm going to do it. In fact, I've chosen a date. April 1st. But the thing you said that has stayed with me is about my dropping off the team and making you do my work. I never thought of that."

I learned more about Ron's history as we walked and talked. Like so many of us, he had not had the ideal home life. Misunderstandings and neglect had been passed down from generation to generation. And unfortunate teachings about things sexual had scared and scarred him. "I died at age twelve," he said. "That's when I died inside." He had masturbated, felt it to be a sin, but had not been able to stop doing it occasionally. He believed that God frowned and crossed him off the list. From then on, Ron felt he was deeply flawed. (It should not be necessary to mention that masturbation does not cause homosexuality; ask a few hundred million heterosexual people.)

As we approached my brother's house, I said, "One more thing. I want you to listen carefully. You are positioned right now to do something remarkable. You stand between your unhealed ancestors and your posterity. You have the power to say, 'It stops with me.' You have the power to refuse to leave a legacy of failure to your children. Don't be the name on their genealogy chart they describe as 'gay suicide.' Don't give them that terrible gift. Give them a father who opted for healing and who came to terms with his homosexuality with self-respect. And you know what else, Ron?" I stopped walking and grabbed his arm. "You can heal your family not only in the future, but in the past. I don't know how this works, but I think about it a lot. Einstein proved that time is not what we think it is. Somehow you can do a work right now that will ripple forward and ripple backward and help to heal everyone who brought you here. A weird and awesome kind of work for the dead! I know you can!"

Tears were running down Ron's face. "Wow," he said. "Wow."

I SPEAK NOW to those reading these pages who have contemplated or attempted suicide because of the torment they feel being both religious and gay. Especially to those who might be contemplating it now.

I cannot say I know just how you feel. None of us can who have not truly been in that hopeless, helpless darkness. I have never



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considered suicide. With three different events in my life, I have wished that all Being, including my own, would cease forever. In the dark night, I have quoted to myself that awful, beautiful poem of Swinburne's that I memorized in college. I can write it here without even opening the book:

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever,
That dead men rise up never,
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea—

Then star nor sun shall waken
Nor any change of light
Nor sound of waters shaken
Nor any sound or sight—
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal—
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.

But I don't believe in eternal night. I believe in eternal light. The closest I ever came to acting on annihilation was the time I taped large posters over all the mirrors in the house so I would not have to see myself. But I find life irresistible. I find my own eyes irresistible.

If you are considering ending your life: walk with me. This I know. God loves you just as you are, and "abomination" is a word gone awry. We have been called to travel a hard frontier, but there is meaning in it and no one can play the part you or I came to play. Move toward the light here. Claim life. Claim love. Be love. Reach out. Trust. Trust tonight. Trust tomorrow. Trust yourself. Walk with me. Let's all walk together.

TODAY IS APRIL 1st. Yesterday I called Ron and left a message on his voice mail. "Hi, Ron, it's Carol Lynn. Just noticed that tomorrow is April 1st. It's going to be a good day for living. Still raining at my house, but that's okay. I'm going to do my best tomorrow to give and take a little love, and I'm counting on you to do the same. You're on my prayer list, Ron..."

This morning I got a call from Ron. His voice sounded good, sounded strong. He was calling from the California coast, where he was on a business trip. "I'm feeling pretty good. Looking out the hotel window at the ocean right now."

"Ah, the ocean. The movement of eternity right in front of us."

I made him promise to call me next week. I'm counting on it, Ron.

RECENTLY I spent an evening re-reading a favorite play, *All My Sons*, one of Arthur Miller's best. It is a story about responsibility, and as I read I couldn't avoid thinking of the book you are now holding, which I had been working on during the day and would work on again tomorrow.

In *All My Sons*, we meet Joe Keller, a successful, middle-aged, self-made man who has done something terrible and is now forced to pay the price. During World War II, rushing to meet an order from the Army, he knowingly shipped from his plant defective airplane parts, which caused the planes to crash and caused the death of twenty-two men. In a strange twist of fate, Joe learns years later that his son Larry, whose plane went missing in the war, actually took the plane on a suicide mission after he learned that his own father was responsible for the deaths of some of his fellow pilots. Joe finally understands that the other pilots, in the mind of Larry, were "all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were."

Joe Keller cannot bear the guilt, disappears inside the house, and in a moment we hear the sound of a gunshot.

I can't get the title of Miller's play out of my mind. The pain of being homosexual, especially in a religious community like mine, can be ravaging. You can find a partial list of Mormon gay suicides on the Affirmation website (www.affirmation.org), the tip of the awful iceberg, all the faces male. Many were returned missionaries, BYU students or graduates (one BYU professor); some were Eagle Scouts. Their average age was 31. It is a numbing experience to look at the pictures, to read the names. They died from gunshots, by hanging, by poison, by pills. One bled to death cutting out his genitals.

Today I revisited the site, and I saw a new face there: handsome, young, smiling. He was a cello player. I had never met him, though my husband Gerald and I knew his parents long ago in Utah. The handsome new face at the website was their first child, their son.

He is the son of all of us. I see a shared responsibility. He held the gun. We failed to hold him.

We are as complicit in his death as Joe Keller was complicit in the deaths of the men whose planes went down and in the awful decision of his own pilot son. We too have allowed product with serious flaws to leave our plant. Over the years, our dear gay children have been given misinformation that has fueled the anguish and led to the deaths of far too many. They have been told that their feelings were simply an evil choice, a turning from God to Satan, that their problem was

caused by selfishness, that they would be better off at the bottom of the Great Salt Lake with a millstone around their neck than to be in a gay relationship, that marriage to a good woman would straighten them out, that electric shock therapy would set them right, that fasting and prayer and righteous living would heal them, that reparative therapy would cure them.

Today was a hard day for me to see the new face on the suicide memorial site, for this week, writing the suicide section of this book, I have lived in grief and outrage. I have taken breaks to go for walks, even in the rain, then sat back down at my computer trying again to make sense of it.

There is no sense. There is the senseless appearance of the new face on the suicide memorial site, the sweet face of the cello player. And the other faces. All our sons.

At the end of Miller's play, Joe's other son, Chris, says to his mother, "It's not enough for him to be sorry. Larry didn't kill himself to make you and Dad sorry."

The mother asks, "What more can we be!"

Her son replies, "You can be better! Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it. . . ."

We too can be better. We are better than we were twenty years ago at addressing the difficult subject of homosexuality, both as churches and as individuals. However, today brings an invitation for possible backsliding in our slow progress. The political and religious rhetoric around the "Protection of Marriage" concept provided the last layer of despair that drove Stuart Matis and others to take their lives.¹ We must not allow this to happen again. Whatever our convictions about which unions are appropriate to legalize and which are inappropriate, we must recognize once and for all that in our universe of people there are many dear loved ones who happen to be homosexual and that we are responsible to them: responsible to see them as our own kind; to give them respect, Christlike love; to circle the wagons around them so that they too can be safe and warm.

I am hoping for that day soon. ☺

NOTE

1. After years of self-hatred around the issue of being a believing gay Mormon man, and especially despairing over California's "Protection of Marriage" initiative, Stuart Matis shot himself on the steps of the Los Altos stake center in 2002. His story is told by his parents, Fred and Marilyn Matis, in the book (co-authored with Ty Mansfield) *In Quiet Desperation: Understanding The Challenge Of Same-gender Attraction* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004).