

Oral History Interview: Brian McNaught

Interviewee: Brian McNaught

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B: This is Mark Bowman with the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network here doing an oral history interview with Brian McNaught. It is May 5th, and we are doing this via Zoom. I'm at my home in Chicago and Brian's in his home in Florida. So Brian, if you might just start actually just sort of saying and spelling your name for the transcriber. So hi, Brian.

Brian M: Hi, Mark. Brian, B-R-I-A-N, McNaught, M-C, capital N-A-U-G-H-T.

Mark B: Thank you again for taking this time to share your story. And I'm going to ask you to just begin with your coming into the world. Tell us a bit about your family and the family that you came into.

Brian M: Very good. Again, thank you for doing this, Mark. Born on January 28, 1948, so I'm an Aquarian. I was born into an Irish Catholic family. My mother's mother was a Branigan and had, I think, six or seven siblings. I was born on the Eastside of Detroit. About the most significant, I think, fact around my birth is that a baby brother died tragically prior to my birth. He was bitten by the family dog in a freak accident, and died as a result. I hadn't been born yet, but I was born after that. In total my folks had seven children, two of whom didn't live past age two, my younger

brother being one, and one brother died in a gun accident when he was 41.
He was my older brother.

Mark B: Where do you fall in the order?

Brian M: I am the classic middle child. I am an Aquarian and middle child, codependent, Irish Catholic background. My dad was the oldest of seven children. His father was the head of a VA. He was a non-medical head of a Veterans Administration hospital and they moved around to different VAs. My mother was the only daughter of a Detroit electrician. She had three brothers that lived. One died in a World War II airplane, he was a pilot. And soon after I was born my parents—my dad, when I was born my dad was a journalist who had graduated with a journalism degree from Marquette University, which made him an unusual character in most news rooms. Most news rooms were very suspicious of anyone who got a degree. If you didn't have "ink in your blood," as they would say, they didn't really respect you much. But he served directly under Edward Steichen in World War II. Steichen is one of the most famous photographers of the Second World War, and his daughter was Mary Calderone, who started SIECUS. His cousin was Carl Sandburg. And so my dad served under him, and when Dad got out of the Navy he was hired by *The Detroit Times* to be the photo editor and the Sunday editor. We moved to Flint, Michigan when he was hired by Buick to be the first public relations director ever hired in the United States for any corporation in a full-time position. And he was very clever. He was a

smart man, very funny, not easy. And we challenged him, my younger brother and I challenged him on every issue every step of the way. He rarely got the last word.

So growing up—and we were very Catholic. Born in a Catholic hospital. No Catholic kindergarten in Flint, but Catholic school, St. Matthew’s, taught by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Went there first, second and third grade. Loved being Catholic, but did not consider myself superior to my best friend, who was Jewish, who lived right behind me. Luckily, I grew up in a neighborhood with people from lots of different faiths. So while I loved being a Catholic, I wasn’t a Catholic in any sort of arrogant way. Although if kids weren’t going to church I did try to convert them to go to church. My mother got an occasional phone call from the mother of a neighbor saying, “Could you please ask Brian not to try to convert our children to Catholicism?”

Mark B: [Laughs.] Good, good, good.

Brian M: So I must have done that. So I’ve been a missionary since I was little.

Mark B: What other passions in your childhood? How did you spend your time? What kind of activities do you recall, Brian?

Brian M: I remember playing with my friends, playing softball, or kick the can, or hide and seek. We’d look for lightning bugs, which I still look for. A big bonfire at the Livsey’s, who lived down the street, in autumn because we all helped rake their leaves, and they’d bake apples wrapped in tin foil in

the pile of leaves. I had an older sister with whom I was, and continue to be, close, and she would take me wherever she went. We went to the YMCA. We were allowed to do that, amazingly, to take art classes in the summer. I had a younger brother I was very close to. In fact on Halloween, when Mom bought me a Woody Woodpecker outfit, he got one, too. He was two years younger. I both liked and hated that.

Mark B: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Brian M: I walked to kindergarten and my dog Tippy would follow me and bark outside the building until the teacher sent me home to take the dog home with me. I remember very clearly, Mark, in church having very strong sensations of tingles up and down my back when I prayed. I felt I had a very close, special relationship with God, and still do. It has guided me throughout my life. The name that I called this power changed over and over again, as did some of my feelings.

The Irish part of me that was very influential was that my mother's being a Detroit, her mother and all her aunts and uncles, they would live together if they weren't married. The Irish did that. And so, on Thanksgiving or Christmas, after I got my license, I'd drive down to Detroit, pick up as many as were still living, and would get in the car and I'd drive them the hour to Birmingham, where we lived at the time.

We moved from Flint to Grand Blanc. And Grand Blanc, at the time, was a cow town, really. And my dad, with a couple others, started Warwick Hills Country Club, and my dad started the Buick Open as part of his job

as public relations. It was a \$52,000 Buick Open, which was the biggest cash tournament. And we lived on the first fairway. And when we moved into our house there were still horses in what became the pro shop. It was an old estate. And I used to come home from school in fourth grade and throw a golf ball out on the fairway and go off with two or three clubs and play golf until I found a best friend to join me fishing in a pond or wade through the water to find golf balls.

And because Dad was in public relations, since childhood I've been exposed to TV personalities or famous people, and we children were expected to hold our own in conversations. And we did more than that. When the chairman of the board of General Motors was at the house one time I cornered him and asked him about when GM was going to get out of South Africa because of the apartheid, and my father heard me, and grabbed me, and rescued the board chairman. My older sister, when she was young, peed on Dale Evans' lap. Years later she met Bob Hope. And golf pros would come to the house.

The significance of that, if I can, is that I've never been intimidated by celebrity status, and I've never been intimidated by someone's stature in a corporation. So when they would bring me in and people would tremble like they were in front of the Wizard of Oz, I sat very comfortably, called them by their first name. And I've always done that. With priests, if priests were good, in my mind they were "Father." If they weren't good, I wouldn't be brash enough to disrespect them, but I didn't see them as

“Father.” And as I grew I never called them “Father” when I would meet them. They’d say, “Hi, I’m Father Joe.” I’d say, “Hi, Joe, how are you? Good to meet you.”

Mark B: That really explains a lot of the roots of the work that you’re doing many years later really came back there.

Brian M: It really does. And I had to reflect on it. I didn’t put two and two together when I was out there doing it. But also speaking. When I was elected class president—I went to all boys Catholic prep school. We went from Flint to Grand Blanc, and I was there from fourth through seventh grade. In eighth grade Dad was hired by General Motors, away from Buick, to be their PR director, so we moved to Birmingham, Michigan. So I went from Immaculate Heart of Mary nuns, to Sisters of St. Joseph, back to Immaculate Heart of Mary nuns. And then when I went to Brother Rice High School in Birmingham, Michigan I had the Christian Brothers of Ireland.

And I was very impressed with them. And I was aware at the time of being anti-clerical because I liked the fact that they didn’t have any priests in their order. So many other orders the brothers waited on the priests, and Christian Brothers didn’t have any priests to wait on, so I was actually very attracted to joining them.

In high school I dated. I’ve had girlfriends since I was in kindergarten, but I’ve also known since I was in kindergarten that I was attracted to men, older men. I was never attracted to boys my age. I was attracted to their

fathers or the lifeguard at the swimming pool, and TV stars. Boy, I went from one male TV star to the next to the next. I could have 20 boyfriends at one time on television. My favorite, of course, being Robert Conrad, who would always take his shirt off.

Anybody my age—I'm 73 now—but anybody my age who is male and gay will say "Ah, I remember Robert Conrad." And we would wait in anticipation of his shirt coming off, and when he was in *Wild, Wild West*, and *Hawaiian Eye* was on, and, *Baa, Baa Black Sheep*. I mean, it was...you know, he turned out not to be the most friendly person to gay people as he got older, but he knew he was being exploited. He was one of the few people that took his shirt off at those times. But at any rate.

So I've always known that I was attracted to men, and I wasn't able to talk about it. I didn't have a name for it. I thought it would go away. I thought I'd marry. So I really loved my girlfriends. And I was pretty good in sports, but I was also good at jacks, and jump rope, and hopscotch. I held my own or beat the girls at that.

In high school I sort of knew, in this all boys environment, to keep my head down. I had a girlfriend, like many gay men I know. My girlfriend and I were two of the funniest people in the crowd, and that humor would help us deal with sexual tension. It would help me deal with it. If I could be funny when I was feeling this tension to perform, then I could avoid it. I was fast on my feet. I've always been quick-witted, and I've always been able to articulate. So people would say, "Where did you learn to talk so

effectively?” And I’ve got to give the nuns and the brothers and my dad and mom credit. They all influenced me. This all didn’t happen in a vacuum. Nor did my soul develop in a vacuum.

One of the great things about the Christian Brothers, at least when I went to school from ’62 to ’66, was that they were a pretty progressive order, and we read books like *Animal Farm*, and *Mr. Blue*, and *Cry the Beloved Country*, and I was aware of, and had access to, the book, *The Lives of the Saints*. And the nuns did a great job, as far as I was concerned, in talking. I didn’t hate nuns like so many Catholics my age did. I actually liked them.

But I was a good boy. See, I never got in trouble. I could name the one time that I got in trouble with nuns, and that was in first grade. And I’m sure I drove the nun into a mental institution because she sent me out in the hall to stand out in the hall with a friend of mine who was talking to me, and I was answering, and I came back in and I said, “Sister, will that mean that I get a bad grade in conduct?” And she said, “Well, Brian”—now remember I’m seven—“if you’re good as gold for the rest of the year that won’t impact your grade.” So every day, “Sister, Sister, was I good as gold today?” [*Laughs.*]

Mark B: [*Laughs.*] Yes, yes, so—

Brian M: Before you go there, another telling funny story about me and my lack of fear. The family was away on vacation when they cast the play for the second grade play. We went to Florida. And I came back and I said, “Sister, what’s my part?” And she said, “Well, Brian, you’ll be a stage

hand, so you'll be in your uniform. They'll be in costume, but you'll be in your blue pants and your blue shirt, and your job is to"—it was the story of the king and the golden pears—"and your job is to hold these pears on the tray and when the servant comes over, you silently hand them to him and he will take them to the king."

Well, when the time came I walked around the servant on stage in my blue uniform and handed the pears to the king myself and bowed. [*Laughs.*] I was not going to be left out of this production. My mother's friends were hysterical. They were all sitting together watching these second graders and this play. So I've always had an opinion to share. But not disrespectfully.

Growing up, the Brothers liked me. In fact in high school, Mark, I don't know if you had this, but we had what was called the Kuder, K-U-D-E-R I think the spelling is, Preference Test, and it was to help you and your guidance counselor figure out what work you're going to be best at. And I had the highest score in social work they had—it was 99%. And so they thought, you know, you really are either going to enter religious life, which the nuns and the brothers had said forever that I was going to be a priest. The brothers preferred the idea of me being a Christian Brother.

And that fit perfectly what I wanted to do, because ever since I was little I always watched out for the person who, the kid who was in trouble, the kid left out, the fat girl who didn't get invited to dance, the kid that no one sat with on the bus. I always sat with the kid who no one sat with on the

bus. And I was a good-looking, smart kid who came from a well-known family because of Flint or General Motors, and so it was odd, because I wasn't a nerd, that I would sit with these people. And I just felt that that was part of my faith and a manifestation of the message that I got from Jesus. It was so clear to me. The Sermon on the Mount was so clear to me. And the Prayer of St. Francis. When I first heard that my heart just resonated with it.

And I incidentally, Mark, that was my mother's mass card when she died, the Prayer of St. Francis. And I carried that everywhere I traveled with corporations and colleges, and I read it before every single speech, and I would say, "Make me an instrument, make me an instrument. This is your time. If I'm good it's because of you." And I would tell audiences that. People would say "Oh, you're so good at what you do." I'd say, "Listen, I'm just a vessel. It flows through me."

This great story that I heard growing up was the priest came into the classroom to quiz the kids to see if Sister had done a good job teaching them catechism, and he said "Okay, who can tell me what a saint is?" And this little boy in the back of the room raised his hand and said, "A saint's that thing in the church that the light shines through." Now, he was talking about stained glass windows, but I thought it was the best definition of a saint I've ever heard. And our job as humans is to make sure that the glass is clean, that our ego doesn't smudge it up so much and cake it in dust that

the light can't shine through. And that's this whole thing about, "Have you found your light?"

So at any rate, in high school and in grade school the guys who were rougher than me, the beer drinkers, for instance, they would—I knew that I was being made fun of because they thought I was a goody two-shoes. At an eighth grade pool party when we were changing clothes and a guy that I found out later was gay, years later, but he said, "Look at Reininger's dick. Look at all the hair on Reininger's dick." He was the first guy to have hair. And then he said, "Oh, and look at McNaught looking away," which I did. Why? Not because I was holy, but because I was afraid to look too long and have them say, "Well, you seem real interested."

In high school one of the brothers brought in a male porn magazine that he said he got in the mail and wanted us to know about it. And I was in the honors class. I think this could have even been...it was junior or senior year. And he held it up, and it was this model naked with a star over his genitals. And the guys in my classroom were all saying, "Oh my god, look at Murphy, he's really looking at it, Brother. Why don't you let Murphy look at it?" Well, I was mesmerized, and I was trembling because I wanted that magazine, but I didn't want to be noticed. And so I kept my head down.

But that night, after pacing for easily an hour, I picked up the phone, and called the monastery, and asked to talk to the brother who was the teacher,

and said, “I was really upset today and I wondered if I could meet with you?” And the next day I met with him, and of course I used the word “bisexual,” because I had heard it at the time, “I think I’m bisexual.” And he said, “Oh, lots of people, even in the Brothers, have feelings like that, don’t worry about it.” So I thought, huh. So that made me think I’d like to be a Brother. That was one of the things. He was so cool.

And so the Brothers really thought that I was going to join. I decided to go to school first. When I graduated from Brother Rice—I know you know the details of the story—but the Brothers unanimously voted me the John Stewart Christian Leadership award, and I was the first name on the plaque because I was only the third graduating class. And when I came out eight years later my name was taken off the plaque. And then it was put back on because one of the teachers, a straight coach, thought it was awful, had it put back on. But at any rate, I had this reputation even then.

And I went to college, had a girlfriend in college, had a girlfriend in high school. But I went to mass every day in college. I was the lector at 5:30 mass at Jesu at the Jesuit school. And my closest friends would come with me, and I would lead the singing, and I’d have the loudest voice up at the lectern. And singing a lot of songs that Ray Repp wrote and was persecuted for, and then later came out as gay, has since died. But I knew him well in later life.

But I entered the monastery in the summer between my sophomore and junior year. I only stayed like eight weeks because we went to classes at

Loyola, I think, in Chicago. We were in Lockport just outside of Chicago. I think it was Loyola. We went to summer classes. I took theology. But while I was there I started to fall in love with one of the brothers. I had sexual feelings for him. And I went to the movie, *Juliet of the Spirits*, which was a Federico Fellini movie. I skipped class.

And the plot of the movie was that there was this very straight-laced woman whose husband was having an affair, but she just ran the house. And next door was this pleasure palace. It was a place that she wandered into and then was guided up to this bedroom where this gorgeous naked blond man was waiting for her to have sex. And she struggled, you know, should she, shouldn't she, should she, even knowing... And I thought, "You know, you're the housewife, Brian. You live this life. You've never even had..." I had never had sex. Seriously.

In order to enter the monastery you had to see a psychiatrist, and I told the psychiatrist that I had same sex feelings, and he said, "You've had the sexual experiences of a 12-year-old, you won't have a problem, you'll sublimate them." Well, I thought these feelings are getting stronger and stronger and stronger. So that movie and my inability to follow orders—*[laughs]*—we weren't supposed to have pets, so I got a hamster.

Mark B: *[Laughs.]*

Brian M: Which got loose in the monastery. I left, went back to Marquette as a junior. There was a freshman on our floor and I had my first sexual experience. And boy, was that difficult. If he didn't have such a common

name, Jim Clark, I might have been able to look him up, because I've tried to, to say, "I am so sorry that that first experience was so awful." I knew that he was going to be coming to my room that morning. I didn't get up, I didn't brush my teeth, I didn't shave. When he came into the room I hemmed and hawed, and hemmed and hawed until he almost left. Then we fumbled through an experience, said, "Oh, thank god you've just proven to me I can't possibly be homosexual."

But he kept following me at night into the bathroom. And one time I came out and he had this huge erection. I mean, this man was, at least in my memory, was beautiful, built, and had a large cock. But I said no, I'm not going to do it until I've had sex with a woman. This rational brain said, "You have to have all the evidence in, Sherlock Holmes, before you make a decision."

So I moved into an apartment. The girl next door was like a—had a revolving door, all these guys coming in having sex with her. She was from the state university. So I bought a six pack of beer and a massage book, knocked on the door, went in, and we bathed together, we had sex. She said, "I can't believe this is your first time," because I knew what to do. Had no sexual arousal at all, except for touch. You know, you're naked and you're touching, so the penis is reacting. And that was the last time I had sex with a woman.

Then, when I was a senior, I was yearbook editor, so that eliminated all social life totally. Graduated in 1970. Still wanted to be a priest. And the

church was really changing, Mark. This is now post-Vatican II. Now the mass is being said in English. And I went to confession, even as a freshman, and confessed masturbation, and this Jesuit said, you know, “That’s not a sin.” And I said, “Yes, it is.” And he said “No, it’s not.” I said, “Yes, it is.” He said, “It’s not, get out of the confession. I’m not going to forgive you for something like that, it’s not a sin.” Well, that blew my mind.

And then in a theology class this lay theologian explained to us that the whole story of Christmas was made up because they needed to give Jesus a miraculous beginning. I thought, “Well, if they made that up, what else did they make up?” And then somehow I got a hold of Malcolm Boyd’s book, *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* because I read a lot of... Theology was my minor at Marquette, journalism was my major. I loved Martin Buber’s *I-Thou*.

But here’s this priest, an Episcopal priest, who says he’s in a gay bar. And I had never seen the word “gay.” Except the Dutch catechism. These Dutch bishops, theologians, in their catechism, Catholic, said homosexuality wasn’t a sin. Well, of course that was never going to be accepted by Rome. But I’ve got Jesuits telling me masturbation isn’t a sin, Jesus really wasn’t born on Christmas, here’s a priest who’s in a gay bar. Suddenly “gay” as a word floated as a possibility for identity more than behavior, which was huge. Huge for me. Because I thought it was just an act that you did rather than something that you could be, that you were.

But what really took precedence over that—you can't say what "trumped" that anymore because that word is so disgusting in my vocabulary, I can't get it out even in bridge—so what took precedence was the Vietnam War. And I was the first year of the draft, and my number was picked early. I was 77. And so I was going to be drafted right after I got out of college. And I had to think, "Okay, are you willing to take someone's life?" And I decided "no." Everything that I'd read, even from high school, said you can't do that.

So I filed as a conscientious objector and had the toughest draft board in all of Michigan. You've heard this, but I'll say it. My father was so embarrassed. He said, "I'm either going to commit suicide or reenlist in the Navy I'm so ashamed of you." So here I am, 21, going back to live in my parents' house, but bucking my father, saying I'm doing this. And the draft board approved it, which blew everyone away. The head of the draft board said "You should be an attorney," because I was good on my feet arguing why. So I started work for *The Michigan Catholic*, the diocesan newspaper.

Mark B: Just backing up. Why do you think you took that strong stand? What was it? Against family. And did you have support from anyone for doing that or it really was kind of an individual thing?

Brian M: That's a really good question. I had support. I saw support on the streets from the nuns and priests and brothers in religious garb who were demonstrating. The Berrigan brothers were getting arrested, right? So the

people that I most respected in the Catholic Church were taking really strong stands. And bishops, priests, nuns. And my college classmates all were opposed to the war. The yearbook staff was all opposed to the war. College professors. So I wasn't coming from a vacuum.

But it also fit so neatly into the image that I had of a follower of Jesus. Even though he tipped over tables in the temple, he never struck a person. Ever. He never struck a person. And people came to him because of the... And there was no saint that I—Joan of Arc, but—that I admired that went to war.

And my journalism, the reason I applied for the job at *The Michigan Catholic* was that I loved religion, and still do, comparative religion, and I love to write. And so I thought, "Well, this is great." They hired me. And just prior to my being sent to Massachusetts to work at a mental ward in a VA hospital to do my alternative service, just the weekend before that the Michigan draft board said that they would accept my service at *The Michigan Catholic* as my alternative service. But I couldn't make more than an enlistee, \$100 a week, which is what I was paid anyway, \$100 a week, and I had to be contributing to the public good. And they felt I was with my column.

I wrote a weekly column in the paper. And I was this well-known and respected—and Mark, while it's fun, while it was fun to go on stage and be part of handing the pears to the king, and it was fun to get elected class president, it's never been about that for me. For me it's always been about

service. Service and faith. When I was in first grade I would take the public transportation from my house, a city bus, to go to church for Saturday mass. One day my best friend and I, age seven, eight, were standing at the bus stop, and a car pulled up, and a man asked us to get in, and we did. You tell that story today and people go crazy. He said, “Where are you going, boys?” And we said, “To church.” And he gave us each a dollar when he let us off.

Mark B: [Laughs.] Uh-huh.

Brian M: Times have changed. But at any rate, I would go. So *The Michigan Catholic* was a perfect fit. I would go to mass during my lunch hour.

Mark B: You were still going to mass every day, huh?

Brian M: I loved mass. I loved the Eucharist. I loved the prayers. I loved believing that I belonged to a powerful source of social justice. That was me. And then John Paul II came out with—or was it—no. Whoever issued *Humanae Vitae*. Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, which was you can’t practice birth control. And that’s when easily 40,000 priests and nuns left the order in the Catholic church, and suddenly now bucking the church is not considered disloyal.

Vatican II talked about the Holy Spirit works through everybody, including lay people. And so I thought, “All right, you know, what’s to say that the Holy Spirit isn’t working through me, that what I’m writing

and what I'm saying isn't right?" I got up the courage to go into a gay bar and after a couple visits met an Episcopal priest, which was perfect.

Mark B: [Laughs.]

Brian M: My first sexual experiences out of college were with two Catholic seminarians, who were as emotionally screwed up as I was. We were all adolescents. One of the things I talk about today is that all of us, Mark, yourself included, we were spiritually abused and sexually abused as children because they withheld the truth from us, and we suffered terribly. If I had gone into the priesthood, which, I entered the monastery. Then I tried to get into the Jesuits while I was at *The Michigan Catholic*, but I told them I was gay and they refused me. And I know that if I had become a Jesuit or any other priest I'd be an alcoholic, easily.

Mark B: So you're writing for *The Michigan Catholic*. Are you living at home or are you living out on your own then?

Brian M: I'm on my own. If things got bad I knew that I could go home, which, when I was living with the Episcopal priest, I went home fairly often. But I couldn't talk to them about it. They knew what was going on, but we hadn't said, really, "gay" yet. And so I got an apartment in the inner city and I lived in the inner city of Detroit from college on. I was often the only white person in a block. Often I lived in drug neighborhoods. But that's what I could afford.

But once I met this Episcopal priest, he and I bought a little house in Mount Clemens, Michigan, and I was ready to homestead. And I started to meet gay people. That was my first time of meeting other gay Episcopal priests and going to people's homes for dinner who were gay, so my gay identity started to emerge.

Mark B: How did you hear about Dignity?

Brian M: A priest at either Holy Trinity or at Sacred Heart Seminary told me about Dignity. And I went... Because I was having so much trouble in my relationship with the Episcopal priest, I sought counsel. And it's a really good question you're asking because I'm trying to remember how I ended up talking to this priest at the seminary. But he told me that he was also talking with three or four other men. And then I read at *The Michigan*—oh, you know how? At *The Michigan Catholic* we had a wire service and the paper would keep coming through with news stories, and I read about Dignity. And we never ran gay stories, even though we were the most liberal Catholic paper in the country.

So I read about Dignity being in Boston and I reached out to them. And I told them that I had met these other guys and that we thought we'd like to start a chapter. And that's when Paul Diederich and Tom Oddo and Jack Hart took me under their wing. And then I learned—so my gay identity is emerging. My independence from the priest is emerging. I'm getting an identity. My speaking is—the church asked me to host, on cable, occasionally a talk show, and so I started getting a sense of in my skin and

my feet being able to talk, teaching catechism. Invited to teach catechism because of my column. Invited to speak at communion breakfasts because of my column and my reporting.

And so I'd have trouble with Dan, I'd go home, stay with my folks, come back, trouble with Dan, go home. Finally trouble with Dan and I drank the turpentine and took the pills after he left the house, changed my mind, had my stomach pumped. That's in my story. And I know we're trying to do new stuff.

Mark B: No, that's important...

Brian M: But on the suicide thing, it was more a call for help than a desire to die.

Mark B: Sure.

Brian M: Because I remember I drank the paint thinner, I think it was, and then I thought, "Oh, that was dumb," so I drank milk, thinking I would neutralize it. I thought, "Well, you don't want to do that. You can't live with him anymore, and if you can't live with him anymore you're a divorced Catholic and you can't have another relationship." I mean, I imposed on myself the same rules that—you know, my brother got divorced and so that was huge.

So I drank more turpentine, and then took pills and sat down and I thought "This is really stupid. How are your folks going to react to this? How are they going to live with this? They've already lost two children." So I say in my talks—you've heard me say—that when I was having my stomach

pumped—just down the street was a Catholic hospital—but when I was having my stomach pumped that was a really powerful moment for me. I thought, “Okay, if you go back to the way you were living you’re going to die. Something’s got to change. You need to come out. You need to be who you are.” Seriously, that’s when it happened.

And at one time I talked about it being my “born again” experience because my gay identity emerged, and that’s when I started taking everyone at work out to lunch one by one, and I went home and I... I didn’t tell my folks that I attempted suicide, but I told them that I was gay. And my father said, “Well, I think you have a hormone imbalance and you’ll outgrow it.” But my mother cried and she said to my sister in the kitchen “The world’s going to be terrible to your brother and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

Mark B: Yes, that’s... Mm-hmm.

Brian M: So Mark, the fun thing about this interview is that a lot of things are coming together that are creating this persona. One is that I’m not afraid of the media. So when I was asked, somebody who was doing a historic podcast recently said to me “Okay, so this reporter from *The Detroit News* who you happened to know calls you at home, discovers that you’re gay because she’s writing a story on homosexuality and religion and your phone number is the Dignity phone number, she asks you to be interviewed with your real name, why did you say ‘yes’?” Because the

MCC minister who's obligated to use their last name refused. He went by Pastor Tony, which mortifies MCC now. But at the time it was Detroit—

Mark B: That's a very different time.

Brian M: Nineteen Seventy-Four, you know, you have to judge people by the time. But I said, "yes." And now that's again with a father in General Motors. But I said "yes" because I felt like, "If I say 'no,' no one's ever going to find out about Dignity or they're going to think that we're all closeted and the closet kills you." So I said "yes."

And this guy who did a story on—well, actually, he did his thesis on the gay rights movement in Detroit. He interviewed a couple of the people who were out before me who couldn't pull together ten people to distribute a newsletter. People were terrified. And they were kind of scary because they were so far left. And when they interviewed him they said "Brian McNaught came out of nowhere." And I did. It was just simply... And I was naïve enough—I should tell you this—I was naïve enough to believe that I could run Dignity and still have my job.

Mark B: I hear that. I understand that.

Brian M: I had come out to everyone at work and they said there's no problem with that, right? I had even written a column on homosexuality. When I came home from the Bergamo Conference, the first conference ever held on homosexuality and the Catholic church sponsored by the Marianists in their conference center in Bergamo near Cincinnati, and that's where I met

Sister Jeannine Gramick, and Father Paul Shanley, and Tom Oddo I think was there, and John McNeill, and John Harvey, this Catholic theologian who at one time was forward-thinking, and then everyone kept moving past him.

But I came back from that filled with the Spirit, so I wrote this column, “Gay or Straight, Love is the Goal.” I was quoting Paul Shanley, who was the official minister for the Archdiocese of Boston to the gay community, so how could I not quote him? He was a priest sanctioned by a diocese. Well, that’s when letters to the editor started pouring in, and the bishop sent a letter out saying I was wrong, and homosexuality is not okay. And that was supposed to have been read from every parish. That’s when my folks quit going to church for a while because they were mortified that one, my name was out there, and then now I’m saying I’m gay. And in *The Detroit News* this big story about homosexuality and religion with a very bad picture of me. I thought I wouldn’t join Dignity if I thought... But boy, did...

And that appeared on a Saturday, and I went to work on Monday, and you know the story, that the editor called me into her office and said “We’re dropping your column.” And I said, “Why? You said it wasn’t an issue.” “Well, it wasn’t until you went public, and now we have whole parishes that are threatening to cancel their subscription and advertisers that are threatening to pull their”... And that’s what today, Mark, actually is going on even with the whole voter suppression and the corporations stepping

forward saying we oppose what you're doing. It's the reverse now. They're stepping forward saying they're going to pull money out of a state because they're anti-gay. But this time it was, "We're going to pull money out of the newspaper if you don't do something about this homosexual." So they said, "We're dropping your column and we'll say it's because of space limitations." The reporter called me that afternoon and I don't know what to do or say. She calls me and she says, "Has there been any response?" I say, "Yeah, they dropped my column." You know, "Wait a minute, I'll get a pencil." So it starts. It really starts.

It was an unintended career, it really was. I really, I wanted to be the religion editor of *The New York Times*. And my alternative service was over after two years, so I was there two more years not serving any alternative service. And I really thought I'd go from *The Michigan Catholic* maybe to *The New York Times* and be religion editor because I loved religion.

And I'm still going to mass. I hated what was going on in the Vatican with the popes, and I hated some of the Catholic cardinals. But in Detroit at the time we had a very progressive cardinal and archbishop, so why not stay in the church? And this elderly, saintly monsignor who no one would cross, not even the cardinal, took Dignity under his wing in an inner city parish, let us have mass there.

Mark B: Say a word about what was Dignity like then. You were doing weekly mass?

Brian M: I'll tell you—

Mark B: About how many folks were there? How many folks were coming and what was it like?

Brian M: Mark, we had, at the first mass, symbolically, we had 12 people in an upstairs room with a priest celebrating mass. It was my apartment, which we called the Dignity Center, in a huge, Pepto Bismol pink painted, Victorian, three story house. Everyone called it “the Pink Palace.” And it was in the inner city, and some of these guys had never driven in the inner city. But they read about Dignity in *The Detroit News*. And we got so big so quickly that we had to end up moving out of the apartment into Holy Trinity.

But what's really interesting—and I was the first president—was Dignity has struggled its entire history about “Are we a social action organization that's going to challenge the church at every step, in every way, cleverly, or are we a place where people can come as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and go to mass? And Brian, according to some people who were presidents of other chapters, is threatening us with this behavior in Detroit because he's giving Dignity a bad name.” But others are thrilled, other chapters, because Dignity is finally doing something compared to what MCC was doing. And at this time all the churches, your own included, are creating these religious caucuses, right? Affirmation, Integrity. And it's a pretty exciting time.

Mark B: It was very, yep.

Brian M: Your conference, “Rolling the Stone Away,” really, for me, was a great homecoming because like me, you and all of the other people really were out on your own. There were people behind you, but there wasn’t a safety net. And we did, because the organizations we represented weren’t very sophisticated yet, they had never had a national gathering, they had local chapters, so Dignity was the most respected political group, gay political group in Detroit. Everyone wanted to know.

And the two guys that were interviewed about me years later, they came to help when I was on my hunger strike and we were sending out newsletters. They showed up and we had like 50 people. They couldn’t get five to join the meeting, and we gay Catholics have 50 people sealing envelopes, sending out this stuff, picketing the chancery. It was the birth of activism in Detroit, and it was coming from the Catholic church. And a lot of these guys were—and women, when I say guys, men and women—were really brave. I was out there and yes, it was clear, I lost my column, probably going to lose my job. But I think them seeing what I was willing to sacrifice made them willing to risk, too.

Mark B: Talk a bit about how that resistance developed, how did you decide to do a hunger fast, how did that all evolve.

Brian M: The hunger fast came to me because I was, as a reporter I interviewed a diocesan priest who went on a hunger fast over the Vietnam War. His name was Father Tom Lumpkin. And as a reporter I was sent out to interview him. And he told me he was on a fast created by Dick Gregory,

who was a Black activist, and you had to be on fruit juice for seven days. He told me the regimen. Daily enema, daily Epsom salts bath to get the poisons out so they don't screw up your system, a little lemon and a drop of honey in a big jug of water to coat your intestine. And if you're going to do it you have to give them something that they can do or you're going to just die—what's the end of the fast, where is it going, when will you end it? And so I had great respect for him.

After it came out in *The Detroit Times*, or *Detroit News*, rather, that I was head of Dignity, Dan Berrigan invited me to come over for dinner. We sat on the floor. I think there were a couple other people there. But suddenly I felt like our cause is part of the bigger cause, right? If Dan Berrigan is saying, you know, who's antiwar, is saying, "Come into my house and share a meal," then the gay thing has to be not just on its own. We must be part of this bigger thing. And we were.

And for the longest time the Catholic church was this activist organization. And Detroit was this incredible place to be, exciting. This monsignor, Mark, who took us under wing, in his 70s was picketing with Playboy bunnies outside of the Playboy Mansion for better wages for the bunnies. And that was my model of sainthood. That was a saint. That thing in the church that the light shines through. And Father Tom Lumpkin was that. So after my column was dropped and I started appearing on every radio and TV station in Detroit, my parents were mortified. And the Catholic people at the paper turned on me, all of them but one. They felt that I was

using the paper as a platform. And I wasn't at all. It was coincidental that I was an employee of the paper. What was more relevant was that I was Catholic, and that I was gay, and that we had this group called Dignity. And so they said to me innocently, "Well, tell us all the shows you're going to be on." So I told them, thinking... Well, they put it on all the walls, copied the listing, and there were anti-gay articles that were on the walls, things written by people who opposed me. And no one took them down. And I thought, "Huh?" The lesson I learned there was that people can say they support you, but when it gets uncomfortable, they're not still there.

I took this one guy—after I came out at work, after the suicide attempt, and I took everyone, including a guy I car pooled with out to lunch, and he said "Cool, no problem, no problem." Well, the day after *The Detroit News* article appeared that Brian McNaught, who works at *The Michigan Catholic*, has started a group called Dignity in Detroit, all these kids from the University of Michigan were picketing outside of *The Michigan Catholic*.

Now here's the most liberal Catholic paper in the country being picketed. That was really hard for it because now it was seen as the conservative enemy of gay people. So there were these picket signs, and this guy that I knew who I took to lunch who said he was cool opened the door and yelled out, "Which one of you fairies owes me a quarter for my tooth?" And I thought, okay, you know.

And this Black woman who was my friend, whose son used to come to work occasionally as a youngster, as a young, maybe 11-year-old, this Black woman, big Black woman, called me to the back crying and she said, “Brian, they circulated a petition that says that every employee opposes what you’re doing, and if I didn’t sign it, I knew I would lose my job.” And I said “I understand, I’m glad you signed it.”

Voice: I don’t know that one.

Brian M: That’s Alexa chiming in. You never know when she’s going to say something. So just coincidentally years later the son of this woman contacted me, told me he was gay and that he had a crush on me every time—

Mark B: [*Laughs.*] Of course, of course, of course.

Brian M: I love it when these stories get pulled together years later. And I hear today from people who followed the story in *The Michigan Catholic*, or were in the seminary when my book *A Disturbed Peace* came out. But at any rate, so—

Mark B: Why don’t you talk a bit about the hunger fast, what that was like and how that came out?

Brian M: The hunger fast resulted because I kept—after all the publicity, I started getting a lot, a lot of phone calls from people who were in horrible pain, including bishops who said, “You’ve got to keep doing what you’re doing,

you've got to keep fighting." And I thought well, you know, how? I read Saul Alinsky's book *Rules for Radicals*. Do you know that one?

Mark B: "Reveille for Radicals," right? Yeah.

Brian M: Well, he was the one who cleverly took a group of people who had eaten beans for dinner to a symphony that didn't want Black people and they farted through the whole thing, and finally they changed their mind. So the hunger strike appealed to me as a nonviolent way to get their attention, because I didn't have it. And I had to first tell my friends that I was thinking about it, and they opposed it. My close friends opposed it. I told Dignity members about it and they were nervous about it. But I said I need to do this. And I'm going to write a statement that I'm making up—"This fast is to atone for the sins of my church against homosexuals and to ask that the church pledge to educate itself on this issue." So it was an out. All I was looking for was a promise.

And the fast was hard, Mark, not because I was hungry. You lose your hunger pretty quickly. It's because I lived in a rat-infested house, and I never could sleep at night, and I listened to them run up and down the hallway of my apartment. And there was parts of it that I thought "Okay, you know, this is good drama for your saintly behavior." What was really cool, though, was this elderly woman who was our landlady, who lived on the same floor I did, brought in cut flowers for me.

Mark B: Ahhh.

Brian M: I told her about it, too. While I was on my fast I got a note stuck in the mailbox from this kid down the block who said, “I’m Jimmy, I’m 12, I’m like you.” He cut out pictures from a book of Hercules. Said, “Would you meet me tomorrow at 4:00 behind the house?” And I couldn’t because I was being watched, and all we needed was to have Dignity founder with 12-year-old boy. So it broke my heart, but it also gave me impetus to see the fast as a way to get people’s attention. And it did.

I knew that in order—I was part of a union, the Detroit Newspaper Guild, so if I had a medical excuse then they couldn’t fire me, so a doctor’s office called my editor every day to say, “Brian’s not able to come to work.” I was checked in on regularly by a gay psychiatrist and a gay doctor checked in on me.

Mark B: Had you been in touch with Bishop Gumbleton around this directly?

Brian M: No.

Mark B: No, okay.

Brian M: Not on the fast. You know, that’s a really interesting question because I love Tom, and he’s been a great ally. But he wasn’t in the beginning. I went to see him and I wrote about it. I went to see him and ask for his support, and he couldn’t give it. And he had to have given permission because Cardinal Dearden wasn’t there, he was in Rome. Gumbleton had to have given permission to my being fired. And years later I wrote to him when I—and Jeannine Gramick was talking about what great work he was

doing. And I wrote to him and I said you may not remember me. And he said, “Oh yes, I do.” He said, “You were ahead of your time. We didn’t have any training in seminary on sexuality at all.” My hope was to get his support.

What happened was, because of the lobbying of Monsignor Clement Kern, this saintly guy who, legend has it, actually wrote the letter the bishops signed to end the fast, Bishop Gumbleton and Bishop Joseph Imesch both said they went on the fast for one day in solidarity with me. But they wrote this letter that said if I would end the fast they would work to educate the clergy. I met with all of Dignity Detroit and I contacted Dignity National to say, “Okay, what do you think I should do?” And there were a couple voices that said, “It’s not enough, they’re not giving you enough,” but the majority said “I think you’ve accomplished your goal, which was to get a pledge.”

And in the letter, Mark, they had this statement which was bigger than anything we had ever read before. It said, “We have a serious obligation to root out those structures and attitudes that discriminate against the homosexual as a person.” I thought that was huge for them to acknowledge that there were structures and attitudes that discriminated. Because at the time, we were fighting just to get recognized as a civil rights group. Detroit, incidentally, before they fired me, Detroit did pass an ordinance that said you can’t discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. But that’s never applied to the church.

Mark B: Right. The church is exempt.

Brian M: There was a reporter for *The Christian Science Monitor* who was being fired at the same time, Chris Madsen, I think was her name. Does that ring a bell?

Mark B: Yeah, mm-hmm, yeah.

Brian M: And she either didn't have the ability to use the ordinance to defend herself.

Mark B: Want to move on from there? I know you start doing some writing, a syndicated column.

Brian M: What happened was that after my fast ended and the press covered it, I called the paper and said, "I'll be there tomorrow." And the manager, who I didn't really like, his name is John Howell, he said, "Don't bother, there's no desk for you." I said, "You're firing me?" He said, "Don't bother coming to work tomorrow, there's no desk for you." So I contacted the reporters again and said, "The paper has fired me."

And the attorney, you know, we filed a suit against the church. And this priest attorney said, "Brian," who was donating his time, he said, "There's not a jury in the world who's going to give a homosexual money from the Catholic church in 1974." He said they've made an offer. They offered \$2,500 if I would drop the suit. But I was told I could never talk about the results, the payoff.

Mark B: Sign a confidentiality agreement, mm-hmm.

Brian M: Yeah. So much for that. So right afterwards I got a call, and I can't remember from who, saying "You wrote a column for them, write a column for our paper." And I said, "Okay, that's great." And then it appeared and I started getting other papers saying, "Can we run it, too?" And you know, Mark, that was long before the Internet.

Mark B: Right, that is, yes.

Brian M: You typed on an Underwood. I had an Underwood. You know, *bing-bing-bing-bing*, no electric, no thing to replace. You had a ribbon and you whited out, and what did you make? You made carbon copies with carbon paper.

Mark B: Did you have a fax machine or did you have to mail the stories around?

Brian M: I mailed them. There were no fax machines at the time. This was 1974. So I would type in duplicate, and I would send them out. And then when there were so many that I couldn't do it all, Ray bought me a copying machine, you know, a Xerox copying machine, which was, I thought, the most wonderful thing in the world. And an electric typewriter. Oh, my god. I'm still using two fingers. I still use two fingers.

Mark B: You mentioned Ray. Did you meet Ray in Detroit or this is in Boston?

Brian M: No, I met a wonderful guy in Detroit who was involved with Dignity, and initially I thought the love of my life. I gave him an Irish setter for Christmas. And then we broke apart. I don't know if it was the media or his... I don't know what it was. I don't remember. But we broke apart, and

I said I'm going to go to Boston, because Dignity was located, its national headquarters, in Boston, and my grandparents that I loved lived outside of Boston, and I loved Boston. And I was tired of being the biggest name in Detroit.

Mark B: You're very visible there.

Brian M: Oh, god, it wears you down. And it's scary. You live in fear. People don't realize how many threats were made, and phone calls, obscene phone calls, threatening phone calls. And of course there's no caller ID. You know, the phone rings and there's no cell phones. The phone rings, you pick it up or you don't pick it up. If you don't pick it up you might miss the call from the priest who's thinking of leaving the seminary.

Mark B: There was no voicemail or messaging systems, nothing.

Brian M: No. So you picked the phone up. And sometimes you wished you hadn't and you hang up. But you keep picking it up. In the middle of the night you pick it up. It wakes you up at 3:00, you pick it up because some guy drunk in San Francisco at midnight finally has the nerve to call you and ask you for help, so you pick it up.

And so I met Ray. When I was deciding to come to Boston I heard from Patrick Keefe, who was Dignity's national treasurer, that he and another guy had found this great apartment and they needed a roommate, and he had heard that I might be interested in coming, would I like to come. And I hemmed and hawed and hemmed and hawed, and finally he said "Look,

we need an answer or we've got to get somebody else." I said, "Alright, I'm coming." And Ed gave me back the dog. He didn't want to keep the dog.

So Jeremy and I made our way across country to—well, at least across a few states—to Massachusetts from Detroit, and that's where I met Ray. They stopped near the expressway where I was supposed to get off. I have a terrible sense of direction. And they said they'd wait for me, and they spotted my little red Opal wagon with the little U-Haul, five by eight U-Haul behind me carrying my bed and dresser, which is about all I had, and potted plants, and electric frying pan, which came in handy because I cooked for them the first night. But that's how I met Ray. And instantly liked him. Yesterday we celebrated 45 years together.

Mark B: Forty-five, yay.

Brian M: Forty-five years. Forty-five years ago yesterday I moved in, and we instantly, instantly hit it off.

Mark B: What was the attraction there, as you look back on it?

Brian M: We weren't each other's types at all. At all. My type was more the Mediterranean, hair on the chest, dark hair. He was like a strawberry blonde, and no chest hair. But we shared values. He was social justice oriented. He had been in the seminary. He read the same, you know, Alan Watts books, Martin Buber, so we spoke the same language. And he was

kind, and thoughtful, and generous, and fun. And so we became instant best friends. We bonded.

I looked around, you know, Patrick had already put his stuff up in the living room and I said to Ray, whispered, I said, “Do you like this stuff?” He said, “No, I hate it.” So we had to think of well, how do we lovingly redecorate without Patrick’s feelings being hurt? “Patrick, this would look great in your bedroom.”

Mark B: [Laughs.] Yes, yes, yes.

Brian M: So at any rate, Patrick realized that Ray and I were more than just roommates. Patrick moved out.

Mark B: Okay. And then you go to work for Dignity, right?

Brian M: Well, I asked Dignity. They didn’t really have a salary for me. But I asked them.

Mark B: Oh, they didn’t? Oh, okay.

Brian M: No, they didn’t. They made me head of national social justice, but I had to ask for the money. I had to send out letters asking.

Mark B: So you did your own fundraising.

Brian M: I had to do my own fundraising to support my position.

Mark B: Did you have another job then or you lived off what you were paid?

Brian M: No. Mark, I got paid to go speak on college campuses occasionally. Occasionally. I got paid maybe a total of \$100 a month from the columns. They'd give me \$20 a piece, so maybe I'd get \$100 that way.

Mark B: Those early activist days, wow.

Brian M: We had nothing. Oh, terrible, terrible. People would invite you to speak and they'd put you on their sofa with their German Shepherd to sleep. "I'm sorry, you have to share the bed with Trixie. She loves that sofa."
[Laughs.] And you got gas money. Seriously. And of course nobody had any money at the time. But when it was a college, then you could at least ask for a couple hundred dollars, which was what my fee was for many years.

Mark B: So what were the highlights of those early Boston years with Dignity? What do you most bring from that?

Brian M: Well, Ray and I left Dignity Boston after a couple years because going to mass was more than just us going to mass, it was me going to mass and then doing a lot of counseling. "You're Brian McNaught?" Yes. Bla-bla-bla-bla-bla. So we were really good friends with Paul Shanley, the priest who was assigned to gay ministry, really close friends. We visited Paul in prison. He became sort of the epicenter during the priest, the scandal of the priests and youngsters. We firmly believe that he never had sex with a youngster, but he was into teenagers, which was inappropriate, but they weren't five-year-olds, as he was accused and found guilty of.

And we had a priest friend, Father Matthew Flynn, who was a Trappist monk, who used to come and spend lots of time with us. And Jeannine Gramick, New Ways Ministry and the Salvatorian Gay Ministry Task Force. We weren't apart from any of that. We were still very much involved. But I also started to get more involved politically.

And some of that happened...well, a big part of it happened the night we lost in Dade County. And that's when I wrote Anita Bryant. Stayed up all night and wrote this letter to her, which ultimately was supposed to be published in *The New York Times*. They held it for too long and then it was published in a national sex education journal, but it made the rounds, and she responded to it. So I'm finding myself more and more involved in politics. And that's not how I cut my teeth. I'm not a political strategist. I was a strategist with the church, "How do we say something to the bishops in a respectful way?"

I represented...after I moved to Boston I was sent back to Detroit to represent Dignity at the historic Call to Action conference where 1,300 people from the United States, theologians, priests, bishops, laypeople came to Detroit to give the bishops advice on social action for the church. I was the only gay person—the only openly gay person—among the 1,300. And they passed everything that I asked them to. And they couldn't explain to their friends why they did it. That's why I really believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. I felt it. I just really felt it. And Cardinal Law was in my group, my small group, and of course he opposed every single

thing that I stood up for. But he lost the vote every single time, which was great for us.

So what a lot of people don't—and I'm digressing here, but I said it at the Rolling the Stone Away conference—what a lot of people don't understand is that the work that was done in all of the denominations by yourself and everybody in the Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, every group, Jewish, if we hadn't done what we did the change would not have come about in corporations. Because even though corporations made their case on the war for talent, that the reason we're bringing Brian McNaught in to speak is the war for talent, before they made that decision the culture had changed, and the culture had changed because a lot of people started going to church in what was now being called a welcoming or an affirming congregation, and they were getting educated, right? Because of the work that we all were doing.

Mark B: Right, in churches.

Brian M: But the gay movement politically didn't want any part of us. Jonathan Katz' *Gay American History*, the first history written, mentions only Troy Perry. He doesn't talk about anything that was done in any of the churches. And subsequent history books did not either, until we started saying it's more than MCC. They're doing great stuff, but look at how the Catholic church has changed. Well, what about the Vatican? That's the Vatican. The majority of American Catholics support gay civil rights.

Where do you think that happened? How did that happen? Because of our grass works—

Mark B: Roots initiative work we did back then, yeah.

Brian M: They talk about Supreme Court changing and acknowledging gay marriage. How did that happen? Well, all these Catholic Supreme Court justices go to church hearing from priests who have been to conferences where gay speakers spoke where they sort of had a change of heart, right? So we're part. It's a cobweb. It's a spider web that has all these different connections, but we were a part of it in the earliest days.

And we were stuck, Mark. Religious activists were stuck out by themselves between a church that didn't want them and a gay community, political gay community, that didn't want them, either. At the March on Washington, whenever they would have a March on Washington and they would have all these groups represented speaking, the gay group—because I was at every march and I was at the first one—they gave the gay group, all of us together, like ten minutes, and the first one—

Mark B: The religious groups, you mean?

Brian M: Yeah. That's all we got, was ten minutes. And the first speaker was a Black woman from MCC who took up the ten minutes, because she was moved by the racism of it.

Mark B: Yeah, right, uh-huh.

Brian M: Well, hello. And of course we were never brought up later. I got in history books for one incident. In Boston at an early Gay Pride march they had this anarchist invited speaker who threw the Bible into a flaming cauldron, and he initially threw a copy of his Harvard degree, not his real one, a copy of something else, a dollar bill, big deal, and then he was holding the Bible. And of course I picked up what was going on, and so did Dignity and Integrity members and others, and they started booing him. But the radicals were cheering him, right?

And Elaine Noble, who you know is the first person ever elected, 1974, into a statehouse position in Massachusetts, she walks by holding a bucket trying to raise money for the march, and I said, Elaine, “Dade County is just happening and look what they’re doing, Charlie’s burning the Bible.” Oh! So she runs back to the stage and she comes back to me and she says, “They want you to say something.” Well, I’m not even—I’m not head of anything, right? I’m not the mayor’s liaison yet.

But I go up and I just say to the crowd, “You know, Charlie just burned the Bible. When I think of burning books I think of Nazi Germany and how they burned the books about homosexuality.” And so the crowd starts—although the activists know what I’m doing, and they’re booing. And I said, “You know, that’s not...you know, I came out—the Bible helped me come out.” And it did. Now today I think the Bible can be the biggest obstacle one has to get over to get to enlightenment, but when I

came out there were passages that spoke very clearly to me. And so at any rate.

Mark B: Good. We have about 20 minutes left in the session before we need to break. You were talking about getting involved in politics, so do you want to move into the mayor's liaison position, how you got into that and then what that work was like?

Brian M: Well, the mayor of Boston was talked by Elaine Noble into creating a part-time position. And we had a guy who was part-time who really just wanted to work with the police. And they let him go. And a bunch of people applied, and I applied, and I was chosen. The *Fag Rag* people, the ones who burned the Bible, they put up posters with my picture all over the—"Brian McNaught, the new liaison, invites you to a public orgy in the Boston Commons sponsored by Dignity and Integrity."

Mark B: [*Laughs.*]

Brian M: Mark, that's again, you know, there's just hatred on the far left thinking if you're Catholic you must be a papist, if you're Catholic you must be opposed to abortion, if you're Catholic, right, if you're a Christian, blah-blah-blah. At any rate. So I applied. I did, I consider, a great job.

Mark B: Who was the mayor then?

Brian M: Kevin White. It was 1982 to 1984. And something's starting to happen. I'm still going to college campuses. They're allowing me to do it while I'm working for the mayor. But I also, when I was in Detroit I was on a

national talk show that a professor at Syracuse University was told about, and he invited me every year to come to his class, but he also had a summer institute in sexuality that I started going to, and we called that “Sex Camp,” and I wrote a book about it, and I was on the staff for 30 years. So I got certified as a sexuality educator, right?

So here I am, gay Catholic, now politics in the mayor’s office starting the AIDS Task Force in Boston, but I’m also becoming educated as a sex educator. And that was a transformative experience for me, too. Barney Frank, Gerry Studds were all people that Ray and I helped come out in our apartment. In our house in Gloucester every leading gay political person in the state came to a Christmas party. It was incredible that we were all there. If somebody had bombed the house that would have been the end of the movement in Massachusetts for a while. But we knew each other. It’s impossible to know everybody now.

Mark B: Right. Yeah, it was a small world, yeah. So any of the highlights of that time, or what you took from that experience for you.

Brian M: Well, AIDS was clearly the transformative moment. But Mark, one of the things that I say, and this is part of it, is that when you and I came out—I don’t know what year you came out—but speaking for me, when I came out, homosexuals were portrayed in the media only as monsters, only as people who committed suicide at the end, like *The Children’s Hour*, or we were the villains. And it was an act that we engaged in. “Why don’t you just stop having sex?” And from that point, ’74 to where we are today,

we've gone from that to being parents, adopting children, or having children of our own and being married, and no one thinks about the past. And we helped, the churches helped transform it.

Mark B: Yes.

Brian M: So at any rate, AIDS. One of the things I learned with AIDS was that even with the death of your child, fear. "I was told my son wanted you to be his eulogist, but you can't say that he was gay and you can't say how he died." So my writing the column turned into books. My becoming a sex educator turned into videos. And Mark, I didn't plan any of it. I did not plan any of it. I did not ask for any of it. It happened. But I kept saying the Prayer of St. Francis. Use me, use me, use me. And I continue to. I'm writing a book called *On Being Gay and Gray*. And in it I talk about all of this. So I'm 73 now and still active.

Mark B: How did the corporate diversity work get started? What were the roots of that?

Brian M: Oh, that's a great question.

Mark B: And I'm not sure when that started. At what point did that—when and how did that get started?

Brian M: I was the mayor's liaison from '82 to '84, and then Kevin White didn't run again. So Ray and I had moved to Gloucester, Mass. I had been commuting to the mayor's office. We moved to Gloucester. Ray was

working for Lehman Brothers, and sometimes he was in New York, sometimes he was in Boston. I'm doing lots of stuff.

And a friend of mine, Ron Robin, who was a DJ, said "You do these talks on college campuses, we've got to videotape it." I said "Okay." So they videotaped me at home giving my talk and then they videotaped me on college campuses and they created the video *A Conversation with Brian McNaught On Being Gay*, and it was the first video that was available.

So when this small group of employees at Bellcore, Bell Communications Research, approached their head of the department and said "We have training on sexism, and we have a training on racism, but we don't have any diversity training on sexual orientation, we're the Sexual Orientation Equity Committee, and we think we should have a"...He said, "Well, go find one, who's doing it?" Well, no one was doing it.

So they called the National Gay Task Force. This is 1986. And it was the National Gay Task Force at the time, not the National Gay, Lesbian and Transgender. And they said "The only one we know of who's doing this kind of stuff is Brian McNaught. His video is *On Being Gay*." So the group got a copy of the video and they wrote to me and said "Would you put together a workshop? No one had done it. Would you put together a workshop eight hours long on homosexuality and the workplace?"

So I did. And I called a friend of mine, Mary Lee Tatum, and I said, "Why don't we do this together? We'll be balanced off. You're straight, I'm gay,

female, male, right? You're a little older, so different experiences." And so she said, "Yes."

And I had to go first and meet with the head of the department. And everybody at the table stopped talking when he and I started talking. And he said, "So, why should I be doing this?" And I made the first case for why corporations should be interested. I said, "Because in your war for talent you can't afford to not have the best and brightest person..." In the computer world they all knew who Alan Turing was. He was the father of the modern computer. He broke the German code. He committed suicide because he reported a robbery in his home, they investigated, found out he was homosexual, gave him estrogen, destroyed his life as an athlete, and he ate a cyanide laced apple. I said "What if Alan Turing had been available to work for you? Would you not hire him because he was homosexual?" And so he got it. He said, "Alright, we'll do one trial workshop."

So they did. They did one trial. And all the evaluations had to be looked over. Alright, it was overwhelmingly successful, even though people were opposed to it on the basis of religion. I had to do the religion question. We had to cover that. We had to say, "This is not about changing your moral views, this is about changing inappropriate behaviors."

So what they got in eight hours was a great sex education, but they first got a case for why it was a business issue, because you can't afford to lose good people. "If there are people who are gay who work among you and

people tell jokes around them and they decide to go work for Bell Labs rather than for you, and you really thought they were the brightest person you've ever met, what good are you doing?" So they all bought into that. In the 37 years, I think—how long? I did this training in corporations for 36 years, I guess. The most powerful thing I ever did was tell my story. After we did everything, and we allowed an hour for me to do it, I would tell my story. People would cry, people would laugh, and at the end people would say, "I do not want my child to go through what you went through. I promise to never again tell a joke or laugh at a joke." Because that was what we were battling at that time, was mean talk and senseless jokes.

And boy, the word got out. We were doing this at Bellcore and the guy who brought us in was married to a woman at AT&T who was in human resources, so they brought us in. And then Bell Labs, and then Motorola, and Hewlett Packard, and then Disney, and Chrysler, and just everybody. And I at one point, Mark, had five people working for me doing the workshop. But that was only for the eight hour workshop. And I would send them out two by two. And at AT&T and Bell Labs you were required to do one eight hour training a year, so we were now on the menu. And it became so popular people said "It is harder to get into this class than to get a ticket to *The Lion King*."

And why? Because people connected person to person. When we tell our stories, people relate to another human being telling their story, right? I can say "I'm gay." They don't have a context for it. But if I say "Boy, I

need to tell you, when I was eight years old, and I was watching TV with my friends, and my mom, who I loved, called me, but there was a guy with his shirt off, and I would feel torn, and I wouldn't be able to tell my friends why I was so upset, or my mother why I was being disrespectful and not coming..." When they heard that, the parent in them, or the sister in them, or whatever it was that they could relate to thought, "I don't want my child to go through that experience, and I don't want my friends to go through that experience." So that's why it was so successful.

And the eight hours, though, I'm sure they're, in some corporations they're still doing that training. The eight hours got whittled down to four hours in some corporations, and then two hours, and then some places they'd invite me for one hour, and I'd say, "Okay, you need to know, though, that I'm cutting three hours out of my presentation." And then they'd say, "Alright." —I'd be there for an hour and they'd say "Well, I know we're 15 minutes late, but we still should wait for stragglers." I said "Okay, you need to know that I've already cut 15 minutes out of a presentation that used to be four, so I'd start on time if I were you." But I still knew that if I didn't get my story in somehow that I was not going to move them, that they had to have the personal connection in order for it to change.

And then one day it was a bank that brought me in to London, JP Morgan brought me in. Don't know how they heard of me. Well, you know how they heard of me is the press. *The Wall Street Journal* did a feature on me,

and a woman named Sheila Landers, who was head of HR at Lucent Technology. So they brought me to London and I did a presentation, I think it was two hours, but there were representatives from other banks there, and then they all wanted a presentation.

And so then every bank in the U.S. and in, you know, everyone wanted it. Because the Human Rights Campaign had created the Corporate Equality Index where, if you wanted to be rated as being a good place to work for gay, and then later transgender people, you needed to have this, this, this, this, this, and having training was part of that, so that's what generated me being brought to Mumbai, and Tokyo, and Singapore, and Hong Kong, and that was all before COVID.

Mark B: Obviously that was a kind of ministry, very clearly. What did you get from all that experience of doing that work? How did that shape and inform Brian?

Brian M: That's a really good question. One of the things that I would... Years ago, Mark, the *U.S. Catholic*, which is a national Catholic magazine, asked—they had done a feature on me and I won this big award for an article I wrote called, “The Sad Dilemma of the Gay Catholic,” and so they were familiar with me, and they said, “Brian, write an article about ‘Are gay people part of God’s plan?’”

And I wrote—they never ended up publishing it—but I wrote, and I've used this story over and over again because it's so powerful for me, that when I die I imagine that God will ask me, “Brian, did you sing the song I

taught you?” And I’ll tell you, Mark, every single person in every audience, in India, in Singapore, Hong Kong, Dublin, wherever, every single person is sitting there thinking not about homosexuality, but about their own song, and whether or not when they die will they have actually sung it? Some churches , “What’s your light?” I use the metaphor “the song.”

But I continued. I said, “God, in the beginning I didn’t because I was too afraid. For 26 years I sang ‘I am Brian, I’m a heterosexual, won’t you love me today, accept me today?’ And then I drank the turpentine. And the song I sang was “I am Brian, I am gay, won’t you accept me today.” And I sang that song for 30 years. And then this voice, was it 30, maybe 20 years—this voice said to me, “That is not the song I taught you. I did not teach you to ask for people’s acceptance.” The song I sing today is “I am Brian” - and this is what I tell everyone—“I am Brian, I am gay, I’m God’s gift to you today.”

But Mark, before I was able to say that I had to work through my own heterosexism and my own internalized homophobia, because for years, especially, I had to be as the messenger, and I would tell people “The messenger is the message.” I felt I had to be perfect. In front of college students I had to watch how I held a glass. No little finger up. When I smoked I had to watch how I held the cigarette, how I crossed my legs, because I did not want to give them one little thing to run with. And so I

was really doing everything I could think of to get them to accept me as a homosexual.

And then I'd go home and I'd watch *maPhil Donahue*, and the gay people that Phil Donahue or Oprah or some other talk show host, Jerry Springer, had were often effeminate, and I would think to myself, "I do all this work to break down stereotypes, and in one minute you convince everybody that we're men who wish we were women." And that, I didn't recognize at the time, was my internalized homophobia. Because I felt like I had to package the goods, and the goods could not be anything like the things that I hated seeing other people behave. Not because I hate you, but because your behavior satisfies the stereotypes, and you're going to get us all beaten up. But they won't beat up me because I'm, you know, I'm not like you, they've accepted me.

Well, telling my story over and over again, and I had—Mark, as the amount of time shrunk that I had to tell my story, because sometimes I'd look at my watch and I'd think I have ten minutes left to tell a story that used to take one or two hours, I knew that I had to give just the highlights that were important. The funny stuff I didn't have time for. You've got to get to the really important stuff. It forced me to think about "Okay, so what is important, and why are you telling them this? And why is it that you react the way you do? Are only people like you supposed to be acceptable or is this everybody?"

And so I really did get transformed in singing my song. I got to the point where I knew that, you know what, if you think that you should make fun of them, then make fun of me, too, because we're all... What you're really laughing at is difference. What you're making fun of. And that opened me up to... I mean, I was good on all the issues, but then I got to the point where I "got" all the issues. I got it. I got how every soul is connected, every soul is divine, regardless of how we name ourselves.

And sometimes it's irritating or tiring—"I want another letter added to the acronym!" "I want to change the flag!" And initially you think, "Oh, god. Okay, shut up, Brian. Tell me your story. Tell me what's going on for you. Okay, I'm with you. We've got to add 'nonbinary' to our—we've got to add 'queer'." Now, "queer" was a tough one for a lot of us my age. But I get it. All right, I'm fine.

Because all we're talking about—and go back—you know, you said, "Brian, you were in a ministry." And Mark, I was. And I wasn't...I was selling more than just LGBTQIAA. I was selling valuing diversity in others and in yourself. And that, for me, is the message of Jesus.

Mark B: And having dignity for everyone.

Brian M: And everyone has dignity. Everyone should live with integrity. Everyone should feel affirmed. It's true. And no matter what the issue is. Now if you don't agree with me, then in your own home you have the right to say whatever you want to say. You can't do it in this workplace because we'll

lose really good people if you're allowed to say whatever you want, so that's why you can't do it here. But you can say it at home.

But let me tell you something. If you say it at home and if you have a child or a grandchild who is gay, they will never tell you who they are. You will never have the intimacy of love with your child if you talk like that at home. And suddenly you have their attention because they don't want to lose the love of their child.

Mark B: Speaking of child, do you want to say a word about your recent work with children's books and the video that you're doing? What led to that?

Brian M: Well, I'll tell you, one of my children's books I wrote back just after I got fired at *The Michigan Catholic*, and it's a rhyming story, and it's, *Grogg is a Frog Without Polliwogs*. And it's published by myself.

Mark B: I remember that.

Brian M: My first three books were—well, actually my very first book was published by Dignity. Frank Scheuren, who's still alive, he was Dignity's president, said, "Brian, why don't you put a collection of your columns together and we'll publish it." And I said, "Okay, that's great." So I did, and I did it thematically, and they called it, *A Disturbed Peace*. Well, I called it, *A Disturbed Peace – Selected Writings of an Irish Catholic Homosexual*. Dignity sold about 11,000 copies, which was huge at the time. But they didn't want to stay in the business of sending books out. So St. Martin's Press picked it up. It morphed into *On Being Gay*. They sold

50,000 copies. And then they also contracted for *Gay Issues in the Workplace*, which is now in the Library of Congress. And, *Now That I'm Out, What Do I Do?*

The next two books, “*Sex Camp*” and *Are You Guys Brothers?* I published through Author House, which is kind of a vanity press. You pay them, they do all the work—you do the work. You can pay them to do editing and stuff, but they get a big chunk of it because they’re the distributor.

And then Amazon came along, and said you can publish through us. So I published my guide on gay and lesbian workplace issues, *Grogg is a Frog Without Polliwogs*, *Professor Tuttle’s Lessons on Love*, and the book that you’re talking about, which is “*What’s ‘Gay’?*” *Asked Mae*. I wrote it on an airplane. It’s all rhyming.

And Mark, and I’ve said this to a couple people, I think it’s as important as anything that I’ve done. And the thing that I get most credit for is the *On Being Gay*. I keep hearing about that. But this book, “*What’s ‘Gay’?*” *Asked Mae*, is about two kids, one Black, one white, they’re cousins. One asks the other, “What’s ‘gay’,” and the birds around them start giving them the answer. And the mourning dove says, “It’s a way to love. It’s a way to love. It’s a way to love.” So, suddenly, before children ever hear “That’s so gay” by their friends, they’re hearing it’s a way to love.

And so a friend of mine who’s straight, Mark Schoen, who is a pioneer creator of films, sex education films, he calls me not long ago and says, “How about making a movie out of your children’s book?” I said, “Great.”

Mark, this is the way it has always happened. From the guy saying, “Let’s tape you giving your talk.” I went to Colorado to speak to AT&T and Hewlett Packard and the public access television station there said, “Will you do two shows for us while you’re here?” They didn’t have any money. It didn’t cost them.

So they brought in this audience. I came in, I wore one shirt and tie. I did a talk called *Growing Up Gay and Lesbian*. They moved the audience around, I changed shirts, changed ties and did a presentation on *Homophobia in the Workplace*. They aired it and TV stations around the country air these programs. I just said, “Yes.” So I said “yes” to this friend. My advice to people is just say “yes” to life. The universe keeps inviting you to stuff. Say “yes” to it, even if you’re scared.

Mark B: You have to walk through the doors that open.

Brian M: Yes, so I said “yes.” And guess what? Today is the last day—this is May 5, 2021—we put it up on Mark’s site for free, and I started talking about it. My niece and my nephew are the voices of the two little kids, which is so fun. The others are done by professionals. But Auden and Easton are the voice of Mae and Ray. But a couple thousand people have already watched it. And my hope is that Ellen or Katie Couric or somebody is going to fall in love with it, because everyone who sees it loves it. It’s only three minutes long. They took the illustrations and animated them by getting their mouths to move. Did you get a chance to look at it?

Mark B: I haven’t yet. I will look at it.

Brian M: Do it. Do it after we finish. You go to—and I hope people still go because this is where you're going to find it, at www.sexsmartfilms.com. Sexsmartfilms.com. And the name of the movie is "*What's 'Gay'?*" *Asked Mae*. "*What's 'Gay'?*" *Asked Mae* is the story. It's the name of the movie, and it's the name of my book. My hope is that some publisher is going to say, "Oh my god, we've got to take that book and get it a bigger audience," because when you self-publish it's great, but you have to keep pushing, pushing, because it's not a publishing house that has—

Mark B: You have to do all your own marketing, yeah.

Brian M: Yeah. But I'm excited. The work never stops, right?

Mark B: Yes. Exactly. Thank you for the time, Brian. A most incredibly inspiring and illuminating story.

Brian M: Thank you. And I've got to run because I've got a haircut.

Mark B: You do. So—

Brian M: Did we get—was it good? Did we end great?

Mark B: I think that's good, Brian.

2:05:34 [End of recording.]