

## Oral History Interview: Jonathon Thunderword

Interviewee: Jonatho Thunderword

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: October 31, 2017

Monique M. For the official record, my name is Monique Moultrie, and today is October 31, 2017, and I'm here with Rev. Jonathon Thunderwood—Thunderword.

Jonathon T. Mm-hmm.

Monique M. We are conducting an oral history to supplement the biographical narrative on the LGBT-RAN website. We are going to begin wherever he feels comfortable, so feel free, in this process, to skip questions, to not answer one at all, to elaborate, to go back to something that occurs to you. The purpose of an oral history, to give you a sense of a style that I use, is for you to tell your story in your own way. So I have some probing questions that are more to give the reader and the listener benchmarks so they can sort of follow the trail, but that doesn't mean you have to follow that trail. So when you start, you start wherever you want and we'll end wherever you want. So you mentioned you want to cover your activist work. We can start exactly there. And I'm going to ask some questions that sort of help us get timelines. So you talk about activism and I'll say something like so was that after the free love movement, or was this after the HIV-AIDS

pandemic, just so that the listener has a sense, demographically and historically, what movements we're taking.

Generally these interviews take no more than two hours. I just did one in record time. It was an hour and five minutes. So it's completely up to how much of you you want to share. And for us the purpose is for you to leave on record a historical legacy for others, and you get to tell that story, so what legacy do you want people to remember from you. So with that being said, start us wherever you would like.

Jonathon T. Okay. So I will begin in 1982, at the beginning of the HIV crisis in the country. At that time I got involved with HIV because I was married to a female impersonator, and she worked the clubs doing shows and pageants, and so my life was very much involved with the trans women and the drag queen community back then.

In '82, because I'm already in that community, in '82 they began to say that they were going to start a task force to deal with HIV in the Tidewater area. The Tidewater area of Virginia consists of Northampton, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, and Newport News. Norfolk was a very hot spot because of the Navy base, and it was a Navy town, it was a college town. We had Norfolk State and Old Dominion University, Hampton University, so there was a lot of schools and military in that area, and of course shipyards, etc. So we had this booming town.

And because you had people coming from all over the world, being in the Navy, the epidemic. And a lot of the guys, the gay guys, were in the Navy, and they were undercover, so they would go to the gay bars off duty. They would sneak into the gay bars and they would come and they would pick up the girls on the ho' stroll and in the bars, and so the virus really started to build up because they were all having unprotected sex in '82. They didn't even know what they—they were still calling it GRID. They had no idea what they were dealing with or how people were getting infected with this disease.

But once they realized that this disease that they were calling GRID then was sexually transmitted, and that mostly gay men had it—that's why they were calling it GRID, it was a gay disease. Which always damaged the history of it because it started out with this stigma over it, the gay disease. So the gay men in Norfolk, the owners of the bars, realized that a lot of their customers were getting sick, and dying, and not showing up, and they were getting sick and running out of money, getting dishonorable discharges from the Navy and having nowhere to go, and being excommunicated from the churches. And so they said we're going to start an agency that's going to look after our people. And when they said "our," they were really talking about young, white gay men.

Well, when they started it, they had a meeting for anybody that was interested in this epidemic, this new disease and wanted to help and be a part of it. And I went to that very first meeting. And it was only two

African Americans in the meeting, and I was one of them. And I went because of my involvement with the clubs and with the transgender women who worked the clubs. And so I went to be a voice because their voice was not going to be at the table if I hadn't shown up. So I showed up. And they voted that they were going to start this HIV group and they said it's going to be a task force. And they called it the Tidewater AIDS Crisis Task Force.

And they used the word crisis as we were deciding on the name because they really thought that this would be a crisis and that we were weathering maybe a year, six months. It's just a crisis. It's going to pass. Doctors are going to find a cure. We're all going to live happily ever after. So all we need to do is just support these men through this critical time, and it's going to be over with, and they'll go back to work, and everything's going to be fine. But it didn't work out that way.

It continued to grow and grow and grow because what they did the first year and a half was if a gay guy was out sick and he couldn't work, he'd come to the Task Force and they'd pay his rent. You know, they'd pay his car note. Just keeping people afloat. They didn't really know a lot about the disease, so it wasn't a lot of medical advice they could give them, or hospitalization they could give them. It was really a helping hand to help them weather the storm.

But very soon after they realized it was more than that, and they hired a case manager and a director. And the director handled all the business and administration, and the case manager, outreach worker did all the education. And he was a registered nurse, and he brought just the information that he had picked up. And that was the beginning of the Tidewater AIDS Crisis Task Force, two employees. And it was the nurse who did the education and the director who managed. And it started in one room. And I stayed there for almost 18 years. And I—

Monique M. Which one of the two were you?

Jonathon T. Neither. Neither.

Monique M. So you were a volunteer?

Jonathon T. I was a strictly volunteer person. It wasn't until 1985 that I came on staff as a paid person. Until then, those years from '82 to '85, I educated myself about the AIDS virus, especially in the African American community. The first place I went was Washington, D.C. There was a man there working named Billy Jones. And I asked him to teach me about outreach. And he worked with transgender women in the bars and on the ho' stroll, and we went out together, and he told me how to do it and how it went. And then I went the next year to L.A. and met with Bishop Carl Bean. And he had just started MAP, the Minority AIDS Project, and he was telling me what he was doing and how his agency.

And I went back to Virginia and told them about what was going on in L.A. and D.C., and told them the things that I thought needed to be done. And they began to do stuff. The thing was they weren't really focusing on African Americans at all. That wasn't their main target. It wasn't their main concern. They still had that mentality this is for us and our boys, you know, our people. And I was interested in my people. Just be selfish, okay, my people are sick and dying, too.

And it wasn't until 1985, when the epidemic began to show up in the IV drug community, and believe it or not, white gay boys use drugs, too. So now they're really beginning to take notice of what I was saying about needle exchange, and work in the community, and doing something about passing this virus on through the use of dirty needles, and through prostitution.

And so they had a grant. They wrote a grant to do street outreach, to go out and educate, because prior to that we had a new director of the Department of Health in Norfolk, and I met with him to tell him that the information that Koop had sent out to educate the communities about this virus was not sufficient to the people that I was working with in my community. We talked about the literature that he sent out had a whole paragraph about semen and how you could catch HIV through semen. And the people that I was working with say oh no, honey, we don't do seamen. And they were thinking about the sailors of the ship, they were seamen to

them. And so I realized right then and there that your literature is not educating the people that I work with on a daily basis.

Their idea of protected sex in the health department was to use a condom to protect yourself from the virus. The people I was working with idea of protected sex was use a condom with the johns on the street, but it's okay to have unprotected sex with your partner or your boyfriend. So it was a whole different type of education and outreach had to be done. And that's where I began to do that kind of outreach with those particular groups. And for me, people don't want to hear, or didn't want to hear so much about HIV or this, that and the other. They weren't really interested. You know, it didn't affect me, it has nothing to do with me, why are you telling me all of this when I got other issues that's more important?

And so I started outreaching to that population, and started the first outreach program and training outreach workers to go out to the bars and the ho' stroll. And I used a different technique in educating the outreach workers that I trained. And my first rule of thumb was you have to be committed to this. You have to realize that it's not your hours. This is not 9:00 to 5:00. And they were used to 9:00 to 5:00. I get up, I go to work at 9:00 in the morning, I educate people, I talk to them. I said the people that I work with, they don't even get out of the bed till 12:00 at night, you know. They don't even get ready to go out until midnight. 11:00, you're doing good if you can get somebody out. The clubs, the shows, everything started at 11:00 to 2:00 to 3:00, and then after the shows, then at 2:00 in

the morning when the bars closed the girls went out to work on the ho' stroll. So if you're going to do this work, your whole work hours have to change. You have to come to work at 11:00 at night, and you have to stay to work till 7:00 a.m. in the morning.

And you do the 7:00 a.m. to 7:30 because the girls got what they call the late trick. He's on his way to work, really, so he's up at 6:00 and he catches his girl on the ho' stroll at 6:30, get his job done, and then go to work. So we had that early morning shift that was still the last of the leftover shift, but really the worker has to be out there from 11:00 at night to 7:00 in the morning to get it done. And that's how I did it.

The second thing in training people was not only do you have to be out there, you have to be more than a person handing out a condom, telling you be safe and do your work. I, before it was even a catch phrase, had a holistic point of view, and I would say you can't help a girl if she's out there and her pimp just beat her down to the ground and you can't take time to take her to the hospital. These are people, and they have lives, and they want to be cared about, so you have to be there to take them to the hospital, to listen to their problems. You have to have a personal interest.

They're not a statistic and a number you put down at the end of the night and say I gave out 50 condoms and you don't even know their name. You give out 50 condoms, and you gave them ten condoms per person, you should come back with at least ten names. You don't have to reveal the



names, but you should know the people personally when you see them. Hey, girl. How you doing, Sally? How you doing Miss Rose? This is important. I felt it was important to do good street outreach. You have to be there. You have to be there when they get a eye punched out in the bar. You have to stand there till the ambulance come.

And in those days the ambulance would come, and they'd see it was a trans person, a drag queen, they'd just stand there and watch you bleed 'cause they were so scared you might accidentally get some blood on them, you know, so somebody to be a voice to say the person needs to go to the hospital, you can't treat them like that. So that's the type of advocacy I had to do to make sure.

Advocacy to me was when a person was sick in 1982, '83, '84, '85, '86, when things started to finally calm down, that I'd go into a hospital and one of my girls, I call them, was in the hospital, and her tray was still outside her room because the dietary people wouldn't take the tray in. They were so afraid of this disease. To advocate at the hospital that no, this is not acceptable, that people laying in the hospital lost weight by the pound because they were sick and they wouldn't feed them, they wouldn't take time. Well, I gave them the tray. If you can't sit up and you can't feed yourself, what good is bringing a tray and you're coming back in a hour and taking the tray away, and knowing that the tray hadn't been touched? That's a clue. Hello. So that's the type of advocacy around the HIV epidemic that I did in the early years.

And then we got into the next year, 1989. The children, the babies were being born because of the drugs, because of the mothers having HIV, etc. That started a whole different wave. Now you've got little babies being born with this disease. Which again you have another crisis on your hands. And not only were most of them born with HIV, or at least they had the virus and then they developed AIDS afterwards, but because of the substance abuse and the bad prenatal care, that the children were, they used to call them, crack babies, so nobody wanted to adopt them, nobody wanted to deal with them. So this was another place that advocacy needed to be taking place, because now you have these babies, and born in this disease, through no fault of their own, but they don't get any care, and nobody wants to raise them because they have all these temperaments and all these issues that they have to deal with. And so it had to be advocacy.

And then the third realm of advocacy was when people, especially gay men, would die in the African American church, the preachers would not do their funerals. The undertakers didn't want to do the bodies. And if they gave them a funeral, they would put them in a coffin and they'd put this plastic glass over the top of the coffin so you couldn't touch the body, you could just look at the person through the glass, but you couldn't touch the person at all. If they would allow them in the sanctuary of a church. But many of the people who died had to have either a funeral home funeral, in the chapel of the funeral home or a graveside service by the

grave because the churches didn't want to be bothered with these terrible sinners, and they weren't going to give them last rites.

And they would preach these hellfire, brimstone, very cruel sermons. The reason I got into the ministry was because I attended a funeral of someone I knew, and the whole community loved, and we went to the funeral. And the preacher was standing there. The mother of the person was sitting on the front row, and the preacher said to this woman, he said Sister whatever-her-name-was, I want you to get up and look at your boy right now. And she looked at him. And he said, you look good because you're never going to see him again, 'cause he's burning in hell. And you will never see him again because you, glory to God, is going home to be with the Lord, and it's too late for him.

Well, that was very upsetting to the girls that I was sitting with, you know. And they all got up and walked out. And I got up and I walked out with them. And they were standing out in front of the church and they were crying. And they said, God really hates us. Nobody cares. The church, the ministers, the undertakers. And I said, yeah, I do.

And I started to minister, doing graveside services. The undertakers would actually call me and say we got one of your people over here. You can meet us out at what we called a potter's field. It's one of those cemeteries that, between the dogs and the cats, we lay a few people. But I would do funeral services. And the gay community would come. The black gay

community would always show up and pay their respects. But we couldn't go into a building. We couldn't, you know, the churches, many, many of the churches wouldn't. There were always a few brave, especially if you were a mother, a pillar of the church like that boy. But the person who's deceased gets no good play. They're going to hell, period. Ain't nothing to discuss. Ball game over. They lived that sinful homosexual life. They're going to hell. Don't you do the same, and give a altar call.

Well, later on, because of HIV being spread through the use of dirty needles and drug abuse, where you don't think things through, and you do things, and have sex, and you get infected, there was another group who were being infected, were people that were mentally challenged. Because I was doing case management work and some of the clients who would come in were really, really mentally challenged. And people would take advantage of them. Tricks and johns, they would like, you know, tell them...

There was one young guy. He was like, I think he was like 17, and believe it or not, he was going to a church that really had a ministry and a outreach to gay and lesbian people. And all the boy wanted was love. And this guy just took him home, took his virginity, and told him to go home. And the boy was just so upset. He was talking to me. He said I thought when we finished we was going to cuddle and he was going to be my boyfriend. He could not even wrap it around his mind he was just a piece of meat and he conquered you, and it's over with. And he infected him with the virus.

And I kept finding more and more young men who were mentally challenged, emotionally challenged, looking for love from older men who just thought it was an opportunity to prey on them. And so that became another one of my pet peeves, you know, this has to stop, especially in the church. When people come and think they are in safe place and that they can get help, and you prey on them for your own personal satisfaction.

Monique M. When you were doing the funerals, being asked to do the funerals, did you have a religious component yourself that you were adding them?

Jonathon T. Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. I grew up a devout Christian, per se. My father was a deacon in the church and he was a upstanding man, a man of great integrity, a man who reached out to everybody. And I really believed that people are supposed to practice what they preach. And the more I grew up, the less I could see the showing of the love of God in the church and all that. People say one thing, like you say. They preach thou shall not commit adultery, but the deacons were having sex with the deaconesses and the ushers, and I got really, really like I'm over you. I'm really over it. But I've always had a great passion for God. And then on top of that to be considered a lesbian didn't make it any better in the church for me. And so I tried to abide by the standards of what God wanted. And I really believed what they were pushing out. And I wound up because of being a lesbian, I wound up in the Exodus International ministries, where they were going to deprogram me, and I was going to grow up and be a nice heterosexual

woman, and life was going to be sweet. And I went through the whole excommunication thing with my church, and then I went to them. And I was really—see, because really, in my heart of hearts I just wanted to do what was right and pleasing with God and all that good stuff, you know.

And after I went off to camp to get deprogrammed, I started to look around and listen to their stories and spend time with them and those who had been cured of homosexuality. And they had their own psychologists and psychiatrists that worked with people from a very negative thing towards it. And of course you've got that home—if you had been sexually abused, that person put the spirit and the demon of homosexuality in you, so you were possessed. And this was their thinking and the way they teach things, so you've been possessed, and so you need to be exorcised of this homosexual demon. And the therapist would always say you had a bad relationship with your mother, your father and all of this crap.

And so it won't, but the bottom line is what I was saying, was that in all of that, I looked around and all I could see was a bunch of gay men who had married a bunch of lesbian women, and they were still as gay in their spirit. He was as effeminate as he ever been, and she was as butch as a hard rock, but now they're trying to live this sham of a heterosexual life. And I couldn't really see the change. And a few years later even the founder of Exodus had gone back to his partner. And I realized this is not working.

And after that I found MCC church. And MCC church was a church that taught that gay and lesbian people were loved by God, and they found scripture and the main scriptures that condemned homosexuality, they had did the queering theology of it and, you know, as Carl Bean say, God made me this way. And so I found an acceptance of being gay and being Christian when I became a part of that church. It taught me a lot of how to live as a gay Christian. And I stayed with them for about 15 years.

Then I moved on from MCC. And I moved because I'm a very...I like rules and regulations. I like a guideline, boom, boom, boom, boom. This is what we do, this is what is expected of you. And in those times everything had to be, for me, black and white. Today I live in the gray. But back then I was definitely black and white. Right, wrong; do, don't. And this is the way a Christian is supposed to live, and it doesn't matter whether you're a gay Christian or a heterosexual Christian, the standards were the same.

And you couldn't convince me back then—I'm a changed man now—but you couldn't convince me that being a good Christian you could have multiple partners. It just didn't ring well with me. Or not only could you have multiple partners, but you could have more than one wife, or, you know, you could be a married man and have a wife and family, and just because you're gay you can just walk away from your responsibility. After all, it was a mistake. So let's forgive ourselves and forgive others, and you just left a wife and four kids with no father, and you have no consequences?

So I had moral issues with that. You just can't say that everything is all right. I'm sorry that you gay and you couldn't come out of that closet, but you still have a wife and five kids that you're responsible for. You just can't walk out. I don't care if you get a relationship, but you've got to handle this before you just run off with your new man and act like it never happened. So I had issues. And I was looking for more of a foundation, and I wanted more accountability.

So I started going to a very, very Pentecostal church. The Word movement was out, and prosperity, and the evangelist, so I went down that road for a while, [Raymer] church and the Pentecostals and all of that. And I learned a whole lot of good stuff from them. But then I had to leave that, you know, because they couldn't get the understanding that they were loving me and treating me good, and when I told them who I really was, it was like ball game over, hit the gate, you know. But three weeks ago I was one of the pillars of the church, one of the healers and the leaders, and had the gifts of discernment, and now you're crying because you have been deceived by the devil? That was beyond my imagination. And so I had to leave again.

Went back to MCC and stayed another five years, you know, because it was a place where I could understand the gay—and by then, five years, people change, and they began to have more accountability, that it wasn't okay to come to church drunk 'cause you was out all night Sunday night, you know. It wasn't okay to have sex with every new member that came



to church, you know. It wasn't okay to do all this stuff because they done screwed you, I'm going to screw them, you know. It wasn't okay to not have accountability to your family. And so they grew. And I was very, very pleased with the growth. And of course they'd split up. You had those who still fight women's issues, and women in the pulpit, and women not in the pulpit, and inclusive language, and all this stuff was going on. But they had improved.

But meanwhile, I'm still doing all this AIDS work that I'd already been doing all this time, and so I was very involved with that. But I've always been involved with the marginalized people that were dealing with the virus. So the church, if you were really focused on the mainstream congregation, and I was always pressed to the minorities. I wanted to do the food pantry, I wanted to do the homeless outreach. I wanted to make sure that you go out and people had food and stuff like that. I wasn't concerned about those people who were having six figure jobs and they had plenty of food and all of that. I wasn't interested in that part of ministry. I was interested in having a Sunday School for the mentally challenged, people with autism and all of that stuff. These are the people I wanted to work with in the church, and that's what I did. And I enjoyed doing that.

What goes on with that, as I continued to do that kind of work and reach out and bring in—'cause I thought I was the last of the great evangelists—to bring in these people to the church, the church wasn't ready for the

people. They didn't care for the kids, the young adults who had emotional and mental problems because you bring them to church and we all sit together, and they would holler out, and they would talk during the service and disrupt their prayer and meditation. We're not here for all that. We don't need all of that. And I say, well, look, if you got tracks and you can't help yourself, why you can't come to church? You're talking about people who have the mentality of a three-year-old and the preacher's there, and he's got the cup, and they say, hey, what is you doing up there? You know, they don't mean any harm. Just 'cause you know what they're doing, they don't know what's going on. And so I started to have little issues with this, you know.

And then I would invite the drag community, and they'd come in drag, and they'd say things like that's for the stage. You don't come to church looking like that. You're supposed to be a gay church for gay people, but not transgenders are not dressed according—it's all right if they come in and look like a little gay boy, but don't come in with the same thing they had on Saturday night at the bar they can't wear to church on Sunday. Didn't like that. You can't do that to people. So I had issues. See? People who were homeless and they'd come in with their sleeping bag and no bath. Why they can't come to church? I'm growing now and I'm getting real personal with this thing, because the Jesus I was reading about and the Jesus you're preaching about, they ain't seeming to ride the same horse.

One is on a stallion and the other one's on the donkey, you know, so this ride ain't coming out the same for me.

And so these were problems that I was bringing to the church. Homeless people, mentally disturbed people, people who don't take baths, the unwanted. When I thought that's what the church was for. Especially if you're dealing with they're gay and lesbian where there are other gay and lesbian people, and they all don't teach school, and they're all not in the closet, but they're living on the streets, and they got mental health issues, and they got substance abuse issues. These people are the ones who need your help. And they weren't ready for that. So I started my own church. I left and I founded a church called By the Way Baptist Church.

Monique M. When was that?

Jonathon T. By the Way. 1993 it would have been. In 1993 I started By the Way Baptist Church. By the Way Baptist Church was started because I had formed a recovery group, and we would meet in my home every week, sometimes twice a week. And all of them were recovering from crack, you know. That was their main drug of choice. But any other drug would do. But basically they were recovering from crack cocaine. And we would meet and it would be like a NA, AA group, but it was a...I used spiritual principles of recovery.

And because they were like that, they came from non-church backgrounds.

And anybody who had been in church hadn't been in a church since they

were like five or six years old, so they weren't church, as they call them, church people. They knew nothing of the politics of church, church religion, how this thing is supposed to go, church protocol, how you're supposed to act, who do you cooch to, and who do you bow to. They had no clue of that. So I didn't send them to church. We didn't go to church. They didn't go to church. I went to church. They didn't go to church. Then I didn't go to church. So it wasn't a church group.

And I met this guy, a minister, who had a church, and he wanted to...he says that group of yours, he says you're doing marvelous work, great work. Say, I would love for your church, bring your people to my church and I could minister to them and we could have church together, and they can learn the church experience and all of that great stuff. And I told them, I said you know, we've been invited to the brother's church to participate, and they said okay, we'll go. We'll go. And so we went.

And he had got this huge Baptist church building that had a lot of old members. And so, you know, you have these huge churches and no members 'cause the church is paid for. And it had a full, full kitchen, gymnasium. They had a room, it wasn't for homeless, but they used to have youth camp, so they had this whole basement side with bunk beds and stuff like that for the kids and all of that. And he was telling me we're going to use this part for the homeless, and we're going to use this and this and that and the other, and we're going to get money.

He said now what I have to do is—because I went to MCC, I went through the student clergy program, but I was never ordained. And so he said I'm going to ordain you as a Baptist minister. I said man, that's cool. I'm all excited, really. So I get ordained as a Baptist minister and I go with him and I take my people with me.

Three months later he tells me, he says, I got a grant for \$50,000 from the National Baptist Association of Tidewater, and they're giving us this money to start this program that you were talking about. Because what I had talked to him about was it was getting near summer, summer was coming. I said we have all these people in our neighborhood that's on crack, their mamas don't work, everybody's on the street. I said when school close, they get nothing. The only meal they ever got was lunch, and now lunch is gone. We need an after school program and a day program so these kids can come and get off the street and get at least two good meals. They get breakfast, they get lunch, and then you make it this way. So this was my idea. And we can work with the families and help them get off drugs, and we can be supportive, and all these great ideas I had. And he said oh yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes.

And so he said he had got this grant, and he told me, he says—now you've got to remember my congregation, not only were they all on substance, but they were all transgender people. I had two straight people in the whole church, two. Everybody else was transgender, one way or the other, or gay. That was the whole congregation. And all of the, every last one of

them, one, was addicted to crack cocaine. So we had this. And so when I say transgender, imagine in your head the average woman in the church is at least five eleven or six feet tall. You can't miss them, okay? You look and say, hm. As a person said one time, that's a man in a dress. You're not fooling me. And then we had some who were around my height, you know. But we had these full outstanding that were like six feet, five eleven.

And so the board from the Baptist association was coming to visit the church to see what great work we were doing. And the pastor there told me, he said look, Jonathon, you tell these not to come this Sunday. Tell them to stay at home. They got a Sunday off church. And I'm like, what? Yeah. We want to make a good impression. We don't want to scare the funders. So could you do that? Well, it didn't sit well with me and it didn't sit well with my wife.

So we made an appointment with the National Baptist Association personally and we went and we had a meeting. And I sat down at the table just like this. And all the big wheels were there. And I told them who I was. And I told them about the project. And they knew about the project, and they were all behind it. And this was the first thing to knock me off my socks. They said, well we are sending the pastor an associate pastor to help him with his project because it's too much for one man. And I said, excuse me, I am the associate pastor. They'd never even heard of me. I'm the associate pastor. You're the associate pastor? I said yes, I am. Here's

my ordination, here's my paperwork. I am the associate pastor there. So they were already off their...

And then they tell me, well, the pastor is working to heal them of their homosexuality, and heal them and bring them out of their drugs. I said no. [Laughs.] No, I don't think so. And I said these people, some of these people are officers of the church. The church secretary, the head of the deacon board, head of the trustee board all are transgender people and gay. He says well, according to the constitution of the Baptists, no gay person can hold office in a Baptist church. Now they can come and they can worship and praise God, they might get saved. But they cannot have office. I said, well sir, I'm a transgender man myself, and I'm the associate pastor. He says you can't be a pastor and be trans in the Baptist church. Said I can. Said no, you can't.

So went back home, told the people it won't work. And by then they were clamoring. We want our own church. We ain't got to mess with nobody. We can have our own church. You can be our pastor. And you know me, Mr. Technical, by the book, I went and got the Baptist standard of rules and regulations of the Baptist church. What I found out in that book was no, it's been voted on and settled, gay people cannot have a pulpit, office, or nothing.

As everything a good lawyer finds out, there's a loophole. Every church is autonomous. You can't tell one what to do and another one not to do. The

only thing you can do, once a person is ordained, you're ordained. When they lay hands on you, they can't un-lay hands on you. It's a done deal. You are a Baptist minister. But you can't have and pastor a Baptist church. So the people wanted me to be their pastor. And the Baptist name is a name. It is not incorporated. Anybody can use it.

I said we will be called By the Way Baptist Church. And that's what I named the church, By the Way Baptist Church, 'cause by the way, we just happen to be a church. [*Laughs.*] And by the way, we happen to be Baptists. It was a little pun joke there, you know what I mean? But that was the beginning of By the Way Baptist Church, and it consisted of all these unchurched people who were really struggling with their crack addiction, with life in general, with all the heartaches and all the pain, and not knowing how to be church, and not knowing what it required, and not learning how to do it.

One of our big problems was one of the members of the church was having sex with one of the other member's husbands, all right? And the woman that she was having sex with—I mean her husband with was upset that this sister in the church was having sex with her husband. And so let us come and reason together and find out what's going on. So we're in the office and we're sitting, and I said look, sister, I said you're having sex with this sister's husband. Do you know that? And she said yeah, I know, I know. I say don't you know that that's not acceptable behavior in a Christian context? She says, why? She says I got four sisters and I have



sex with all their husbands. So it's about how people are raised and their mentality. Not that she was a bad woman. It's like it's normal. And so to teach normality is one of the things I had to do, to teach love and compassion, and how to get along.

And to keep them from getting hurt by the rest of the body of Christ was my biggest job, to protect them from the church. [*Laughs.*] Which seems kind of crazy, but that was my whole job and the whole purpose of that church and congregation, to teach that kind of love. And then I asked people to come in to try to bring the rules and regulations of church, and church work, and all of that. But the churches, per se, the mainstream churches, were not really feeling this group of people.

But they stayed together until I moved. I moved from Virginia to California. I moved to California, San Francisco, to attend the Pacific School of Religion because I felt like I was a jackleg preacher, and that I did not have enough education to... And I wanted them to have the best pastor they could. I didn't want nobody laughing at them. You know how people laugh? Oh, you got that old jackleg preacher you hanging out with. He don't know nothing. He ain't never been to seminary. Child, he gonna lead you all to hell.

Monique M. So why Pacific and not Virginia Union or...?

Jonathon T. Well, because Pacific School of Religion were more open to gay, lesbians and transgender people. Even Virginia. I had a member who was going

to—first she was at Regent, which is Pat Robinson’s school. That’s where she was getting her religious education. I say you’re wasting a lot of money now. I’m telling you the truth. [*Laughs.*] When they find out, they’re gonna burn your master’s degree, okay? It’s not gonna mean nothing to them. And she said, well, I’ve been looking into Virginia Union. I said let’s go up there and see what’s going on.

And I went with her for the interview. And they were almost a don’t ask, don’t tell seminary. And the whole thing about her was to come out as a transgender minister when she finished school, and that wasn’t going to happen, and as far as getting a pulpit or whatever. So no, that’s why I didn’t choose. At least PSR will fool you, like you gonna get a pulpit. No disrespect to anybody, but, you know, they give me a false sense of security is what I’d say, all right?

Monique M. So you went there to do an M.Div.?

Jonathon T. Yeah, I went there for the M.Div. program.

Monique M. Where did you do your undergraduate degree?

Jonathan T. I didn’t. I didn’t. I didn’t have time for that kind of stuff, you know. And if you let me talk to you long enough about how I believe, I can talk you—I talked them people into letting me into Pacific School of Religion with a GED, because I knew what I wanted, I knew what the world needed, and I knew who I was sent for.

And as they say, very few people get into the Pacific School of Religion on a GED with two separate learning challenges, dyslexia and what I can't even think what they call the other, but a person who cannot read and cannot even hear vowels and syllables, you know, due to brain damage and stuff. I got into Pacific School of Religion. And I'm a person who believes you can do anything if you put your mind to it. So yes, I don't—that's why you don't hear about me 'cause I just skipped through all of that, boom. You know, I'm right there in PSR, you know.

Monique M. So you wanted to get educated.

Jonathon T. Yeah, I wanted to be—

Monique M. And it was the plan to go back—

Jonathon T. And the thing with me, and up until what, last year or so, I've always gone back for the summer program. And extended learning, continual education to know what's going on in different areas of school. But every time I go, whether Bishop Spong is teaching, I refuse to take it for credit. I don't take any classes for credit. I want the information. I don't need the piece of paper. Because I've met too many people with paper with no sense. They got all, they got so many letters behind their name they could make a cup of alphabet soup. But if you ask them the bare minimums of how to minister, they're totally helpless. I got my own. But that's all right. I'll do a big one. I don't know where you came from.

Monique M. They have them set up in the room for the interviews.

Jonathon T. I like to know my water and my people. Okay.

Monique M. So was the plan then to go back to the church?

Jonathon T. Yes. My plan was to finish and go back to Virginia.

Monique M. Now were you working still full-time, still a pastor?

Jonathon T. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Monique M. Was that still with the Tidewater AIDS Crisis?

Jonathon T. Yeah. I worked—in fact I worked three jobs. I pastored a church, I worked for the health department in pre and post counseling and drawing blood of people with HIV. I worked for the Urban League doing research in ho's in the African American community, and I worked for the Tidewater AIDS Crisis as an outreach worker and a case manager. I did case manager for the noncompliant clients.

In fact I had to fight the whole state of Virginia, and they lost, because according to them, if a person didn't have an address, a phone number, etc., then they couldn't be a client and your files weren't complete. If the state come in and they pull your file and you got a client in there, John Doe, and John Doe don't have a address, then you can't count him as a client. But if you don't have a house, how you gonna have a address? And that means you can't get services? Or you are noncompliant if they ask you to get your birth certificate, get this paper and that paper, and your Social Security and all this stuff, so you have this nice little folder that

people can pull out. Some people are never there long enough to remember their driver's license, if they had one. They couldn't comply.

And so they just handed them all, here are all your noncompliant people, and this is your case load, and you explain it to the state when they come through. And if you're not here, you set up a folder so people could understand. I made up my own folders. I had yellow tags, red tags, blue tags, and each tag meant—if you were a red tag, that means the only thing I knew about you was your drag name. I didn't even know what your birth name was. Is no way you could—but still you're a human being and you need services. So I worked it like that.

But like I said, I did continue to work. And then, like I said, I moved and came to California. And then I moved back to Virginia after I finished. I moved back to Virginia. And I was a part of a UCC church in Virginia.

Monique M. So you didn't go back to your church?

Jonathon T. Oh, yeah, I went back to my church. But I went back because now I'm supposed to be civilized, and I wanted to incorporate them into the mainstream UCC church, and I wanted them to experience not being renegade, and not being the one, the odd people, just a normal, happy, welcoming and affirming church. And so I went back.

And UCC is autonomous, too. They may say we're open and affirming, but if you don't put it on your door, then you can do what you want. You do not have to, by all means, be open and affirming. You could be as

fundamental as you want to. You could be more fundamental than Jerry Falwell. And so the first problem I had was when I went back, was to find an open and affirming UCC in southern Virginia, in the South, that was open and affirming. So I spent time going through the phone book, calling every UCC and asking were they open and affirming, and getting a big old runaround which basically wind up no, you know.

And then they had one that was listed. Well, I was looking for an African American church, UCC, and that's another rarity, to find a UCC that is all African American. And so I was working with substance abuse, an NA program, and they were having their meetings in a UCC church. And when I went there that night for the meeting, I asked the deacon who was guarding the door to make sure we didn't defile their church in there, all them addicts sitting up in there, were they open and affirming, and he said yes. I said I'll be here Sunday.

So I got up and I went to their church on Sunday morning, and they were friendly, and loving, and all of that good stuff. And I figured, well, it might be a safe place. And then one of the guys who was an abuser, he was staying with us, and he was clean and sober, but he'd been on drugs for months and years. You know, you don't have a great wardrobe. He had a regular button down shirt. I think it was blue. And he had a pair of khaki pants, and he would wear them, call that his Sunday clothes. He would wear them to church with me. And we would go.

And then the one I was telling you about that was in the military and was at Regent went with me to church, and she decided to go as a woman. And she went to church with me that Sunday. And they asked people to stand up, new visitors stand up, give your name. And she stood up and she said her name, and she said this is my pastor and we're glad to visit with you today. And one of the older women, who had been there like 50 years, all her life in this church, looked up and said, right in the service, that's a man in a dress. They're not welcome here. Okay. So her being a goodhearted person bit the bullet. We left.

So I meet with the pastor, because we were supposed to get them to train ushers, because they knew nothing about being ushers. They knew nothing about being deacons. They knew not what a trustee was. I'm trying to get them church wise. And I figure you go to a church and we grow up here, right? And we fellowship with each other, and your deacons can train my deacons and all that. But anyway, it didn't work out that way because of that incident.

So I went to talk to the pastor and the head deacon who told me they were open and affirming, 'cause I wouldn't put myself nor any of my members through that madness. And I said okay, I said, what is the problem? I said you told me that this was an open and affirming church, and yet I bring a transgender woman here and you embarrass her like that. And he said we are open and affirming. For the last weeks you've been bringing that brother in our church with no tie and no suit coat, and we never said a

word until you showed up. We opened our arms and our hearts to this no tie wearing man, tennis shoes and khakis. We are open, but not to that.

And again I had to tell him, look, I'm trans. You know, I think I better start leading with that from now on, get you all on the right track, you know. Because I hadn't been in the church a week and they gave me the keys to the van. They didn't know nothing about me. To take the kids to the camp and drive the old folks around. But anyway. That was their idea of open and affirming.

Monique M. So that didn't work.

Jonathon T. No, it didn't work. And so I called my pastor at the time and told her this is not working, and this is what happened. And she said just come back home. Just come back to California, 'cause they're not ready for you. You got good intentions, but they need some more years of dealing with...

And the deacon say he didn't understand what the vote was when he voted that their church would be open and affirming. And so that was my next thing. Please let people know what open and affirming is. Don't assume that they know what they're getting into. Don't assume that this sounds so good on their resume, we are open and affirming, you know. I'm the one who went to the UCC about—they used to have this TV commercial, and it had this bouncer standing at the door. I don't know whether you ever saw it or not.

Monique M. By a open door.



Jonathon T. Yeah, and he would open the door. And I said y'all need to take that thing down. I mean, really. You're sending a message. Because people see that, they really think you mean what they say, and then they standing there with their six feet heels and their six feet body, and you still got the door shut, I said, because they didn't understand that it didn't mean them, you know. But anyway, that's another story.

But anyway, I went back, came back to San Francisco and continued my ministry, which has always been working with the homeless, working with runaway youth, working with people who had HIV and AIDS, and people who've just been dissociated. And this has always been basically the bottom line of what the bulk of what I have done is working—like that picture there. When I was back in Virginia—

Monique M. This one?

Jonathon T. Yes. I think it says '93 on there. I started a transgender support group, and they would meet at the church. They would come to the church and meet. But it was the first one that they had had, because trying to transition in Virginia is a whole 'nother story. Back in those days it was very difficult. In fact it was difficult even finding the transgender community. They were still going by the rules that were so outdated of what qualifies for transgender, who can have—you had to go a year, and you had to live a year in the sex that you choose, and then you had to live another year before that, and it was just a whole mess. And you had all these batteries

of tests, and then you had to have a therapist, and you had to have a psychiatrist and a psychologist. And really, it wasn't easy for black people to even get in 'cause you didn't have that kind of money. And these tests you had to pay for.

Monique M. Right.

Jonathon T. Back to my problem. All these girls wanted to do it, so what were they doing...on the crusade. Having silicone put in their body with no medical care, taking hormones that came from Mexico, and who knew what was in it besides rat poison. And they were killing their selves. So the playing field wasn't even even for a black transgender woman to even get into the program to get to have the transition. And there were only a few who was like African American men.

And you had to have a job, and you had to have some money, because all this cost. And if you working on the ho' stroll and you trying to get some lunch money, you ain't got money to be talking about you got to have a psychological report. And even if you had, they gonna think you're crazy because of the life you live and the drugs you use and all of that, so it wasn't fair. And that was a whole 'nother rampage I had to go on to stop all this illegal hormone usage and silicone injections, and people were dying from overdoses and clogging their arteries, and clogging their body with all of this stuff. So that's it for that.

Monique M. Can you talk a bit about—so for the record, I’m trying to track—I’ve tracked your religious activism and we’ve done a bit about your secular activism. Can you talk specifically about your activism as it related to black trans-ness? What animated that call? Was it simply the marginalized of the marginalized, or from personal experience you saw the need that you didn’t get and you wanted to fill in the gap? Can you speak more about what led you to an activist orientation for that community as well?

Jonathon T. Okay. Well, I really have always been involved with black trans people, period. It wasn’t until, what year was it, Black Transmen, Inc. came about?

Triptta: Six years?

Jonathon T. Six, seven years ago. A group out of Dallas, Texas started Black Transmen—because they felt like trans men, trans women of color were not being represented with any type of stability and any type of...they would pop up. You know, like they’d have a black trans something and it’d last six months, a year. You’d have one conference and they’d never get the money to have another one. It kind of died out, the work that black people were doing around the trans issues. You know, they had this small. But when Black Transmen came up, the couple, S.B. and Carter, they were young and they were totally dedicated.

And I went to their very, very first conference. And not only was it done tastefully, and it had a spiritual component to it, but it was done with such

quality of excellence. You know, like have you ever gone to those conferences and sometime they have them, and they, because of money, the program is printed on newspaper, on the back, the print is bad, there's nothing glossy, there's nothing professional about the whole conference. The topics are weak and un-innovative, and uninteresting, and they use it as a platform to complain about how the white trans community is dogging us. Well, I was over them. But that's the way they usually run, the black trans conferences prior to Black Transmen. And this conference was nothing like that. Everything was done with such professionalism, such excellence. It was just supreme. And I wanted to be a part of that. I really wanted to be a part of that. And that's how I got involved.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, City of Refuge had a large population of trans men, and I started working with them. And later on they were still members of City of Refuge, but they wanted to broaden their selves so other trans men—'cause some trans men just don't like church, and they won't even come to a meeting if it's inside of a church 'cause they have such bad feelings. So we started a thing called Brothers Rising. And they wanted to do outreach, and they wanted to learn to collaborate with the other agencies and stuff. But Black Transmen, or now just Black...

Triptta: Black Trans...

Jonathon T. Advocacy. They changed their name to Black Trans Advocacy. Were more spread out into the general population. Because the first year was all

about black trans men. And within one year they had added the black trans women. And then after that they became an advocacy for all the trans—

Monique M. Non-gender conforming.

Jonathon T. Yeah. And that was good. And they always, from the very first program, had a spiritual component where black trans people could bring in everything from the African religions, to Christian, to Catholic, to whatever you were, and we could all participate and always do offerings to the ancestors and all of that. It became a very inclusive spiritual component to... And the work they've been doing, going around educating and being advocacies for smaller components, like these little towns in little two by four Texas, you know, going out educating and working and starting a unit there in those places.

So that's where I really got involved with the black advocacy part of the trans movement, in the last six years. And because I was—not only because I was one of the first there, but I became an elder. But not only because the first, but because of my age. Most of these little guys that are there, 35 and under, you know. And I became like an elder because I talk real talk to them, especially those who are like 18 and 20 and 21. I give that old elder advice to these young men, like get a job, go to school. Tell me you want a woman. You can't take care of no woman, boy. What's wrong with you? You better get a house to put her in, a education to take care of her. Talk about having children. You ain't grown up yourself.

But I'm there for that real talk. You want to be a man? You don't know what being a man is all about. It ain't about the way you look. It's a heart thing. You know, if you don't have the heart of a man, you don't know how to be a man. And it's more to be a righteous and a virtuous man, whether you're a trans man or a biological man, or whatever you want to call yourself. You have to conduct yourself that way. So I became an elder there. And I'm still one of the elders.

Monique M. So typically at this point I ask about people's personal lives, ask about your significant other, children if you have any, other means of support. Specifically for persons who are activists it's really important to have a network, and so I ask who's your village?

Jonathon T. This is my wife. She's Triptta. And she's my right hand. She keeps me focused. She's my secretary, 'cause I don't do emails, Facebook or none of that. She answers all my letters, makes all my appointments, 'cause I'm not interested in none of that. I just do the work. And she takes care of that. She has to go through my email 'cause I delete everything. Delete, delete, delete, delete. If I had a thing I can push say delete all, it'd all be gone. But she goes through and see who's writing me.

Even when people write me, text me or whatever, she says what do you want to say? Whatever you want to say. I don't care. I don't. I'm not a mushy, wordy person. You know, somebody will say—oh, say it's somebody's birthday, and she'll look on and she'll say, you know, today is

so-and-so's birthday, what do you want to say? I said, say happy birthday. But not her. Oh, it's been a pleasure through the years of where you've been, and we're so glad you're in our lives and you're—I ain't got all that to say, you know. She's my fluffer, you know. I just give it to you raw, you know?

So she's my wife, and she's my right hand, and she understands all my quirks. And she looks after me thoroughly. She makes sure that I'm where I'm supposed to be when I'm supposed to be there, and doing what I'm supposed to do. And she makes sure I don't get distracted. She's my buffer because I'm borderline autistic and what's that thing?

Triptta: Asperger's.

Jonathon T. Asperger's. And so she filters me when I'm talking to one-on-one people because I'm clueless. Like I just tell you what come in my head, and she just says no, no, no, can't say things like that. You're hurting people. So she's there to buffer me, to make sure I don't say nothing dumb, you know, basically. And then when I'm going all off, she like reels me in, you know, so I need her because, you know, that's what she does. She's a very, very good wife, and she does it. She's not a jealous woman. I have a ex-wife, and they're real close friends, you know. In fact we just visited her a couple weeks ago in Virginia. What does she call you now?

Triptta: Her wife-in-law.

Jonathon T. No, that was Farrah. Farrah is my wife that died. She always called her her wife-in-law. She's your wife. She is her wife. That's what she tells her. Yeah. But she's not jealous like that. And the rest of my wives are dead. I just killed them all.

Monique M. Oh, please. Don't put that on the record. *[Laughs.]*

Jonathon T. I didn't kill them all. No, they died of cancer and other diseases, you know. My husband, I was married to a mama's boy. And he lived with his mama till they both died in a nursing home due to diabetes, because they don't believe that sugar kills, and so they sat there with their legs coming off and coming apart and drinking Pepsi, and eating Ding Dongs. And they went blind and lost their limbs, but he never left home. He never left home.

And I was his mother's girlfriend back in the day. We met in the penitentiary. She was doing life, and I was only doing a year. But we met. And I got out. And I said, well, if you get out we'll hook up. But lo and behold she made parole. And I'm a man of my word, so we got together. My word has got me in more trouble than the love boat.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Jonathon T. If I say it, I'm gonna do it, okay? Bad trouble, but that's the way we be, you know. And I told her we'd get together, and we did. And I'd always wanted kids. I love kids. I wanted one, really. I wanted one child. And I thought I'd have this one kid and he would love me and I'll love him



unconditionally. That was my dream. So anyway, I had my one kid, but my mother, old fashioned, bless her heart, I didn't want to get married. But she couldn't hold her head up in the church if her daughter wasn't married. Oh, god, how can I say I got a bastard? Oh, you've got to marry. Yeah, and blah-blah-blah.

So anyway, I married the guy. But he never left his mama. He never left his mama's house. It wasn't that kind of marriage. In fact he had no backbone. He didn't even have a gristle, all right? He was like totally his mama's boy. He never held a job. He never did nothing but sit in that house and read comic books. He went to the army and they kicked him out. He went to the Job Corps and they kicked him out. He couldn't hold a job for nothing. He stayed home with his mama all his life.

But I had a child by him, and so I had two boys. I had two boys. And I had a girlfriend, 'cause me and Mama weren't getting along too good, so we had to go our separate ways. But we couldn't go too separate because we had these kids together. So she stayed in my life until the day she took her last breath, you know. Because she's the children's grandmother. But I had a girlfriend. And she had two kids. And her sister died and left her two kids. And I had two kids. So together we had six kids. And she died of cancer. But we raised those six kids as a couple together for all those years, and they grew up as brothers. They grew up as brothers. And she had one girl. But they all grew up as brothers and sisters, and they all kind of kept in touch with each other.

My youngest son that I gave birth to, he died of...what was it? Kidney failure. He had hypertension and didn't know. Ain't nothing to be sorry about. He just did, though. But anyway, that's another story. Anyway, he had hypertension and he didn't look after it. He didn't take care of his self. And it's that silent killer. And meanwhile this hypertension shut down his kidneys, and then he had total kidney failure. And then they put him on dialysis, and then he finally got another kidney, and it was a young boy's kidney. The kid was about 12. So the kidney was really too little for this great big grown man. He was a big boy. And so that kidney failed. And he was on the list for another one, but he never did get another one. He finally went into total kidney failure and he died at 43. He was 43. He died.

My oldest son is 50. And he lives in Texas where I do. I went to Texas. And he lives in Texas, and we are very, very close. We have a very good relationship. We've always had a very close relationship. In fact when we made the movie "The Believers," he was upset because Miss Major's son was in it and they were interviewing him about what it's like to be raised by a trans parent, and he wanted to tell his story. It would have been an opportunity to tell what it was like being my son back in the day. So he has never had any problems with my transitioning and all of that. He has a daughter.

My son that died has two kids, a girl and a boy. They live in Philadelphia. Just finished visiting with them. And then the other kids got kids. And

then I...Decella, who was the wife before Triptta, she has a son, and I raised him from the time he was nine, and he's like 30 something now. So he thinks of me as his father. And I had already transitioned when I met him, so he never knew. And my grandson never knew me, because I had transitioned before he was born. Now my granddaughter, she knew me as her grandmother, but she got with the program real cool, you know. And I let her decide what did she want to call me, you know, 'cause it's kind of hard to call somebody who looks like me Grandma. It looks bad on you.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Jonathon T. It don't look bad on me. And you want to look crazy talking about where's my grandmama, you're the one. It's just like my husband that's dead. He couldn't get with the program. I was going to visit him in the hospital, and I had been way into transition just like I am sitting before you, and he would say, I want you to meet my wife, my wife here. And the people in the bed would say, okay. That's your wife? You gay? I don't know what your problem is. But it looks bad on their part, not my part. If you want me to be your wife, I'll be your wife. Okay, I ain't got time to argue or explain this whole thing to you.

But yeah, that's my family dynamics. I was adopted. And my aunt raised me. My aunt raised me as hers, and her husband. They raised me and they adopted me. And so I grew up. But because her brother was my father, I was always in the same family. Back then they farmed me out. That's

what they call it. You got too many. We'll send you to live with this aunt, we'll send you to live here. So they went me to live with his sister, 'cause he had 38 kids, so more than he could handle, you know. Yeah, and he was trifling. He wasn't taking care of none of them. So his mother felt, the matriarch, she had to make sure that all his children had good homes, and so she placed us different places, those that didn't stay with their biological mothers.

And so we were all raised together. I knew who—it wasn't this...you know, people have all this trauma, I don't know who my daddy is. I knew who he was. Good for him. I knew who my biological mother was. So it wasn't this secret thing that nobody knows you're adopted and we're not going to talk about it. Everybody knew you were adopted. Everybody knew you went to live with this one and you lived—it would come Christmas, Thanksgiving, all the holidays, all his children, all the aunts, everybody was together, so it was still the same family. So I grew up in that kind of dynamics with the family.

And my grandmother was a midwife and my grandfather was a farmer. And I guess I learned to love the earth and farming from hanging around with him. And my adopted father, he worked in the shipyard. And the one thing I got from him was great integrity. You say what you mean, you mean what you say, and you keep your word. You live a clean and honest life. You don't lie, you don't steal, blah-blah-blah. He was a good guy, a real good guy.

Monique M. So I have two final questions and then you can look over your list and see if there's anything you haven't touched that you want to.

Jonathon T. Okay. All right.

Monique M. So one of the things that I've noted in your bio is it listed you as omnifaith or a multi-spiritual practitioner. And that hasn't come up, your Hebrew studies or your multi-faith perspective hasn't come up, so I'd like that to go on record.

Jonathon T. Okay. Well, after many years of dabbling with every type of faith and religion and studying, I found out that no one religion is true, that they all have bits and pieces of truth, that religion has been manipulated through the institution of religion, whether it be the Catholics or the Mormons. They go in and tweak it. And then I learned that it was all about control of the masses. And when I learned that, it began to turn for me. When I realized, started reading books like religion and the brain, your brain on religion, God and your brain, the psychological effects, the psychology of religion, knowing that it was not all this spiritual thing, that some things are wired in your brain to react certain ways. So I learned biological, chemical reaction of why people got to have it, and the same their drug and their opium of the masses, and why it's needed, and can you live without it, and all of that kind of stuff kept leading me away.

And especially when every time I would try to settle down and have a faith—you mentioned Judaism. Started out as a devoted Christian, Jesus

on the cross, hallelujah, died for my sins, life is good. It don't get no better than this. The truth and the light and forever and ever. And really spent about three years studying Jesus. And as I studied the life and the teachings of Jesus, I wanted to know more about this Jesus. And then Jesus led me to Judaism, because he was a Jew. And then I'm a person who, because of the way my brain is, that's never been enough for me. I don't think you can understand a faith until you've lived it. And so I became a Jew.

Monique M. A Messianic Jew or...?

Jonathon T. No, no, no. I left Jesus. No, no. Jesus was not a Messianic Jew. Wasn't no such thing. I went to be an Orthodox. I was in a Reformed Jewish synagogue. But they were a gay and lesbian type synagogue. And so all of the members and the leaders were old Orthodox Jews, so they taught me the Orthodox ways, even though we were Reformed. So I learned all of the rules and regulations that a Orthodox Jew would learn and just say add then transgender with it. But we were basically Orthodox.

And so I had to do everything. I did the whole shebang. I mean, I studied for over a year the Torah and all of that. And then I had what they call...I went to speak before the [Beth Din??], which is rabbis, and they ask you questions. You have to write a paper and all of this stuff. And then I passed all of that. And then I am so, when I'm into something—I had to go to the mikvah, and that's how you come out a Jew. But before I did

that, I had to be circumcised. I wanted to be circumcised because the law says that every male has to be. Go in there and do what you got to do, you know. And I even—so when someone say were you pledged. Look, I did everything according to the covenant, including circumcision, obeying the law, kosher. I was on it. Like I brought her back to Judaism. She was born a Jew and I got into it and I drug her back. Her mama was so happy. Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Jonathon T. Her brother, thank you, thank you. You brought her back to the fold. You brought her back to the fold, you know. Because now you got to light the Shabbat candle. We Jews in this house. We're gonna read the Torah and we're gonna pray three times a day. But... So I lived, celebrated all the holidays year after year, and participated in everything. And so I was a sure enough Jew.

Now when you get behind the green—this is what I call the green door, the technicalities, I started to look at the divisions in Judaism and that started to trouble me. I thought a Jew, when I first became a Jew, a Jew was a Jew. But then I understand that a Reform, a Renewal, an Orthodox, an Ultra Orthodox, you know, they were so divided. It broke my little heart. How can we be separated?

And then being black, I'm always going to the black side of the road, I started to deal with the black Israelites, the black Jews, the Rastafarian

Jews, and I say man, the Jews as messed up as the Christians, Lord have mercy. Look at this mess we're in, you know. And then I look at the politics and how they split, just like the Catholic church and the Protestant church. I saw the same dysfunction in the Jewish faith. After all of this tiptoeing through the rose garden of Judaism and smelling all the beautiful roses, I found my hand just full of the fertilizer, and I wasn't a happy camper.

And so I lost my feel for that like I did for being a Pentecostal or being a Roman Catholic. After they couldn't pray my friend out of hell, I had to let them go. They wanted too much money to get her out of hell, and I couldn't afford to get her out of hell. So basically, you know, I found these little pitfalls that I'm not happy with, but yet I found all these golden nuggets and these wonderful pieces that sustained me, that nurtured me, the Torah, the text, the Buddha, you know, the... And so it became this omnifaith. It was everything and yet nothing.

Monique M. Okay.

Jonathon T. And that's how—

Monique M. So what do you practice today?

Jonathon T. My personal practice, if you were to ask me do I have a particular religious practice or group, I would have to go now that I am a devotee of Amma, and that's a Hindu religion, because Hindu's got all sorts of gods and all sorts of ways of worshiping, and everybody's god, and everybody



been god, and everybody will be god, and, you know. Amma says my religion is love, like Bob Marley. Love is my religion. And that it's about service and selfless service. And I can follow that.

And any particular...because I look at Buddha, and I look at Krishna, and I look at Ganesh, all these gods and deities that they have, they are just a god that the god made. God made all the gods. And so I want to work on his behalf. So I deal with angels, and fairies and all realms of beliefs. And so I might be talking to the fairies today and Gabriel and Rafael tomorrow, and Amma the next day, and Jesus the next day, and Buddha the next day. Whoever comes to sit down and talk with me, we can have a little talk and find out what's going on.

But as far as a structure, if I was going to structure my life now around a particular faith, because Hinduism goes way, way back before Jesus, before any of them, you know, one of the world's oldest religions. And even with Christianity now, I've gone all the ways—'cause I kept following Jesus, and I followed him all the way to the Essenes. And they go all the way back to Enoch in the Bible, and Melchizedek.

So I trace religion as far back as I possibly can, and then I jumped off the end of the world, and that's where you get that omni religion. I just float through and whenever I want to sit and settle, you know, I can go to the Hindu temple and worship and meditate and read the text, because all the texts will build on another text. I can go all the way back to Egypt, where

Moses, he got his stuff from the Egyptians, and he took his stuff to the Hebrews. And so I followed everybody all the way to the end of the rainbow, and now I live at the end of the rainbow and I sit at a pot of gold, and that is the, what we call the dharma truth, the eternal truth, and that's where I worship now, with the eternal truth.

Monique M. Okay. Well, I think that's a perfect place to stop. But you had a list, so were there any things from your notes you wanted us to cover?

Jonathon T. No. The only thing I left unsaid, and I made a note of that the other day, was in California, 'cause I'm always in the interfaith, they had a interfaith AIDS project that the state of California paid a group of people, and I was the only African American transgender person on that committee. And what our task was, it was to go from what is that place?

Triptta: Eureka.

Jonathon T. The top of California all the way down to San Diego. We went and educated religious groups. We went to mosques, we went to shuls, we went to Jehovah Witness. We went to any established religion to teach them how to deal with their parishioners that had AIDS, and how they could build AIDS ministries. That's it.

Triptta: I think the part, too, that you talked about earlier, you didn't mention here, about how you did the pre intake, you did the...you drew their blood, you did the—

Jonathon T. Oh, that. She wants me to tell you about that.

Triptta: That's like amazing.

Jonathon T. She likes that. When I was doing—back to the AIDS days—when I was working in HIV and AIDS, and I had been thoroughly trained, I wound up working, as I was telling you, at the health department. And my job was to be a pre and post test counselor, which means you come in and I tell you about what I'm going to do, and then I would actually draw your blood, and two weeks later you come back and I give you your results. And if your results were positive, I encouraged you to become a client of the Tidewater AIDS Crisis so you could get services and learn to deal with the disease.

And I was usually assigned that person's case manager. And then as their case manager I would work with them till they got really sick, and then they would die. And then when they died, I would do their funeral services for them. And then after they died, and I would do a year's follow-up with their family for consolation, and I would go visit their mothers or their wives, and every three months how you doing, you know. I know you're still missing, are you getting grief counseling. And so I had that thing from the day you found out till the day you died, I'll be with you. And that's the way that was.

Monique M. Wow.

Jonathon T. And you know what? You almost burn out that way, 'cause after a while, if you know anything about the epidemic, people died. And we had case management meetings when we go in on Monday—this was in the early days around '83, '84, '85—we'd go in, and that was before AZT, before anything. We'd go in on Monday morning and everybody had lost—by then we had a staff of case managers and every case manager would have lost at least one or two people between Friday, when we closed up, and Monday morning, when we opened back up. So that's a lot of people dying.

Monique M. Well, thank you for adding that.

Jonathon T. You're welcome.

Monique M. So I'm going to give you the consent form. I'm going to stop all of the recordings.

*[End of recording.]*