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Title

Jonathon Thunderword Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 31, 2017

Extant

1 hour 45 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Jonathon Thunderword, a theologian and black transman, discusses undergoing electro shock therapy for his homosexuality before finding acceptance through MCC and Queer Theology. While ministering to trans people recovering from cocaine addiction, he started By The Way Baptist Church despite opposition from the Baptist Church due to his trans identity.

Biographical

Jonathon Thunderword is a theologian, a scholar, and a free thinker. He identifies as a Black transman. He was born on April 20, 1949 in Suffolk, VA. He was adopted at 13 months of age by his biological aunt and her husband, who Jonathon affectionately calls father. He was raised as an only child, though his biological father had a total of 39 children. Jonathan has very fond memories of his childhood. He knew he was loved and cared for by his parents. He learned integrity and responsibility from his father. He spent countless mornings with his father where they would stand in front of the mirror and lather shaving cream into their palms and spread it over their grinning cheeks. Jonathan's father would make sure to take the blade out of Jonathon's razor before they began to shave. His father knew that he would be a boy at an early age and also wanted a son. At an early age, Jonathan knew, as well. Jonathan started to experience some learning challenges in elementary school. He had a hard time reading and comprehending letters. He later found out that he had Asperger's Syndrome. Educators did not receive training in assisting students with learning disabilities during this time, therefore leaving him to teach himself the basics of reading and writing, but at a slower

pace. Due to his learning disability, he dealt with depression and he always felt like he was behind his peers. During this time, he was also exploring his gender identity and sexual orientation.

By the age of 14, in 1963, Jonathon was committed to a mental hospital for electric shock treatment. He tried to abide by the standards of what God wanted. But he knew he was attracted to women, and believed the homeopathic ideals that the church taught. His parents and doctor thought he should have the shock treatments at this age. Later in life, he ended up in the Exodus International Ministries. Between the ages of 14 and 27, he underwent 26 electric shock treatments on a very high dose. From there, the plan was to grow up to be in a nice heterosexual relationship and to be pleasing in God's eyes. He later found out that the leader of this organization went back to his male partner.

Soon after leaving the Exodus International Ministries, Jonathan found MCC Church. This church taught gay and lesbian people that they were loved by God. During services, if they found scriptures that condemned homosexuality, they used Queer Theology to move forward with their lessons. Carl Bean was his mentor, Jonathan took to heart when Carl said, "God made me this way." He was a part of the MCC for 15 years. He left that church in search of a more African American religious community.

Around the age of 34, and after 27 tries, he successfully received his GED. This was a great accomplishment for him since he did not have the educational support for learning disabilities that he needed. Throughout this time in his life, he moved back and forth from Virginia to California several times. California was the only state he found that provided educational support for adults with learning disabilities. After earning his GED in 1983, he moved back to Virginia and attended Thomas Nelson Community College. While there, he took special education courses and spent several semesters there. He did not gain a degree from Thomas Nelson Community College, but felt that he had more control over his education. He returned to California and attended City College of San Francisco and earned a degree in Alcohol and Substance Abuse in 1996.

Jonathon began working in the HIV/AIDS movement in the 80s while married to a transwoman in Virginia. Those in the Tidewater area started a taskforce to deal with the epidemic. The Tidewater area consists of Northampton, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, and Newport News. The areas around the Navy Base near Norfolk were hot spots for the gay community. He began attending meetings for the Tidewater AIDS Crisis Task Force. There was not a lot known about the disease at the time so participating in this organization was an opportunity to support those affected in any way they could. Those involved really learned as they went day to day. There were two employees, the director and nurse who provided education. Jonathon volunteered with the task force for several years before coming on staff as a paid employee. He spent his time educating himself on HIV and the Black community. He traveled to Washington, DC. to work with Billy Jones. He then went to Los Angeles, CA and worked with Carl Bean, yet again, but in the capacity of supporting Bean's Minority AIDS Project (MAP). After researching the HIV support organizations for Black men, he was able to return to Virginia with more knowledge about better ways to support those in need. He began to assist with sexual education and the importance of condoms. He began working in outreach and training others so they could help educate the community that was most affected. He went to clubs, drag shows, hospitals, and took to the streets, no matter the time, in the spirit of advocacy work to educate the people about HIV. Jonathon was committed to this work and this vulnerable group of people. He was

not only operated as an educator and advocate, but a caregiver in the hospital to support those affected.

Though he was finding his way through his educational goals, he still had time to find love. He married several times in the 60s and divorced several times, as well. He finds pleasure in being married and making commitments. He gave birth to two sons when he was married to his first husband, Larenza. Darryln was his second son and has since passed. Michael, his first born son is still living. Jonathon has a very strong relationship with Michael and his family. Out of the six marriages Jonathon has had, he gained several children by marriage and still has strong ties to all of his children. He loves his big family and lives in Texas, which is where his son, Michael, and his family also reside. He is a wonderful father and grandfather. He and his current wife and amazing assistant, Triptta, currently live on 50 acres in an Ashram community. They have lived with this community for 3 years. Their duty is to take care of the land, which they do willingly and lovingly.

The legacy that Jonathon would like to leave behind are these Golden Rules: Above all, read. And after you read, don't believe everything you read; Think for yourself and question everything; and The only thing there is is unity and one human race. There are no gender or religion boundaries. Love all. He wants others to learn as many religions as possible. He does not prescribe to one religion. To close, Jonathon is an omni-faith, multi-spiritual practitioner who is a part of Mata Amritanandamayi Center. He is an ordained minister, founder of Finding Another Right Road Authentically and Holistically (FARRAH) and founder of By the Way Ministry in Virginia. He is also affiliated with National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Faith Network, Pacific School of Religion (alumnus), Lehrhaus Judaica (Hebrew student), Black Trans Men International, and Brothers Rising (Oakland, CA). On April 22, 2020, right after his 71st birthday, Jonathan Thunderword published his first book, *From Christendom to Freedom: Journey-Making with a Black Transgender Elder*.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Jonathon Thunderword, a theologian and black transman, discusses undergoing electro shock therapy for his homosexuality before finding acceptance through MCC and Queer Theology. While ministering to trans people recovering from cocaine addiction, he started By The Way Baptist despite opposition from the Baptist Church due to his trans identity. Thunderword has worked as part of an early AIDS Crisis Task Force and on the Minority AIDS Project (MAP).

This interview was conducted by Dr. Monique Moultrie, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, and author of *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*. She conducted this interview as a consultant of LGBTQ-RAN as part of the oral histories project.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/jonathon-thunderword>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English.

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Thunderword, Jonathon