



6-27-2016

Becoming the Change Witnessed: Strategic Use of Empathy in Morgan Spurlock's "Straight Man in a Gay World"


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Recommended APA Citation

Tumolo, M. W., & Biedendorf, J. (2016). Becoming the Change Witnessed: Strategic Use of Empathy in Morgan Spurlock's "Straight Man in a Gay World". *The Qualitative Report*, 21(6), 1178-1192. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss6/12>

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Abstract

This essay examines the strategic use of empathic communication that fosters a loving struggle for Existenz in "Straight Man in a Gay World" (2005), an episode of Morgan Spurlock's documentary-styled television program 30 Days. The show functions as a persuasive discourse designed to influence the heterosexual participant and, by extension, the implied audience. This essay offers an overview of key terms in the study of empathy and analyzes key moments of empathic communication in the episode.

Keywords

Empathy, LGBTQ Studies, Morgan Spurlock, 30 Days, Televisual Documentary

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Brett Lunceford and Erik Garrett for reading earlier drafts of this essay and Morgan Spurlock for putting it out into the world.

Becoming the Change Witnessed: Strategic Use of Empathy in Morgan Spurlock's "Straight Man in a Gay World"

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This essay examines the strategic use of empathic communication that fosters a loving struggle for Existenz in "Straight Man in a Gay World" (2005), an episode of Morgan Spurlock's documentary-styled television program 30 Days. The show functions as a persuasive discourse designed to influence the heterosexual participant and, by extension, the implied audience. This essay offers an overview of key terms in the study of empathy and analyzes key moments of empathic communication in the episode. Keywords: Empathy, LGBTQ Studies, Morgan Spurlock, 30 Days, Televisual Documentary

Then there's Ed, the gay man in the "Gay/Straight" episode. A guy came up to Ed and said, "I just wanted to let you know, I came out to my parents six years ago, and I've been estranged from my family for the past six years. My parents saw that episode and called me the next day." That was one of the most beautiful things I could ever hear.

Morgan Spurlock (Malone, 2006, pp. 33-34)

Thirty days of sustained immersion in a foreign situation turns out to be a sufficiently long enough period of time to document meaningful psychological, physiological, social, and/or political change. Morgan Spurlock first put this unit of time to the test in his Academy Award nominated documentary *Super Size Me* (2004), a film that documented the dramatic physiological and psychological effects that a 30 day long all-McDonald's diet had on Spurlock. A year later, the filmmaker took the same format to television where he served as the host and executive producer of *30 Days*, an unscripted documentary-styled television program that aired 18 episodes during its three seasons on the FX cable network (2005-2008). Each episode features an individual or group of people spending 30 days in a situation that differs from their beliefs or is outside of their range of experiences. The participants are given rules that foster sustained engagement in an unfamiliar situation while a film crew documents the participants' interactions and developments. The raw footage is edited into Spurlock's documentary style, which Andrea Hayes (2006) describes as an innovative mix of "statistics, animation, graphics, fly-on-the-wall footage, and interviews with experts and people on the street" (p. 30). Each episode offers viewers an opportunity to witness what happens when people with conflicting beliefs attempt to communicate across what often seem to be incommensurable differences on issues such as abortion, binge drinking, and animal rights. Many, but not all, episodes document participants engaging in ideological compromise, substantial change, or personal growth.

We examine the episode "Straight Man in a Gay World," which originally aired during the first season on July 6, 2005. The episode features Ryan Hickmott, a 24-year old heterosexual Army Reservist from a small town in rural Michigan and Ed Collar, a gay male marketing consultant living in San Francisco. The promotional blurb for the episode identifies Ryan as a "homophobic young man" who will spend 30 days in "San Francisco's largely gay Castro District, where he experiences what it's like to live as a member of a misunderstood

minority that still elicits feelings of fear and hatred from many Americans.” While living with Ed in San Francisco, Ryan must follow the following set of rules designed to maximize encounters with the gay community:

- 1.) He must familiarize himself with the city’s gay culture by socializing with his roommate’s gay friends
- 2.) Get a job in the Castro
- 3.) Meet with the reverend of the local “gay” church for a one-on-one conversation

The episode documents Ryan going through a process of personal development culminating in what appears to be a moment of sudden transformation on day 28. The episode itself and the commentary track subsequently recorded by the participants offer evidence that Ryan retained his religious beliefs while adopting substantially more understanding and compassionate views regarding sexual orientation.

Method

The aim of this study is to understand how this episode functions as a rhetorical text for both its participants and for the implied viewing audiences. As a qualitative study, our aim is to develop an understanding of a “situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing” (Eisner, 1991, p. 58). This study utilizes the methodological lens of close textual analysis (CTA) to analyze mediated discourse. In the discipline of communication studies, close textual analysis is a hermeneutic (textual interpretation) research method rooted in nominalism that privileges the discourse being analyzed rather than prioritizing the application of external theoretical claims (Black, 1980, p. 331). In terms of method, CTA is primarily an emic form research, or research rooted in local knowledge, in which the researcher explains the functioning of specific instances of discourses by closely examining the discourse’s inner-animating features. Within the emic approach, research helps understand how a discourse functions internally. Research might, for instance, look at how structure, word choice, meter, editing, camera angles, or style work to structure meaning for a persuasive message’s targeted audience.

CTA also operates as a form of *etic* research, or research in which external theoretical perspectives are brought to bear on discourses. This approach notably diverges from Edwin Black’s (1980) characterization of “theoretical commitments” as fateful to the “activity of criticism” (p.331). Etic research acknowledges the importance of utilizing theoretical approaches to better understand how, and with what consequences, discourses function. This approach draws from Michael Tumolo’s (2011) argument for the need to root contemporary rhetorical criticism in appropriate contexts for our research to effectively explain, predict, and/or change our approaches to rhetorical phenomena (pp. 55-62). Rather than treating an individual discourse as if it were an isolated island of symbolic action, placing it into explanatory theoretical contexts is a necessary precondition for textual analysis. The present study draws on supplemental theoretical literature on empathy as a form of prosocial behavior to explain how an instance of televisual documentary serves as a persuasive text that invites audiences respond to develop an empathic response to people in the LGBTQ communities.

Since every “way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (Burke, 1965, p. 49), we would like to note some of the limitations for this study. As Nahid Golafshani (2003) explains, trustworthiness emerges as a key term for assessing the value of qualitative research given the breadth of epistemological methods and aims that qualitative research comprises (p. 601). CTA is a time tested methodological approach that, while achieving a constructivist based

understanding of meaning making, has stood up to the test of time as a reliable method. The method can be judged by both the fidelity to the text and to the insights that the research study bears on an extra-textual world. As a qualitative study that views human communication through a social constructivist lens, the “research findings are envisioned here as ‘narratives’ that are premised upon particular ontological and epistemological claims,” since “they involve representational politics that advance a particular version or interpretation of the social world” (Aguinaldo, 2004, p. 130). Aguinaldo explains that qualitative research findings consequently do work to both describe and to “actively construct and explain our social world(s)” (p. 130). Founded on an ethical and political worldview that affirms the integrity of LGBT identity and rights, the analysis consequently employs an empathy lens to see how the text works as a rhetorical text to persuade people to eschew heteronormative positions. The assumption here is that certain biases, those that lean towards broader based acceptance of differences, are preferable to those based on division and exclusion. Such a perspective is mirrored in the demands of APA Style that calls for scholars to use language that avoids a heterosexual bias. Conceivably, one could approach this topic from a heteronormative perspective, consequently arguing that the episode’s persuasive work is unethical. Aside from perspectival differences, approaching this research project through a quantitative research paradigm could isolate textual variables to demonstrate how audience members in laboratory conditions respond to specific textual features.

Through the lens of CTA, we find that, rather than simply documenting a month long social experiment, the episode functions as a rhetorical discourse that features a strategic use of empathy. With this, we argue that the episode was designed to influence both Ryan (the straight man in the episode) and, by extension, the implied audience consisting of people who implicitly hold heteronormative values and are open-minded (cf. Black, 1970, pp. 111-112). Although the show’s narrative suggests that Ryan’s transformation manifests suddenly on day 28, our analysis shows how Ryan’s documented transformation is guided by several more or less successful communicative attempts to arouse empathy that occurred throughout the month. Our critical approach employs *textual explication* to trace Ryan’s experience, slowing down and drawing attention to several significant interactions to show how instances of successful and failed empathic communication set this seemingly sudden transformation into motion. Understanding Ryan’s transformation helps to explain the potential effect that the episode could have on its implied audience who is invited to enact a form of what Dwight Conquergood (2002) labels *coproformative witnessing* in which the lead character’s transformation is similarly experienced (p. 149). This argument proceeds in two stages. First, we offer an overview of key terms in the study of empathy, outlining empathy’s voluntary, involuntary, affective, and cognitive dimensions. Second, we analyze key moments in the episode to explain how the show functions as a rhetorical discourse that employs empathic communication to arouse cognitive empathy to transform Ryan and the implied audience.

Rather than a type of aggressive or violent persuasion, the communicative action of this episode embodies what Karl Jaspers labeled the *loving struggle for Existenz*, which, in part, involves “the *task* of finding a *unique path of realization* that makes it necessary for [one] to go against the universal, even against [one’s] will” (1971, p. 45). Those engaged in the loving struggle apprehend “another truth,” one that is “not amenable to univocal and unanimous statement,” at the limits of experience when “the unquestioned truth that governs [one’s] life appears false to others” (Jaspers, 1971, pp. 34-36). In this process, confrontation with the experiential truth of an Other is transformational, existential, humanizing. “Straight Man in a Gay World” documents 30 days of Ryan’s unique path of realization, his confrontation with the limits of a universal, his unquestioned governing truths. His immersion in a foreign situation and encounter with the Other sets into motion a process of transformation that renders him into a more compassionate person. Insofar as the episode functions as a rhetorical

discourse, members of the implied audience are invited to begin their own similar loving struggle.

Understanding Empathy

Empathy is generally understood as the capacity to put oneself in another's shoes and is a highly valued personality trait. Empathy is also a profoundly communicative act, first learned through involuntary mimicry and later subject to voluntary cognitive processing. Empathy may be employed as a powerful rhetorical resource that advocates tap into to create a sense of connection between their audiences and subjects. An individual's ability to empathize is the product of nature, as well as, socialization and experience. Accordingly, several factors influence the degree of empathy a person may feel, including individual, gender, relational, and cultural differences. Research examining such differences shows how socialization promotes higher or lower capacities for empathy. For instance, females may be more empathetic since empathy is considered to be a desirable behavior in their socialization process (Davis, 1983; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Karniol, Gabay, Ochion, & Harari, 1998; Mestre, Samper, Frías, & Tur, 2009). Across gender lines, people experience higher degrees of empathy when the target of empathy is perceived to be similar to the observer (Houston, 1990; Krebs, 1975). Moreover, observers tend to show more empathy toward friends, kin, or their own ethnic group, a phenomenon referred to as the *familiarity bias* (Costin & Jones, 1992; Hoffman, 2000; Katz, Class, & Cohen, 1973; Meindl & Lerner, 1984).

Empathy is generally understood to have affective and cognitive dimensions that may be triggered both voluntarily and involuntarily. Affective empathy describes the experience of feeling another's emotions. Highlighting its involuntary dimension, affective empathy is sometimes referred to as an *emotional contagion* (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). By contrast, cognitive empathy "refers to perspective-taking and involves recognizing, comprehending, and adopting another person's point of view" (Shen, 2010, p. 399).

Martin L. Hoffman, a leading scholar of empathy, has identified five modes of empathic arousal including mimicry, conditioning, direct association, mediated association, and perspective-taking. Empathy may be aroused in one or more of the modes simultaneously as they are not mutually exclusive. The first three modes of empathy arousal—mimicry, conditioning, and direct association are "passive, involuntary, and based on surface cues," which "requires little cognitive processing or awareness" (Hoffman, 2008, p. 441). These modes suggest that empathy is an innate human ability happening, for instance, when infants respond in kind to the distress of other crying infants (Martin & Clark, 1982; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976; Simner, 1971). Mimicry is understood as one's automatic response that involves the successive processes of imitation and feedback. Imitation refers to a person involuntarily mimicking another person's facial or bodily expressions. The muscular movements, in turn, provide afferent feedback to the brain that triggers a feeling in the observer that corresponds to the feelings of the person observed (Hoffman, 2000, p. 37). Empathy can also be aroused through conditioning, involving the pairing of a cue with a feeling that subsequently can recur even in the absence of the cue. Direct association involves empathy arousal via "cues from the victim or his situation with one's own painful past experience" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 5). In other words, previous experiences allow one to empathize with someone else going through a similar experience. Taken together, these first three modes of empathy arousal showcase empathy as an innate capacity. At the same time, these modes reflect an emotional experience that is fostered and developed through social interaction.

The two remaining modes of empathy arousal—mediated association and perspective-taking—are "higher-order cognitive modes" that describe empathy as a conscious state in

which one vicariously experiences another's emotional state cognitively (Hoffman, 2000, p. 5). Hoffman (2008) explains that empathy

can be defined as an emotional state triggered by another's emotional state or situation, in which one feels what the other feels or would normally be expected to feel in his situation. . . . mature empathy is metacognitive: one is aware of empathizing—that is, one feels distressed but knows this is a response to another's misfortune, not one's own. (p. 440)

Cognitive empathy is presented here as a complex emotional state mediated through conscious reflection on human experiences. For instance, in the fourth mode, mediated association, a person's emotions are communicated through language as "semantic processing is necessary to mediate the connection between the victim's feeling and the observer's empathic response" (Hoffman, 2008, p. 442). Perspective-taking, the fifth and final mode of empathy arousal, refers to the process of imagining oneself in another's persons circumstances. This mode requires the most advanced processing at the cognitive level even as it may provoke a strong affective response.

The theoretical terminology offered in the psycho-social research on empathy is useful for textual analysis in general and the textual analysis of televisual discourse in specific. Suzanne Keen (2006), for instance, establishes the parallel research findings concerning the positive effects of empathy between contemporary neuroscientists using fMRI technology and centuries worth of qualitative humanistic research (p. 207). Keen's theory of narrative empathy maintains that we may observe three varieties of strategic empathy

First, *bounded strategic empathy occurs within an in-group stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others.* Second, *ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end.* Third, *broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes.* (p. 224, original emphasis)

While Keen's theoretical work limits the generalizability of its claims due to its qualitative approach, R. Glenn Cummins and Boni Cui's (2014) study, "Reconceptualizing Address in Television Programming: The Effect of Address and Affective Empathy on Viewer Experience of Parasocial Interaction" provides a substantial foundation of fifty years of scholarship on both "perceived relationships and interactions" between viewers and characters with onscreen personae and how parasocial interaction serves as "an antecedent to a variety of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes" (p. 723). Their approach indicates that research supports the claim that "viewer relationships with onscreen personae impact much of how we respond to media messages" while maintaining that there are both limitations and opportunities disclosed by varying approaches to understanding specific viewer relationships with personae in television programming.

In Search of a Reason: Becoming the Change Witnessed

"Straight Man in a Gay World" stands out for its resolutely humane depiction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues. Spurlock himself identifies this as his favorite episode from season one of the series, citing the moving stories and positive responses that he received from many viewers. In 2006, the episode was honored with the Gay and Lesbian

Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Award for Outstanding Reality Programming, an award given for accurate and inclusive representations of LGBT communities and issues.

One of the most salient features of the episode is its use of empathic communication, which is embodied in a substantial transformation of Ryan, the episode's heterosexual participant. In what seems to be a brief communicative exchange on day 28, viewers appear to witness a conversion experience when Ryan suddenly displays a more understanding and compassionate position regarding sexual orientation and the gay community, a change that is not reflected in his religious position regarding homosexuality as a sin. In this section, we draw on features of empathy to explain how the transformation documented by the episode was far from instant, having been enabled by several significant interactions.

For many episodes of *30 Days* (i.e., "Binge Drinking Mom" and "Abortion"), viewers are offered competing protagonists with whom they may choose to identify. "Straight Man in a Gay World" breaks from this pattern by offering the male heterosexual participant as its central character who is tasked with testing himself, his views, and his experiences. The key to selecting the male heterosexual participant for the episode was to find someone who, despite espousing commonly held anti-LGBT beliefs, would approach the experience in good faith as a loving struggle with his unquestioned truths as he confronts others who hold different truths (Jaspers, 1971, p. 34). In the commentary track, R. J. Cutler, the executive producer, discussed the principle thought behind the episode's casting, "Our thought was from the beginning—let's not go in that obvious overly done direction where we get the most flamboyant homosexual and the biggest gay-basher we could and put them together." Spurlock summarizes the casting of Ryan in the episode, announcing "I found an all-American boy, someone willing to put his strong religious convictions about homosexuality to the test." Read as a rhetorical discourse, the most concrete purpose of the episode is to invite its implied audience, consisting of people who are similarly open-minded yet hold heteronormative values, to become the change that they witnessed on the screen.

In service of its rhetorical purpose, the episode represents the male heterosexual participant as possessing both stereotypical beliefs and a degree of open-mindedness and does so in such a way that the implied audience could immediately identify with him. Following the general introduction, Ryan is seen washing a tractor on his family's farm outside of Oxford, Michigan, a small town with less than 4,000 residents. After having been established as an average "Joe" from rural Michigan who likes to hunt, play sports, and who served as an Army Reservist before college, Ryan takes the audience on a tour of his room. The logic of this sequence suggests that the décor reveals Ryan's ethos as he states "this is my bedroom, there [are] a lot of artifacts and things in here that represent my life and represent me well." As he speaks, the camera glosses over the mounted antlers lining his walls and an overcrowded trophy shelf. He then points out a poster of Jesus Christ and a picture of him in the Army Reserve before showing off his "babies"—a 12-gauge shotgun and a .357 Magnum revolver for which he plans to get a concealed carry permit. He anticipates that the guns in particular will differentiate him from his future roommate in San Francisco.

This scene introduces Ryan's family and a few close friends at a barbecue discussing their expectations and concerns for Ryan's experience. Ryan's mother appears to be afraid of the show's potential consequences on her son, declaring "I hope it doesn't change him." By contrast Ryan's father suggests that the experience will open him up to something he already experiences without even knowing it. Though using distancing third-person pronouns, Ryan's father affirms that there are more LGBT people in the world than "you think there [are]. You just don't know they're out there. They're there." His family and friends discuss his plans while announcing their take on sexuality from a religious perspective. Many of the people gathered consider homosexuality to be a sin. They agree that those who believe otherwise are probably engaging in "manipulation of scripture," an idea that is confirmed by one friend saying "yes,

it's interpretation." Here we see the terms interpretation and manipulation being conflated, which will prominently recur in Ryan's interactions with a lesbian pastor over the course of the episode. Ryan considers his reading of the Bible to be an accurate foundation for his personal opinions. On the contrary, he considers readings that diverge from his opinions to be manipulative or interpretive. Ryan justifies his religious beliefs by arguing that the Bible says that "God made man and woman," therefore "it doesn't make sense that he would have people born homosexuals." Before departing for San Francisco, Ryan confesses that his biggest concern involves the "sleeping arrangements," which he qualifies by adding that "if I don't get touched, I'll be fine." As a whole, this segment demonstrates that Ryan is typecast as a normal and well-meaning, albeit naïve, Midwestern religious conservative. To the producers' credit, the Hickmotts are not caricatured for their presumptive support of stereotypical and discriminatory views towards the LGBT community. Rather, they are presented as kind, supportive, good humored, and loving.

Day 1 of his sojourn features Ryan's introduction to Ed and San Francisco. The two greet one another and then tour Ed's apartment, which is spotless and sparsely decorated save for the multi-panel mural of a nude male in the bathroom. Ryan will spend the month living in a closet renovated by Ed for the purpose of the show. When offering a champagne toast to kick off their time together, Ed assumes his persona of a mentor or a big brother. He offers a drink, quickly to add that, although alcohol is part of the culture, Ryan should keep within his comfort level. While Ed clearly demonstrates a care for the integrity of Ryan's comfort zone, he additionally establishes an important power dynamic of their mentor-mentee relationship by correcting Ryan when he asks whether dinner will be with "12 gay guys." Ed pauses momentarily, appearing to search for how to respond. In his reply, Ed performs a linguistic shift that moves sexual orientation from the singular defining feature to just one of these men's many attributes, saying that all of the men that they are having dinner with are gay. While this shift in emphasis may appear minor, it induced visceral discomfort in Ryan, who announces "I think I need to go wash my hands." As he rushes off, Ed quips "Well he's going to get a lot of attention, and, in this city, I hope he knows what he's in for." The rhetorical work performed by Ed foreshadows that Ryan and the viewers are in for a reckoning with flesh and blood humans rather than stereotypes, opening the door for empathic arousal.

The first explicit call to empathy in the episode comes from Ryan himself as he expresses the isolation that comes with the territory when one is a stranger in a strange land.

When I was walking through the Castro for my first time today I just kept thinking, this is pretty outrageous. Knowing that the majority of the people that are walking past me are gay and looking at me like I'm the oddball—it's a little intimidating. . . . I'm definitely the oddball here. I'm the outcast.

Having already established Ryan as a sympathetic protagonist, his comments are likely to be perceived as a genuine reflection on the isolating feeling of difference rather than some type of assertion concerning so-called reverse discrimination. The same type of isolation is reported later in the episode by a group of teenagers who recount their stories of coming out at a meeting of the Openarms Youth Project in Tulsa, Oklahoma. During this meeting, one teen recounts her story of being chased, physically accosted, verbally taunted with the words "faggot" and "dyke," and threatened with rape to "turn" her straight. A question posed by another teen gets closer to the heart of this experience of isolation, "if it was a choice do you think that every one of us would want to put ourselves through the torture of having your families disown you?" Although the isolation experienced is substantively different, both Ryan and the Openarms teens' stories call for empathy.

The dinner conversation reinforces the call to empathize with Ryan in his isolation. He is repeatedly put on the spot concerning topics including gay marriage and gays in the military. Isolated and under fire from every direction, Ryan is looking for empathic support for his right to an anti-gay opinion. Instead, he is met by Ed laughing and rolling his eyes, which is followed by the other men sharing their stories of being persecuted, humiliated, and physically assaulted by people holding anti-gay opinions similar to Ryan's. In Ryan's experience, isolation stems from being around others who are different. In the case of Ed's friends and the Openarms teens' experiences, isolation stems from their being different, a difference that has resulted in concrete consequences including being cast from their families and targeted for symbolic and physical violence due to their sexual orientation. Without yet grasping differences of kind or degree, Ryan summarizes his lesson on isolation, "feeling attacked and feeling like you're wrong—it's definitely a bad feeling. I don't like it, and I wouldn't wish it on anybody." This statement could be read as an indication of Ryan suffering from "empathic over-arousal," the intense feeling of empathy that turns into an egoistic drift, in which care for the Other is superseded by a preoccupation with personal distress (Hoffman, 2000, pp. 60, 206). Even if Ryan is primarily self-oriented, his experience of distress is coded in a language suggestive of empathic arousal.

A strong and friendly rapport is developing between Ryan and Ed, which is demonstrated by their playful banter while working out the following day. In the scene, Ryan asks a series of questions concerning Ed's sexual orientation including when he knew he was gay and when he came out. Ed's responses come off as natural, even as Ryan appears to be shocked by the content:

Ryan: How old were you when you knew you were gay?

Ed: Honestly, I suspected it when I was 6.

Ryan: [leans in, makes eye contact] Really?

Ed: [returns eye contact] Yeah.

Ryan's reaction suggests just how far this response fell from his expectations. It is also marked as a point of failed empathic communication when, during a diary cam sequence in which participants speak directly to a camera, Ryan confesses: "At this point, I still believe that Ed chose to be gay just with my religious beliefs and what I've learned from the Bible I can't fathom the idea that anybody was born gay." This marks a failure on the fifth level of empathy arousal, position taking, since he explicitly avows that he cannot imagine another in their own circumstance let alone imagine himself in their position. Ryan's failure to empathize is the defining feature of this sequence. Ed's personal narrative does, however, lay groundwork for challenging Ryan's presumption that being gay is a choice.

The second explicit call to empathy, albeit one that ultimately appears to fail, occurs in the series of vexed interactions between Ryan and Reverend Dr. Penny Nixon, then pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco (MCCSF), which is part of a fellowship of gay churches. Ryan appears eager to attend the gay church service, noting that he is open to and will learn from what they say even though his views will remain intact. That he has already established an unwillingness to alter his religiously-based stance towards sexuality is prologue for the conflict between Ryan and Rev. Nixon that follows.

The two meet for their first time a few days after Ryan attended one of Nixon's services held at MCCSF. The first task that they accomplish is setting up an additional meeting to discuss *What the Bible really Says About Homosexuality* (1994) by Daniel Helminiak, an openly gay Catholic priest and theologian who argues that there was no historical term for homosexuality, so translations including this term are inaccurate. As with their later discussion concerning that book, Nixon confronts Ryan with logical inconsistencies in an attempt to

produce a sense of cognitive dissonance. While the two are looking at a Biblical passage, ostensibly about homosexuality, Nixon asks if Ryan has ever had lustful thoughts about women. They laugh together as he admits to having more lustful thoughts about women than ever since moving to the Castro. Their laughter ceases when Nixon adds “Did you rip your eye out and cast it away?” The scene culminates in an exchange during which Nixon asserts her belief that “God cares a lot more about what we do with our resources than what we do with our genitalia.” Similar to the previous interaction with Ed, this admission had a visceral effect on Ryan as he shifts in his seat and begins to cough repeatedly.

Rev. Nixon’s primary point of contention with Ryan, and others like him, is that they support their condemnation of others by evoking literal readings of the Bible while exempting themselves from Biblical passages that, if read literally, would lead them to self-condemnation. He admits to this practice during their second meeting as they discuss Helminiak’s book, which uses linguistic and historical evidence to show how such literal readings are based on problematic translations. Nonetheless, Ryan describes the book as having a boomerang effect on him, that its Biblical hermeneutics seemed like a “big runaround . . . that almost just reinforced what I was thinking,” later confirming that when he picks and chooses which Biblical passages he holds true, he does “pick the verses out about homosexuality being a sin.” His response effectively drops issues of translation and interpretation, casting the Bible as an infallible text that he reads selectively. Although Nixon explicitly recognizes that Ryan’s issue is with the content of the Bible, she tries to arouse empathy through *perspective-taking* by inviting Ryan to suspend his belief for a moment and to imagine himself in a hypothetical scenario in which the Bible commanded men to be with other men. “Not a chance,” he replies. That he tacitly endorses an understanding of sexual orientation as not being subject to Biblical demands does not, however, alter what he understands those demands to be—an unproblematic and non-interpretive reflection of God’s will. While conversing with Ed, Ryan summarizes why his interaction with Nixon failed, “It’s just my view that saying murder’s wrong, homosexuality’s wrong. . . . Look at it this way. In God’s eyes, there’s no sin greater than another sin.” Viewers are denied a good sense of Ed’s response because the episode promptly cuts to Ryan’s diary cam. There, Ryan demonstrates that he is aware of his own cognitive dissonance, while explaining that he cannot simply change his religious beliefs because someone expresses different ones.

As the first two interactions with Nixon demonstrate, changing a belief rooted in cultural and religious experience, however hurtful it may be, requires more than logical argumentation. In this episode, such work will be accomplished by people playing familial rather than religious roles. Nonetheless, after this second meeting with Nixon, Ryan appears to be looking for a way to explain his transformation rather than looking to support his previous beliefs. Particularly due to the confrontational tone that they struck, Ryan appears to be too ego-involved to display a change resulting from their interactions (cf. Gregg, 1971, p. 74). As we will see, a narrative mirroring Nixon’s scenario with similar propositional content proves to be the catalyst for Ryan explicitly acknowledging his transformation.

The first encounter with familial personae fittingly happens on Mother’s Day (day 17 of the episode), when Ed takes Ryan to meet his mother, sister, and two brothers, all of whom are heterosexual and appear to be a family of “cowboys” who take great pride in Ed. After bonding over target shooting in the family’s cow pasture, they sit down for dinner and field questions from Ryan about how Ed’s coming out affected the family, whether they saw him differently, or if they saw him undergo unique hardships. With this line of questions, Ryan appears to be searching for a reason to justify adopting a new position, signifying that he has already changed and now needs to learn how to explain it. In short, he appears to be looking for Ed’s family to offer an *aha! moment* of sudden comprehension that would allow him to empathize and alter his position (cf. Auble, Franks, & Soraci, 1979, p. 427). Ed’s mother

frustrates Ryan's search, explaining that it "would be really nice to say, 'Oh yeah, we had this big epiphany,' it's all bullshit," continuing "Ed's a good guy. He grew up, and we loved him and he's still a good guy and we love him. He doesn't ask me about my sex life. I don't ask him about his sex life." Laughter from all followed. The encounter aroused empathy by enlarging Ryan's experience of Ed—no longer reduced to his sexual orientation, he is now someone that can be bonded with as "an uncle, brother, or son." Although Ryan shows empathy, this emotional state did not precipitate any visible change in Ryan's position because it both bracketed the issue of sexuality and individuated Ed as a "good person," a position that Ryan has already adopted.

Ed, who subsequently describes his persona as Ryan's "guide through a really challenging and unknown place," plays a significant role in Ryan's transformation. The next day Ed offers a hypothetical scenario building on the empathy aroused in the meeting with Ed's family. During their conversation, Ryan reports on the confrontation that he just had with openly gay veterans of armed conflict (from World War II on) with whom he shared his opposition of gays in the military. Ed asks how Ryan would respond if the war in the Middle East escalated, resulting in Ed being drafted into Ryan's Army unit. Ryan goes on to contradict his position by saying that he would be comfortable serving with Ed, specifically, and that Ed could "benefit the Army." Ryan recognizes his dissonance and reconciles it by allowing an exception based on his familiarity with Ed. This position is consistent with the research indicating a relationship between likeableness and empathy (Costin & Jones, 1992; Katz, Class, & Cohen, 1973; Hoffman, 2000; Meindl & Lerner, 1984).

Empathic communication is put on display when Ryan's friend Jake visits for a long weekend starting on day 24. Over a meal, Jake asks "a big question" of the gay men present, "When did you come out, and how did people react to it?" Charles, the gay softball coach who Ryan describes as breaking "the stereotypes of gay men" since he is a "big strong man" who speaks with a "very masculine voice" offers his tragic story:

When I was 12, my mom kicked me out of the house. I lived on the streets from 12 to 14. This is back when I was religious and I used to pray every night before I went to bed that I would wake up and this little feeling that I have inside is not going to be there and I'm going to be just like everybody else. And, you know, very suicidal, and then I just said, "You know what? Screw this. Screw it all, and I'm gay, and that's just what it is."

Although we are not given any textual evidence of how the testimony affected Ryan or Jake, Ryan, in particular, appears deeply concerned by the story as he listens. Immediately following an extended exploration of the serious topic of coming out, the episode cuts to a bar where Ryan is seen encouraging Jake to drink heavily while he motions towards a platform for dancing. The two climb onto the platform, are joined by Charles, and the three dance together while removing their shirts. Ed confronts the men for the hypocrisy involved in dancing shirtless in a gay bar since the men expect others to empathize with their outsider status as straight men in a gay community and to respect their boundaries.

Ryan has his final contentious meeting with Rev. Nixon on day 26. The conversation begins with Ryan raising the threshold of evidence required for him to change his religious position—he now requires explicit and non-interpretive textual support from the Bible to consider changing his view of homosexuality as a sin (which he holds to be the result of a literal reading of the Bible). Nixon responds, "the Bible also says do not kill. And, don't you carry a gun when you're in the reserves?" followed by "if you had to shoot somebody, you'd do it," concluding "but the Bible says don't kill." Ryan confirms defensively, "to protect the lives of my fellow soldiers? Yes. To protect our country? Yes," he adds "What are you saying? Are

you saying that you don't think the military should defend this country?" Nixon insists that she is only exposing the logic of his system of thought, that he is able to overcome Biblical commandments to not kill while remaining bound to a Biblical condemnation of homosexuality. Having already admitted to a selective reading of the Bible, he seems to be put on the defensive and asks "Honestly, what do you expect me to say?" Nixon diverts from her original line of persuasion and asks for an affective response from Ryan, "Can you see it's hurtful?"

The interactions between Nixon and Ryan indicate that persuasion is more complex than mere logical connections between claims and evidence. Following the logic of Ryan's position, he required scriptural evidence to change his belief, signifying that they were debating policy itself, not its effect on people. The logic of Nixon's argument was that pointing out a contradiction ought to be enough to evoke empathy that would then precipitate a shift of perspective or position. If such a presumption were to hold true there would be two extreme options for Ryan to overcome his internal contradictions—he could either subject all Biblical commandments equally to idiosyncratic interpretation or he could adopt a severe literalist position, which from their earlier conversation, would involve casting off his own eye. When such a shift appeared unlikely, Nixon once again invited Ryan to personalize the issue and refocus on the human consequences of his position. The movement of Nixon's argument reflects her view that Ryan required a more personalized connection to the topic for his loving struggle to begin in earnest—"something will happen in his life that will open him more deeply to himself." In this light, her insistence that he begin with the interpersonal rather than the theological may well have paved the way for the transformation that he explicitly acknowledges two days later. Similarly, Ed indicated that, from week four on, he challenged everything that Ryan stated that "was contrary to . . . being a friend," hence showing him that his anti-gay belief "does affect people, it hurts people, it keeps them down, it discriminates and that he now needs to be accountable for that belief." By Ryan's admission on the commentary track, however, his interactions with Nixon failed because they argued without hearing one another.

On Ed's advice, Ryan meets with three representatives of the San Francisco chapter of the support group PFLAG (Parents Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). The conversation is driven by a narrative offered by Sam, a PFLAG parent and past president of the national organization. Sam takes on the persona of an aged parental figure sharing wisdom that he learned on the job. On the commentary track, Ed describes Sam as "everyone's grandfather" and impossible to disagree with because of the wisdom he displays. Sam's narrative lasts for approximately 80 seconds, while completing four distinct rhetorical tasks: it uses perspective-taking to invite empathic identification, offers an aha moment, deepens the empathic experience with additional perspective-taking, and fosters empathic concern as common ground for a call to action. He begins by inviting perspective-taking with the use of the second-person singular and possessive pronouns: "Your daughter has come home . . . in the middle of her freshman year in college and says solemnly, 'I have something to tell you.' And what goes through your mind?" Ryan promptly responds, "she's pregnant," interrupting Sam who appears to be saying the same thing. Both laugh and Sam continues, explaining that his daughter told him that she is gay—"And then I asked how she knew. And she looked me straight in the eye and said, 'How do you know you're heterosexual?' And I got it." This was the type of aha moment that both Nixon was trying to provoke with her hypothetical Biblical scenario and that Ryan appeared to be searching for without success from Ed's family. Ryan responds by simply saying "mm-hmm" while continuing to listen to Sam explain that he understood that his heterosexual sexual orientation and his daughter's lesbian sexual orientation are just a part of who they each are.

The empathy first aroused by taking the perspective of Sam, a loving and protective father, meets the threshold of proof set forth by Ryan insofar as the narrative is experienced as a type of non-interpretive support of sexual orientation—in this case, a good parent’s duty is to support their lesbian or gay child. The next part of the narrative arouses additional empathy, also by perspective-taking, by inviting Ryan, and the viewers, to share the fear that Sam and his wife felt when they realized that they “would have a child at risk for discrimination just because she is who she is.” Ryan again responds with “mm-hmm” as Sam’s story works to turn empathic concern into a call to action concluding with “my truth is that my daughter deserves to be treated with all the same respect and dignity and receive all the same privileges rights and obligations as her two straight brothers.” Ryan answers the call immediately, admitting that he has been “one-sided” and that it is hard to disagree with Sam’s heartfelt plea for equality for his daughter. Ryan describes the empathy he is experiencing, saying that he can now see the issue from a different, and much more personal, point of view, claiming, for instance, that he would want equality for a lesbian or gay sibling. On the commentary track, Ryan adds that this was the first time during the 30 days that he had thought about how he would react if his son or daughter were to be gay—he would love them and believe that they deserve equal rights. Sam concludes with a closed question: “Why should my daughter be treated differently from her brothers?” Ryan responds, evidencing his, now explicit, change, “You’re right. You’re right. She shouldn’t. . . . I have some thinking to do now.”

Conclusion

Textual explication of the strategic use of empathic communication in the *30 Days* episode, “Straight Man in a Gay World” yielded five critical observations concerning the episode. First, the episode is a rhetorical discourse with a purpose of advancing a perspective that humanizes LGBT issues and people for an implied audience that implicitly holds heteronormative values and is open-minded. Second, empathic arousal is the primary communicative device used to advance the pro-LGBT perspective. Third, the implied audience is invited to follow Ryan’s lead and adopt a more hospitable position towards sexual orientation based on empathic perspective-taking with familial personae. To empathize like Ryan is to avow oneself as a good sibling, a good parent, or a good friend. Fourth, the change documented is not the reflection of some type of conversion experience. Rather, it is the result of the protagonist’s loving struggle of communicative self-reflection that results in a new mode of existence. Fifth, the episode affirms religious freedoms and differences while maintaining that particular positions, religious or otherwise, have human consequences for which we ought to have empathic concern. At the end of the episode, Ryan maintains his belief that homosexuality is a sin, yet acknowledges the dignity, rights, and humanity of the gay community. In this way, the transformation both documented and invited leaves religious belief relatively alone. Instead, the transformation happens in a realignment of social, political, and cultural values.

“Straight Man in a Gay World” allows the audience to vicariously experience a month long social experiment in approximately 45 minutes. As such, viewers of the episode may be inclined to see the interaction between Ryan and Sam as an example of the elusive moment of epiphany that Ed’s mother previously said did not exist. Although it appears to happen rapidly after encountering Sam, a sympathetic grandfatherly figure who is the proud father of a lesbian woman, Ryan’s transformation from intolerance to compassion was an effect of a process of self-reflection provoked by several instances of empathic communication, both successful and failed. This is, Kurt Salamun argues, the essence of the “loving struggle” described by Jaspers. When one experiences a boundary situation, it is “necessarily tied to an intensive process of self-reflection (i.e., a non-empirical and non-objective relationship to one’s self). By means of self-reflection, a person elucidates his or her own existential possibilities, and facing boundary

situations, the person is, ideally, lead[sic] to an act of self-acceptance” (Salamun, 2006). Ryan’s transformation happens only after he learns to accept and value a changed version of himself. So too, the implied audience’s transformation would happen only after its members learn to accept and value a changed version of themselves.

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Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Brett Lunceford and Erik Garrett for reading earlier drafts of this essay and Morgan Spurlock for putting it out into the world.

Article Citation

Tumolo, M. W., & Biedendorf, J. (2016). Becoming the change witnessed: Strategic use of empathy in Morgan Spurlock's straight man in a gay world. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(6), 1178-1192. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss6/12>
