

Sally Goldner and Anthony Venn-Brown

This interview with Anthony Venn-Brown was on Out of the Pan with Sally Goldner on 3CR after the release of the second edition of A Life of Unlearning.

Sally Goldner

3CR around the cyber universe, 28 minutes to one on a Sunday afternoon, Sally Goldner with out of the pan covering pansexual and well gee LGBTI queer issues on community radio, and The Road Less Travelled well as sometimes we have to take it. And I think it could be fair to say that our next guest has taken the road less travelled. A man who has been through life as an evangelical slash Pentecostal preacher and had to reconcile the issues of homosexuality with that, and has appropriately to do that put out a book called A life of unlearning that is launched in Melbourne, next week on the line to talk about his journey and where he's at now. Anthony Venn-Brown, great to have you with us on 3CR

Anthony Venn-Brown

It's good to be with you as well, Sally, and hello to everyone in Melbourne.

Sally Goldner

It's great that you're finally coming down here. It's great that you say hello to everyone in Melbourne because the second edition of a life of unlearning has been out for a while you've had launches in Sydney and Brisbane, I think during their pride season. And finally you get down here, which is great. And you know, I just had a very well not have a certain tie reread but a re-skim of the book last night. It's just amazing to hear to sort of get your experiences out there. It's powerful yet not overpowering. Where do you start? I'll leave it to you to start and just tell about what a life of unlearning is about?

Anthony Venn-Brown

Well, a lot of unlearning is autobiography of my journey, spending 22 years doing everything I possibly could to be heterosexual believing that, you know, being gay meant that I would be unacceptable to God and of course to other people within society. And in that journey, of course, I went through ex gay programs and exorcisms, psychiatric help with mental health professionals. 16 years of marriage ending up one of the popular preachers within Australia and the megachurches of Australia, the large ones, preaches toddlers to 5000 people at a time. And then the age of 40. There is falling in love with a man and having to face the toughest decision of my life. What do I do? Do I live a lie? Or do I be true to myself and lose everything I held dear. And then I spent some years after that sorting it all out in my own head. I guess unlearning is, as the title implies was unlearning all that negative stuff that I had about myself and my sexuality.

Sally Goldner

That's a good summary. That's what is it? They say in reports the executive overview?

Anthony Venn-Brown

I should record that.

Sally Goldner

And it's like, well, where do we dive into the detail? I think I'll keep it logical. Let's go right to the start where, you know, you said, you know, you were given the belief that homosexuality was a sin,

etc, etc. I mean, yes, it was extreme, virtually totally commonplace. You know, sort of so many years ago, who was specifically where did that first come from? For you? Have you sort of retraced that?

Anthony Venn-Brown

I traced it all back Sally, of course, it was a society initially that told me that because when I realized that, you know, I was I was guys that one has sex with and not girls. And I discovered that the term used for that was homosexual. Then as I began to ask questions, I found out that they were put in prison, or that they were cured through aversion therapy, you know, electric shock treatment, even lobotomy at times. And so there were two guys in my high school who committed suicide, they were harassed so much. So, you know, from my mid-teen years, I had very strong messages, number one, that I had to do everything possible to change this. And then secondly, that, you know, I need to keep it a secret. I couldn't tell anyone about this. And that was what began my quest, I guess, to make sure that I wasn't a gay man. And, and it was in that quest that took me to Christianity because, you know, I believe that if anyone could change me; it was God.

Sally Goldner

Yeah. of course, the belief that God that was taught you know, and that God could do anything and you follow down that path you know, for so long and although and you tried to fight your homosexuality you ended up in a chapel or an organization in Sydney that tried to as well say in big inverted commas cure people of homosexuality that must have been, just utterly horrendous

Anthony Venn-Brown

Sally it is funny, you should bring that up. Because last night, I went to a reunion with all those people. And for those that have actually read my book, there's an entire chapter on that though called rehab with a twist. They're Australia's first ex gay program. And I went to a reunion last night. And saw everybody that I name in that chapter that I hadn't seen for 35 years. The ladies who ran the organization, and that the abuse that I experienced, they're the leaders, my minder, who looked after me, my roommate, everybody was there. It was the most interesting evening.

Sally Goldner

Now, when you say the ladies who ran the organization and the minder, are we allowed to ask, well, let's say where they're at now.

Anthony Venn-Brown

My minder, is a bishop in Melbourne I discovered last night. I'll be catching up with him and his wife when I go to Melbourne next week. And the lady leaders are doing different things today. One of them still has the belief that homosexuality can be cured.

Sally Goldner

One doesn't or just doesn't, doesn't talk about it.

Anthony Venn-Brown

Yeah. I think from the experience, people have realized, though, they actually did more harm than good. And just recently, I've actually released five statements from former ex gay leaders in Australia. One of them has just resigned as the leader of Exodus, in Australia, and Asia, and all of them have said, you know, look, what we were doing, we were doing out of ignorance, but we thought we were doing the right thing. But we now know, after all these years, of course, that, you know, there is no such thing as an ex gay, there's only people who have a level of heterosexual functionality. Yeah, that's all I have.

Sally Goldner

Yeah. And well, if you I suppose if we wanted to get into the fun topic of our community definitions, you could, you know, sort of use the word bisexual, which is, you know, an interesting point. I mean, you know, one of the things that there's so many things you talk about, but you know, you've entered a heterosexual marriage for a long time and had two kids say, you tried to live heterosexual but, you know, in one sense, sure. It wasn't you. Do you think it could be possible to use the word bisexual?

Anthony Venn-Brown

For some people that does happen. I think so for most people. What actually happens? Of course, hindsight, fantastic. Yeah. And all the research that I put into the second edition of the book, Sally talks about that, that we know that heterosexual men can go into goal. And I have an and haven't had a sexual experiences and behaviour. When they come out. They're still heterosexual. They haven't turned gay. And it's known as situational homosexuality. And I would switch that around and say, you know, 16 years of marriage, what was that. It was situational heterosexuality.

Sally Goldner

Good call. Yeah. Good call. I wanted to ask just sorry, I'm jumping around a bit. But I want to ask in terms of all the people who are in the program, will say on the happier side, how are they going now?

Anthony Venn-Brown

Well, of course, you know, there are some that we've lost to suicide, which is very sad. There are those that would not talk to people there, they're still so hurt through what's happened. And then there are those of us which have completely resolved any perceived conflict that we have between our sexuality and our faith and our living as openly gay people today. Were the happy ones.

Sally Goldner

That's right. The happy ones. And just say to close this paragraph, it wasn't just gays, it was I think, street workers, prostitutes and other people were taken to this organization as well.

Anthony Venn-Brown

That's right. Actually, you're one of the ladies that was there last night was known as I named her in the book as Clara Queen of the Underworld, and she was actually involved in the underworld, and she was classed as Australia's most violent female criminal. And she's now living as an openly gay woman. And she's great. She was she was a great support to me when I was going, going through that program, and we connected just about 12 months ago.

Sally Goldner

Yeah, it's amazing how things come back. I mean, I had an interesting situation a long time ago . When I was living as male and was attracted to a girl. I've gone down a transgender path. She's turned out to be lesbian and she and we caught up at midsummer festival down here a couple of years ago and just had it well had a laugh about it.

Anthony Venn-Brown

Life's Interesting, Sally isn't it.

Sally Goldner

It's a journey with twists and turns definitely. And then, you know, after you realized that, at that point, you couldn't sort of go, you know, be cured. You ended up living sort of doing the King's Cross scene in the 70s for a bit. How was how was that at the time, both in terms of the scene, but also how your feelings were going around in your head, too?

Anthony Venn-Brown

Well, I went into that for seven months with a purpose. And because I still had the belief that, you know, homosexuality was wrong. I guess I was, up till that point, I had a few gay experiences that I had never been a part of the scene. And in those days, we're talking 1970s, early 70s. Of course, it was still a criminal offense, but everything was very clandestine. And I found it hard to fit into the community. Actually, you know, I'd heard that there were lots of bitchy people, and you couldn't have in a long term relationship, et cetera, et cetera, all those stereotypical things. And I have to admit that at that point, that was, that was my experience. Maybe it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. But I certainly within seven months, I thought that this is not what I want. So then I went back in the closet.

Sally Goldner

And well, was there for a while, a long time. Yeah. And, you know, as was covered on 60 minutes, a few weeks ago, you entered a marriage and had two kids and became a well, one of the, I think we can say one of Australia's big Holy Rollers.

Anthony Venn-Brown

That's right. Yeah. That was there.

Sally Goldner

Yeah, there was still, as the book says, some experiences through your travels of, of homosexual experience, but then, was it does it reach the proverbial breaking point? You know, it seems almost by chance that will, you know, chance, but maybe does chance really exist? Of course, the question to debate but I'd sort of like to talk about from your point of view that experience and the experience with a man in Brisbane,

Anthony Venn-Brown

If you're living with that dissonance, that internal dissonance, Sally, you're paying a price for that. Because you're fragmented your real self and the public persona that you are presenting all the time, I mean, huge conflict, and particularly for me was, you know, within a Christian religious context. And so that really takes a toll. And I think George Michael, had a similar experience that he said that, possibly deep down subconsciously, he was wanting to get caught. Because he was wanting to come out. And I noticed in me, I was very tired. I was very, very tired of this daily fight and battle and trying not to think the way that was natural to me, and, you know, trying to change that. And when I met Jason in Brisbane, up till that point, my sexual experiences were just basically a very physical thing that lasted two minutes, if I was lucky. I'd never let anyone touch me, in my soul, or in my emotion. There was never any affection, any tenderness. And, and that, that's a few hours I spent with Jason, I guess I let down a barrier. And I knew the next day, you know, something has had shifted in me. He touched the very real part of me with was my, my gay self. That was saying, when are you gonna let me out?

Sally Goldner

And all the barriers came down, we're totally destroyed. And, and well, certainly, of course, didn't come up again. And you then had to face well, at that time, you were so high up in the Pentecostal church and had to deal with that. God that opening chapter. It just that is I mean, that's blows me away enough. When I read that, and that experience, this must have been, I can't imagine, Can you weren't willing to describe it for us.

Anthony Venn-Brown

I used to cry Sally every time I had to write go there do it as there are times that had to get off the keyboard because they just couldn't type anymore. I compose myself and get back. But I knew in my heart that I had to tell everything. There are times when people read my book, I'm sure that they want to hit me sometimes because of the stupid things that I did. You know, and I told it warts and all but there was when I finally came out and said, No, I can't do this anymore. I had to do a public confession in front of 800 people, telling them I had committed adultery and asking for their forgiveness and resigning for the ministry, and my wife and children were there in the front row of the church as well. And that particular experience I know that day I died, or maybe that person that I was pretending to be died, but it took me three weeks to recover for in that experience, you just get the courage to stop crying, put my feet on the floor and get out and face the day and try and build my life again.

Sally Goldner

Yeah. And you had to go through, you know, almost the whole experience, of course of fighting yourself, you know, it's physically mentally emotionally spiritually draining, but that would have just about, yeah, that would have drawn, well being the last bit of draining then you have to well replenish, which is it is a journey in itself, that part will say through about the 90s, where, okay, you have faced who you are, and then sort of go through things, there are some amazing stories in there as well.

Anthony Venn-Brown

It's been, I have to say, it's been an incredible life. You know, it's, I look back at some of those things that have happened to the synchronistic events, you know, going to Jason parents' house in the Hunter Valley going to his graveside, you know, he died of AIDS, you know, years later, I'm having that experience with at the grave side itself was really almost supernatural. And it took me quite a long time to deal with all the negative subconscious stuff, which had been so implanted within me. Whereas today, you know, if I was reincarnated, and, and I was given the choice as to whether I would come back, gay, or straight, I would choose to be gay. I love my life as a gay man.

Sally Goldner

Yeah, yeah, it's, that's the thing, you are amazingly settled now. And, look, I had to say out right on, I suppose we all work in the way we work. And I know I'm somebody who wants to see changes the system from the outside, you have now tried, to some extent change the system from the inside by going back to a service at the Pentecostal church, and then writing that letter to the national executive that I just say that right, that blows me.

Anthony Venn-Brown

It took a great deal of courage to do that, to go back into that environment where I basically had been traumatised and face those demons. But it was also on the other side, so empowering, because I knew from that experience, that that there was no doubt in my mind whatsoever as to who I was. And there wasn't anything that anybody could save to me for the rest of my life, that would cause the pain or the damage that I had experienced because they know today who I am.

Sally Goldner

Absolutely. And when you face the demons, not fight them. You can live in accordance with your true spirit and creativity, which you're doing now. You know, of course, with your work in the Pentecostal or sorry, in sort of the work that you're doing with a life of unlearning, and trying to build bridges to the church. But where can I ask Where else is life? Now? You know, we are a whole person, of course, in so many things, what are other parts of your life that are happening now?

Anthony Venn-Brown

I've got a guy at the moment of Perth who emailed me two weeks ago after the 60 minutes show. And his email was almost suicidal. I was very concerned. He finished it that he was saying, I've heard about people coming out. He said, but I feel like coming out of the closet because I feel like I'm in a coffin. I'm dead. If I stayed, I'm dead if I come out. Now, two weeks later, his email says to me, I've read your book. I have a list of 12 people who are going to come out to what I'm up to number 10. The last two, I gonna do this weekend. And then my mother and father. Unbelievable. And the freedom and the joy and it is a man of transformation is incredible.

Sally Goldner

Absolutely. That is that is just enormous. Anthony, what can I say. your story is amazing, empowering. I didn't even get a chance to say that you've met Michael Kirby, which to me would that Justice Michael Kirby of the High Court which would be to me like meeting your favourite rock star and go now I'm your biggest fan. I've got all your albums. But that's, that's another story. I'm looking forward to hearing you and meeting you on Friday night. I urge lots of people to come along and pack out the Metro Community Church in Burnley and, Anthony, I'll conclude I've got a few announcements of other things coming up during the week but I'm going to go out with a song that will look at dedicates my musical dag pedigree, but I think it's very appropriate for you it's the Eagles song I wish you peace because I think you've certainly got it and we'll keep it from now on.

Anthony Venn-Brown

Thank you Sally. Great to talk to you.

Sally Goldner

Anthony Venn-Brown on 3CR talking about Wow about His amazing, amazing journey and of course you can hear more about it. Next Friday night.