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# First Friday News & Views

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## SAGGY BAGGY THE ELEPHANT

by Jonathan Wilson

When I was a kid my parents bought me various books from the Golden Book series. Some were better than others and some carried a meaning beyond the obvious. As an adult who struggled but finally came out as an unapologetic, gay man, I have reflected on one of those books and gained some insight that escaped me as a child -- **The Saggy Baggy Elephant**.

As I recall it, it's about an orphaned little elephant, alone in the jungle, and perfectly content and happy. Life was good. As with people, the little elephant was born without a discriminatory bone in his body. As with people, he would have to learn about that pernicious trait.

While prancing merrily along, his reverie is interrupted by a shrieking, colorful parrot. The bird commences to berate the little elephant, commenting derisively on his appearance. He had clumpy legs/feet, a l-o-o-o-n-g nose, floppy ears, and his skin -- his skin was a drab gray and all wrinkled. It was saggy and baggy, and the parrot decided to call him Saggy Baggy.

The little elephant looked at his reflection in the lake and confirmed what the parrot said was true. He was ashamed and miserable. He tried all sorts of things amusing to a child, like filling his belly with food or water to stretch the skin tighter and make himself more acceptable. It didn't last, of course, and he was right back where he began with nothing really changed. He chose then to hide himself in a dark cave; elephants don't have closets.

Shortly, a hungry lion happened along and fancied the little elephant for his lunch. I've been to Africa and can tell you that tiny elephants are a favorite menu item for lions. The little elephant, sensing the danger, began to run for dear life. The hungry lion was right on his tail. Just before the lion was about to catch him, the little elephant stumbled and went roly-poly through a thicket into the midst of a huge herd of full grown elephants. They made short work of the lion and sent him on his way. I've seen that happen in the wilds of Africa as well.

The little elephant then picked himself up, dusted himself off, realized that he was safe, and he . . . looked . . . up . . . at . . . these . . . magnificent . . . full-grown . . . elephants that surrounded him. For the first time the little elephant was able to see the truth; he was beautiful without making any changes whatsoever. To hell with ignorant, bigoted parrots (read: right wing-nuts). He was an elephant and rightly proud of it. With time, he'd become as magnificent as the ones who had saved him. That bird had been reading the wrong book about what is and isn't beautiful.

The First Friday Breakfast Club provides a unique "Saggy Baggy the Elephant" experience for those who attend, particularly for those who are still struggling through the coming out process. It can be a grueling and protracted process. It requires folks to shed the shame they have been conditioned to feel growing up in a heterosexist society. That shame has been aggravated for centuries by institutional churches still touting a First Century view of human sexuality, and the implicit belief that all of God's children are straight. Not so. I am a gay man; I am decidedly *not* a straight man merely acting out or, worse, "sinning."

The First Friday Breakfast Club provides exposure to well-adjusted, productive, successful, intelligent, spiritual, accomplished, compassionate, and unapologetic gay men. Real men. Straight forward, but not straight. Those who attend can draw confidence, strength, and direction from those who have previously traveled the same road.

The First Friday Breakfast Club does one more important thing. It affords the opportunity

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### CALENDAR

- ▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, June 1, 2012, at Hoyt Sherman Place, 15th & Woodland, Des Moines, IA.
- ▼ R.S.V.P. by May 30 to [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or 288-2500 by phone.

## Elephant (cont.)

for those well-adjusted gay men who are members to “thank” those who have gone before them. You see, those who have gone before us don’t need our help. In fact, many are nameless or already deceased. The only thanks they would want -- could want -- would be for each of us to help others who are coming along behind. And the road grows ever smoother for future generations.

Gay men don’t have to lift a finger other than turning off the alarm and showing up once a month to participate in the First Friday Breakfast Club. When they do, they are -- perhaps unwittingly -- an important part of that monthly “Saggy Baggy the Elephant” experience for others. By simply warming a chair, a service is done for others who are now where so many of us fearfully have been.

## Scott Schoettes

By Bruce Carr



Our guest speaker on Friday morning, May 4, was lawyer Scott Schoettes, HIV Project Director for Lambda Legal. His presentation outlined the concerns and the work of the Positive Justice Project (PJP) of the Center for HIV Law and Policy (CHLP), a national legal and policy resource and strategy center for people with HIV and their advocates. Schoettes began with a truly alarming summary of our criminal justice systems’ prosecutory attitudes

and practices toward persons living with HIV, as outlined in PJP’s [HIV Criminalization Fact Sheet](#) (you can download the full document from <http://hivlawandpolicy.org/resources/view/560>):

- \* Currently there are 36 states and 2 U.S. territories that explicitly criminalize HIV exposure through sex, shared needles, and in some jurisdictions, through “bodily fluids,” including saliva.

- \* At least 39 states have singled out people who have tested positive for HIV for criminal prosecution or enhanced sentences, either under HIV-specific criminal laws or under general criminal laws governing crimes such as assault, attempted murder, or reckless endangerment.

- \* In these cases, neither proof of the intent to transmit HIV nor actual transmission is required.

- \* Sentences for HIV-positive persons convicted of HIV exposure are typically very harsh and disproportionate to the

actual or potential harm presented by the facts of the case, perpetuating the stigma that HIV-positive people are toxic and dangerous.

*And yet:*

- \* Studies show that these HIV-specific statutes and prosecutions have absolutely no effect on behavior and, in fact, they undermine public health goals.

**The goal of the Positive Justice Project is to repeal these HIV criminalization statutes and to end HIV-specific prosecutions, increased punishment, and government-sponsored discrimination against people with HIV in the criminal justice systems.**

Schoettes detailed some of the negative effects of the statutes:

- \* They don’t change behavior

- \* They encourage non-disclosure of HIV status

- \* They “chill” doctor-patient relationships, and

- \* Because the statutes generally state that if you don’t know your status you can’t be prosecuted for these “crimes,” they discourage even getting tested.

And, in fact, he concluded, more hopefully, getting tested and publicly declaring one’s status is one of the best public-health practices we know. As Schoettes -- who is himself publicly HIV-positive -- blogged two months ago for Huffington Post:

“Antiretroviral medications (ARVs) provide us with the opportunity to seriously impede progression of the disease, especially when it is discovered in a timely fashion, to prevent most of the complications and poor health outcomes associated with an AIDS diagnosis, and to dramatically reduce the number of AIDS-related deaths each year. For those with access to consistent, quality care and treatment, HIV can now be a chronic, manageable condition -- akin to diabetes or high blood pressure.

“What’s more, quality care and effective treatment for those currently living with HIV will significantly curtail the further spread of HIV. ARVs work by reducing the level of virus in a person’s blood to extremely low levels -- and the less virus in the blood, the lower the chances of transmitting the disease. Recent studies show that the already-lower-than-generally-realized risk of contracting HIV sexually is reduced by up to 96 percent when a person’s viral load is suppressed to undetectable levels. Not only is near-universal access to quality health care good for people living with HIV, but it is also one of the best prevention tools we have.”

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Scott Schoettes is the HIV Project Director for Lambda Legal, the oldest and largest national legal organization committed to achieving full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, and people with HIV.

Shortly after being diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1999, Schoettes left a decade-long career in the theater and began his legal studies at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C. While in law school, Schoettes was an associate editor of the **Georgetown Law Journal**, served as co-chair of Outlaw (the LGBT student group at Georgetown Law school), completed a fellowship with the Human Rights Campaign, and volunteered

(Continued on page 3)

# Jeff Who Lives at Home

Review By Gary Kaufman

Jeff, played by Jason Segel, is 30 years old, smokes pot, and still lives in the basement of his mother's home. He has been this way since his father died. He believes that "everything happens for a reason", and so he believes that there must be some reason that this happened to him. He is seeking his destiny by looking at signs that will show him what his special destiny is but laments later in the film that after much searching he found that "it wasn't really all that much." It is his mother's birthday (Susan Sarandon), and she is trying to get him out of his long slump by giving him a task to perform for her on her birthday. But on that day, Jeff's day began by receiving a phone call for a Kevin, but there was no Kevin living there, so he spends his day trying to figure out if this is a sign, and if it is, what it means. He rides a bus to get the glue he needs to perform a task for his mother, but, instead, notices a black man on the bus with a sport shirt that says "Kevin" on it. Is this what the call for "Kevin" meant? The black man wearing the Kevin t-shirt gets off the bus, and Jeff decides to get off the bus and follow him. Jeff sits watching Kevin and other black men in pickup games at the local basketball court, and eventually they run out of players and ask Jeff to join in. Jeff is amazingly quite good on the basketball team, and especially works well with Kevin. Kevin invites Jeff over to smoke some weed, but it is a setup, and Kevin's friends beat up Jeff. "It was a coincidence," exclaims Kevin to Jeff.



Meanwhile, Jeff's older brother, Pat (Ed Helms), is having troubles in his marital life. He and his wife, Linda, live in a small apartment in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He believes that what they need is a new Porsche, so he buys it. His wife is aghast when he tells her this surprise news as she was thinking they needed to live more within their means. The mother of these two brothers is having her own difficult adjustment after the loss of her husband, but then she receives a photo of a rose flown to her desk cubicle via a paper airplane. She has a "Secret Admirer" at work. She is wondering if the Admirer is real or is just a joke by one of her co-workers.

The movie includes a surprise gay plot twist and a really strong, totally unexpected, emotional ending in which this totally dysfunctional family becomes fully functional, and loving. It may sound syrupy, but that ending had me crying for an entire 10 minutes. If at all possible, DO NOT MISS THIS MOVIE.

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*Using superlatives when unwarranted anesthetizes us, and it keeps us from recognizing a real crisis and, therefore, from addressing it when one occurs.*

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# Scott Schoettes (cont.)

(Continued from page 2)

as a counselor in the wills department at Whitman-Walker Clinic. After graduating *magna cum laude* in 2002, he clerked for the Honorable J. Frederick Motz in the United States District Court for the District of Maryland.

Prior to joining Lambda Legal in October 2007, Schoettes spent four years litigating a wide variety of matters from the Chicago office of Latham & Watkins — primarily working on class action, employment discrimination, and political asylum cases. His *pro bono* work during that time continued to address matters involving the intersection of sexual orientation and the law. In his position at Lambda Legal, Schoettes focuses on cases and issues affecting individuals with HIV. He can be reached at Lambda Legal in Chicago (312-663-4413).

The Center for HIV Law and Policy and Positive Peace Project can be found online at <http://www.hivlawandpolicy.org/public/initiatives/positivejusticeproject>.

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*So health care for all is unconstitutional big government, but religious regulation of a woman's uterus is constitutional small government." Yeah, right, that makes sense. —not. Interesting how often and consistently the right is wrong.*

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## BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the June 1 meeting no later than May 30. E-mail [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or call him at 288-2500. At the June meeting, nine FFBC Scholarships will be awarded, and our speaker will be Rabbi David Horowitz, national President of PFLAG.

Thanks to Frank Vaia for his introduction of our May speaker, Scott Schoettes, Lambda Legal's HIV Midwest Project Director.

Out Networking meets the second Wednesday of every month at 5:30 p.m. at the Kirkwood Lounge (the new home of The Des Moines Social Club), 400 Walnut Street. It is the social, business, and philanthropic networking organization for anyone who is gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning, or supportive.

Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. Book donations are always welcome. Thanks to **Fred Mount** and **Barry McGriff** for coordinating the book exchange.

Contributions to the scholarship program are tax deductible and always welcome.

# Father to Son

By Tony E Hansen

www.tigersndragons.com

During high school, I was introduced to a poem by Langston Hughes entitled, “Mother to Son,” where the mother explains to her son about some of life’s unpleasant realities through a metaphorical approach of stairs. The lessons being taught in this poem are similar to what I am poised to illustrate to my own son because “...life ain’t been no crystal stair.” As my son turns sixteen, I suddenly find myself confronted with a discussion about what it means to be, or to have, a gay parent with all of the goofy “taboos” surrounding this. Thus, I pen this open letter to him:

Son, life can be tough and sometimes not so great. We are given many things in life for which we have no choice (e.g. our parents, our siblings, our athletic ability, our intelligence, our ethnicity, or our sexuality.) Some would decry these as reminders of the inequalities of life through miserable feelings about how we have been treated unfairly or destructively. Yet, I say we can find these as examples of our diverse natures and how we can embrace those differences while learning to enjoy them with a little laugh. Thankfully, we have differences because life would be considerably boring if we were all vanilla.

If we look at everything given to us as a tragedy, then our whole outlook is founded in negativity, and then, how people perceive us, in turn, will ultimately be negative. Interestingly, similar-minded people tend to congregate and reinforce those ugly dimensions of life upon each other rather than looking at circumstances as learning opportunities or even realizing the sheer comedy of our lives.

The thing is that this idea took a long time for me to understand because I felt that I was missing good role models in my life. Yet, I cannot sit and stew about what did or what did not happen.

When I found people with good nature in their hearts and



learned different philosophies of life, I found an appreciation for the present moment. In that, we do not know the eventual outcome of many paths in our lives, but things do happen for a reason, whatever that might be. We cannot worry ourselves about the past since there is literally nothing we can do about that except to acknowledge our part and to learn. There are many things in life that we wish we could undo or decisions we may have done differently for potentially better outcomes. We cannot agonize over what may happen in the future or what people may think since that is only a possibility. We can wait for things to happen; we can wait for that perfect opportunity; we can wait until there is more time to do something; or we can fret over the possibility of something going wrong. Yet, at those points, we are not living today because our focus is not here and now.

Instead, get busy living! We can focus our effort on the present moment, and we can do good in the present moment. This does not mean to forgo planning or always to be reckless about the present moment. Good things will reveal themselves to us if we are willing to plan, to do good, to look at the whole picture, and to do that with a smile. We could worry about someone’s opinion, wait for someone to act, or even agree with someone. Ultimately, you have to decide what you are willing to do and if that action is appropriate. No one else can do more for your own happiness, your own future, your own work, and your own family than yourself. That is neither selfish, nor egoistic, nor inconsiderate because with compassionate heart and action, you are promoting positive influences upon people all around you and beyond. The rest will take care of itself.

You have to decide what you are going to do to make your world a better place despite the “splinters and boards torn up” along the way. Keep moving forward and climbing, even when life gets tough. Be proud and look up. Believe in the moment because you are destined to be in that moment, and only you can make the most of what you have here and now. Learn, grow, have compassion, work diligently, and trust in yourself. Consider what Steve Jobs said, “Be a yardstick of quality” and, “if today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?” If you can affirm each of these, then no matter what anyone else says, you can say today that you are your best, and the rest will fall where it may.

I am proud that you are my son! Congratulations on your birthday and may you continue to enjoy life with a good heart and good mind. With loving kindness, Dad

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*Communications – state and nation-state boundaries around the world—have become so prevalent, pervasive, and rapid that we are simply finding out more about what’s actually been going on for a LONG time. We are damned by our cognition and complacency. Those, joined together, spell **complicity**. No wonder it was a simpler – and a more innocent – time in days-gone-by.*

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4 *Dwell on the past and deal with regrets. Dwell on the future and deal with anxiety. Dwell on the present and deal with reality.*

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*Whatever happened to Preparations A through G?*

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# From the Pastor's Pen

## The Challenge of the Early Church

By Rev. Jonathan Page

When we think of church, most of us picture a building on Main Street with pews and an organ. We envision people showing up every Sunday morning dressed in their best clothes to sing old hymns and mutter, "Amen," in response to pastor-led prayers. Others of us might picture a contemporary church with a stage, rock band, and spotlights. It can be hard to think of what the church was like in its earliest days when churches met in people's houses and attendance was radical and could get you in trouble. Yet, it is in the context of early Christianity where most queer people find church most hospitable and welcoming.

The early church could not have been more different than church life today. For starters, the first Christians had no New Testament. The New Testament, as we have it today, did not come about until the fourth century and the oldest book in the New Testament, 1 Thessalonians, was written in 49 or 50, nearly twenty years after Jesus died. These early communities of believers relied on stories, liturgies, and the working of the Holy Spirit as they worshipped God together. Since scrolls were expensive, many Christian churches would have had only some of the Hebrew Bible from which to read aloud. There were no well-thumbed Bibles lying around to use for harmful proof-texting and exclusion. The dogmatism and Biblical literalism that dominate so much of evangelical Christianity today had no place in the early church. Church life was much more free form.

Not surprisingly, early Christians got into a lot of arguments about what the faith was all about. The most divisive debate of the early church was over the inclusion of non-Jews into the Christian fold. Could a non-Jew become a true follower of the Christ? Did he or she have to conform to Jewish laws and practices in order to do so? Paul of Tarsus was the leading proponent of expanding the scope of Christianity beyond Judaism, while James and Peter and those in Jerusalem opposed it. Paul argued that the presence of the Holy Spirit should trump any legalistic definitions of what it meant to be Christian. Christianity should be open to all. Queer people could not agree more. The legalistic exclusion of gays and lesbians from the church is reminiscent of the insistence that Christians be Jews in order to be fully accepted Christians. What if gay people experience the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ? Using Paul's logic,

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*I do not find in orthodox Christianity one redeeming feature.* Thomas Jefferson

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should not that supersede a heterosexist reading of a few fringe texts that supposedly condemn gays? Without a doubt.

The early church was remarkable for its inclusion of different people within the Christian community. Paul wrote emphatically, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28) Despite living in a shockingly patriarchal society, women played a key role in the early church. In Romans 16, Paul names some thirty-five different people in the Christian church, ten of whom are women. He calls Phoebe a deacon or minister, and Junia, another woman, is mentioned as an apostle. Most of the male names that Paul lists in Romans 16 have no female name along with them, which likely indicates that they were unmarried since Paul coupled the names of married persons together. How many of the unmarried men were gay?

We also know that the early Christian community included slaves and freed slaves, a fact which is most explicit in Paul's letter to Philemon when he commends Onesimus, a former slave, as a partner in Christ's work. We find another example of radical inclusion in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Not only was the eunuch of a different race and ethnicity than Philip, but his status as a eunuch excluded him from full participation in the Jewish cult (see Deuteronomy 23:1-2). Yet, the Holy Spirit inspires Philip to reach out and include him. Again and again, the early church violated the commonly accepted rules of the day to welcome different people to the Christian fold. A church that embraces gays and lesbians is proudly following that Biblical example.

Surveying this brief look at the shape of the early church, I cannot help but wonder how we can recapture some of the radical spirit of those Christian communities. How can we be more inclusive of those who do not feel welcome now? It might just be that welcoming gay Christians opens up the possibility for a whole new way of being the church, a way of being the church that is more true to its roots.

*Jonathan Page is senior pastor of the Ames United Church of Christ, 217 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Ames, Iowa. Sunday service at 10:45. He can be reached at [jon@Amesucc.org](mailto:jon@Amesucc.org).*

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*Blind faith is fertile soil in the Garden of Evil.* ~J. Wilson

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*"With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."*~Steven Weinberg

# FFBC

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News & Views  
Des Moines, Iowa*

*JUNE 2012*

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## My M.O. (Monthly Observations)

### National Day of Prayer?

By Steve Person

Thursday May 3 was the National Day of Prayer, one of those spurious events sponsored by people who believe it is OK to interrupt the daily lives of individuals by invading their workspace and clustering in groups spouting incantations to God and performing obnoxious music. If it were truly a day of national prayer, members of ALL religions would be represented. But, of course, the event is co-opted by fundamentalist Christians who have no qualms about imposing their narrow views on everybody else. I happened to be working at the Capitol that day, and true-to-form, the Bible thumpers showed up and got in everyone's way to promote their agenda. I wonder how they would feel if I wandered into their churches and began conducting tours of their buildings while their ministers were delivering their sermons. I daresay I would be asked to leave. These fools who claim religiosity obviously have never read their Bibles too carefully. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Matthew, Jesus says, "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Verily, I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut the door, pray to thy Father, which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Enough said.

The weekend of May 12/13, I took my eldest grandniece for her seventeenth birthday to the Mall of America in Minneapolis to see the Princess Diana Exhibit. My grandniece is enrolled in the fashion program at Central Campus, and I thought she would enjoy seeing the beautiful clothes on display that the Princess of Wales wore. It is a fine exhibition and will continue there until June 4. As for the Mall of America, I place it among the top places in the United States NOT to go shopping. Shopping malls are bad enough to begin with, but with over 500 shops and no Tiffany's, I say, "Why bother?" Enough said.

While on one of my periodic visits to The Book Store in The Equitable Building in downtown Des Moines, I came across a wonderful little book entitled **Why Not Catch-21?** It is a book of essays written by Gary Dexter, and it looks into the origin of fifty famous book titles and how they got that way. For example, Plato's **Republic** has nothing to do with republicanism, and **The Swiss Family Robinson** is not about a family called Robinson. Of particular interest to me is the title, **Catch-22**. Author Joseph Heller originally had entitled the book **Catch-18**, but, "shortly before publication, however, the blockbuster novelist Leon Uris produced a novel entitled **Mila 18** (also about the Second World War). It was thought that Heller, the first-time novelist, should be the one to blink." After going through a sequence of numbers for the title, Heller was persuaded to use the number 22. Dexter states, "The doubling of the digits emphasized a major theme of the book: duplication and reduplication." Things always have a way of working themselves out. Enough said.

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*More is wrought by prayer than this world of  
dreams of; doing it in public doesn't count.*

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