

I Spent Eight Years in Conversion Therapy Mistaking Shame for Faith

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The author outside the U.S. Supreme Court as the Court heard oral arguments in *Chiles v. Salazar* on Oct. 7, 2025, in Washington, DC. *Andrew Caballero-Reynolds—AFP via Getty Images*

On Tuesday, I stood on the steps of the Supreme Court with advocates from The Trevor Project, the Human Rights Campaign, and other conversion therapy survivors. Inside, the justices heard [oral arguments for *Chiles v. Salazar*](#), a case in which a Christian therapist in Colorado argues that the prohibition against conversion therapy is a violation of her First Amendment free speech rights.

When I first started conversion therapy at age nineteen, I thought I was pursuing healing for what I was led to believe was broken in me. I didn't want to erase myself. I wanted peace. I wanted to stop feeling like my faith and my sexuality were at war with one another. I sought it out of my own accord. My parents and pastors didn't force me into therapy, but everything in the culture around me convinced me it was my only option.

Conversion therapy sells a promise of transformation, but what it really delivers is a slow disintegration of the soul. You learn to measure your worth by how well you can pretend. You learn to call shame devotion. And you learn that love has conditions.

I was in conversion therapy for nearly eight years. I was taught to artificially deepen my voice, second guess my every action, and replace my hobbies and interests with more "masculine" ones. My life became all about being faithful and doing everything I could to become like the man I was told God wanted me to be. Ministry leaders, therapists, and pastors prayed over me. They said I was brave. And when nothing changed, they said I was the problem. So I prayed harder and tried to fake it until I made it.

Read more: [*The Fate of 'Conversion Therapy' Bans Is in the Supreme Court's Hands. Here's What to Know*](#)

The irony was that this performance followed me into my career. I worked for some of Evangelical Christianity's largest megachurches, like Hillsong, Willow Creek, and Elevation Church, where I helped craft messages of belonging for millions. But my presence in these spaces operated by unspoken rules: I was useful in the shadows, but unacceptable in the light. I was selling the idea of love and acceptance while practicing self-exclusion.

For almost a decade, I did individual therapy, attended conferences, joined support groups, and listened to testimonies from people who claimed they had changed their sexuality with God's help. I told myself I could, too, if I just had enough faith. I was told repeatedly that the opposite of homosexuality wasn't heterosexuality, it was holiness, and I strove to meet that impossible standard.

But the truth was that the more I tried to heal, the further I drifted from myself. My prayers became bargains. My faith became a performance. I started to believe that peace might only exist if I ceased to.

It took years for me to understand that what they were calling healing was really a kind of harm. The turning point came when I finally recognized God's failure to answer my prayers to make me straight was, in fact, the answer. I had to stop seeking a miracle that was never going to come, and start acknowledging that I had been worthy all along. This was the difference between chasing holiness and choosing wholeness. Healing meant embracing the self I had spent almost a decade trying to bury.

The arguments against conversion therapy aren't about attacking religion or silencing free speech. They're about safeguarding children. People of faith will always be free to seek guidance consistent with their beliefs, and churches can still provide pastoral support. What's at stake here is

whether states should endorse practices that every major medical and mental-health association has already disavowed as [dangerous and ineffective](#).

According to The Trevor Project's 2023 report, [more than 1,300 practitioners](#) in 48 states and the District of Columbia continue to offer licensed or unlicensed forms of conversion therapy to minors. That means millions of young people remain vulnerable to a practice the nation's leading experts have long rejected as both harmful and scientifically baseless.

Freedom of religion doesn't mean freedom to cause harm under the banner of care.

Pastoral and spiritual care are sacred in their own way. Licensed psychological care serves a distinct purpose and adheres to a higher standard. We can't blur those lines. Prayer and pastoral counseling have their place in religious communities. But when a licensed therapist uses the authority of medicine to validate the idea that queerness is a disorder that can be fixed, it's malpractice. States regulate professional mental healthcare so "help" never becomes harm.

Some people say bans on conversion therapy take away choice. I understand why that sounds persuasive. But a choice made under shame and spiritual fear isn't autonomy,

it's about survival. When a young person has been told for years that God will only love them if they change, consent isn't free. It's coerced by the culture that raised them.

As I listened to the arguments from both sides, I couldn't help but think about that version of myself. I wasn't a child when I walked into that office, but I was still young and afraid and shaped by years of teaching that told me God would only love me if I changed. I thought I was choosing therapy. What I was really choosing was survival in a world that had convinced me I didn't deserve to exist as I was. I took on shame and self-hatred disguised as faithfulness.

The harm isn't abstract. Youth who experience conversion therapy are [almost twice as likely to attempt suicide](#). I remember what conversion therapy did to me. It taught me to mistrust my own heart. Even now, years later, I sometimes flinch at joy, second-guess love, and brace for punishment when life feels too good. That shame eventually led me into addiction.

In 2013, Exodus International, the largest network of conversion ministries in the world, [shut down and apologized for the harm it caused](#). Its president admitted that few people had ever successfully changed their sexuality. But the ideology behind it never died. It lives on under new names, in new churches, and now protections against it are being considered by the highest court in the land.

When we talk about conversion therapy, the debate often centers on freedom of speech and whether counselors should be free to say what they believe, or whether people should be free to seek whatever help they want. But freedom without truth isn't freedom, it's confusion. And there's nothing free about being taught that the only way to be loved is to stop being yourself.

The danger of conversion therapy isn't just the trauma it causes. It's that it disguises shame as healing. It teaches people to doubt their own goodness. It tells them peace is possible only if they become someone else.

Real healing isn't about erasing what's wounded. It's about telling the truth about where it hurts. That truth didn't come easy for me. I had to rebuild a faith that could hold my full humanity. I had to learn that love and shame cannot exist in the same space. I had to believe that God's love was bigger than the box I'd been told to fit it inside.

When I finally stopped trying to be someone else, something shifted. The peace I had been praying for didn't come from perfection. It came from honesty. I finally felt a true sense of belonging in a community that celebrated the fullness of who I was.

We live in a culture obsessed with fixing things. We treat discomfort as a disease. But our sexuality, identity, and

capacity for love were never meant to be cured.

Conversion therapy taught me that anything built on shame will always collapse. Real healing comes when we stop apologizing for who we are and start believing that we were never broken in the first place. And healing, I've learned, isn't becoming who others tell you to be. It's having the freedom to become the person you were meant to be all along.

As the justices debate the case before them, I hope they remember that there are people behind those words, people like the 19-year-old I once was, who mistook fear for faith and control for care. What I needed then wasn't the freedom to change. I needed the freedom to be myself.