

The Inheritance of Shame: A Memoir by Peter Gajdics

Review by [Steve Susoyev](#)

The term “homosexual reparative therapy” conjures, for many of us, images of wrathful, bible-thumping parents dragging a 16-year-old into a church basement for an exorcism, or into a grim clinic for genital electroshock treatments.

Less common in the popular imagination is the story of a young gay person who *voluntarily* submits to psychological mutilation. In *The Inheritance of Shame*, Peter Gajdics, now in his early fifties, takes us into the heart and mind of his 24-year-old self, a desperate young man who believed everything his family and church told him about who he was, and who resolved to become an entirely different person, at any cost.

In 1988, Gajdics sought out a program of therapy that some people will find difficult to believe could be practiced in the civilized world. Gajdics received a referral to “Dr. Alfonso” — a British Columbia psychiatrist whose identity, on the advice of a lawyer, Gajdics shields with a pseudonym. Alfonso promised to “cure” Gajdics of homosexuality, although, 15 years earlier, the psychiatric profession had officially ceased to recognize being gay as a mental disorder.

Gajdics writes clearly, sometimes passionately, and always believably about his six-year nightmare living in a therapy house called “Styx” in Victoria, B.C., with several other patients including some who, like him, were struggling to overcome same-sex attractions. Among several abominations, Dr. Alfonso prescribed dangerously high doses of six psychotropic medications and routinely administered injections of ketamine, a veterinary anesthetic. On the psychiatrist’s instruction, Gajdics kept a vial of his own feces on hand, to sniff whenever homosexual urges erupted through his drugged stupor. He often received the threat of genital electric shock, in case he ever tried to resist any aspect of the therapy regimen.

Reflective but passionate, Gajdics takes the reader on an exploration beyond the *what* of his experience as a young, conflicted gay man and deeply into the chasm of his search to discover *who* he was.

People who have found their way out of cults are often asked a seemingly simple question: “How could an intelligent person like you allow someone else to take over your life?” *The Inheritance of Shame* answers that question with a step-by-step diagram of how Gajdics’s psychiatrist took control of him.

Gay men’s culture in the 1960s and ’70s celebrated sex as the ultimate liberation. Gajdics, exposed to sex at an early age, against his will, and with no models of emotional love between men, grew up believing the propaganda to which he had been exposed — the message that homosexuals, driven by their sexual obsessions, are incapable of emotional commitment. At age six, during a church bazaar at his parochial school, Peter had been lured into a toilet stall in the school basement by a fat man who forced the boy to give him oral sex. The man’s saying “I love you” during the incident led to years of confusion that compounded Peter’s shame.

Early in their work together, Dr. Alfonso told him, “In all my years as a practicing psychiatrist, I have never met one happy homosexual.” At 24, Gajdics was prepared to believe this statement. In his mind, being a homosexual meant being exactly the same as the man who had violated him in the toilet stall. He wanted to be anything other than that.

Gajdics’s therapy-cult journey followed a common trajectory: A vulnerable person, usually too young to have formed a strong sense of selfhood, is attracted to, and/or recruited by, a charismatic, powerful figure who promises emotional freedom. At a crucial moment, after struggling to resist therapy processes that are humiliating, painful, and debilitating, the patient hears an offer of unconditional love: *You are no longer alone in your struggle*, the healer promises. *In our work together you have shown me the darkness in your soul. Despite the darkness I have seen, I accept you. My love, and the love of the other members of this group, will help you become whole and fulfilled.*

“Dr. Alfonso” intoned these magic words, the kid was hooked, and the outrageous demands no longer appeared unreasonable. Alfonso based his therapy program on the “Primal Scream,” a system that blazed through Western culture in the 1970s and whose popularity has continued in various adaptations. Unlike most therapy techniques, Primal Therapy — as it was dubbed in 1970 by its developer, the Los Angeles psychologist Arthur Janov — is extremely simple on its surface and, accordingly, easily abused by untrained or unethical practitioners. Patients lie face-up on mattresses in a soundproof room, and the therapist instructs them to beat the mattresses with their fists and heels, turning their heads from side to side and screaming. With eyes closed, they are prompted to picture the faces of the people who traumatized them early in life, and to scream about the traumatizing events. The process releases anguish and rage, and can exhume buried memories. A patient emerges from a session exhausted and hyper-vulnerable to suggestion. An ethical therapist guides the patient through the process without affirming imagined memories.

An unethical therapist uses the released “material” to control the patient. Particularly disturbing is a moment when Gajdics describes the emergence of a “recovered memory” involving his childhood incident with the man in the toilet stall. During a screaming session, he imagined seeing his mother outside the restroom, accepting money from the man. This manufactured memory incorporated itself into his personal history, bolstering his conviction that his parents had not only failed to protect him but actively participated in abusing him. Already estranged from his family, Peter was now encouraged to see them as enemies — reinforcing his dependence on Dr. Alfonso.

When Gajdics’s treatment had been underway for nearly six years, he “acted out” by having sex with a stranger in a park. When Alfonso learned of the encounter, he issued a threat that precisely fit the cult programming pattern: “You think anyone else out there will understand you the way I do? I’m your last chance. Without my help you’d probably just get AIDS and die.”

The cult-like aspects of some therapy movements, examined methodically by the late Margaret Thaler Singer in books including *Cults in Our Midst*, can catch us off guard. Singer, an Army psychologist and ex-

pert in brainwashing techniques, demonstrated that some of the most powerful and insidious cults are not religions, but “personal growth” systems that capture sensitive young people.

Dr. Alfonso, wielding false promises of a “cure,” swallowed the young Peter Gajdics into his cult and billed the young man’s medical insurance carrier for six years of residential psychotherapy. At the end of those years, Alfonso abruptly closed the therapy house and spat out Gajdics and other residents.

Gajdics emerged into the world broken and hopeless. Wary of therapists, he found that his primary means of healing was to write about his six-year experience in reparative therapy. While withdrawing from the overpowering medications, he undertook to reestablish a relationship with his family. Later he filed an administrative ethics claim and eventually a malpractice lawsuit against Dr. Alfonso. The reader is left cheering Gajdics and his willingness to stand up for himself, but pained that he has so fully exposed himself while his perpetrator, protected by court orders sealing the records of those official proceedings, has enjoyed anonymity.

Despite the best efforts of Dr. Alfonso and other powerful people, Peter Gajdics eventually had a chance to become himself. Among many other things, the person he has become is an activist. Citing California’s groundbreaking law that regulates the reparative-therapy industry, he wrote in an *Advocate* essay in 2012, “Enacting laws to make it illegal to practice reparative therapy on anyone under the age of 18 is only a start.” He supports a ban on the use of such treatments on people of any age, because the therapy fundamentally promotes mental illness. “Reparative therapy,” he wrote, “‘works,’ for those who end up claiming to have changed from gay to straight, by dissociation: The person undergoing treatment is viewed as separate from their sexuality, and so they dissociate themselves from everything they have conflated with the idea of ‘being gay.’” Dissociation, of course, is a symptom of disease, not a mental-health milestone. Gajdics observes that “Reparative therapy may be a lie, but the lie begins not with the idea that we can change from gay to straight, but with the belief that we are who the culture tells us we are... And no one, no matter what age, is safe from that.”

Gajdics identifies the effects of reparative therapy — dissociation, depersonalization, the suppression of desire — as examples of the “incommensurable trauma that lives on in the person who has undergone what I now consider to be psychic lobotomy.” Among other things, his book prompts the reader to ask, *In what ways have I been willing to submit to psychological mutilation?* In an essay published while he worked on this memoir, Gajdics remarked that gay male pornography is filled not with images of “gay men” but with “projections of the aggressive, competitive male, suppressed of emotion while engaging in one sexual conquest after another... images of a hegemonic masculinity fucking itself.” In this and many other observations, he challenges us to consider how we might, in our day-to-day lives, allow elements of our own community to brainwash us into betraying our true selves.

The Inheritance of Shame is a serious work, but it is not without humor. Gajdics entered Catholic school with a big strike against him — a Hungarian surname that his teachers pronounced “GAY-dicks,” and he gives us a darkly funny sampling of what his high school classmates made of that before he began introducing himself with the proper pronunciation, “GUY-ditch.” He was not entirely isolated, and we encounter lovely but brief interludes of communion with others, particularly a gay schoolmate, Tommy, and a girl named Pearl — who let him know she accepted the gayness she recognized in him. Heartbreaking moments involve his rejection of these true friends as he embraced his anti-gay therapy regime.

This exploration is a hero’s journey in which any reader, gay or straight, can find inspiration. Gajdics’s story would be worthwhile reading, and would engage us, even if he had recounted merely the outlines of his involuntary coming out, his family’s consequent rejection, his hopeful escape from their orbit with acceptance into a performing-arts school, his stumbling through his early twenties, the drug-fueled, therapy-cult nightmare that he lived for six years, and his eventual return to the world with his steadily growing acceptance of himself as a gay man. He greatly enriches the narrative with excerpts of his parents’ war-refugee stories and other details of his family’s life, and his meditations on the nature of the self.

As Gajdics prepared essays that eventually appeared in a medical journal, in the *Gay and Lesbian Review | Worldwide*, and elsewhere, his family feared embarrassment and became defensive. A sister's admonition was perhaps the most demoralizing, as she informed him that no one in the family thought anything would ever come of his writing: "You should just give it up now." For a short time, he dated a man who encouraged him not to dredge up the six-year trauma, to stop writing and move on with his life.

Gajdics ignored his family's admonitions, dumped the boyfriend, and kept working on this memoir, including by workshopping an early draft in 2010 at the [Lambda Literary Foundation's Retreat for Emerging LGBT Voices](#). His years of work have paid off in a book that does far more than recount a sensationalistic tale. His story is well thought-out, and much of the writing is raw but lyrical. Every passage rings true. In this painful chronicle, Gajdics asks provocative questions about who we are — can we really be reduced to a catalogue of our sexual behaviors and drives? No, he concludes, we cannot.

Gajdics worked on various forms of the *Inheritance of Shame* manuscript for twenty years, and might have had an easier time if he had slapped a happy-ever-after ending on his story. But what he has given us is more satisfying and inspiring. His work will encourage others to tell their stories and consign their own shame to the past.

[The Inheritance of Shame: A Memoir](#)

By Peter Gajdics

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