

Issue Date: October 21, 2005



Brian McNaught speaks on gay issues in the workplace at a New York-based financial services corporation.

One-time Catholic columnist now pioneer for gays in workplace

By RENÉE LaREAU

It is the end of the workday at a Manhattan-based corporation, and nearly 100 senior-level investment bankers and managers drift into a posh meeting room for an after-hours presentation. Hints of trepidation and curiosity fill the air as well-dressed men and women take their seats, many of them paging through the paperback book that has been placed on each of their chairs. They look expectantly toward the front of the room as guest speaker Brian McNaught introduces himself, promising strategies to help the company

improve its productivity and retain the best and brightest personnel.

McNaught, however, begins his workshop with a surprising confession.

"I know nothing about finance," he said.

While McNaught may know nothing about finance, he knows more than a thing or two about how workplace dynamics affect a corporation's productivity, specifically, the interpersonal dynamics between coworkers with diverse sexual orientations.

Designated "The godfather of gay diversity training" by *The New York Times*, McNaught, author of the book *Gay Issues in the Workplace*, is the leading consultant on gay issues for corporate America. He has spent his 30-year tenure as a sexuality educator giving presentations to the largest U.S. companies, including Lucent Technologies, J.P. Morgan/Chase and Hewlett-Packard, as well as scores of colleges and universities.

During the course of this particular workshop on gay issues in the workplace (name of the company withheld on request), McNaught skillfully transforms the room's atmosphere from one of diffidence to one of thoughtful engagement. The central issue for discussion is what gay, lesbian and bisexual people need from their coworkers in order to be fully productive members of the workplace.

According to McNaught, even the most articulate corporate nondiscrimination policy isn't enough if it doesn't translate from paper to the atmosphere on the trading floor.

"You have great nondiscrimination policies here, but not everyone knows what they mean," McNaught said. "Often there is a gap between the policies themselves and management's ability to speak up, defend policies or explain them to other people."

He picks up a rainbow-striped silicone bracelet, placed on each person's chair in recognition of the company's celebration of Pride Month (June), and holds it up for everyone to see.

"You have this bracelet here -- does anyone know why it is rainbow colored?" he asks the audience. They shake their heads. "This is what I'm talking about -- people are being asked to support something without even understanding it," McNaught said.

So what does it mean to understand, support and affirm a gay person in the workplace?

McNaught uses the example of a typical Monday morning conversation in the office.

"Everybody's asking everyone else, 'How was your weekend?' 'What did you do?' And nobody asks the gay person," he said. "It's not because they are hostile or evil or mean; they're afraid of the answer. Our anxiety stops us from being comfortable enough to participate in the simple everyday conversation about the weekend."

Just as heterosexual people may be reticent to ask the questions, said McNaught, gay people can be hesitant to answer them.

"Even in 2005, even in New York City, you don't want to answer your colleague's question 'How was your weekend?' because you fear that your life is going to change," he said. "Many of your gay colleagues are not 'out,' and many of them are thinking 'If I tell them I'm gay I'm going to lose everything.'"

If there's more than a hint of sincerity behind that comment, it's because McNaught's words are rooted in personal experience. At one point in his own life, 30 years ago, McNaught himself was on the verge of losing everything, including his own life.

In 1970, McNaught, one of seven children born and raised near Detroit, graduated with a degree in journalism from Marquette University in Milwaukee. Dreaming of a future position as religion editor of *The New York Times*, he was hired as a columnist for *The Michigan Catholic*, newspaper for the Detroit archdiocese. McNaught was a conscientious objector, and his job at the newspaper fulfilled his alternative service requirement. In addition to his reporting duties, he wrote a weekly column, "Write On," geared toward a high school and college age audience. "Write On" dealt with the expression of faith in day-to-day life, primarily through the lens of civil rights issues. The column was wildly popular with readers, according to McNaught.

"It was a symbol of how a young Catholic could be relevant," he said. "It served as a bridge, since a lot of younger people were leaving the church or finding it irrelevant."

McNaught became something of a local celebrity in Detroit-area Catholic circles. He was regularly invited to speak at Communion breakfasts, senior citizen lunches, and religion classes. He hosted a Catholic cable television show.

"I was heady with success," McNaught said. "Everyone in the Catholic world knew who I was."

Though on the surface, McNaught was well loved, well-known and steadfast in faith, his inner life was racked with turmoil. At a young age he had realized he was attracted to other men, and he hadn't told a soul. Keeping his sexual orientation a secret from his friends, family and coworkers was starting to take its toll on his mental well-being.

“It was a tough time,” McNaught said. “I was very self-conscious, not being honest about who I was, yet I was helping everyone else feel good about who they were. I would think to myself, ‘Why don’t you tell them who you are?’ and then think, ‘But I’ll lose everything.’ I would write beautifully about loving yourself, loving your neighbor, having nice friendships at work, and yet I was not being honest with people about who I was. This went on for four years.”

McNaught recalled one heart-wrenching conversation with his father, then the head of public relations at General Motors.

“The chairman of the board at GM told my father that his wife cried when she read my Mother’s Day column,” McNaught said. “My father was so very proud. And all I could think to myself was, ‘Would he feel as proud if he knew I was gay?’ ”

Eventually, keeping his sexual orientation a secret proved to be too much. At the age of 26, McNaught drank a bottle of turpentine and swallowed all of the pills in his parents’ medicine cabinet. He sat at his parents’ kitchen table and waited to die.

But as he sat there, he started to think of his mother and father, and how devastated they would be. In a panic, McNaught drove himself to the hospital and had his stomach pumped. As he lay on the table in the emergency room, he made himself a promise.

“I told myself I was not going to pretend anymore,” he said.

Energized by his 11th-hour promise to himself, he came out to his family and friends. He took his coworkers out to lunch, one-to-one, to tell them he was gay. He got involved with the Detroit chapter of Dignity, a support group for gay Catholics.

Then one day, the religion editor of *The Detroit News* called McNaught to ask him about his involvement in Dignity for a story on gays and religion. She asked if she could quote him. McNaught didn’t think twice.

“I said, ‘Of course.’ My family knew, everyone at work knew. In retrospect I was naive, but at the time I was so filled up thinking this is what the Holy Spirit wants me to do. I thought, ‘The whole gospel of justice supports me and this interview is spreading the good news that there is a place for people to go.’ ”

The story ran in *The Detroit News* on Saturday, and McNaught was quoted extensively. On Monday, all hell broke loose at *The Michigan Catholic*. The office was flooded with irate phone calls. Subscribers threatened to cancel. Advertisers called and threatened to remove their ads. And the editors informed McNaught that his column was going to be dropped.

“They said they were going to say it was for space limitations,” McNaught said.

The Detroit News religion editor called to see if there had been any reaction to her story, and the news coverage exploded. Soon McNaught’s story was in the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*. Detroit radio and television covered the story, and McNaught’s family received threatening phone calls and letters.

“My head was spinning,” McNaught said. “In some ways it was exciting. I kept thinking of people like César Chávez, Martin Luther King, Dan Berrigan. I thought ‘Blessed are the persecuted.’ ”

Though McNaught had been dropped as a *Michigan Catholic* columnist, he stayed on as a reporter. But the office dynamics shifted permanently from that point.

“I was going to work every day but no one was talking,” he said. “It was very intimidating and very scary. They would wait for me to leave before they had staff meetings.”

After about three weeks, McNaught decided to go on a water-only hunger fast, with the goal of keeping the fast until Detroit’s bishops made a commitment in writing to educate the clergy about homosexuality. He stopped going to work because he wasn’t eating, and he lost 20 pounds. On the 24th day of McNaught’s fast, Detroit’s bishops committed in writing to educating the clergy. That evening, McNaught was fired from *The Michigan Catholic*.

McNaught began a new phase of his professional journey. He began to educate himself about sexual orientation and homosexuality, eventually becoming certified as a sexuality educator by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists. Colleges and university professors invited McNaught to speak about his experience, and his calendar began to fill with speaking engagements. The mayor of Boston invited him to be the liaison to the city’s gay and lesbian communities, a post he held in the early 1980s. McNaught wrote three books. (*On Being Gay* has sold 43,000 copies.) He created six videos. McNaught spoke to thousands of fraternity and sorority members at UCLA as well as groups at Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Penn State and Holy Cross, educating students and faculty about homosexuality and homophobia.

In 1987 AT&T invited him to speak, and his presentation resulted in a flood of corporate speaking invitations. McNaught’s underlying message to those in the working world is this: You do not have to change your personal or religious beliefs about homosexuality. But you do need to understand what it means to support a gay person in the workplace. Your company will be a better and more productive place because of it.

“Policies do not change culture,” he said. “This is not about changing values, this is not sex education, but this is about embracing diversity.”

At 57, with thousands of presentations, lectures and workshops behind him, McNaught describes himself as in “semiretirement.” He now spends time promoting his self-published work of fiction while scaling back his public appearances, citing road weariness.

“I’m tired of taking off my shoes and belt at the airport,” he said.

He and his partner of 30 years, Ray Struble, divide their time between residences in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and Provincetown, Mass.

In terms of religious affiliation, McNaught describes himself as somewhat of a “spiritual traveler.” Every morning he prays the Prayer of St. Francis and reads from the *Tao Te Ching*.

As he looks back at his years working for *The Michigan Catholic*, the workplace that ironically ended one kind of career while simultaneously launching another, McNaught has only positive things to say.

“I loved my time at the paper, and I loved the people I worked with,” he said. “I know they did the best they could at the time and I did the best I could. I was a starry-eyed young gay Catholic man who really thought that people’s affection and trust would be enough to get through this. It was a tough time for everybody.”

In the aftermath of a past professional crisis situated uncomfortably at the intersection of sexuality and religion, some lingering acrimony might be understandable. But in listening to McNaught successfully educating Wall Street executives on gay issues with a disarming blend of warmth, knowledge and respect, one detects not a whiff of anger or bitterness about the past. McNaught exudes the aura of someone truly at peace with his unconventional career path.

“I never did become the religion editor of *The New York Times*,” he said. “But when I give a presentation, tell my story and look across a room, seeing the mood change, the heads nodding, the arms uncrossing, that to me is an affirmation of success. I’m making a difference and that makes me happy.”

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National Catholic Reporter, October 21, 2005

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