

# Richard Cohen, M.A.

## Source:

Compiled by Thomas Coy from *Coming Out Straight – Understanding and Healing Homosexuality* by Richard Cohen, M.A., and from a conversation with Richard Cohen.

## Born:

1952

## Family Status:

Married Jae Sook in 1982. Richard and Jae Sook have three children.



## General Information:

Richard Cohen counsels men and women who seek to “heal out of homosexuality.” His teaching and speaking work is through the International Healing Foundation <http://www.gaytostraight.org/Home.asp> which he founded after earning his master’s degree. Richard Cohen’s master’s degree is in counseling psychology. He is the author of several books including *Alfie’s Home*, *Coming Out Straight – Understanding and Healing Homosexuality*, and *Gay Children, Straight Parents: A Plan for Family Healing*. In the past he served three years as an AIDS educator for the American Red Cross, worked for Catholic Community Services in Child Abuse Treatment and Family Reconciliation Services, and worked as a volunteer helping individuals with AIDS.

## Personal Testimony:

Richard Cohen was the youngest of three children born to a Jewish couple in Philadelphia. He was a child with a “sensitive nature” and lived in a family defined by its “constant fighting and tears.” His father would come home from work and scream at everyone. When his dad would tear into his older brother, the brother’s aggression would be unleashed on the younger Richard. “Fighting between my parents and fighting among us kids was our daily diet. My role was that of a peacemaker. I was always trying to bring order and peace to this chaotic home.”

Between the ages of five and six his parents invited a family friend to stay with them while he was going through a divorce, they called him Uncle Dave. Uncle Dave gave the young Richard what his father had not. He spent time with Richard and made Richard feel like he “mattered.” Uncle Dave was the first adult that Richard bonded to. When the bond was formed Uncle Dave started playing with young Richards genitals and encouraged Richard to play with his. Richard remembers the occurrences as “shocking and horrifying,” while at the same time feeling good. When Uncle Dave left the Cohen household Richard told no one, and probably because of guilt and denial the experiences eventually went subconscious.

As Richard Cohen went through middle school he “began to experience same-sex attractions.” He wanted “to be physically intimate” with his guy friends. He defined this feeling as wanting “to hold and to be held.” At seventeen he sought out his first homosexual relationship by going to his father’s health club, where he met a man who invited him to his apartment. Richard described that encounter as disappointing

to the point that he felt violated. He was looking “for closeness, for a safe place to be held and to hold.” What he experienced “felt like rape.”

Richard told his parents that he was struggling with same-sex attractions toward the end of his senior year. His dad was predictably embarrassed and his mother told him she already knew. He requested to see a psychiatrist and went to one, but there was no connection and the sessions were fruitless.

In his first year at Boston University Richard had several boyfriends and began psychotherapy with a traditional Freudian psychoanalyst. Although Richard learned a little about himself, the therapist never found the origins of Richard’s same-sex desires and there was no relief from his pain. Richard’s attempt of suicide with aspirin failed and he continued in psychotherapy.

In his second year at Boston College Richard began a homosexual relationship with another art student, Tim, which would last for three years. Tim was a Christian and Richard persecuted him for his beliefs. Because of Tim’s devotion to Jesus, Richard started reading the New Testament to see why Tim “loved Jesus” so much. Eventually Richard and Tim became convinced that “homosexuality was not compatible with God’s Word, so they ended their physical relationship.

Richard joined Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church in 1974 and remained celibate for nine years. When same-sex attractions emerged now and then, Richard would push them away and “begged God to take them away for good.”

Richard met his wife through a Unification Church ministry. They were both part of a traveling performance group. Richard was in the choir and Jae Sook was part of a Korean folk dance group. The marriage began in 1982 and Richard told his new wife about what he thought was his homosexual past, but problems soon surfaced. Richard started treating his wife the way his father treated his mother. He projected on his new wife all the pent-up-hostility that he had “previously felt for his mother.”

Richard’s wife was pregnant when he sought help from a psychologist. It was through a “bioenergetic technique” in the psychologist’s office that Richard had a flashback where he saw male genitals coming toward his mouth. He screamed and felt horrified. The sexual abuse that he had buried in his subconscious had reemerged. Tears continued to flow following that revelation as Richard tried to sort out “the web of confusion and destruction that those experiences caused” him. He became aware that his “neurology was programmed to respond to men in sexual ways.” For Richard “intimacy with a man equaled sex.” From that revelation Richard reasoned that to overcome the programming in his brain he “needed to be close to men in healthy ways to heal and grow.”

The first Christian group Richard went to rejected him because he was part of the Unification Church. Richard went to another ex-gay ministry and a leader approached him for sex. At his home church he seemed to scare away most of the men. He became frustrated and told his wife that if he couldn’t find what he needed through godly men, he would go back into the homosexual world.

Richard felt he needed to heal with men and he didn’t know how to do it. He left his wife for a homosexual relationship while telling her he was committed to their marriage relationship and asked her

not to divorce him. He knew he was a hypocrite and Jae Sook did not divorce him during this time of betrayal to her.

After a couple of years of this conflicted and bizarre behavior Richard found a Christian man who was willing to help him heal his wounds and reprogram his neurology. This man helped the child in Richard see that he didn't cause the sexual abuse and that it wasn't his fault. Richard was able to cry in his arms and release the shame and guilt, and know that another man cared. Richard contends it was those moments of release that freed him from his same-sex desires.

The healing of the wounds from Richard's childhood continued at a Christian healing community on Vashon Island outside Seattle. Richard and Jae Sook undertook six months of intensive therapy and received counseling and support from this Wesleyan ministry for two and a half years.

Richard believes he was called to help others overcome emotional wounding and homosexuality. Before he began that calling he volunteered for three years working with people who had AIDS. He started giving "public presentations on the process of transitioning from homosexuality to heterosexuality while he worked as an AIDS educator for the American Red Cross. Soon the "Gay and Lesbian Task Force of the mayor's office in Seattle" sent the American Red Cross a request that he be fired from his position for being "homophobic and spreading hate." He also received death threats at his home and office as a result of those presentations. Richard thought that "because of my heart toward the homosexual community, they would see that I was not their enemy, but just presenting another possibility for those who desire to change. I was naïve." In 2002 gay influences within the American Counseling Association were successful in getting Richard expelled from that organization.

#### **Factors of Causation:**

Several obvious factors contributed to Richard Cohen's homosexuality. Richard was born with a sensitive nature and artistic. His father grew up in a military school, was a marine in World War II, and prone to yell at his wife and children. There was no father-son bond between the young Richard and his father; no bond that would make him want to be like his father or that nurtured him into a healthy male identity. His brother took out his aggression on the young Richard as a means to vent his own anger toward their father. The male identity in the Cohen household was a disturbed emotional state at best.

Richard had a strong attachment to his mother. He described it as "a love-hate relationship. I didn't know where she began and I ended. I knew part of my gender confusion was due to our inappropriate closeness."

The sexual abuse by Uncle Dave was young Richards first experience with an adult whom he felt cared about him as a person. Uncle Dave provided the attention that Richard was lacking from his father and turned it into an opportunity to exploit him. As Richard writes, "one reason that sexual abuse is so confusing for a child. It feels painful and pleasurable all at the same time." It was imprinted in young Richard's brain that having a male care about you is correlated to a homosexual experience.

#### **Motivation to Change:**

Richard's motivation to change was twofold. One of his childhood dreams was to "marry a beautiful woman and create a loving family." He had married a beautiful woman and created a family, but he

hadn't created the loving family of his dream and there was a real possibility he would lose his beautiful wife.

Richard's other motivation was a religious conviction "that homosexuality was not compatible with God's Word." He broke off a three-year homosexual relationship for that reason and he knew he was going against all his religious convictions when he left his wife to go back into the gay world.

### **Personal Change Process:**

It took Richard Cohen over ten years to overcome his homosexuality. Richard acknowledges making many mistakes in that process and those mistakes are part of the inspiration he has for helping others to overcome homosexuality. Richard not only struggled with unwanted homosexual desires, he struggled in his effort to find professionals who understood his condition and how to help him heal.

Richard's first experience with a psychiatrist was completely fruitless. There was no connection between the physician and patient. His psychotherapy at Boston College in the early seventies did not help him either. The therapist did not uncover the causes of Richard's same-sex attractions nor did the therapist enable Richard to gain relief from his pain.

Richard's first positive step in the personal change process was a religious conversion. "Then I met Jesus. He was a remarkable individual. In fact, he was the kind of man I had always wanted to be myself." Richard became celibate for nine years and begged God to take away his homosexual desires whenever they emerged.

Marriage to Jae Sook soon brought out subconscious feelings that turned Richard into the exact opposite of the man he desired to be. The next therapist Richard went to was a psychologist who used "bioenergetic techniques." While pounding a pillow with a tennis racket Richard flashed back to his child abuse at the hands of his Uncle Dave, a memory that he had buried since grade school. He realized that Uncle Dave gave him the attention that he craved from his dad and then used that trust to sexually exploit him. The memory was painful and Richard did not know how to deal with the wounds from his childhood.

When Richard left his wife to go back to the gay world he was trying to recreate the childhood nurturing he missed from his father. He learned that he "was indeed looking for closeness, not sex." During this period he continued his psychotherapy and began to feel healing as he grieved over his past sexual abuse and spent time with his gay friend.

However, the wound in the pit of Richard's soul was not healing, but turning into an "ulcer." The entry of a willing heterosexual man, "stable and comfortable in his masculinity," to help Richard heal his "homo-emotional wounds" led to the next breakthrough. This man was able to be the substitute father figure in whose arms Richard would sob "for about an hour." This man was able to console Richard that the abuse was not his fault and that God had forgiven him.

From that breakthrough the same-sex desires were overcome. Richard and Jae Sook wisely sought out further healing and counseling; searching until they found what they were looking for. The Wesleyan healing community on Vashon Island provided not only healthy male heterosexual relationships for Richard, but guided both Richard and Jae Sook to be better spouses to each other and better parents to their children.

Richard's mother and father traveled to Vashon Island and participated in sessions to help Richard heal his wounds. Another important healing moment happened when Richard, then 36 years old, was able to talk his reluctant father into letting him sit on his lap and have his father hold him. At first Richard had to place his father's arms around him. His father was able to do this and it began for Richard the bonding he had longed for since he was a child. He told his father, "Dad, please just let me cry. It's good. I just need to let go of all the losses of my life, all the times we missed being together when I was growing up. Please just hold me while I grieve."

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