

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: Shall we start at the very beginning then. Can you tell me a little bit about your upbringing and what brought you into contact with faith in its very broadest sense?

Jay: Oh, good heavens. My upbringing was sort of very conventionally middle class. My father was a chartered accountant. My upbringing was very straightforward, very loving, very cared for. I was an only child. Of course, I lived through the war and all the deprivations that followed, and there were plenty of those. And eventually I decided I too was going to become a chartered accountant and did.

Interviewer: Okay, so, that does sound quite conventional. Okay. And where were you during the war, were you...?

Jay: I was in Southampton partly, partly in Fleetwood and also, in Manchester.

Interviewer: Fleetwood right up north?

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: So, you moved around a fair bit.

Jay: My father moved around with his job, yes.

Interviewer: Okay. So, when you began training as a chartered accountant, presuming that was straight after school that...

Jay: School in that case was actually in Kenya. I was living in Kenya when I finished school. So, I came back to Manchester to do my articles.

Interviewer: Okay. And where was faith within all of this for you?

Jay: Absolutely nowhere. My father was a refugee from the Congregational Chapel, which had horrified him, and my mother equally was a refugee from Presbyterianism.

Interviewer: So, as a child you weren't particularly brought up with it.

Jay: Not at all.

Interviewer: Okay. So, if church and faith wasn't something that you were brought up with, when did it catch you then?

Jay: It was a long, long time. By that time, I was married, which of course was a mistake. And my wife had been a churchgoer and was interested and things medically weren't good with her and she turned back to her church and I came along too.

Interviewer: And you found it quite a welcoming place?

Jay: In the sense that they were accepting a normal male in the family, as it were, yes, it was a very welcoming place.

Interviewer: Okay. So, at what point did it become clear to you that that normal family that the church appeared to be accepting wasn't the whole picture?

Jay: Oh, I knew that for a long time. I mean my history of transsexualism is utterly typical in that I knew from about the age of five or six that I was in the wrong sex. And of course, in those days there was nothing you could do about it, and one assumed that one was the only person in the world with this particular problem. I think it was entirely typical.

[0:02:55]

Interviewer: No role models at all? Nothing at all?

Jay: Sorry?

Interviewer: No role models at all?

Jay: None whatsoever.

Interviewer: So, as difficult as it might have been to have been gay, we think that we had a tough time, actually there was nothing, there was a complete invisibility.

Jay: Totally invisible.

Interviewer: How did you live with that then?

Jay: Because you have to. Life is what it is. You get on with it. And I did the little bit of cross dressing that I could, which was precious little, and had to be satisfied with that.

Interviewer: When did you realise that it couldn't carry on like that?

Jay: I don't know that I ever did realise it couldn't carry on. It had to because I got married and I regarded my marriage vows as of significance. So, I couldn't walk out on them. So, it had to continue as long as it continued. But as it happened my wife had a bad heart condition and she did die, which left me the problem of two youngsters to care for.

Interviewer: How old were they?

Jay: Well, one was 18 and one was just 11, which was not good. And it took me a while. It took me quite a few months, but I did realise that eventually the opportunity was opening up to look after myself.

Interviewer: So, where did you go? Where did you turn to?

Jay: I tried to find the Beaumont Society, which was not so easy in those days, and failed totally. And I found the Seahorse Society, which was a lovely little, essentially transvestite group, based around Woking. And they made me extremely welcome. And that was the starting point.

Interviewer: Can you remember exactly how you found those, or even knew about, because I'm trying to think back to before we had internet. I mean we've become so used to you just Google it now. Where did you even begin that kind of search? Because it's not even as if the Beaumont Society tells you on the label what it does.

Jay: I think, I don't know, I can't remember. I found the number somewhere. I can't remember how. And I think what happened, I'm quite sure that what happened is that I spoke to someone who was working for the Beaumont Trust, slightly different, and they were also a leading light in the Seahorse Society. So, I think they more or less snatched me.

Interviewer: Okay. So, in a sense, they found you.

Jay: In a sense of they found me. I was looking, but they found me.

Interviewer: So, what happened when you found yourself part of this group of people? You realised you weren't the only person in the world?

[0:05:50]

Jay: Well, I wasn't the only person in the world, which by then I did know of course, and it gave me a chance to cross dress in relative safety and to start finding myself properly. And that wasn't easy.

Interviewer: What sort of period would this be? Can you give us a dates so I've got a sense of where it fits in?

Jay: This is about 1988, 89.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what did finding out who you were need to look like? What was that like?

Jay: It was a very slow process because I think people didn't really understand transgenderism, particularly transsexualism, in those days. And the feeling was that because I was inclined to be taking my time and I was concerned about my daughters, I had to look after them, because I wasn't rushing, therefore I had to be a transvestite. The common belief then was that transsexuals were absolutely keen to get on and get the operation and get it over and done with and do it. And I eventually found a psychiatrist by accident and talked to him about it and he said, "Well, it's perfectly normal. You're just being transsexual with some logic". Which of course is the case.

Interviewer: Okay. That's interesting though that that would be a distinction people would feel confident enough to make, that if you were genuinely transgender, you'd want to get on with it.

Jay: The world is always full of opinions about the other people and what should be.

Interviewer: Yeah, it is.

Jay: I doubt it's really changed.

Interviewer: No, I think you're probably right there. I think you're probably right. You have to be cautious where you get your advice from. Okay, so, you through the Seahorses began to explore transitioning?

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: And how did that process roll out?

Jay: It rolled out quite nicely. I was working for the Beaumont Trust then, working on their helpline. So, I was talking to a lot of people on the helpline ringing up with a multitude of problems. And I found my psychiatrist, Russell Reed, who was famous to many people, and a very helpful individual, and things evolved from then on. It was really a question for me of seeing my daughters, or certainly the younger one, growing up to an age where she could cope and also dealing with work, because I was in a fairly responsible job.

Interviewer: Still, as an accountant at this stage?

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Jay: Yes, yes. And I was in quite a responsible job working very close to the main board. And had they known about me, I'm quite certain I would have been fired.

Interviewer: Because this would have been well before there's any kind of protection in law.

Jay: Oh, no protection whatsoever. And, no, I would not have lasted. And I did want my pension.

Interviewer: Were unpleasant ideas like blackmail a worry for people, both yourself and for people that rang looking for advice?

Jay: Yes, they were a worry, because it was so fraught that if people did know, it could have been disastrous. People were concerned about neighbours, family, a lot of people of course were concerned about wives and employers certainly. So yes, it was a very fraught situation.

[0:09:11]

Interviewer: How did people meet up? I mean, you mentioned being involved with Beaumont yourself, but was Beaumont quite a widespread network?

Jay: Beaumont was a widespread network and it had a series of meetings at various locations up and down the country. Seahorse was just very tiny, but it had its regular monthly meeting and you knew when it was and you knew where it was.

Interviewer: How did people find out about, I'm intrigued by that. Because it's that one step that opens the door for people, isn't it? We were talking about this earlier. How did people make that connection? Do you know?

Jay: It's hard to know. I mean, basically you sort of left trails around as best you could but how people made the initial breakthrough, it can't have been easy.

Interviewer: No. So, you're still working at this point. Were you still a part of a church and did they know any of this, or was it something that had to be very separate?

Jay: Yes, I was working and I was part of a church and I did confide in a church warden who was a friend. And he took it very well. And we then talked to other people, the priest and other people within the church. And they were all extremely supportive. It was quite a liberally minded Anglo Catholic church and they were extremely good to me.

Interviewer: I'm guessing you will have been the first trans person they had any experience of.

Jay: I'm quite sure of that, yes.

Interviewer: Because we're talking 30 years ago.

Jay: Getting on that way, yes.

Interviewer: We are. (Laughter) Yeah, it's that long. Okay. So, you're still working. When did, we talked about Malcolm Johnson earlier. How did he come into your life then?

Jay: Well, I was getting to the point where I was taking decisions about what I was going to do and I'm always a little wary of taking my own decisions. I'll do it and I'll take the consequences. But I always find it very helpful to have someone looking over my shoulder and saying, "Hang on, just perhaps think again". So, I'm looking for a spiritual

director. And luckily, very luckily, got pushed in the direction of Malcolm Johnson, and happily he took me on.

Interviewer: So, what was that like?

Jay: A special direction itself I think is a great thing which people perhaps don't know enough about. But it's an unfortunate phrase because direction implies telling people what to do. And direction in this case means much more which way to go. So, it's really having someone alongside you, you can talk to in total confidence about absolutely anything and decide between you which way is God saying I should go or I shouldn't go, which is the right way to go? And it's an invaluable thing which I'm so surprised that more people don't use. It's something that the Church of England has provided free of charge, of course, and to have a spiritual friend like that, it's just an invaluable thing.

Interviewer: And were you able quite early on with Malcolm to be clear about your journey in terms of your trans identity?

[0:12:33]

Jay: Oh, before we even met.

Interviewer: Okay.

Jay: Maybe. He took me on on the basis that that's what I was.

Interviewer: Okay. So, tell me a little bit about the beginnings of Sibyls then, because that, the impression I get is that it grew out of your relationship with Malcolm and you were encouraged by Malcolm to think about that.

Jay: It did, it did. I had discovered via the church that I could listen to people. And I decided that doing the spiritual direction course myself would be a good thing to do. So, I did the two year course with Southwark diocese and owe them a lot because that was a most intriguing course and I really enjoyed it and learned so much. So, I emerged as a fully-fledged spiritual director and thought, "What do I do with this?" And didn't really know. And talking to Malcolm about it, the idea for Sibyls cropped up and he said, "Why don't you form a group for Christian transgendered people?"

Interviewer: There was nothing like that around then?

Jay: There was nothing like that around. There were groups for transgendered people, Beaumont and Seahorse and other groups as well, but none with a specific Christian emphasis.

Interviewer: Okay. Tell me about the name. We haven't talked about that.

Jay: The name came along with some difficulty. It was hard to find a name for a group like this that really covered it. And I certainly couldn't find an acronym that worked. So, the thought flipped across my mind about the Sibyls which of course were the classical women who spoke the word of God. Well, that seemed to sum us up rather nicely. Let's go for that.

Interviewer: I think it's perfect. I think it's really good.

Jay: It worked, yeah.

Interviewer: So, tell me about the very beginning of Sibyls. What did you do? How did you make it known that you were around? Because presumably also that involved you breaking cover to some extent and being more public about, yeah.

Jay: Yeah. I wasn't so bothered by it myself in those days. I'd learned that you could be fairly open in the closed world.

Interviewer: Okay. What was the closed world then?

Jay: The closed world of transgenderism, of the various societies and groups. They were all very good and they did respect confidence.

Interviewer: And what about your daughters by this stage?

Jay: Oh, they knew, of course.

Interviewer: They knew. Okay. So, did that give you a little bit more freedom?

Jay: It gave a lot more freedom because I didn't have to worry about them knowing, they knew, and had in their different ways coped with it.

[0:15:08]

Interviewer: Okay. So, you made the decision you're going to set something up. What was it like at the beginning?

Jay: Quite easy actually, because it really was a matter of advertising in all the various magazines which, the group magazines like the Beaumont Society's magazine, the little bulletin that the Seahorse produced, all of them, wherever possible, just making it known I was going to do this and there would be an initial meeting in several months' time because obviously it takes time for the word to get around and eventually there would be a meeting at my house.

Interviewer: Okay, so this is where you first met?

Jay: This is where we first met.

Interviewer: There'll be a pink plaque.

(Laughter)

And how many people came to that?

Jay: There were five of us.

Interviewer: Okay, okay.

Jay: The original five of us.

Interviewer: Okay, okay. And when was that?

Jay: That was on 3rd August 1996.

Interviewer: Okay. All right. So, 20 years this year.

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And of those people I'm guessing, unlike people who are coming to perhaps a Beaumont meeting who for the first time we're identifying as trans, these are people who had made that step but we're saying there's some part of my identity as a person that is not being met fully and I want to explore that with other people. Would that be about right?

Jay: It would be, actually it was more complicated than that. There were various people. Three of us were transsexual, one was transvestite, and the final one was really interesting because she was a normally born woman who was interested in writing a book about someone who was Christian and transgendered. And she asked if she could join us. And the blessing was, of course, that what else can you say but yes? And that solved everything because there was a debate then, should it be for transvestite people, should it be for transsexual people, should it be for all people, should there be any exclusions or inclusions? And the fact there was someone who fell right outside that but was interested opened it up and there was no argument after that. Anyone who wanted to come was welcome.

Interviewer: So, I notice now that Sibyls meetings are advertised as being for people who identify as transsexual, transvestite, transgender and their friends and allies. Has it always been like that?

Jay: It grew out of that, that anyone who was really interested and had an association was very welcome.

Interviewer: How did you keep it a safe space for people? Or has it just always been possible to do?

[0:17:47]

Jay: With difficulty. It had to be kept safe. So many people could lose jobs. So many people could lose families. For the members who were priests, they could lose job, living, everything. It had to be kept very, very secret. So, the golden rule in Sibyls was that Sibyls as a group is open. Anyone can know about us, but no one will know anything about the membership.

Interviewer: That's quite, yeah, very clever way of doing it. And that's worked, that's served you really.

Jay: That worked because there was a fantastic headline in The Sunday Times about a year or two after we were formed, really sensational about transsexuals holding services in churches. Wonderful, fabulous day if you like. And for years the reporter concerned was trying to infiltrate Sibyls to find what he thought were two priests who had transitioned. And he was determined to find these two absolutely non-existent priests, and he was trying very hard to get into our group. And to the credit of everyone in the group he didn't.

Interviewer: That's a real mutual dependency which I guess creates a loyalty, doesn't it, to one another and yeah. So, what happened at your early Sibyls meetings, what sort of format were they?

Jay: Well, the first meeting here, of course, was simply a dinner to talk about it and sit on the patio afterwards and discuss where we were going to go.

Interviewer: Sounds a good start.

Jay: Which was a good start. The next meeting was arranged by Malcolm, who took us to the, he was the master of the Royal Foundation of St Katharine in Limehouse, and he offered space there if we, and a communion service, if we would organise things, which of course we were delighted to do. And Malcolm has been a huge strength throughout. And we held the first meeting there when we got one more member.

Interviewer: Great.

Jay: And it grew. And we've been usually holding about two, sometimes three, meeting at weekends a year and the next one at the Limehouse Royal Foundation produced a lot more people came to that and it's just grown.

Interviewer: Do people tend to have a cycle of time within Sibyls and then move on? Or do they stay or...?

Jay: It's very variable. It depends entirely on the individual. Interestingly, it has been mainly transsexual people who have joined, who've been seeking, obviously to move from one sex to the other, which is strange and transvestites have come but have been relatively scarce. I've never quite understood why except of course presumably they can manage their dual lives a little more easily, as it were. So, it has largely been transsexual people and a lot have come, gained a lot from Sibyls. Transitioned, moved on and disappeared and are now running their lives. Occasionally you hear of some of them doing very nicely indeed.

Interviewer: Good. That sounds healthy.

Jay: It's the way it should be.

Interviewer: How have you managed the diversity of people within the trans community? I think we've talked before about is there any such thing. Because they're very different experiences, aren't they?

Jay: They're all different people and they might be looking for similar things, but it's always different. Every human being is that bit different. And I think we've been in a way blessed by circumstances, because people who join Sibyls desperately needed to find something or somewhere where they were understood. In the first couple of years, we had a rush of people and most of them had been thrown out of churches and they were looking for somewhere where there was something spiritual that they could relate to. So, they all had that commonality of need which overcame differences in aims. And we got on very well indeed.

[0:22:11]

Interviewer: And you've always been very clear that Sibyls is not about campaigning, it's actually about fellowship and pastoral support and...

Jay: Yes. It wasn't the campaigning group. So many people needed help and support and that's what it was about. And it was administered one to the other all round. I mean, it wasn't a question of someone being in charge and offering it. It was everyone was helping everybody else and friendships and advice and everything was freely given. It was great sharing.

Interviewer: What did you learn about church in the process of setting up Sibyls? I mean it sounds as if you had people who were refugees from some pretty bad experiences. How did it change your relationship with church? It sounds as if you were in quite a good place.

Jay: I was in quite a good place. I was okay. I was accepted and I did transition in my church. And the church was very good about it. Probably about ten members of the church who found it vaguely horrifying and couldn't cope. But the rest were fine. So...

Interviewer: What does not coping look like?

Jay: It was a shying away. Sort of if you see me approaching retreat five yards to keep out of the way. As someone said, I don't know what to say. Well, you just say hello. It's simple. But that was too hard. So, they didn't cope.

Interviewer: I mean it's ironic to think of them coping when I stop to think about what you were having to cope with. Who really in this situation needs to be doing the coping?

Jay: Yes, I do remember we had one big event and I was sort of left standing in the middle of a vast open space being watched by everybody about ten days after I'd come out. I did feel very much on public view.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm sure. But these were people who'd got an established relationship with you.

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Jay: And of course, that changed. It's always the rule. It always seems to work that way. But when I transitioned in church, the male friends fell away and the female ones came in.

Interviewer: Isn't that interesting?

Jay: It's the way it went.

Interviewer: Yeah. Were you expecting that?

Jay: Not really, no.

Interviewer: Got no template for it I guess. Everyone's different. Yeah.

Jay: But it was nice.

Interviewer: Yeah, it sounds nice. Were you working still by this stage?

[0:24:40]

Jay: I was still working, yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And you transitioned at work?

Jay: No.

Interviewer: Okay.

Jay: No, I never transitioned at work. I waited till I retired.

Interviewer: Okay.

Jay: The arrangement was I would take early retirement, clearing out the older ones, I think. And which I did and transitioned the following Monday.

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Interviewer: Golly. (Laughter) So the start of a new life.

Jay: Absolutely.

Interviewer: So, you had plenty of time on your hands I guess.

Jay: When?

Interviewer: When you retired.

Jay: I didn't really because sorting things out, getting things in order, and that I went for the operation two months after I retired which had been prearranged.

Interviewer: Golly, and you'd still got two youngish daughters though.

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Jay: But old enough then to cope.

Interviewer: So, how did the church support you through that very intense period, the sort of surgery and all of that?

Jay: It didn't really, terribly intense.

Interviewer: Okay.

Jay: It was just something you do. As the surgeon said, the major problem is while you're waiting for the... (Laughter)

Interviewer: Is that right?

Jay: And in the 70s, right. Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah. Because you'd been living as Jay for some time by now. Yeah. Okay. Did the church mark that for you in any way liturgically or...?

Jay: No. It didn't. Malcolm came and anointed me with oil before I went to the hospital. But I think that's as far as it went.

[0:26:12]

Interviewer: Oh okay. Do you feel there's a need for that for people or a declining need because people's understanding of religion is changing?

Jay: I think some people would like that. It wasn't available in any shape or form when I went through the process and I don't really feel the loss of it.

Interviewer: You don't feel the loss of it? No. Okay. Okay, that's interesting. What about, for example, your baptism. What happened to that person?

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: Was she always Jay?

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- Jay: It is an awkward one. I really don't know what the answer is. A good friend who was a parish priest did ask me that round about the time, what about your baptism? Well, sorry, I'm not going to hang on to that for the name I had then. That seems inappropriate. I think it's overtaken by events.
- Interviewer: I think that sounds a sensible way of seeing it. Yeah, that seems a very sensible way of seeing it. So, to return to Sibyls again a little bit more, I know you've not been involved with them for a few years now. How long were you, leading is not the right word, but how long were you involved with them for? And what sorts of things did you do together?
- Jay: I'm trying to count up. I think probably about 2009 I announced I was going to retire. So, I suppose I was with them for 13 years or so.
- Interviewer: 15 years, yeah.
- Jay: We really, it was really, it was running the weekends, because twice a year on average we held weekends, firstly at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine's because it was so welcoming.
- Interviewer: What was it like it's St Katharine's when Malcolm was there?
- Jay: It was a lovely, warm refuge, bang in the middle of the East End, surrounded by traffic howling around. And inside it was peaceful and lovely and reflective and very welcoming.
- Interviewer: Okay. And did you find it easy to get people to come and talk with you or to spend time with you? Or was it just about sharing with one another?
- Jay: It was both. I've always felt strongly that it was a question of encouraging people to find themselves and to find their God. That was what it was about. No prescription of saying what that should be, but they should find it. So, the aim was to provide services that satisfied, that were exploratory. We also, tried to get speakers along who would say talk about something that was leading on to something different, something better. Some were amazingly good.
- Interviewer: Can you remember who was good? Name names.
- Jay: Well, a name of course that really comes to mind is Lionel Blue.
- Interviewer: Right, okay.
- Jay: Who was inspirational and was wonderfully supportive, and who also came to entertain us as well as... (Laughter)
- [0:29:20]
- Interviewer: He's entertaining just by being, isn't he?
- Jay: Absolutely. Great fun.
- Interviewer: Okay. That must have felt very special for people.

Jay: Yes. The other good thing we did, which was again Malcolm's idea, which we did from the word go at the weekends was have an entertainment section on a Saturday night. So, after dinner, people would be expected to do a turn.

Interviewer: Oh, my goodness.

Jay: Which sounds absolutely awful.

Interviewer: It does.

Jay: But we made it compulsory. So, they could do anything they like. A song, a dance, a joke, a routine, a poem, a favourite reading or anything. And people did. And after a time or two, people wanted to do it. And you've got them absolutely queuing up to do it.

Interviewer: Was this the beginning of your dancing days?

Jay: My dancing days were slightly before it, but I did bring that into it.

Interviewer: So, we were just talking about how the evening entertainment was a really important part of people being together. Tell me a little bit more about that. Why do you think it was so important to what you did?

Jay: Well, it was good fun. So, it was people laughing together and enjoying themselves together, which is always a good foundation for good fellowship. But more importantly, without realising it, they were doing things as themselves, being who they were and then finding they could do and finding they could actually enjoy doing it. And I think the amount of confidence that gave to each and every one must have made quite a difference.

Interviewer: Because it's a terrifying thing to do I think.

Jay: It is a terrifying thing to do if you've no idea what to do or what your reception will be, but what I knew the reception would be good because they were good people.

Interviewer: There's a lot of grace in that gathering by the sounds of things.

Jay: They would not have been unkind, but even so people did it and found they could.

Interviewer: And I guess people had to dig within themselves to work out is what is the unique thing I might have to bring to this gathering. So, the process of that is probably more important than the performance.

Jay: That's important. I think both were important. Yeah, just the fact of being and doing, I can do it.

Interviewer: Can you remember any of those performances, your own or other people?

Jay: Oh, there were some brilliant that people who could tell stories, some could, some very moving poems. Just a wonderful blur of people giving of themselves. It didn't matter what they did, it was always good.

[0:32:10]

Interviewer: It would be, wouldn't it?

- Jay: It was. It was a bit harder for those of us who were going regularly to keep dredging up something.
- Interviewer: Fresh repertoire.
- (Laughter)
- Maybe that's why people did a few years and moved on. They ran out of things to do. I don't think that's very likely. It does sound like they were very lovely gatherings. Did you have a communion service together usually as well?
- Jay: We started off with having two communion services in the weekend, slightly different each time, preferably different denominations. But we found that actually was a bit much and people were happy with one.
- Interviewer: Okay. And you used that very unusual space that St Katharine's has got. Their chapel's quite distinctive, isn't it?
- Jay: Very distinctive. It has been rebuilt since, but it was quite distinctive. And of course, we didn't only use St Katharine's, we did start moving out over the country. Windermere and Holland House and places like that, Worthy(?) Hall.
- Interviewer: What were those places like? Was it difficult to find places that would...?
- Jay: It was difficult in those days because you had to go along and explain to them saying you've got this bunch of transgendered people who want to come for a weekend. Shock horror. I don't know whether we can cope. And obviously the ones who went could cope and cope actually very well because it's not quite so bad when you actually do it.
- Interviewer: I'm sure it's not quite so bad, but we're talking about the early 90s at this point, are we? Things were very different.
- Jay: Yes, yes. Things were different.
- Interviewer: Yes, a long time ago. So, was it always your hope that people would move through Sibyls and be able to just integrate? What are your thoughts about?
- Jay: Oh, the hope was that people would find their way through Sibyls. They would become the persons they wanted to be and they would get on with life. And the hope was that the church could gradually, gradually fall into line and be accepting that actually this wasn't a terrible sin and we weren't doing anything wrong. We were just actually seeking to be who we were.
- Interviewer: So, are the people who came to Sibyls, many of them had had difficult experiences in church, didn't feel there was a space for them in church. You were in quite a good place, but you've always been quite clear you were saying that Sibyls was not an alternative church. Can you tell me a little bit about that?
- Jay: It couldn't be a church because it was too infrequent. We used to have two weekends a year, odd house gatherings, mainly at my place. And it wasn't enough to replace a church where people were looking for a regular weekly thing. We just couldn't. We hadn't got the resources to provide it. Sibyls was always far too small. So, I was very, very clear we were never setting up as an alternative church.
- Interviewer: So, people would try to stay rooted in a local community if they could, but that I guess would be more or less difficult depending on where they were.

[0:35:07]

Jay: It depended on where they were and the encouragement was to try and find somewhere where they would be welcome and where they would feel at home. Not always possible.

Interviewer: And I guess Sibyls who knew of good churches could point people in the right direction or...?

Jay: Yes, but it's a big country.

Interviewer: It's a very big country. Yeah. It is a very big country. Do you have a sense that church has become more accepting, an easier place? I mean, you can't generalise, I know, but...

Jay: I definitely have a sense that the church as a whole, put it this way, there are more churches that are accepting. Church as a whole, as an institution, rather different.

Interviewer: I think that reflects the dichotomy that there is around for a lot of LGBT people that what they experience at a ground level is great. But actually, the hierarchy is less excellent. An awful lot of that must be that people who've come through Sibyls have gone back to the churches they're part of and been part of making that change happen, even though you say you weren't campaigning group. Just by being and being confident enough to be.

Jay: I've certainly found that people by being themselves and being sincerely themselves have had an effect on other people, particularly congregations and priests, to think, yes, they are sincere. And then to find that it's not such a terrible thing. Yes, we can accept.

Interviewer: So, all of you really were pioneers.

Jay: I think everyone did something to further the cause by just being and getting on with it.

Interviewer: How much have you kept in touch with people?

Jay: It varies enormously. Some have kept in touch very faithfully and we correspond, talk, whatever. Others have moved on. And that's fine too.

Interviewer: Has the world moved on?

Jay: I think the world has moved on.

Interviewer: Can you characterise that at all?

Jay: Oh yes, I think society at large is quite accepting. I don't think being trans in any form days is really a problem. I know there are always going to be sink estates and awkward people who are going to be horrible. But the world in general, I think is okay. It might not totally understand, but it's much more accepting than it ever used to be. So, yes, I think things are improving.

Interviewer: And again, what do you put that down to? Just openness, awareness, experiencing people realising we're human?

Jay: I think the openness. The fact that there came a time when nobody didn't know of or know someone who wasn't in terms. People just knew and it stopped being an unknown terror and became, "Oh yeah, is that all?"

Interviewer: That's the least exciting thing around. What about church for you then? Your journey through your trans experience has been...?

[0:38:20]

Jay: I'm sorry but Sibyls has largely done for church for me. The problem is that I spent an awful lot of time writing to, talking with, discussing with archbishops and bishops. Trying to get the trans point of view over to them, which we were okay. And it always seemed to me that I was meeting people who didn't want to understand, sometimes were downright nasty about it, frequently were well-intentioned, but utterly ineffectual. And they just were doing nothing for the good. And I found I just couldn't cope with that. I have no respect. And I then thought if church is run by people like that.

And the other factor which is interesting is that I've always believed in trust yourself. And I've always found in church that I've tended to sit there and look out of the window and think, watch the trees, because they're usually trees around a church, and the sky, and think there's life going on out there. That's where God is. What's going on in here? Not so sure about that. But I've just come from the realisation that God is important, God is around, that church is not necessarily the place to be.

Interviewer: I'm interested in the contrast between how you'd see the general population's embracing of trans diversity and how you characterise Christian leaders' failure to embrace. I mean, you can't stand in their shoes but what do you think that's about? Why would one not want to hear that?

Jay: I think it's a question of human institutions, of church as a human institution. They get set in their ways and I don't think we want to change and having to change is troublesome. It means you've got to do something and talk to something and legislate for something. And I think it all gets a bit, we just really can't be bothered.

Interviewer: Sad, though, isn't it?

Jay: Utterly sad.

Interviewer: When you think of the riches of what you've described to me in terms of relationships and people's ability to minister to one another that the church can't hold on to that seems a massive lost opportunity.

Jay: Yes. And I think the trouble with a lot of human institutions are they are not very fleetfooted.

Interviewer: So, you talked about providing spiritual direction as part of what you've offered back to the community. Is that something which has been very important to you in terms of your giving back?

Jay: I think it has been quite important because I used what gifts I picked up and learned in spiritual direction and I did use them in Sibyls and it really was a question of listening to lots of people, being alongside lots of people and generally trying to find a direction for them and say the question of finding their direction, not what I thought.

Interviewer: What was it like to see the diversity of what those directions would be like?

Jay: Not so much a diversity of directions. People find their own lives and all lives are diverse. And yet they have a similarity. We are human. You have to live within that limitation. I'm just lucky to see people blossom.

Interviewer: I bet. I bet it was lovely. They always struck me as a very warm group. You've had a life beyond you actually.

Jay: Oh yes, well that I wanted, because I did try and get out a little bit early. I was getting older. And in a sense had done it and there's no sense in hanging on indefinitely. Other people, if it is to continue, will soon or later have to take over. So, it's always better sooner than later.

Interviewer: Can I ask you about the other four people who met here at your first meeting? What do you know of where they are now?

[0:42:53]

Jay: One is a successful author. One has qualified as a doctor and has disappeared to me. One has died. One is soldiering on.

Interviewer: That's great. That's lovely. That feels like a really nice place to end but is there anything else I should have talked with you about? Anything more that we might cover?

Jay: I don't think so. We didn't talk about the dancing, but I don't know whether you really want to talk about that or not.

Interviewer: (Laughter) I'm fascinated by it, really. Because you were talking to me earlier about you're a professional belly dancer.

Jay: Belly dancer.

Interviewer: Yes.

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: So, how did that happen?

Jay: Well, I got interested in belly dancing when I was driving out to dinner one night and listening to this talk on the radio about the difficulties of belly dancing, what fun it was, what a challenge it was. And I thought it's fine because I've always loved dancing. And so, I pursued this one and basically found my way to it. In those days perhaps as hard as finding the Beaumont Society.

Interviewer: (Laughter) Just different.

Jay: Yes. And the lovely thing about belly dancing from my perspective is of course you don't need a partner. It is essentially a woman's dance for women. That's it.

Interviewer: In front of women only usually or not?

Jay: Ah, theoretically, so they say. I'd rather doubt it. I think if something is, can be taken as sensual or sexual men will usually find their way into it.

Interviewer: (Laughter) Okay.

Jay: So, I'm not so sure about that one. Anyway, I found it and it took time and I really enjoyed it. It was just hard work, very challenging, yes. You can do it from the word go, but it takes a long time to learn to do it well.

Interviewer: And you're still doing it?

Jay: And I'm still doing it. And I found a very challenging teacher and I found that a lot of people there were trying very hard to become good individual dancers and it seems a very logical thing, so I turned professional at the age of 68, which is ridiculous of course. I thought it was hilarious. So, people pay me to dance at that age in this Western society?

Interviewer: I think it's wonderful.

Jay: I think it was hilarious.

[0:45:20]

Interviewer: Has it brought you a lot of joy?

Jay: And I quite enjoyed it, but on the other hand it was a lot of hard work and a lot of travelling and a lot of fairly grotty conditions, and I decided eventually this is too much trouble. Leave it to the ones who are younger, are really making their way, and the ones who want the money. So, I bowed out.

Interviewer: But you do still dance.

Jay: I still do dance. One of the few sword dancers in the country.

Interviewer: Okay. One of the few?

Jay: Sword dancers.

Interviewer: Sword dancers?

Jay: Yes.

Interviewer: You're going to have to explain that a little bit to me.

Jay: I'm a belly dancer who can use a sword and can balance the sword and do things balancing.

Interviewer: Okay.

(Laughter)

Okay. Yeah. Have you ever done belly dancing with the Sibyls?

Jay: Yes, I have.

Interviewer: Has that ever been your turn? When you've done the entertainment?

Jay: Oh, it has, quite frequently because when I was starting with this, which is more or less the same time as Sibyls was coming along, and you do think every time you've got to do one and being the leader, there's no way I could ever have possibly opted out of it.

Interviewer: That sounds wonderful.

Jay: So, this is what we're do in belly dancing. Teaching what we're doing. You know, a few simple moves. They enjoyed that, and I found it went very well. So, that was good. And so, gradually I started dancing was usually my thing to do my turn.

Interviewer: It sounds wonderful. It sounds really lovely. Just a lot of joy. Yeah.

Jay: Nobody else did it.

Interviewer: No, too right. Beats your poem hands down. Lovely. Jay, thank you so much. I mean thank you for this interview and thank you for your legacy and the Sibyls. I know that it's something that's still tremendously important to people. Your story has been very important to my journey of understanding, and we first met 15 years ago, and that was very important to me and has underpinned a lot of my thinking and awareness over that period. So, thank you so much for this and thank you for the interview. Thank you.

Jay: I've really enjoyed it. Thank you.

[End of Transcript]