



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Uneven Progress of Gay Pride

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This week, when I told one of you I was preaching on gay pride today, you said, "why? Did something happen? Gay pride happens in June!"

It's true there are a lot of pride parades in June, but gay pride is supposed to be a year-round thing, and yes, something did happen. Events both hopeful and hateful to the LGBT, the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender community, happen regularly. In the last year, it's been a real mixture of winning legal rights, events (such as Arcadia City Hall hosting a Focus on the Family speaker) that cause community concern, and the well-publicized slew of gay teen suicides last fall. All these along with the continuing hate crimes against the LGBT community: the latest reported one happened last weekend on George Washington University's Campus. The victim, a straight male student who was only perceived to be gay, doesn't even remember what happened, the brain trauma injury was that severe.¹

Attacks on those merely perceived to be gay are not unusual. In 2008, two Ecuadorian brothers were walking home in Brooklyn late at night a little tipsy and arm-in-arm; two men displaying casual affection in public isn't so unusual in their home culture. But it was enough to incite a group of men to assault them while shouting anti-gay epithets. One of the brothers was declared brain-dead two days later.²

Sometimes, we'll also hear about disturbing trends, such as the homelessness epidemic of GLBT youth. Currently, of the estimated 1.6 million homeless American youth, between 20 and 40 percent identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Why do LGBT youth become homeless? In one study, 26 percent of gay teens who came out to their parents or guardians were told they must leave home; LGBT youth also leave home due to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. If leaving home wasn't bad enough, LGBT youth report they are threatened, belittled and abused at shelters by staff and other residents.³

I begin with some of the most distressing facts, in part to get them out of the way, but also to get your attention. It's human nature that we mostly want to focus on the positive, and celebrate the good news. Well let's do that, too. Since 2004, five states and the District of Columbia have full same-sex marriage rights: Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, and New Hampshire. Iowa? Seriously, Iowa before California? Aaaaar! My 88-year old Grandma who lives in Davenport loves to rub this in my face. Since Obama became president, there have been three achievements toward equality and justice:

The Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act, an Act of Congress, was signed into law by President Obama in October, 2009. I'm still not sure how he did this, but in December, 2010, Obama led congress to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell in our military. And then most recently last month, the Justice Department says it refuses to defend in court the Defense of Marriage Act, DOMA, which defines marriage as only between a woman and man, calling it unconstitutional. But the caveat here is that the administration will still enforce it as law until it gets struck down by the courts, and House Republicans have vowed to defend DOMA since the Justice Dept won't.

Still, all told, that is a lot of progress in less than one decade's time.

So now that we've reviewed the evidence of gay pride's uneven progress, let's turn this into a sermon. Let's

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<http://www.towleroad.com/2011/03/straight-student-sustains-brain-injury-from-brutal-anti-gay-assault-at-george-washington-university.html>

² <http://brooklynian.com/forum/crown-heights-and-prospect-lefferts-gardens/man-killed-in-brooklyn-hate-crime>

³ http://thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/homeless_youth

get to the heart of the matter. The truth is, none of the above addresses the issue of gay pride. We hear about the horrors of hate crimes, and we hear about gleaming legal victories, but little, very little, is ever discussed in our media, or in any broader cultural outlet, about this: the life and death struggle of members of the LGBT community to achieve a positive self-image. We don't hear as much about how common low self-esteem is, or the widespread tendencies toward self-destruction in this community. As far as I know, not even the UU OWL program, Our Whole Lives sex education curriculum, adequately addresses how deeply wounding the social stigma of being lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or transgender can be.

Let me be clear: not every member of the LGBT community has such dramatic struggles in finding peace with who one is, but from what I can tell - from research, and from my own friendships - it's unusual to come of age LGBT successfully, without a fair amount of very challenging emotional work, even in the best of circumstances. My aim in this sermon is to lift up a certain angle of a well-known issue that doesn't get talked about enough - the dearth of authentic gay pride - and how this stymies the broader well-being of the LGBT community, whether legal victories come to pass or not. This is about looking at, right in the eye, what prevents right relationship, within families and society, but especially right relationship with ourselves, and that means every one of us. Let me be clear: this is not just an LGBT issue, for living in a straight world affects every man, woman, and child. No matter how dimly we may be aware of it, the menace of macho masculinity oppresses us all.

At the heart of right relationship is acceptance and authentic affirmation of who someone really is, not matter how different. But this is prevented because seeing what acceptance and affirmation of the LGBT community looks like is in short supply in our mainstream media. The little there is in television is limited to adult programming. Let's see . . . there's Ellen, there's Wanda Sykes, there was that sit-com, Will & Grace . . . there's Rachel Maddow, and there's . . . us! The liberal religious community - who rarely get into the news unless we're victims of a hate crime.

Recently my Grandma in Iowa sent me a February 12th article from the Quad-City Times, with the headline, "Unitarians turn tragedy into lesson in tolerance." It talks about how Valentines' Day has become National Standing on the Side of Love day, a UU campaign inspired by the heinous shooting at a Knoxville UU church in 2008. The shooter was described in the article as unemployed, depressed, and ready to take his anger out on what he called an "ultraliberal" church that "never met a pervert they just didn't embrace." He walked into the church one summer Sunday morning, and fired into a group of 200 people watching a children's performance of the musical "Annie."

"He killed two people and wounded another six before church members wrestled him to the ground . . . The night after the shooting the church held a vigil that was attended by an overflow crowd . . . The service ended with the children, on their own initiative, singing the "Annie" theme song with the lyrics "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow."

That image will forever choke me up. Our UU children, assuring adults that a better day lies ahead, when ignorance and hatred are not so destructive. This image is further nuanced by the fact that, for many members of the LGBT community, the destruction of ignorance and hatred associated with homophobia begins when they are children. What acceptance and authentic affirmation of LGBT looks like isn't just in short supply in the media, it's in even shorter supply in average family life, where children grow up. I've known that's true for a long time, but two books have really brought it home to me, and I want to strongly recommend them. They are quick and easy reads: *The Velvet Rage* by psychologist Dr. Alan Downs, with subtitle, *Overcoming the pain of growing up gay in a straight man's world*, and *The Meaning of Matthew* by Judy Shepard, with subtitle, *My Son's Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed*.

Toward the end of the book, Judy Shepard describes going through the mountain of letters and cards she received after her gay son Matthew was brutally beaten to death in 1998. It was emotionally exhausting, but she found herself continuously moved and inspired. She writes,

"Eventually, it occurred to me that it wasn't so much the details of Matt's life, or even the tragedy of his death, that drove many of these individuals to write. For most of them, it was the fact that my family was the first they could identify with. Many of the parents writing were in the same position I'd been in fifteen years earlier, when I first considered that my little boy might be gay but didn't know where to turn for more information. Many of the kids who were writing, I imagined, were in the same place Matt must have been when he first realized he was somehow 'different' but was too afraid to put words to that difference for fear that he'd be alienated from his friends and family."

Judy Shepard says it was by reading those cards and letters that she gained a clearer understanding of what the mission of the Matthew Shepard Foundation needed to be. She writes, "It wouldn't be about tolerance, since you tolerate bad hair days, not people. *It needed to be about accepting people for who they are*[italics are mine]."⁴

She goes on to outline how the foundation would achieve this mission, and it's about what you'd expect: partner with anti-hate campaigns, try to educate the public about the needs of LGBT youth. But I couldn't help wonder: isn't there something more . . . how do you really *teach* acceptance? Authentic acceptance comes most readily from a deeply cultural place, from the familiar comforts of culturally shared tradition.

There's no silver bullet to achieve the tipping point of cultural acceptance of LGBT. While it's true that younger generations seem more and more accepting, it's a mistake to simply wait for ignorance to literally die out. If we're doing nothing, we're approving a status quo that's clearly not acceptable. How many more homeless kids, suicides and hate crimes will it take before we as a society understand that this isn't just about laws? What I'm working up to here is that I'm not sure who's better equipped than liberal religious institutions to lead the necessary cultural shift that will save lives.

In a perfect world, it would be our elementary schools, no matter what flavor - public, private, charter, whatever - that would make such basic human education part of their core curriculum. It could include the gay penguin story of the Central Park zoo in New York⁵. Children would all learn from the get-go that being gay is natural, normal, no big whoop.

But we know that changing culture is a slow and arduous process. This church has a magnificent history of fighting for LGBT rights. However, since Prop 8 passed in 2008, we've gotten very quiet. There are several reasons why, but that's not important. What's important to consider now is that there is a big, big need for our voice - there is an unfilled need in the community, and *our faith in particular* calls on us to fill that need. There are so many forms that filling this need could take, but one that seems like a no-brainer is making sure that Neighborhood Church becomes known in our community as a safe place for LGBT youth. While there's a P-Flag youth group that's been meeting here for some time, it's sparse, and I suspect there is much more we could do to outreach to LGBT youth who are on the brinks. Let me know if you'd like to be part of an exploratory task force.

As for the book, *The Velvet Rage*, while it's written for gay men, again in a perfect world, everyone would read it, because there's so much insight shed on how damaging living in a straight world can be. It describes a series of stages. At a young age, once a gay boy knows he is 'different,' instead of being affirmed, the message he receives is to be ashamed. In order to avoid feeling shame, he begins a long quest to be validated. But since he can't be authentically validated for who he really is, all his energy is put into developing attributes that society readily validates, such as being smart, funny, well muscled, and wealthy.

Have you ever wondered about the stereotype of gay people being so 'fabulous?' Before I read *The Velvet Rage*, I used to think one reason I had so many gay friends was because they're smarter and funnier than other people. Think of all the people in the media for whom it's okay to be gay: they're almost all comics,

⁴ *The Meaning of Matthew* by Judy Shepard 2009, pp. 263 - 4.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/And_Tango_Makes_Three

they're larger than life, and they're fabulous. Could it be that, society will only accept a gay or lesbian, forget bi or trans, who is extraordinary? We can see this in a lot of -isms - racism, sexism, ageism - you have to be exceptional to be acceptable. Why would it be any different for LGBT that they feel they must compensate for who they are?

But no matter how smart, funny, or rich one becomes, it means very little in the end if we can't just be accepted for who really are, whatever our difference is from the mainstream. Toward the end of the book we learn that some of the happiest gay people are ones who have given up 'fabulous' for being ordinary. They are secure in their sense of self, and they have a solid community of people from whom receiving authentic validation is the normal way of life. Kind of like, I imagine, so many of our own LGBT members who call this church home.

It was my friend Chris who told me to read *The Velvet Rage*. I've known Chris since 4th grade, and we became friends when we both shared the same public speaking event for our High School speech team, SOS, Special Occasion Speaking. I was the first friend he came out to, literally the day after High School graduation. I had no clue - he hid it so well. Chris himself would say that he's made uneven progress toward authentic gay pride. He struggles with the body-building obsession, a body image disorder that he knows has a name - it's called Body Dysmorphic Disorder. And recently he's seen his share of tragedy in the gay community. In just three years, he knew four gay men who committed suicide, including his ex-boyfriend.

This may sound melodramatic, but I'm so grateful that I haven't lost any of my gay, bi, and lesbian friends to an early death. They are some of the dearest people in my life, and a few of them have come close to dying. HIV, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, suicide - these kinds of things have become so common in the LGBT community that it seems we're desensitized. Have we come to accept that that's just the price a community pays for being different? How long do we teach this to our children, until we insist on addressing the root of the problem, until we insist on teaching authentic acceptance?

Judy Shepard never wanted to become a public speaker, but she realized all she had to do was tell her story. When she speaks to groups, and she's spoken to over a million people, she begins by saying that her son was killed because two men learned that it was okay to hate. She says,

"Somehow and somewhere they received the message that the lives of 'the others' are not as worthy of respect, dignity, and honor as the lives of 'us,'" . . . She says, "They were given the impression that society condones or is at least indifferent to violence against 'the others.'"

Then, as an introduction to her overall civil-rights campaign, Judy Shepard uses an acronym that a friend once shared with her:

"We have become a SIC society: silent, indifferent, and complacent," she says. "For all who ask what they can do for Matt and for all the other victims of hate - my answer is to educate and bring understanding where you see hate and ignorance, bring light where you see darkness, bring freedom where there is fear, and begin to heal."⁶

Let us do so, and let us all begin to heal.

⁶ Same, pp. 266 - 67.

