

What Is Pride?

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
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One of the unexpected pleasures of ministry is the jokes.

Seriously.

In every church I've served, someone, often several people, have made a practice of sharing or sending me comical emails, cards, or cartoons concerning religion, theology, or ministry. And yes, there is one among you who does that here. I have to say, I really appreciate them, because when I tell most non-church goers that I'm a minister, they often give me a look like I should have my head examined, as if every clergy-person believes the earth is flat and was created in the space of week by a grandfatherly, though sometimes cranky straight white man living in the sky. Well, the joke's on them, for as it happens, aspiring ministers, at least Unitarian Universalist (UU) ministers, are required to have their heads examined. Actually, we have both our head and hearts examined to help ensure we're going into this vocation for the right reasons.

But even before I got deeply into the UUA's process of examining my head and heart, I had begun my own internal investigation as to what this whole nagging call to ministry was all about. It seemed like more trouble than it could ever be worth, at least by contemporary American standards.

A turning point for me came one autumn day about twenty years ago at a place very nearby, just across the street in fact, on the beach at Mercy By The Sea. There, while meditating on my call, the word "hospitality" emerged in a way that seemed significant; significant but confusing.

You see, I was born the same year that the Stonewall riots, we learned about in our Time for All Ages today, took place. The Gay rights movement and I may have been born in the same year, but growing up it was abundantly clear, people like me, well, we were never meant to survive.

Indeed, Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival", our second reading, offers a disturbing, familiar account of what it's like to live as one of the lonely we... unable to "indulge the passing dreams of choice...who love in doorways coming and going in the hours between dawns...people imprinted with fear...always afraid...when the sun rises, afraid it might

not remain, when the sun sets, are afraid it might not rise in the morning...and...when we speak, afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when silent, still afraid.”

Lorde’s poetic imagery and language point to an experience often spoken of in plainer language stories shared among friends, in therapist’s offices, and even in prayer:

Like that of being bullied mercilessly in grade school.

Or as a young adult contemplating coming out, having my family doctor advise celibacy as the “responsible” option.

Being verbally attacked and threatened with physical violence by strangers.

People I know going out their way to tell me they “have no problem with me being gay” but questioning why we gays have to “flaunt it.”

And as a couple, my husband and I being stared and laughed at in public, being denied insurance coverage and, in one town in Pennsylvania, denied a hotel room.

Still, I count myself fortunate. Many others have been subjected to much worse.

Indeed, trauma is the shared inheritance of every LGBTQ+ person who grows up in a heterosexist society. Trauma whose effect is often higher rates of attempted and completed suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety, and high risk behaviors. All made doubly cruel when pointed to as a characteristic of LGBTQ+ people rather than an effect of relentless heteronormative assumptions and enforcement.

Now, it is true, many things have improved since 1969, even 2009, but the current aggressive assault on the worth and dignity of transgender youth and adults occurring nationwide and Supreme Court justices repeatedly signaling their willingness to revisit and rescind marriage equality is just another way of telling us we were never meant to survive.

And yet, here I am.

Out... and proud.

Gay pride or LGBTQ+ Pride is said to have begun after the Stonewall riots and is variously defined or described as, “An annual celebration, usually in June in the United States and sometimes at other times in other countries, of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identity.” (Britannica.com), “The promotion of the self-affirmation, dignity, equality, and increased visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and

transgender people as a social group.” (Wikipedia), “A celebration of people coming together in love and friendship, to show how far LGBTQ+ rights have come, and how in some places there's still work to be done. (bbc.org), and “A joyful celebration of all of the beautiful identities of our LGBTQ+ community.” (hrc.org)

Clearly, for celebrants, pride stands in direct opposition to the shame and social stigma frequently experienced both externally and internally by LGBTQ+ people. While those opposed often see it as flaunting something that should at the least be kept private if not eradicated once and for all.

Hidden beneath both the celebration and opposition to Pride is a common experience that I see as the true source of its power to inspire celebration and opposition...the experience of survival.

Indeed, for those never meant to survive, Pride IS survival.

And as I see it there are three essential blessings for survival for anyone, and doubly so as an LGBTQ+ person. They are:

The blessing of nature.

Self-blessing.

And the blessing of community.

The blessing of nature is all but guaranteed, for with rare exception everything that lives is imbued with the will to survive. Even a human baby, knowing nothing of the world into which it is born, knows to cry to be fed. Life doesn't readily give up on life.

Self-blessing, on the other hand, takes some work because it is not something we discover or arrive at once and for all, but a continual process. We bless ourselves when we live into our individuality. This is quite different from embracing the hyper-individualism that permeates and is encouraged throughout much of contemporary life. The philosopher Jacob Needleman describes individualism as, “a kind of egoistic, selfish thing: Me, me, me, me, and what I want and what I care, what I think and what I like.” Whereas to be a real individual is to be truly one's unique self, which he says, “is to be in contact with [the] great self within, [the] divinity within.”

The path to this “great self within” has been pointed to again and again through the world's great religious traditions and is often conceptualized as death and rebirth in one way or another. Self-blessing then is the process of dying to all that we aren't, so who we really are may live. Practically speaking this requires what in many spiritual disciplines

amounts to “a pause”, sometimes called a “sacred pause” that interrupts the relentless flow of distractions, preconceptions, and moralisms we acquire and incorporate unconsciously into our understanding of self and the world. This is the crucial point of most spiritual practices and rituals. The pause is necessary to create not a final resting place away from the world, but to set up your true home within. A home from which you can readily come and go throughout your life. The Buddhist teacher Tara Brach describes it this way,

“In bullfighting there is an interesting parallel to the pause as a place of refuge and renewal. It is believed that in the midst of a fight, a bull can find his own particular area of safety in the arena. There he can reclaim his strength and power. This place and inner state are called his *querencia*. As long as the bull remains enraged and reactive, the matador is in charge. Yet when the bull finds his *querencia*, he gathers his strength and loses his fear. From the matador's perspective, at this point the bull is truly dangerous, for he has tapped into his power.”

As essential as self-blessing is to survival, it sometimes needs a little help from outside. Indeed, the late poet Galway Kinnell wrote in his famous poem, *St. Francis and the Sow*,

“for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness...”

And that's where the blessing of community as a third essential blessing for survival comes in. And while many LGBTQ+ people find community in secular gatherings, often with other LGBTQ+ people, for some, finding community within a religious community carries special meaning. Perhaps it's because for those of us of a certain age, churches were long the enemy, so to speak, oppressors who justified their cruelty in the name of a certain conception of God. And while Unitarians and Universalists cannot claim exemption from that past, we can claim to be among the first organized religious groups to move away from it.

Indeed, “In 1970, Unitarian Universalism was the first religion to officially condemn discrimination against gay people. The resolution condemned biphobia as well as homophobia. In 1971, the Unitarian Universalist Association published “About Your Sexuality”, an all-encompassing sex education program for teenagers that treated homosexuality as a valid and normal form of sexuality. UU's ordained our first openly gay minister in 1979, and first openly transgender minister in 1988. The UUA has officially supported Unitarian Universalist clergy performing services of union for same-sex couples since 1984.” Not surprisingly then, Unitarian Universalists were at the forefront of the fight for marriage equality in the early part of this century.

And you may have noticed, at the start of every service I make a point as part of the greeting, to mention Shoreline UU Society is a “Welcoming Congregation.” For those who may have wondered why that’s worth noting or perhaps what it even means beyond that we fancy ourselves friendly people, it refers to a program launched in 1989 by the UUA to support churches in intentionally becoming more inclusive of LGBTQ people in all aspects of church life. After meeting requirements related to church policy, education, advocacy, and more, congregations vote on becoming and are then officially designated a Welcoming Congregation. The program has been updated recently and congregations can renew their designation.

I share these historic milestones not to pat ourselves on the back for a job well done, but to emphasize that at the heart of the blessing of community is the genuine affirmation of another’s “loveliness” to use Galway Kinnell’s word. And, as a gay man having come back to organized religion as an adult after leaving it in my teens, it is hard to overstate what a blessing it is to not have to apologize for or hide who you are. It is a blessing to share joys with others and not be left alone in one’s sorrows. It is a blessing to have an external home that does not deny, but instead cherishes and helps one discover and maintain one’s true home within. These are among the blessings of community, including SUUS, which no doubt has and will continue to literally save lives for the foreseeable future.

Although I have attended parades and parties and donned my share of rainbow-colored garb in celebration of Gay Pride in June, I live Pride each day by surviving. Surviving in a world where I wasn’t meant to survive. Simply put, my presence is my pride. A presence sustained by the blessings of nature, self, and community.

And so, that the word hospitality emerged for me in reflection on my calling to ministry all those years ago at the beach across the street doesn’t seem so strange anymore. For as the late spiritual teacher and author Henry Nouwen wrote, “Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.” To me Nouwen’s view of hospitality captures the intention and effect of what I’ve described as the blessings of nature, self, and community. A lived practice of hospitality I have received from so many and am called now to return by my presence and shared ministry in a world where people like me weren’t meant to survive.

Amen and Blessed Be