

COMING OUT AS OUR FULLEST, DEEPEST SELVES

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Just three short years ago, I marched in Boston Pride for the first time. I was excited and also a little intimidated. I was new to Boston and the size of the city and the size of the event was a bit... overwhelming. Soon, though, the whistles blew and the bikes roared and we stepped off. I was marching with my seminary's gay/straight alliance and we were eagerly anticipating the reception of our new banner, which said: "We are tomorrow's Queer Clergy". We were not disappointed. All along the parade route, our banner was greeted with hoots and hollers and whistles. The mood was joyful and it seemed like the entire city was smiling and laughing. I was especially proud as we marched past 25 Beacon Street, the home of our own Unitarian Universalist Association, and saw fellow UU clergy, standing on the sidewalk, wearing clerical collars, and was reminded how early and how long our association has been working for gay rights.

Soon after, the parade was over and I, along with my friends, moved away from the main Pride area. We were happy and tired and hungry. Our new banner had been received with glee. We were ready to rest and recharge. As I stood talking in a circle with my friends, I felt someone hit me. It hurt and I cried out. Since I'd been hit on my back, I turned around to see what was going on. I saw a woman, holding a huge handbag, glaring at me, and walking away from me as fast as she could, while dragging a child by the hand. The boy was about seven or eight years old and he was staring at me too. Unlike the woman, whom I presume was his mother, he was not glaring; instead he looked simply confused. He had just seen his mother hit a woman on the back, probably breaking every childhood rule he had ever been taught, for no apparent reason he could tell. Unlike the boy, I was pretty sure I knew why I had been hit. I was, after all, standing in a group of people wearing T-shirts filled with rainbows and other gay-friendly messages, carrying poles and banners, not far from Pride. Unlike the boy, I could see the expression on his mother's face. It was filled with hatred.

Today is National Coming Out Day; a celebration of the first gay march on Washington D.C twenty-two years ago; a day on which people all over the country will "come out" – sharing their pride and self-acceptance in a wide variety of sexual orientation and gender identities. Even straight people come out today, asserting pride in their commitment to stand as supporters and allies of GLBTQ peoples. Today is a day of celebration and there is much to celebrate in the area of gay rights. There is also much which is still wrong, still unjust. There are still faces filled with hatred. There are still hospitals and judges denying visitation to the spouses and children of dying lesbians. If I think too much about these stories, if I think too much about how far we still are from a just society; I feel disheartened, discouraged, and unsure about what to do.

Emilie Townes, a womanist ethicist and a professor at Yale Divinity School, has a few thoughts on how to dismantle oppression. She tells us: "We begin with ourselves. Each of us must

answer the question: ‘What will we do with the fullness and incompleteness of who we are as we stare down the ... cultural production of evil.’¹ *We begin with ourselves.*

We begin with... constructing our identities. Townes tells us that “constructing an identity around what we are not is unhealthy and supremely deadly” on all levels – including economically, socio-politically, and theologically.² We can not identify ourselves by who we are not. We must identify ourselves by who we are.

In constructing our identities, we humans tend to start by categorizing and labeling. GLBTQQI. These are the labels we know and love. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, Intersex. We are familiar with these labels. We teach and learn them in our wonderful OWL classes. For those of you who might not know, OWL stands for Our Whole Lives and is a lifespan human sexuality curriculum, published by the UUA, the four components of which are: responsibility, self worth, sexual health, and justice. We can even add S and A to our alphabet soup of labels, for straight and ally.

As important and helpful as labels can be, I must admit that labels feel to me much like ill-fitting T-shirts. As I pull them on, one after another, they itch and chafe. The tags scratch at my back. They feel too tight. I pull and stretch in a vain attempt to make them fit more comfortably. I reject the dichotomy between straight and gay, a dichotomy which suggests we can claim only one identity or the other. If we are truthful with ourselves, I suspect many of us will find that a straight or gay identity is based as much on who we are not, as it is on who we are. It *others*. If I am straight, then I am not gay. And if I am gay, then I am not straight. I am neither. I am both.

What happens if we go beyond the boxes, beyond the categories? What happens if we take the labels off? What happens if there is no “other”? A dear friend and colleague says it’s this simple: We are all Sexual Human Beings. SHBs.

What would a world filled with SHBs look like? As it turns out, teenagers are showing us the way. Ritch Savin-Williams tells us: “The new gay teenager is in many respects the non-gay teenager. Perhaps she considers herself to be ‘postgay,’ or he says that he’s ‘gayish’... Their sexuality is not ... easily described, categorized, or understood apart from... their life in general.”³ “In response to the probes of parents, friends, and researchers, some teens label their lives with a sexual term – or are pushed into doing so. Many resist the temptation or they disrespect the notion. They think it’s an adult thing, being gay, and they find it difficult to relate to... These teens know they’re not totally straight, and they don’t want to be. Most are okay with it. Some are thrilled with their sexuality, but don’t see why they must therefore label themselves... Maybe their feelings are romantic but not sexual – or sexual but not romantic.”⁴ As one teen so eloquently put it: “If you want to know about me, don’t ask about my sexual label.”⁵

¹ Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, p. 159

² Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, p. 73

³ The New Gay Teenager, p. 1

⁴ The New Gay Teenager, p. 5

⁵ The New Gay Teenager, p. 2

I don't think that the sexual orientation or gender identity of teenagers is so different from the rest of us. I think they're learning to be more honest about who they are. I believe we can learn from them. They are, paradoxically enough, getting at an essential truth in a uniquely post-modern way.

I'm going to share some statistics with you in just a moment. This will be fun, I promise. The key thing to pay attention to is the fact that the numbers are going up. It doesn't really matter what the numbers are, just notice that they are going up. In one study⁶ of adult Dutch men, the following was found.

6% identified as gay or bisexual.

7% reported being in love at least once with another man.

8% said they *might* be homosexual.

13% reported having had sex with another man.

14% reported feeling physical attractions toward men.

In other words, non-gay men, men who do not identify as gay, are falling in love with other men and having sex with other men. This study is not at all unique in its findings. In fact, these numbers are rather conservative in comparison to similar studies. Our identities are complex. Our attractions, emotions, and behavior can and often do vary from our claimed identities. I believe it is this simple: We are sexual human beings. There is no *other*. We are sexual human beings. There is no *other*.

In doing the work of creating justice and dismantling oppression: *We begin with ourselves*. We construct our identities. And whether we are straight or gay, labeled or unlabeled, we allow our lights to shine, bringing more light into the world.

A second story, one I share with permission. A young man, twenty-one years old; a good man, wishing to be of service in the world; one day got on a plane and flew to Germany on a mission trip with his church. His job was to train missionaries to go out on the streets and work with drug and alcohol addicted teenagers. It was a mission of healing and it went well, for about two months. Eventually though, he came to the attention of the superiors. They suspected him of being a homosexual. He was told the homosexual demons must be exorcised from his body. They created a plan of recovery for him. They locked him up in a room by himself. He was not allowed to be in the presence of any women, for fear he might attack them. He was allowed one male mentor, who could visit with him and teach him about how to be a real man, but only with an open door. A sympathetic man volunteered to be his mentor. As the mentor gained the trust of the superiors, he was gradually allowed to bring the young man out for short errands. Eventually, when the mentor deemed it safe enough, he brought the young man to a telephone and told him to call his family and let them know what was happening. He did and returned to his room. A few days later, and after a total of thirty-five days of having been locked in a single room; the German police, having received a phone call from the young man's family, showed up. They rescued the young man, pressed charges against the mission, and closed it down.

We begin with ourselves. And we bring ourselves, in all "the fullness and incompleteness of who we are", to our relationships. At our best, we share our stories and we listen to the stories of others. We share and we listen deeply.

⁶ The New Gay Teenager, p. 38

Emilie Townes reminds us that we live our faith deeply in the everydayness of moral acts. She says: “It is in these acts that we do that say more about us than those grand moments of righteous indignation and action:

The everydayness of listening closely when folks talk or don’t talk to hear what they are saying;

The everydayness of taking some time, however short or long, to refresh ourselves through prayer or meditation;

The everydayness of speaking to folks and actually meaning whatever it is that is coming out of our mouths;

The everydayness of being a presence in people’s lives;

The everydayness of designing a class session or lecture or reading or writing or thinking;

The everydayness of sharing a meal;

The everydayness of facing heartache and disappointment;

The everydayness of joy and laughter;

The everydayness of facing people who expect us to lead them somewhere or at least point them in the right direction and walk with them;

The everydayness of blending head and heart;

The everydayness of getting up and trying one more time to get our living right.

It is in this everydayness that ‘we the people’ are formed. And we, the people of faith, must live and be witness to a justice wrapped in a love that will not let us go and a peace that is simply too ornery to give up on us...”⁷

It is here, in the everydayness of life at First Parish, that we the people are formed. It is here, when we come to worship, when we welcome visitors, when we embrace new members with open arms, when we volunteer with our free medical program, when we host the families in our interfaith hospitality program, when we send stoves to Guatemala, when we ring our church bell 350 times, that we the people of First Parish are formed. It is to these activities that we bring ourselves, our whole selves, in the everydayness of being together and forming relationships. We construct our individual identities. Through engaging in relationships with each other, we also construct our communal identity, the identity of First Parish. This is exactly the task set before the Vision 20/20 team. Although they may ask us in many different ways, the essential question they are getting at is: “Who are we, First Parish?” I hope that each of us, visitors, newcomers, and old timers alike, will take the time to ponder this powerful question.

The creation of justice and the dismantling of oppression is not easy work. Constructing identities and engaging in relationships is hard and difficult and often frustrating. The journey is filled with both joy and pain. I acknowledge these feelings and I hold them up. I have experienced joy and pain too, just like all of you.

So given the acknowledgement that this work is so difficult, why then should any of us engage in it? Some of you may have noticed that I have made an assumption throughout this sermon that we all do engage in social justice work. Some may feel that social justice work is not their calling. I understand that. What is commonly considered social justice work is not for everyone. I believe that every act of our lives, small or large, creates either justice or oppression.

⁷ Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, pp 164-165.

This is the idea behind the everydayness of moral acts. We *create*, whether we choose to create or not. We *create*, whether we choose to create or not. The choice then, is whether to add to or decrease justice in the world. As people of faith, our only moral choice is to increase justice.

Emilie Townes tell us: “We must live our lives not always comforted by the holy, but haunted by God’s call to us to live a prophetic and spirit-filled life, and not just talk about it or wish for it or think about it...”⁸ I am haunted by the holy. I am haunted by the face of a little boy; a boy who witnessed his mother’s attack on a stranger. I am haunted by a holy sea of broken and hurting human faces and I choose justice.

I am human and imperfect like all of you. All of us who choose justice will fall down. We’ll make mistakes. We’ll fail to listen deeply enough. We’ll fail to act. We’ll need to learn to forgive ourselves and others. Rumi reminds us that this is so:

“Come, come whoever you are
Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times
Come, yet again, come, come”
Come sit at the table of justice. All are welcome here. Amen and Blessed be.

⁸ Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, p. 161.