

“Are We There Yet?”
A Celebration of LGBTQ Pride Month
June 30, 2019

Opening Words – By UU Rev. Hannah Roberts Villnave

People sometimes ask:
Is Pride a protest
Or a party?
And the answer is
Of course
Yes.
And why not?
Why not
Rejoice as we resist,
Dance as we demand change,
Celebrate as we create community that delights in
All of who we are?
So bring all of that
With you this morning.
Bring your policy demands
Bring your glitter
Bring your supreme court broken heart
Bring your rainbow socks
Bring the emptiness you feel
For our siblings gone too soon.

Bring your Gloria Estefan remix
Bring your tender hope for change
Bring your most garish eyeshadow
Bring your spirit, tattered and battered
By a world that seems insistent on
Choosing fear and hate.

Gather up all these things
And bring them here
To a place where we don't
Have to shoulder these burdens
Or celebrate these joys
Alone.
Come, let us worship
Together.

Meditation

Call to mind family members and friends who identify as questioning or queer or non-binary.... Picture them. Resist the impulse to go to *your* experience of their journey. Instead, let their faces, their voices, their stories come into focus. A Buddhist meditation:

May they be safe.
 May they be well.
 May they be held in the arms of compassion.
 May they be at peace.

May their partners/friends be safe...well...held in the arms of compassion...at peace.
 May their families and their children be safe [join in if you like]...well...held in the arms of compassion...at peace.
 May their mentors and their heroes safe...well...held in the arms of compassion...at peace.

We lift up the unique challenges of queer people of color, the many who suffer with AIDS, those struggling to make ends meet. May they be safe...well...held in the arms of compassion...at peace.

May all people everywhere be safe. May we be well...held in the arms of compassion...at peace.

Video (shown during this service)

Richard Blanco, the poet who spoke at President Obama's inauguration, delivered the Ware Lecture at General Assembly this year:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11cYcvs_bIU

Blanco's presentation included this video based on his poem "Until We Could":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po9L684vzzw>

Reflections

Thank you to Bobby Dole, Shana Aisenberg, Margaret Rieser, and Hannah Davidson, the four people who responded to the invitation to speak today. They considered these questions:

What does PRIDE mean to you?

In your lived experience, how far have LGBTQ rights come and how far do they have to go?

For you, what aspects of queerness feel celebratory? Uncomfortable? Hopeful? What do you wildly love?

What stories will help listeners understand life as an LGBTQ person?

After each sharing, we will sing the chorus of Hymn #1019 "Everything Possible," written by UU Rev. Fred Small in 1983:

Oh, you can be anybody you want to be, you can love whomever you will.
 You can travel any country where your heart leads and know that I will love you still.
 You can live by yourself, you can gather friends around, you can choose one special one.
 And the only measure of your words and your deeds
 Will be the love you leave behind when you're done.

Bobby Dole:

On December 15, 1973, the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality was no longer a mental illness. Until then psychiatrists could do whatever they liked to cure us homosexuals of our queerness, including locking us up in mental hospitals, giving us electric shock treatments, performing lobotomies on us and administering chemical castration.

In September 1962, when we were only sixteen years old, my roommate and I were forced by the Phillips Exeter Academy to undergo two years of psychiatric treatment in order to be cured of our homosexuality. As a consequence of this psychiatric torture, my friend committed suicide and I suffered an acute paranoid schizophrenic psychosis and was hospitalized for fifteen months. My psychiatrist at Exeter told me that if people knew that I was a homosexual, I would never have any friends or any job. A psychiatrist at McLean Hospital told me that I was the most severely mentally ill person who had ever been a patient there and that I should never return to Harvard.

I graduated from Harvard in 1968 at the age of twenty-two and immediately went into permanent exile. I have never consulted a psychiatrist or taken psychiatric medicine since I left America. Before I moved to Europe, my mother told me that I would never be able to buy health insurance in the United States because of my history of schizophrenia. The United States is the only country in world history where a mother could tell her son that he has to spend his whole life in exile in order to be eligible for health insurance. I became a socialist at this moment and have benefitted from socialized medicine in eight different countries. I told myself that America was indeed a strange country since it had enough money to kill four million Vietnamese people but did not have enough money to give me healthcare. I lived in Europe for nine years and have been living in Québec for the past forty-two years. I thank God every day for having spent the past fifty-one years outside of the United States.

I have published my story in a book entitled *What Rough Beast. The Harvard Divinity Bulletin* will not allow me to advertise my book because of its scandalous contents. I consider this to be an unacceptable form of censorship reminiscent of the Inquisition. In my book I relate how I fell under the spell of the most famous theologian who ever taught at Harvard, Paul Tillich. I reveal that Tillich was a devout Marxist and Harvard apparently finds this information to be embarrassing.

I am happy to say that for the past twenty-three years I have been enjoying a very stable relationship with my husband Réjean and that his Quebec family has adopted me unconditionally. I might add that part of my redemption was my simple religious faith in God. I have never stopped saying my prayers and reading my Bible.

Shana Aisenberg:

June, 1969. I'm a 13-year-old queer kid living on Long Island. The Stonewall Riots, two hours away in Greenwich Village, might as well be another world.

From earliest memories, I feel different. I'm often bullied. "Sissy!," "You throw like a girl!," "Homo!" and worse. I don't fit in with boys, don't enjoy their rough and tumble games, don't understand why they talk trash about girls.

I prefer playing with girls. I like fashion, dolls, playing house. Sometimes when alone, I dress up in girls' clothing, jewelry, make-up.

I love going to the movies. Once at the ticket window, the clerk asks, "How many, Miss?" "One," I say. She says, "Oh, I'm sorry for the mistake, young man." I want to answer that she'd been correct the first time.

I learn about others like me through songs. Some don't paint a positive image of being gay, trans or queer. In "A Boy Named Sue", a boy has to fight because of his female name. An implication is that he dare not express any femininity.

In The Kinks' song, the singer falls for Lola, then rejects her once he realizes she's trans:

"Girls will be boys, and boys will be girls
It's a mixed-up, muddled-up, shook-up world
Except for Lola, lo lo lo Lola...."

Drag queens and trans women in Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" are also hookers, addicts:

"Holly came from Miami FLA
Hitch-hiked her way across the USA
Plucked her eyebrows on the way
Shaved her legs and then he was a she
She said, hey babe, take a walk on the wild side"

I see expressions of androgyny on album covers by David Bowie, Patti Smith and others. "You've got your mother in a whirl, She's not sure if you're a boy or a girl" I want to be beautifully androgynous like them!

Today, having experienced employment discrimination and de-transition, which resulted in having to outwardly present as "male" for two decades, I'm a woman. Trans. Non-binary.

"Out and proud" doesn't fully express my lived reality. "Pride" isn't just for one week. I'm "out" everyday.

While I'm generally accepted in our rural community, and feel especially welcomed here at UUFES, I experience daily stresses. People often misgender me, using incorrect pronouns. I'm on guard in new situations. Will people be OK with me as a trans person? Attacks of the current administration weigh on me, such as anti-transgender military ban and legislation allowing

medical providers to discriminate against and not treat trans people. The threat of anti-trans violence, highest towards trans women of color, is always there.

I've seen much progress in 50 years. In 1969, I couldn't have imagined being Shana. While it's now more possible for our youth to express diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, we have much work ahead. Systemic homophobia and transphobia run deep. Not only must we work to educate and pass laws, ultimately we need transformation from within, embracing a beautiful continuum of gender.

Margaret Rieser

"You can be anybody you want to be, you can love whomever you will." They are lovely words, and in many ways true. But for those of us who have felt that the gender we were assigned at birth doesn't fit who we really are, or the people we are drawn to love (romantically), aren't of the "opposite sex", it's not so easy. Even today.

As a child I fought bitterly with my mother, crying and screaming, the whole 9 yards, about wearing dresses. It was awful wearing clothes that felt all wrong. I thought that being a tomboy meant I could live however I wanted. Then it hit me hard that I could not choose. I directed my rage at my mother, who insisted I had to start wearing bras, and stop having sleepovers with my best friend, John. As I got older, I realized it was not only she who upheld these beliefs. One day John asked if I would bring my friend Lizzie over because he "liked" her. I felt betrayed, and even worse, I knew that what *I* wanted was all wrong.

Realizing that it only felt right to be in a relationship with a woman, (YOW! It feels hard to say those words, even here in my beloved community, even today, when I've been with Missy for 25 years), "coming out" was another painful process. Fortunately one that resulted in great joy.

Being a teenager is hard. Being a teenager who believes that who you are is all wrong is even harder. Even now, and we've come a LONG way, the suicide rate for LGBTQ youth is still significantly higher than it is for teens who do not feel the need to question their gender or sexuality.

There is an assumption, in our culture, that you will be okay with the gender you were assigned at birth. And while we now know there are viable paths available, it's still hard. Agonizingly hard. Ask anyone who's done it.

A little story. I can't tell you how often I am asked, when I mention being married, what my husband does. And while that can seem an innocuous question, I'm here to tell you that it hurts. The assumption that I am other than who I am makes me feel that who I am is not "normal." I feel unsafe. Scared. Vulnerable. Still!

What can we do? Not make assumptions about someone's gender. If it matters to you, ask. Not make assumptions about the gender of the person someone loves. "Oh, you're married? Tell me about your spouse!" Know that every LGBTQ person has a story. A story about identity that includes a lot of struggle, and a lot of joy.

Hannah Davidson

I was born a decade after Stonewall, still more than 20 years before Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. My liminal years of youth, antidiscrimination laws remaining on the books, did not feel particularly safe.

I came of age in the early 90s, AIDS mercilessly taking lives, hundreds of thousands of people whom I might have looked to as mentors, my elder queers, but lack of medical care and societal ignorance meant they didn't live long enough to be those conveyors of wisdom. And, boy, I could have used a mentor—I was a child of the 80s, from a rural town, raised by a Catholic grandmother, ironically an ardent Democrat, but even more fervently homophobic.

I remember the first time I learned of a gay person's existence. I was 5. We had prepared for weeks for my cousin Peter's visit. I'd never met him as we lived a continent apart, but knew he was my grandmother's favorite person, a budding recording artist. She listened to his cassettes daily, his college graduation picture on her nightstand. He called, just before the flight. I didn't hear his side of the conversation. But I saw her tears. I heard her words. Peter, I love you. But I never want to see you again.

Too young to understand, I remember the darkness falling over my house. I didn't understand what my grandmother meant when she called this person she adored a pervert, said he couldn't be trusted around my boy cousins, because "these people recruit" – a repeated refrain throughout my childhood.

I'm not telling you this to demonize my grandmother, but to bring to light the power of fear, fear of subverting social norms, of sexual transgression. It can turn love to hate. We've seen it over and over, this pairing of fear and hatred. From Matthew Shepard, beaten and left to die when I was a teenager, to hundreds of trans women of color murdered in recent years.

At 15, I was palpably aware of two things: I was queer, and I was terrified. I never came out to my grandmother, I simply drifted further and further away, living with a friend's parents during high school, then away to college, then living on my own. She died before I fully came out.

Ok, I promised an optimistic end:

While my family of origin was unsupportive, it allowed me to build *chosen family*. My network of queers is strong and supportive. The solidarity, born from oppression, is a powerful force of love.

This love surrounds me, and more importantly, my son. When I look at him, and know he's growing up in a time where he will be loved and supported no matter what his gender or sexual identity turns out to be, I see the legacy of the intergenerational trauma our people have suffered being reborn into a generation that is open, accepting, and driven by love. And for this, I am so, so very proud.

Closing Words - Rev. Betsy

Are we there yet? How inclusive are we? How clearly do we *see* each other? Maybe a little more clearly this morning. We have felt the weight of oppression and trauma. Of feeling alone. Waking up every morning not understanding and not feeling safe.

We have felt love, too, in the beginnings of questions, in the first imaginings of freedom – a different life. We have felt the buoyant sense of *possibility* in these stories of resilience, solidarity and redemption.

May we have the courage to open up to one another. To see and be seen. The possible – tomorrow – is worth it.