

Straight Talk on Queer Issues - Hamilton – May 31, 2009

by Art Brewer

You see before you a very privileged fellow. I've long felt that I won the jackpot by being born a Canadian. I'm a male in a patriarchal society. I have white skin in a predominantly white country. I'm in excellent health. And by any measure, I enjoy a very comfortable standard of living.

Despite all these advantages, there is one aspect of who I am that has presented some challenges over the years. As a gay man, I have experienced many forms of oppression – psychological, social, and even physical. But I can tell you that the most significant form of oppression has always been silence. So, I am also privileged to have this opportunity to break through that deafening silence and to talk to you about our Unitarian Universalist Welcoming Congregation program. (For any visitors today, we abbreviate Unitarian Universalist as UU)

I have to start by congratulating you for being one of the first congregations in Canada to be certified as a Welcoming Congregation. In particular, the work of Linda Thomson and Gary Hicks needs to be acknowledged, because I know they were especially instrumental in helping run the program. You qualified for this designation by completing a series of discussions and workshops, and holding a congregational vote to alter your bylaws which, since 1998, have read:

“This Congregation affirms and promotes the full participation of all persons in our activities, including membership, programming, hiring practices and the calling of religious professionals without regard to race, colour, gender, transgendered identity, physical challenge, affectional or sexual orientation or national or ethnic origin.”

Last month, I received an email from Lyla Miklos, your co-chair of Church services, asking me to speak to you today. She wrote: “We are trying to start a new tradition of having a Pride/GLBTQ Service each year at Hamilton First.”

(btw, GLBTQ, stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning, although I know -without the Q- you might think it stands for a kind of sandwich). Other letters have been added to this list, but I think it can be well summarized by saying that we're talking about the subjects of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

So, you might be asking yourself what's left to talk about? We're already welcoming. In fact we've been *certified* as Welcoming! And why single out GLBT persons for special welcoming? Of course, these are perfectly legitimate questions to ask, and I'll address them in this brief talk.

Actually, let me tell you how Jon Stewart (The Daily Show) approached the singling out issue a couple of weeks ago. He was commenting on the fact that the US Congress has recently added sexual orientation to its list of groups protected under hate crime legislation. Congress voted 249-175. Stewart asks:

Why would 175 people vote *against* this? He says "you can still hate gays and say so. That's called free speech. You just can't physically hurt them."

Then he shows a video of Congressman Steve King who says "If you don't know, how could you discriminate against me and if I don't know how could I discriminate against you? If you keep those things private there can be no discrimination and that's what I submit is the right thing to do when it comes to sexuality." King was advocating the deafening silence to which I just referred. It's the same as the American military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy which has resulted in the dismissal of 12,500 service men and women since its implementation in 1994.

Stewart's response to the Congressman's argument is delivered in his NJ gangster character "So, what I'm sayin' is if de gays didn't hold hands, den dey wouldn't be so damn punchable." His character concludes "So, rather dan add to a hate crimes bill, let's just ban affection."

I said earlier that I've long thought that I won the jackpot by being born a Canadian. As in so much relating to the human and civil rights of gender and sexual minorities, Canada leads. *Our* Criminal Code was amended in 2004 to add sexual orientation to the list of groups protected by hate crimes laws. While gender identity was not specified, I find it encouraging that Bill Siksay has tabled a private members' bill on May 15th to add protection to the Canadian Human Rights Act for members of the transsexual and transgendered communities.

In 1859, Charles Dickens famously wrote "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." He was writing about the French Revolution. Now, 150 years later, there is much of this sentiment that rings true when it comes to the revolution promoting equal rights for gender and sexual minorities.

Let me tell you about some recent international good and bad news stories, because as a UU and as a gay man – my world does not end at Canada's borders.

Good news: In December 2008, 66 of the UN's 192 member countries signed a nonbinding declaration calling for the global decriminalization of homosexuality, the first time in its history that the UN General Assembly has considered the issue of LGBT human rights.

Bad news: Under the *Bush* administration, the US did not sign this declaration.

Good news: On March 18th the *Obama* administration did sign the declaration.

Bad news: Despite this, 70 member countries of the UN outlaw homosexuality, including seven in which it is punishable by death. Four of these countries have

Unitarian movements: Romania, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Pakistan (where homosexuality is punishable with up to 100 lashes or death by stoning).

Good news: Same-sex marriage is now legal in 7 countries including, of course, Canada.

Bad news: On April 7th, the New York Times reported that in the past two months, the bodies of as many as 25 boys and men suspected of being gay have turned up in Sadr City, Iraq. The police say most have been shot, some multiple times. Several have been found with the word “pervert” in Arabic on notes attached to their bodies.

California has seen a **good and bad news** story evolve over same-sex marriage during the past five years. In 2004, San Francisco officials began allowing same-sex couples to wed. Then the courts intervened, invalidating the marriages on grounds that local officials had overstepped their authority. Then the California Supreme Court overruled the lower courts and 18,000 gay and lesbian couples married between June and November last year. This was followed by Proposition 8 through which voters amended the state Constitution to define marriage as only between a man and woman. The debate then went back to the California Supreme Court which last Tuesday upheld the state's same-sex marriage ban, although it protected the 18,000 same-sex weddings which took place before Proposition 8 was passed. Two steps forward, one step back.

Let's take this good news / bad news story to the national level in Canada:

Good news: Did I mention that same-sex marriage is legal in Canada? I never even dreamed I would see that in my lifetime!

Bad news: Earlier this month, Alberta removed so-called “sex-reassignment surgery” for transgender persons from its treatments covered by publically funded health care. Some prefer the term gender-affirmation surgery. Whatever it's called, the cost of this surgery to Alberta taxpayers works out to about 19 cents each.

Good news: Canada's first seniors' residence for gay men opened recently in Montreal. Suzanne Bienvenu, the marketing and communications director for the project commented “Gays over age 60 had a lot of trouble coming out of the closet, and then when they went to traditional seniors' residences, they faced tremendous discrimination. For them, it was like going back into the closet.”

Bad news: A recent study among high school students conducted by Egale (which is Canada's national lobby group for GLBT rights) had some very disturbing findings:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ of GLBTQ students feel unsafe in at least one place at school, such as change rooms, washrooms, and hallways. Half of straight students agree that at least one part of their school is unsafe for GLBTQ students.
- $\frac{3}{4}$ of all participating students reported hearing expressions such as “that's so gay” every day in school.

- Half heard remarks like “faggot”, “queer”, “lezbo”, and “dyke” daily.
- *Current* students were also more likely than *past* students to hear homophobic comments from other students every day.

When it comes to good news / bad news stories among Canadian UU congregations, I’m happy to say that it’s almost all good news. 43 of our 48 congregations have completed, or are in process to complete the Welcoming Congregation program. This represents 98% of our members in Canada.

At the annual meeting of the Canadian Unitarian Council in Thunder Bay two weeks ago, I was often asked “What happens when we reach 100%?” As much as I’d like to say “Well, the battle will have been won” of course, I can’t. I’d like to say that in Unitarian congregations, closets are just for clothes! But there are UUs who have come out to me in confidence who feel unwilling or unsafe to come out publically. I understand that. I didn’t come out until I was 50 years old. You see, when I was growing up my only role model was Liberace. And even he didn’t come *out* as gay. He just came *on* as gay! They call it the closet, but for me, it was more like solitary confinement.

Friends, despite all the good news, the quest for equal rights by gender and sexual minorities is far from over. This kind of social justice work takes decades. Just as equal rights for women didn’t suddenly arrive with the work of the suffragettes in the 1870s, nor when women were declared to be persons in Canada in 1929, nor with the so-called “women’s lib” movement of the 1960s. Equal rights didn’t suddenly arrive for African Americans with the civil rights movement, nor with the election of Barack Obama. As long as there are people in our congregations, or in the world, who feel they must hide their sexual orientation or gender identity, we *all* have work to do, because we *all* suffer when oppression is permitted.

I’ve thrown a lot of facts and figures at you in this talk. So, let me add a few thoughts less directed at the head and more directed at the heart.

Some of you may have been wondering “Why all this talk of sexuality in a religious community?” The answer is that sexuality cannot be separated from spirituality. As the American Episcopal priest and author Matthew Fox says “We cannot do either of these realities justice in our lives without the other. Sexuality without spirituality becomes boring and addictive and even cynical; spirituality without sexuality becomes disengaged and diseased...disincarnated.” The late Benedictine monk, Father Griffiths, was asked late in his life about sexuality. His answer was as simple as it was profound. “Sexuality,” he said, “is far too powerful to repress and keep down, and it is also too powerful to allow to run totally unbridled. The only solution is to consecrate it.” As UUs, we consecrate it by talking about it.

The related, though different, topic I've touched on is gender identity. A friend in my congregation recently sent me an email. The subject line read "Are you a man or a woman?" I opened the message and read "look down," so I scrolled down the page on my screen. And I scrolled down some more. Finally, I reached a line which read "Not here, dummy!" I know, pretty funny. But a person's gender is not determined by genitalia. To put it briefly and directly: gender is what's between your ears; sex is what's between your legs.

Gender identity and sexual orientation mustn't be confused. Gender identity is a person's intrinsic sense of selfhood, of manhood or womanhood. A gender-variant individual's sexual orientation can be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, pansexual or anywhere else on the spectrum of human desire and affection.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission has said that transgender individuals are among the most marginalized in our society. Institutional barriers — medical, courts, police, education, religion, housing, all these — are constantly placed in front of our transgender citizens, usually driven by transphobia. We need to constructively pursue our discussion and understanding of issues faced by gender minorities and make life better for these people who share our inherent human worth and dignity.

I'll close with words from a meditation manual written by Victoria Safford, the UU minister of White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

She says "People ask me sometimes, 'Is this a gay church?'

It is a privilege to answer: 'Ours is absolutely, gladly, hopefully and humbly, gaily, a gay church, a gay tradition, where everyone, including heterosexual members and friends, is welcome, where everyone is needed, where everyone's experience is cherished as a sacred text, because no one's experience of living or loving can be comprehensive, because each of us holds clues the others need about how to live with dignity and joy as a human person, and none of us knows enough about that yet to be considered whole.'

'It is absolutely a gay church, even as ours is a gay world, if you would look around. Gay church, straight church, peoples' church, a human congregation made holy by the holy hopes and fears and dreams of all who wish to come. Come in, we say. Come out, come in. We're all in this together.'

'I will not speak of "tolerance," with its courteous clenched teeth and bitter resignation. I will not speak about "acceptance," of "other" people and some "other" kind of "lifestyle." I can only look in laughing wonder at human life in all its incarnations. I can taste only in passing the breath of the spirit of life on my mouth and understand our common longing to breathe in deep, deep gulps of it. I cannot think of being anybody else's "ally," even, because even that implies some degree of separation—some degree of safety for some of us, not all. We

are “allied” with no one and with nothing but love—the larger Love transcending all our understanding, within which all the different, differing, gorgeously various, variant, beautifully deviant aspects of ourselves are bound in elegant unity.’

‘I know that on some sad and disappointing days these words describe the church that yet *shall* be and not the church that *is*. I know, I know. . . But I know, too, that to answer is an act of creation. To answer this question, and some others, is a privilege, a prophetic imperative, a joy, a duty, and a holy sacrament.’