

First Unitarian Church

June 14, 2015

We had so much fun yesterday at the pride parade. Were you there? Our mid high and youth groups, the First Unitarian Lavender Family, and lots of other supportive adults turned out to march, many wearing rainbow tutus or rainbow hair. We had our 7 principle banners. Mariah Rivera carried a sign that said, "Unitarians Welcome All." Our ministerial resident James Galasinski was there, blowing bubbles. And I followed right behind him, with my hair in a faux-hawk, trying to pop them while I did hula hoop tricks. If you weren't there, you missed it! Sorry!

"You've gotta work this hula hooping into a sermon," James said. I don't know about that. I know a bunch of UUs were there with other groups too, like Veterans for Peace, and Old Lesbians Organizing for Change. That's a group. I'm not making that up. Old lesbians: rock on, sisters.

When people turn out for the pride parade, they really turn *out*, you know? Tutus, bikini tops, rainbow painted men. Rainbow painted men in tutus and bikini tops. There is definitely a culture of flamboyance. A fabulous one if you ask me. And there are the subtler fabulous things, like lots of same sex or otherwise queer couples walking down the street holding hands.

That's still pretty rare on other days—a clue that we've still got a ways to go before public places feel truly safe and inclusive.

I know for many people born in the 1950s or before, the word queer can be troubling—it used to be a slur. But it has re-embraced, with pride, now. It's the Q in LGBTQ, and is an umbrella term that encompasses everyone whose sexuality or gender falls outside the "norm," quote unquote. The male-female, heterosexual, you are what you were assigned at birth norm. And since it's awkward to say LGBTQ over and over again, and since even LGB and T exclude some people, like intersex people, I'm going to go with "queer."

The flamboyance, the aura of celebration, and the safety to just be, to hold hands with one's significant other whoever that person may be, is really lovely in pride week.

Recently someone asked Dan Savage, the advice columnist and queer activist, whether it is appropriate for straight people to show up at pride parade. Aren't they kind of crashing the party if they do?

In his answer, Savage said, actually, straight people seeing pride parade is kind of the point. ¹

Well that's an interesting answer. Is he saying that gay pride is really *for* straight people?

I'll tell ya what. To understand what he means, and also to understand how all that flamboyance came to be the culture of Pride Week and pride parades, it helps to remember how all this got started in the first place.

How did it get started? What kicked it off? Stonewall. It all started at the Stonewall Inn, 57 Christopher Street in New York City, on June 28, 1969.

Well, maybe it's not quite true to say it *all* started there. After all, work for equality for gays and lesbians had already been going on for a little while. A few major milestones had happened. For example, in 1924 the Society for Human Rights was founded by Henry Gerber in Chicago. That was the first gay rights organization in the US, but soon closed down under social and political pressure.

In 1948, there was the Alfred Kinsey thing-- a study on men and sexuality that reported that over 1/3 of men had enjoyed homosexual activities at least once. The study shocked the public (or at least 2/3 of them), and it shocked the psychological establishment. But the American Psychological Association would still go on to list homosexuality as a mental disorder in its first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The listing would not cite any empirical or scientific evidence for calling gay people crazy—because no such evidence existed. But it would remain a “diagnosable condition” until the 1970s.

In 1950 in Los Angeles, the first national gay rights organization was founded by Harry Hay. The Mattachine Society's goal was to eliminate

¹ Source: (Warning: Savage's full answer is explicit and includes some sexual references.) <http://www.newnownext.com/dan-savage-presents-his-manifesto-for-straight-guys-attending-pride/04/2015/>

discrimination against gays and cultivate an “ethical homosexual culture.”

In 1955, the first Lesbian rights organization was formed: Daughters of [bill-it-iss] Bilitis.

And on January 13, 1958: the US Supreme Court made its first ruling in favor of the gay community when it upheld the first amendment rights of the LGBT magazine, “One”, after the US postal service and FBI categorized the magazine as obscene. This summer, a little over a half a century later, the court is expected to hand down another significant ruling: upholding the right of same sex couples to marry.

And there had been a few marches and protests.

However, despite these early, courageous voices speaking out, in 1969, things were still unbearable. Although it was the summer of love, and a time of huge civil rights strides for blacks and latinos, people who came out as gay were shunned by their families, workplaces, and communities and faced a high risk of being violently attacked. Gays were banned from working in the federal government or serving in the military—they were considered a “security risk.”

Many gay or queer people fled to New York City, where there was still plenty of hostility, but at least they wouldn’t have to face it alone. Most of those who could still passed as straight during the workday—they had to if they wanted to keep their jobs.

Even at night the situation was far from ideal. While heterosexual had a lot of sexual outlets- dance halls, bars, hotels, lovers lanes, places where they could flirt and meet each other, there wasn’t anything like that for gays. There weren’t many places LGBTQ people could congregate, and wherever they did, they faced the risk of police raids. Being arrested could be devastating—it led to a public record that outed the person, and a criminal record that would prevent them from getting a job or going to school.

In New York the liquor authority prohibited bars from serving queer people. The very existence of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people was considered “disorderly conduct.” This prohibition in turn forced gay bars to go underground, becoming illegal

saloons and speakeasys. In the summer of 1969, there had been a major crackdown, and many popular spots had been closed.

The Stonewall Inn was one of the few left. Like most of the others— it was owned and run by the mafia. (Where regular bar owners saw a legal risk, organized crime families saw a business opportunity.)

Now, it was not what you would call a high end, or even a pleasant, place. It had two rooms, but only way in and out- the front door. The ventilation was terrible. The bar had no running water, and was notorious for serving patrons in dirty glasses. In fact, Stonewall was blamed for a hepatitis outbreak that year. The liquor was watered down and it came out of buckets. No one really knew what was in it. But...the Stonewall was a place to get together, when those were few and far between. And it was a place to be safe—or at least safer—from being violently attacked by gay bashers on the street.

Still, nothing was guaranteed. Although the mafia owner of Stonewall paid the local police precinct \$1200 per month to avoid a raid, everyone knew it could still happen. In the back room—the dance room—a white lightbulb that hung from the ceiling was used to alert patrons to a police bust. When the bulb lit up, everyone would stop dancing and separate to avoid being charged with lewd conduct.

On June 28th, that's just what happened.

It was a hot, clear night with a full moon. The stonewall had just been raided the tuesday before, and raids usually happened in the early evening, making it seem like a pretty safe bet to be there late that night. So the Stonewall was packed when the light bulb came on, and the police barged in and started with their usual routine.

Round people up, check ID, check anatomy, make arrests, beat the place up a lot and take all the cash.

Thirteen were arrested. The police are accustomed to doing this with little or no resistance from the arrestees. Everyone was too afraid. But this time something different happened. As one woman was forced into the police wagon, she cried out to the crowd, "Why don't you guys do something?!" And something clicked.

They'd had enough. They started to taunt the police that pass between the bar and their paddywagon. The crowd outside grew larger and larger. They started throwing things. Fires were started. Word got out, thousands of people showed up, and the police could not get the upper hand. Never before had the police experienced gay people as a threat. The stereotype was that they were weak.

An article in the Atlantic magazine describes what happened over the next six days:

The conflict ...played out as a very gay variant of a classic New York street rebellion. It would see: fire hoses turned on people in the street, thrown barricades, gay cheerleaders chanting bawdy variants of New York City schoolgirl songs, Rockette-style kick lines in front of the police, the throwing of a firebomb into the bar, a police officer throwing his gun at the mob, cries of "occupy -- take over, take over," ... and "We're the pink panthers!", smashed windows, uprooted parking meters... frightened policemen, angry policemen, arrested [mafia men], thrown cobblestones, thrown bottles, the singing of "We Shall Overcome" in high camp fashion, and a drag queen hitting a police officer on the head with her purse.²

But why had all this happened at the Stonewall Inn, and not one of the other countless places that had been raided and shut down? Well, there was something different about Stonewall's clientele. They tended to be the people who would not be welcome in other gay bars. It was where the "drags" and "queens" hung out.

It was also where a lot of homeless gay youth ended up, boys in particular who had arrived in NYC with no money or job, who had often left homes that had become unbearable *because* of their gayness- or their families' reaction to it. One boy said his parents fought so much about which of them had "made" him gay that he left so they could learn to live with each other again. Another said his father called him a homophobic slur—one I won't repeat—so many times, that he began to think it was his name.

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/an-amazing-1969-account-of-the-stonewall-uprising/272467/>

Others had been kicked out onto the street, and had nowhere else to go. For three bucks they could stay inside Stonewall all night, out of the elements and mostly away from the threat of being hurt. They had nothing to lose when the cops broke in. Nothing to lose, except for their one safe haven. So they fought for it.

Dick [Lie-ch] Leitsch, president of the New York Mattachine Society, was the first gay journalist to describe what had happened. “Now we've walked in the open and know how pleasant it is to have self-respect and to be treated as citizens and human beings,” he wrote. “...We want to stay in the sunlight from now on. Efforts to force us back in the closet could be disastrous for all concerned.”

One year after Stonewall, there was a Christopher St liberation day to mark the anniversary. Thousands of LGBT people celebrated by marching through downtown New York and into Central park—what will later be known as the first gay pride parade. Now gay pride parades happen every year all over the country, and in other countries too.

That’s how it started. The journey continues. Youth being kicked out of their homes for being gay—that’s still a problem. As many as forty percent of homeless teenagers are queer. In comparison, only 7% of the general population are.

Gay-bashing and trans-bashing—that’s a problem too. A transgendered person is killed in the US every two weeks, and worldwide-- daily. Transgender people experience not only disproportionate levels of violence, but also unemployment, homelessness, and poverty. 41% have attempted suicide (not just thought about it, but attempted it). This is compared to 1.6% of the general population.

On Flag Day, people are supposed to fly the US flag and reflect on all that it means. It is a coincidence that today is actually Flag Day, and I’m preaching on Freak Flags. But it’s a nice coincidence.

I called this sermon “freak flags” because I wanted to draw attention to the role of flamboyance and non-conformity in making our country better. “Freak flag” is not an insult. A “Freak Flag”: is a characteristic, mannerism, or appearance, which implies creative, adventurous or unconventional thinking. It’s the thing about you that gives you away.

We all have freak flags. We are all a little weird. Some of us are just better than others at hiding it.

To be flamboyant is to have a very noticeable quality that attracts a lot of attention. It comes from the French word for “to flame.”

Now, some of us have the ability to choose when to fly our freak flags. Some of us can choose when to be flamboyant—when to have a noticeable quality that attracts attention. And when we want to, we can hide it.

Sometimes I have heard the question- why can't gays or lesbians or trans people just fit in? Why do they have to be so flamboyant? I have also sometimes heard whites say that about blacks, too. As in why does this or that person have to be so *black*? There's a lot to unpack there but it goes back to the fundamental discomfort of being confronted by something that is different from oneself and the wish that everyone would just *conform*. Conform to whiteness, to straightness, to maleness.

You know what? I even encountered this in my training for the ministry, when I was taught, along with other female students, to try not to do be “distracting” in the pulpit. Don't wear bright patterns. Don't wear big earrings. Watch out for bright makeup, don't speak in too high a voice, don't let your knees show, choose your shoes conservatively... you know what? When you add it all up, it sounds a lot like trying to be the typical white straight man. And I don't buy it. I think you want more diversity than that. Anyway, I love my zebra stripe pointy heels and I am not taking these babies off.

But I know I'm lucky to be able to choose to fly my “freak flag” in my own way, to be a little different, and to be accepted for that, because sometimes a person cannot hide even in a hostile climate. This was the case especially in the 1960's and before, when the slightest hint of being gay or lesbian or trans would be picked up by the culture's conservative radar.

It was the people who couldn't hide, the people who had nowhere safe to go, who stood up for themselves at Stonewall, and set a cultural revolution in motion for my generation and the ones after us to see through to its fruition as the first generations in which the majority want and vote for full equality.

Without the extremes, without the voices of outliers and seemingly flamboyant non-conformists, there is no change in the status quo.

In his answer to that question about whether straights should attend gay pride parades, Dan Savage talked about one role diversity, flamboyance, and non-conformity continue to play today. “When you go to Pride,” he says,

you see dykes on bikes, you see the queer Christian organizations, you see the leather guys, you see the drag queens, you see the [young men] shaking it on flatbed trucks blasting dance music, you see the middle-aged regular roly-poly queers, you see the gay dads and lesbian moms and their families.

What you see is a million different ways to be queer.

I think the message in Pride for straight people—and why I think straight people should go—is that there should be more than one way to be a straight person too. There is a script written for straight people about how you’re supposed to live your life and who you’re supposed to be and that script is confining and stultifying and restricting and straight people to need to break out of that. I think what a lot of straight people leave with is ‘Wow, there’s so many ways to be queer maybe I can conceive of perhaps a different way to be straight.’

There is more than one way to be whatever you are—gay, straight, a woman, a man, a minister, a restaurant server, a scientist--fill in the blank. When we encounter radical diversity, we learn something about our own selves, about the assumptions and choices we have made. We are liberated.

And there is more than one way to be a church.

On the sidelines at the parade yesterday, I saw someone holding a sign that said “We’re sorry for the way churches treat you.”

“My church is sorry for the way churches treat people, too,” I told the sign holder.

I am proud this pride week that our church is welcoming and affirming. That we are flamboyantly religiously liberal. And that whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey, we're glad you're here.

Happy Pride.