

**Spirituality and Community: Stories from a gay man's journey**

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Let me begin by saying that I feel a distinct honour in being here today. We honour each other with our invitations to speak. We also respond honourably, I would say, to such invitations by sharing what we have to say, or, if we are so moved – if we choose – by letting our silence be a response. And, I do believe that silence *is* a response.

I want to also note that this sermon is part of *Toronto First's Welcoming Congregation Recertification Process*, so you may wish to consider this sermon as part of your journey towards better understanding the diversity of the bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, and transsexual community.

Although by the end of this sermon, you may still be wondering what I believe when I say spirituality, you will likely be pretty clear as to what I believe when I say community.

*Community is a place where we honour each other.*

This sermon consists of stories woven with my reflections on those stories. The first story I want to tell you is a story I told to the first class I taught at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario this past year. It is a story I intend to tell to every class I teach.

Story One

My first job as a teacher was at a senior elementary school in Ontario. Before classes began that year, I was advised by some of my more experienced colleagues to *not smile until Christmas* and to *not tell my students that this was my first year of teaching*. Now, I do believe that my colleagues were looking out for the interests of one of their newest teachers, but I did wonder about that advice. I wondered about advice that told me that the way to begin a relationship is with intimidation and lies – and, I do see

teaching as a relationship. I see education as a relationship. I see this moment that you and I are having together as a relationship. Healthy relationships do not begin with intimidation and lies.

*Community is a place of relationship.*

*Community is a place of honesty.*

*Community is a place where we can smile.*

I also wondered about the philosophy behind the advice I was given. I think that vulnerability is frequently equated with weakness – and many of us fear weakness. I disagree. I think vulnerability is human and that in sharing our humanity we create spaces of learning, of growth – spaces of vulnerability – for others.

*Community is a place where we can be vulnerable – where we are invited to be vulnerable.*

I did not take that advice from my colleagues. I do think, however, that I have had a successful career as a teacher – although others may define success differently than I do. I also want to say to you, in the interests of this relationship that we have here in this moment that, although I have given many presentations and lectures, *this is my first sermon.*

## Story Two

Last year I resigned from my career as an elementary school teacher. I had worked as an educator for over twenty years. I loved teaching. I had been an out gay educator throughout my career. I do not intend to detail in this sermon my many experiences with heterosexism and homophobia in the education system – and, my partner, Gary, can tell you, they were many – but let me just say that I resigned because I no longer felt that I belonged as a teacher – as a gay teacher – in the system I was working in.

Much of my last year of employment as an elementary school teacher I was off on medical leave. I think mostly, I was avoiding letting go. I was grieving. I was asked by this congregation to be involved in two search committees. Initially, I said yes, and then I had to withdraw because I felt I could not participate to the extent I desired. I was so overwhelmed with the pain from being hurt in the education community that I was not able to give in this community. I believe that in order to belong, we must be able to give.

*Community is a place where we can give.*

*Community is a place where, when we are unable to give, we are embraced and are invited again to give.*

*In particular, in regards to giving, community is a place where we are welcomed to give from who we are, not from some image of what is acceptable.*

### Story Three

The community I grew up in, a Roman Catholic community on the east coast of Newfoundland, had numerous rituals to mark our growth in the community. Last summer I went back to Newfoundland with Gary and our daughter, Brittany, to celebrate the wedding of one of my nieces. Brittany was a flower girl in the wedding party and Gary gave one of the speeches and toasts at the dinner. It was a beautiful celebration of love, of family, of community – and it was clear that my family and I were included, that we belonged, in this celebration. While I have now been a non-Catholic for more years than I was a Catholic (interesting, how I still define myself in relation to that community), last summer I was, perhaps for the first time, finding myself longing for ritual, longing for the rituals of my youth, of a community I once felt so much a part of, while at the same time, discovering that I also felt so very much apart from it.

*Community is a place of ritual, a place where we can mark our journey.*

### Story Four

Speaking of rituals, Gary and I were married here four years ago this coming week. In fact, it was Pride Day, our 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary together.

*Community is a place where we can bring our joy.*

We were both deeply moved by so many of you who chose to stay with us, and with our family and friends, after your regular Sunday service to witness and to celebrate our marriage.

*Community is a place that celebrates our joy.*

We chose to come to this congregation because we expected that we would soon be parents and we wanted our child to have access to a community of some religious diversity. Also, we wanted a community that was gay-positive – a community that welcomed and celebrated our realities as gay men, and our child's reality as someone being parented by a gay couple.

*Community is a place where we want to bring our children.*

On the day we were married, Gary's parents, who live about as close to this congregation as we do, did not show up. It would be over a week before we received a call – not to congratulate us, but to ask Gary what he wanted as a gift. It would be the last straw for Gary – and for me. Except at another wedding that summer (a heterosexual wedding) – Gary's brother's second marriage – we have not since seen Gary's birth parents.

*Community is a place where we can bring our pain...*

...not to have it treated with a "Well it's their loss." response, because it is not just their loss. It is Gary's loss, too; it is my loss; it is our daughter's loss. Nobody wins when *difference* is something to fear, hate, reject instead of *difference* being something to seek, to love, to embrace.

What we need when we bring our pain to a community is to have it wrapped in the arms of the community, in the heart of the community, so that our pain becomes the community's pain as well. It is only by sharing our pain that it becomes bearable. It is only by sharing our pain that we can become aware of how deeply wounded we are, that we can become aware of how much we need love, and how much we are loved – perhaps, not by the people from whom we crave love, but by those who can love in ways that are healing.

*Community is a place where we can heal.*

### Story Five

When my father died in 1993, I remember telling my family that I felt that he had a *good death*. I also explained to them where I got that term. It was from the stories of people in the gay community who had died of AIDS in the 1980s. Always, when someone died of AIDS, people would want to be able to say, "He had a good death" – most often it was *he*. A good death meant cared for, embraced, loved. Many times that caring, that embrace, and that love did not come from birth families, but from lesbians and bisexual women who took care of gay men who were dying, from gay and bisexual men who also became caregivers, sometimes the only caregivers, to other gay and bisexual men, from drag queens who turned their shows into fundraisers, from leather folk who made adding a rubber to leather pretty cool – and a whole lot of fun. I was never so proud my community, of the gay community, of the BGLT community, of the queer community, of my community – whatever we choose to call it. These were the kinds of people I wanted to be with while I am alive, and who I want to be with me when I am dying.

*Community is a place where we can live, a place where we want to live.*

*Community is a place where we can die, a place where we want to die.*

### Story Six

I have noticed for quite some time a poster upstairs in this building with a message addressed to the bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, and transsexual members of this congregation. It reads, "You enrich us with your presence." Now, that is not tolerance, nor even acceptance. That is a celebration, an embrace, a welcome, a thank-you for being here.

However, perhaps because all of us, to some degree or another, are products of our environment, even in that celebration, that embrace, that welcome, that thank-you, we can experience heterosexism, biphobia, homophobia, and transphobia. The difference, here, I think, is that we can talk about it, or that I am going to talk about it, and I hope that we all can talk about it.

*Community is a place where we can speak.*

After I offered to give this sermon in response to an invitation, I was then invited to engage in a process to ensure quality and to ensure that I would not say anything that would offend. It was not entirely clear if this was an invitation or an expectation. There was also a concern expressed that a sermon could be too much like therapy and that you are not here for that. I was asked, at one point, if my sermon was inclusive – if some people might feel left out and, if so, what percentage. There was a suggestion that if my sermon focussed exclusively, or mostly, on what was termed my *life style* then it might need to be balanced with something else. Also, I was reminded of the privilege of the pulpit.

It is *not* unfortunate that these comments were made, or that those questions were asked. What would be unfortunate – a tragedy, really – is if I did not respond to them, if I did not disrupt the understandings on which, I believe, they are based. It would also be a tragedy, I believe, if we could not continue those conversations after this sermon.

Although the request to engage in the process I mentioned may not have been intended to censor, I received it as such. I am always wary of anything that feels like censorship. Perhaps, it is because, as a gay man, much of my realities have been censored – and, in some settings, continue to be censored. I declined to participate in the process and I offered to withdraw my offer to give this sermon. That offer was not accepted, and so here we are. And, I hope, if I have not offended you, that I have at least been able to

disturb you, or will disturb you, at least a bit, to disrupt some of what you might have taken as *given* in your understanding of community – in your understanding of bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender and transsexual people. Also, while I cannot say why you are here – that is for you to determine – I can say that I think *all* of my writing is therapeutic for me; I *hope* that what I share of it is evocative for others. Of what use is a sermon that leaves you comfortable, and me unchanged?

I also experienced the questions about my sermon possibly excluding others, and the suggestion that it might need to be *balanced* with something else, as a censoring filter, and as a marginalization of my realities as a gay man. Are heterosexual people who give sermons asked such questions? Or, are heterosexual realities – heterosexual stories – so universal that we are *all* expected to be able to identify with them, but only a minority could identify with the stories of a gay man?

Maybe everyone feels excluded from my sermon, including other gay men; I do not speak, cannot speak, for all, or for any other, gay men.

Maybe no one feels excluded from my sermon. Maybe it is possible that the stories of a gay man can connect with others, not despite, but *through* our difference.

And if someone does feel excluded, maybe it would be useful – educative – to reflect on how that feels. Such a reflection could bring one closer to understanding what many queers experienced, and continue to experience, in many areas of our lives.

As for privilege, well let me just say this. It *is* an honour to speak from this place, from this pulpit, to speak to you, but it *is not a privilege*. Privilege is *who gets to decide* who speaks to you from this pulpit. If we are to truly reflect on privilege in this congregation, the questions that need to be asked are “Who has that privilege to decide?” and “Why?”

That I have been able to say what I have said from this pulpit says something about this community. That I had to resist silencing also says something.

I said earlier that community is a place of relationship. I want to clarify.

*Community is a relationship.*

Gary and I have a relationship that, if we make it to Friday, will have lasted for twenty-two years. Our relationship has, I believe, taught me a few things about community. The first thing is choice. We are here because each of us has chosen to be here.

*Community is a place we choose to be in.*

*Community is a place we choose to stay in.*

Now, I am not suggesting that we stay in relationships, in communities, that are unhealthy for us – however we define health. I am saying that if you love someone, or something, and you know that you have someone, or something, in your life that is good for you – and whom, or which, you believe you are also good for, then *know also* that sometimes you are going to be hurt and sometimes you are going to cause hurt. Know that sometimes you will need to have conversations in order to talk about that pain you are feeling or that pain you are causing. Know that you will need to have those conversations in order to come to know each other more and to heal *together*. Know that you can only have those conversations if you are with each other, and if *each of you* engages in those conversations – if *each of you* is willing to speak and to listen. Know that the relationship *can* end, and *it would only take one of you* to make it end, but that *the only reason this relationship exists is because of your combined choices*.

*Community is a place where we will hurt.*

*Community is a place where we can really learn about each other.*

I offer these understandings from my relationship with Gary because I believe they are useful in understanding community. It is only by choosing to be with each other – by choosing to stay with each other – that we can continue to grow together in our understanding of each other. It is only by reaching through the hurting we feel, and the hurting we cause – by forgiving – and by allowing ourselves to be forgiven – that we can truly help each other grow as individuals together, and help our relationship – our community – to grow. And while we each can live without the other, *this – what we have here in this moment* – is only possible with each of us being present to each other here and now. And our future together is only possible if *we* are together.

As I mentioned at the beginning, you might say that I have talked a lot about community, but I have said little or nothing about spirituality. I guess I can help to make some connections, however, by telling you that I see spirituality and community as the same. I have said that community is a relationship. I have given what I believe are some traits or characteristics of a community. Communities, like relationships – because they are relationships – are messy and untidy spaces to be in. They are not perfect because the people in them are not perfect. While some might say that spirituality is somehow a way to rise above those messy and untidy imperfect realities, I believe that spirituality *is* those messy and untidy imperfect realities. I believe that, rather than seek a kind of pure spirituality – something which I do not believe exists anyway – we need to content ourselves with – no, we need to revel in – a spirituality that is messy, a spirituality that is untidy, a spirituality that is imperfect, a spirituality that is not fixed with all the answers, but one that is loaded with questions, with uncertainties, with vulnerabilities, with honour, with honesty, with giving and with

receiving, with voice, with rituals, with celebrations, with care for children, with smiles and with tears, with joy and with pain, with forgiveness, with hope, with love. Such a spirituality I can live and die with. Such a spirituality, such a community, is, to borrow this year's Pride theme, UNSTOPPABLE.