

How Warm The Welcome?
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
June 25, 2012
Douglas Buck

"Kind words are every bit as real as pigsties." -- Lucy Maude Montgomery.

Meditation: "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

The Images by Adrienne Rich

Close to your body, in the
pain of the city
I turn. My hand half-sleeping reaches, finds
some part of you, touch knows you before language
names in the brain. Out in the dark
a howl, police sirens, emergency
our 3:00 a.m. familiar, ripping the sheath of sleep
registering pure force as if all transpired --
the swell of cruelty and helplessness --
in one block between West End
and Riverside. In my dreams the Hudson
rules the night like a right-hand margin
drawn against the updraft
of burning life, the tongueless cries
of the city. I turn again, slip my arm
under the pillow turned for relief,
your breathing traces my shoulder. Two women sleeping

together have more than their sleep to defend.

Sermon

Good morning! I'm Doug Buck, a member of this congregation.

As a boy in Illinois, from grades one through six, I was tormented by bullies. I had my face rubbed in snow, was taunted and humiliated in front of classmates, and sexually abused. When my mother telephoned mothers of the bullies, the bullying intensified. The resulting shame and low self-esteem coloured my life for forty years.

Much later, in the Spring of 1956, I was finishing my first year in the Drama Department at Carnegie Mellon University, in the grimy city of Pittsburgh. Every day when I came home from classes, my roommate, John, would be sitting quietly, drinking one Iron City Beer after another dreadful Iron City Beer and listening, over and over, to The Platters hit, "The Great Pretender":

"Oh - oh yes I'm the great pretender
Pretending that I'm doing well
My need is such I pretend too much
I'm lonely but no one can tell
Too real is this feeling of make-believe
Too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal

Yes, I'm the great pretender
Just laughin' and gay like a clown
I seem to be what I'm not, you see
I'm wearing my heart like a crown
Pretending that you're still around."

I didn't know how to ask John what was wrong -- in my family of origin, emotional problems were never discussed. But about 10 years ago, someone told me that John was gay. That spring, was he coming to terms with this; was he feeling what his heart couldn't conceal?

John was studying engineering, likely not an advantageous career choice for a gay man 56 years ago. I was a "Dramat," a drama student, and in our department, there were many gay students and faculty. Lesbian women students, while rumoured, were not out, but were never to my knowledge marginalized.

While I initially found the pervasiveness of gay culture in the Drama Department disorienting, corn-fed midwestern boy that I was, I quickly learned that I liked some gay men a lot and didn't care much for others. It became no big deal.

And then there was Larry, our warm, affectionate Texan Stage Manager at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C, where I worked in 1963 - 64, the year of President Kennedy's assassination. At around that time, I visited Larry in hospital. He had been lured into an alley and badly beaten, his head swollen, his eyes nearly shut. This wonderful, funny man had been attacked because he was gay. In hospital, he passed it off; I think he was embarrassed.

Larry survived, but Matthew Shepard, a gay university student in Laramie, Wyoming did not when, in 1998, he was attacked by two young men.

My experience is with gay men. For most of my life, in the arts and academic world, gay men were able to be “out” in a way that was still difficult for lesbian women. I knew a few, but we avoided the uncomfortable and wildly inappropriate topic of sexual preference.

The affinity I feel with gay men is, in part, because they, too, have often been bullied, been tormented, had self-doubts. Also, many gay men I’ve known are talented, bright, with sharp wits that brightened my own former world of low self-esteem and depression.

So it will not surprise you to hear that I identify with underdogs, and the suicide last October 14 of a fifteen-year old Ottawa boy, Jamie Hubley, who was bullied to death because he was gay, the only “out” gay person in his school. He could have been my child, or yours. His final blog entry was that he couldn’t wait until it “got better.” “It’s just too hard” he wrote.

Following Hubley’s death, I heard an interview with Canadian t.v. star Rick Mercer. (Anna Maria Tremonte, CBC, 27/11/11.) Rick was not “out” in high school -- he “passed” as a heterosexual, but spoke of another boy who couldn’t “pass,” a boy who danced like Michael Jackson, and who was tormented. Mercer also said that as a t.v. personality, his co-workers at the CBC knew he was gay, and he wanted to believe that he was “out” as much as he needed to be, but at a certain point he felt he had to inform the rest of Canada.

So LGBTQ’s don’t come out once, but are always coming out, having to explain their sexuality in new situations. I understand that queer people don’t want always to be the exemplars, always to be the one to carry the flag for acceptance. They shouldn’t have to. I never say: “Hi, my name is Doug, and I’m heterosexual.” It’s no one’s business, and not important. But some people do make it important -- Facebook and texting have opened new channels for the broadcast of anonymous hatred.

This past October, following Hubley’s death, there was a resurgence of the “It Gets Better” campaign which is supposed to give queer teen-agers a message of hope, that if you can survive the next few years, life gets better in your 20’s. But we had the spectacle of Parliamentarians participating in an “It Gets Better” video, including one Conservative Ontario MP who is reported to have said in 2002: “We look at homosexual behaviour and say that’s not what’s prescribed in the Scripture.” (“Conservative hypocrisy on gay issues,” 24/10/11, Toronto Star) I am confused by the ambivalence, charitably put, in attitude toward LGBTQ’s in the current Canadian Government. Also, in the most recent Ontario election, a homophobic flyer was issued by some provincial Conservatives.

I suggest that we, as Unitarians, live in a “gay-straight alliance,” but we also live in a bubble, a bubble of acceptance and understanding.

If life itself became intolerable for Jamie Hubley, a WASPy kid from a kind family, living in the cosmopolitan City of Ottawa, how much more difficult is it for queer young women and men in smaller communities? And, how much more difficult is it for young people in immigrant families from southern Europe, Africa, the Middle-East, or the Caribbean.

When thinking about the marginalized, I find it unavoidable not to think about other youth deaths -- about the suicide last September of an 11-year-old Pickering boy, Mitchell

Wilson, bullied at his school because he had muscular dystrophy. I find it hard not to think about aboriginal youth suicide on reserves, and the murders of young aboriginal women.

Here is a poem by Marilyn Dumont, an Alberta poet and descendant of Gabriel Dumont, the Métis leader in the Northwest Resistance of 1885:

Helen Betty Osborne

Betty, if I set out to write this poem about you
it might turn out instead
to be about me
or any one of
my female relatives
it might turn out to be
about this young native girl
growing up in rural Alberta
in a town with fewer Indians
than ideas about Indians
in a town just south of the "Aryan Nations"

it might turn out to be
about Anna Mae Aquash, Donald Marshall or Richard Cardinal,
it might even turn out to be
about our grandmothers,
beasts of burden in the fur trade
skinning, scraping, pounding, packing,
left behind for 'British Standards of Womanhood,'
left for white-melting-skinned women,
left here in this wilderness, this colony.

Betty, if I start to write a poem about you
it might turn out to be
about hunting season instead,
about 'open season' on native women
it might turn out to be
about your face young and hopeful
staring back at me hollow now
from a black and white page
it might be about the 'townsfolk' (gentle word)
townsfolk who 'believed native girls are easy'
and 'less likely to complain if a sexual proposition led to violence.'

Betty, if I write this poem.

Women, aboriginals, queers, Jews, Afro-Canadians, Muslims, those with physical, emotional or mental disabilities, any group really, can be subject to being de-humanized. But we need to remember to reject bullying, not bullies; the behaviour, not the person: I have heard that one of the boys that bullied me committed suicide when in his 30's. I know his father was mean.

A little brain-function information: Jill Bolte Taylor, the author of "My Stroke of Insight" writes: "Although many of us think of ourselves as thinking creatures that feel, biologically we are feeling creatures that think." (MSI, p. 37)

The limbic systems in our brains allow us to pay attention to our environment and express sadness, joy, anger, frustration, and excitement. Within the limbic system, there is the hippocampus, which allows learning and stores memory, and the amygdala, which is triggered by danger. Unfortunately, this primitive part of the brain does not mature as we get older, and if fear and sadness neural pathways predominate in early childhood, then, without therapy, these burst out again throughout our lives when we experience fear. Fear and anger, closely connected, could be triggered, for example, by experiencing someone very different than ourselves: in colour, class, culture, or sexuality. And we repress accessing these fears because we're afraid of the fears themselves.

Today I ask, where are the rest of us? Specifically, could we "straights" make our congregation a more welcoming one to young LGBTQ people? Would a "Gay-Straight Alliance" help here? I spoke briefly to a likely-trans younger person who attended First for awhile and then disappeared. I regret I didn't do more. Our congregation is enriched by wonderful gay and lesbian members, but most are mature -- people who have, apparently, worked through a lot of "coming out" issues. Can we reach out to the younger, the lonely and desperate?

Gay writer and lawyer Glenn Wheeler last summer wrote this in an opinion piece in the Toronto Star ("The rainbow still matters," July 3, 2011, p. A15) where he talked about a division in the queer community between those: "self-contented same-sex couples (who) diss the Church and Wellesley crowd as throwbacks to a bygone era when we needed a ghetto for protection. (And, on the other hand,) Queer militants who harangue the new bourgeoisie as sellouts and worse, spineless duplicators of the conformist heterosexual model." So Wheeler reports a schism: one group that wants to blend in and live life -- and another that asks "what about the young still in torment?"

When we became a Welcoming Congregation, there was a gay-straight dance, I'm told. Everybody danced with everybody, and it was a kind of golden moment in the congregation's life. Could we recreate that magic, or perhaps create some new magic?

There used to be regular LGTB social events. Has that time passed? Some queer people may easily integrate into the congregation, but many straights have a difficult time integrating; it must also be tough for some gays and lesbians.

To quote Mr. Wheeler again: "The factionalism is less in spite of the recent historic breakthroughs than a symptom of it, a feeling by one part of the community that those who persist with the queer politicking should just give it up and learn to accept their fabulousness, and a frustration on the part of others that we have deluded ourselves into thinking homophobia is history."

Is homophobia "history"? I think we are not deluded.

First began wrestling with these issues in 1971. Then-minister John Morgan was asked if

what was called a “homophile group” could rent space here. (“Surfing the Tidal Wave,” John Morgan, p. 135) Acceptance wasn’t immediate; Morgan got board permission to meet with the “homophile group” in his study, which could be seen as part of his pastoral and community responsibilities, but we’ve come a long way, and have been a proud Welcoming Congregation since 1998. (By the way, I look at our congregation on Sunday mornings, and what I see all around me is “Family Values.”)

Here is the “but”: But to me our outness has seemed muted. Has it become “old hat” to be a Welcoming Congregation? Have we all, to quote Wheeler, “give(n) (queer politicking) up and accept(ed) our fabulousness?”

Other Toronto-area UU congregations, and some Christian churches, have clear exterior LGBTQ signage and rainbow flags, so it’s gratifying that we’ll have our own Rainbow Flag, to be dedicated this morning. It would also be wonderful if, inside, the certificate marking our status as a Welcoming Congregation could be more prominently displayed, and a rainbow flag on the website home page would be unmistakable.

Surely there are many LGBTQ’s who need a spiritual home, but who aren’t comfortable with the message of gay-positive Christian churches. Do we want, as a congregation, to be visibly open and welcoming to them? Can we make it easier for Toronto’s Jamie Hubleys to approach us?

I’m asking whether we can be stronger advocates for love, and for truth. We’re all a little queer; queer is normal. Schopenhauer said: “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as self-evident.”

For us, this truth’s time has come.

Here is one example of positive change in our society: In 2008, a major Canadian bank, TD, for their transgendered employees, began paying costs not covered by the provinces for sex reassignment surgeries. Wow!

I think there’s more we can do to be “out on the street.” May we get the discussion out of the closet again, please?

May it be so.