

“Celebrating the Rainbow ‘straight’ from the heart”
Address originally delivered Feb. 12, 2006
by Joan Wiley-Storm
to the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara

Opening Words: *Becky Edmiston-Lange*

Come into this place which we make happy by our presence.

Come in with all your vulnerabilities and strengths, fears and anxieties, loves and hopes. For here you need not hide, nor pretend, nor be anything other than who you are and are called to be.

Come into this place where we can touch and be touched, heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven.

Come into this place where the ordinary is sanctified, the human is celebrated, the compassionate is expected.

Come into this place. Together we make it a holy place.

Address: This address was originally delivered on Feb. 12, 2006, the Sunday closest to St. Valentine’s Day, an event that celebrates the best part of the human heart.

Imagine, if you will, a world of grey: grey skies, grey plants, grey animals, grey-skinned people, grey music, grey smells, grey thoughts. No colours, no diversity, just deadening, depressing grey.

Imagine you are a gardener making your first highly anticipated springtime trip to the local nurseries and discovering, to your dismay, table upon table displaying the same identical white geranium. Nothing against white geraniums, but just imagine a world without gaudy scarlet impatiens, subtle green hostas, sunny marigolds, cool blue delphiniums or purple butterfly bushes.

Imagine walking into a music store where only one type of music is displayed on the racks. No symphonies or Leonard Cohen, no Green Day or Abba, no Benny Goodman or Scandalnavia, no chants by Benedictine monks, no John Lennon, and by extension, no “Imagine”.

And imagine a world where there is no diversity in culture, or national costume, or sacred ceremonies, flags or anthems or festivals. Or Olympics.

Scientists have long known that one of the keys to the survival of this planet is diversity. British naturalist Charles Darwin, father of evolutionary theory and who was born this very day, was convinced that diversity is the foundation for everything.

But what about diversity in human relations?

Jerome Nathanson of the New York Society for Ethical Culture said: “The price of the democratic way of life is a growing appreciation of people's differences, not merely as tolerable, but as the essence of a rich and rewarding human experience.”

John F. Kennedy noted: “If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.”

Margaret Mead said: “If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.”

And what of the gender- and sexual-diverse community, the Rainbow community, the Pride community? Surely this community, of which we are all a part, is a cause for boisterous celebration because of its rich diversity.

I'm here to speak today about what happens when the human heart is opened to diversity and new possibilities, new definitions, and new friendships. Like the author of this sermon experienced.

The writer, a member of the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, declared from the outset that she was straight as straight can be.

At the time, she and her husband had been married 29 years (to each other!) and had two amazing children. Their daughter was 19 years old. Their oldest child was 22; for the first 18 years, they loved this child as a daughter, and for the last four years as their son.

The experience with their son pushed the launch button that started this Unitarian on a personal journey as a more active friend of the Rainbow

community. On Dec. 21, 2004, she knew her life as a better friend had begun in earnest when she volunteered to sit on the organizing committee for Pride Network of Niagara and “came out” as a straight woman in a gay bar.

Like Winnie the Pooh, she states she was a bear of very little brain, and left the search for the answer to the big question – the meaning of life — to those bears with bigger brains. Instead of the meaning of life, the writer’s path took her on a search for a life of meaning, and this search led her straight, no pun intended, to the Pride community as a friend and ally. As a result, she said her life has been enriched immeasurably and she has gained much more than she has given.

She became a member of the local chapter of PFLAG, a support system for families and friends of the gender- and sexual-diverse community, and she served as an elected director on the board of OUTniagara. She also enjoyed a close association with TransGender Niagara. But closest to her heart, she founded TransParent, a support network for the families and friends of trans children.

You see in front of you a flag, the Rainbow Pride flag. The first Rainbow flag was designed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker, a San Francisco artist, as a symbol of gay and lesbian pride. When Harvey Milk, San Francisco’s first openly gay supervisor, was assassinated that year, the decision was made to use the flag in the 1979 Pride Parade to demonstrate the gay community’s strength and solidarity. The original design used eight colors, but hot pink and turquoise were eliminated because of the cost.

The six colors of the resulting flag symbolize the following: red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sun, green for harmony with nature, blue for creativity and art, and purple for spirit.

Within the first two years of production, the flag became so popular that it used up the world’s supply of purple flag cotton. Today the flag is recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers.

So on with Pride 101. It is not uncommon to see a bewildering array of letters associated with the Rainbow community and they are the following, though not always in the same order: LGBTQ. Sometimes the letters are doubled up, so you might see two Q’s or two T’s.

This is what it all means: L represents lesbian; G stands for gay; B represents bisexual; T symbolizes transsexual or transgender or two-spirited;

Q stands for queer or questioning. Sometimes you'll see an I or an A or an S – I stands for intersexed, A stands for asexual and S could mean solosexual or, I like to believe, straight. There are many hues and shades of the rainbow of human gender and sexuality, all of them diverse and wonderful.

Pride rights in Canada, though they still have a long way to go, have advanced since 1965 when a gay man named Everett Klippert was charged with gross indecency and sentenced to three years in prison, simply because he was gay.

While doing his time, two psychiatrists concluded that Klippert could be described as a dangerous sexual offender. He was ordered jailed for life. Two years later, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the life sentence.

In response, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau uttered the now-famous statement: "The state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation," leading the federal government to decriminalize homosexuality in 1969. But Klippert remained in prison until July 1971.

On February 5, 1981, another landmark event took place in Canada's gay history. It wasn't the first anti-gay police action in Canada, but it was the biggest and most brutal. Shortly before midnight, 150 plainclothes and uniformed police officers staged violent raids on four of Toronto's five gay bathhouses and arrested almost 300 men. It was the largest mass arrest since the War Measures Act was invoked during the FLQ Crisis.

One police officer who examined the pipes in the showers was overheard to say: "Too bad the showers aren't hooked up to gas." Too bad the showers aren't hooked up to gas. Remember, this was 1981.

The next night, about 3,000 people marched in downtown Toronto to protest the arrests, and it galvanized the gay community.

These are a few other notable Canadian dates (*from the PFLAG-Canada website*):

Toronto's Gay Pride Week in July 1972 is considered to be Canada's first gay pride event.

In 1977, Quebec became the first province to include sexual orientation in its Human Rights Code.

In 1978, gays were removed from the “inadmissible list” for new immigrants.

In 1992, lesbians and gays were allowed to serve in the Canadian Armed Forces.

In 1996, sexual orientation was included in the Canadian Human Rights Act.

In 2005, the federal government legalized same-sex marriage.

The Unitarian Church has been in the vanguard in the struggle for equality for the sexual- and gender-diverse community for a very long time. As Unitarians, we are most certainly aware that among our seven principles, we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and to work towards justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Despite gains, we have a long way to go to ensure that we all share the same level of rights and privileges.

Hugely influential in how society views the gender and sexual-diverse community is the media, and how it stereotypes this community.

As we well know, stereotypes can be problematic.

They can reduce a wide range of differences in people to simplistic categorizations. Gay men are often depicted as weak and flamboyant, lesbians as tough and masculine, and trans people as confused freaks whose only place in society is on the Jerry Springer show.

Stereotypes, given enough exposure, become "realities" and they justify the position of those in power. And do the groups being stereotyped have any input into how they are represented? Usually no.

And look out when those stereotypes are challenged. Take the case of the movie *Brokeback Mountain*, a story of love between two male ranch hands. John Wayne perfected the stereotype of the rugged, tough, macho cowboy: *Brokeback Mountain* smashed it.

Bill O'Reilly and Cal Thomas of Fox News criticized the movie as pro-homosexual propaganda, and the Concerned Women for America lobby

group called it “morally offensive.” Another columnist, writing for the right-wing website Worldnetdaily, asserted that the movie represented nothing less than “the rape of the Marlboro man.”

Theatres in the state of Utah refused to screen the movie. These same theatres, however, continued to show the horror movie *Hostel*, which depicts the sadistic torture of two backpacking American tourists.

This little fact was not lost on many people. The Advocate, a respected Pride newsmagazine, wrote: “The media should be examining why it's okay to play a rapist, a demon, a vampire from hell, a serial killer who eats his victims with fava beans and nice Chianti, or any of the hundreds of sick, warped, twisted characters Hollywood puts out and we gobble up. Why do studios green-light films that have gruesome plots or despicable characters, and why did *Brokeback Mountain* languish for years?”

The Advocate also made the point that it is homophobic to suggest that actors are “brave” to play gay roles. Several actors turned down the roles, believing that playing the part of a gay ranch hand would be career suicide.

And then there's that other influential body — conservative fundamentalists of any religious stripe. As if it's not enough to lose family and friends, evangelicals are quick to say that even God, especially God, condemns the Pride community. How is it that a popular-selling bumper sticker that says “Kill a Queer for Christ” even remotely follows the teachings of Jesus Christ? And how many times do we have to hear selected biblical passages thrown at the Pride community, while the accusers studiously ignore passages that condemn their own actions?

This is on the website of Stephen Bennett Ministries, Inc. “No one is born homosexual. By biblically dealing with the root cause(s) of one's same-sex attraction, homosexuality can be completely overcome — just as drug addiction, alcoholism or any other sinful behavior.”

The General Council of the Assemblies of God asserts that AIDS is the “disastrous overarching consequence of sin through the fall of man.” In other words, AIDS is God's method of punishing gay men.

Focus on the Family, which announced in 2006 that it was establishing a Canadian presence, says homosexuality is preventable and treatable, and the Family Research Council states that “Gaining access to children has been a

long-term goal of the homosexual movement." And we all know how those innocent children will be seduced by those gay recruiters: with co-conspirators Tiggy Winkle, Bert and Ernie, and that underwater miscreant, Sponge Bob Square Pants.

Bishop Fred Henry of Calgary wrote in January 2005: "Since homosexuality, adultery, prostitution and pornography undermine the foundations of the family, the basis of society, then the State must use its coercive power to ... curtail them in the interests of the common good."

A presentation of this sort would be incomplete without the words of evangelist Pat Robertson, founder of the immensely powerful Christian Coalition, and one-time candidate for the President of the United States.

"When lawlessness is abroad in the land, the same thing will happen here that happened in Nazi Germany. Many of those people involved with Adolph Hitler were Satanists. Many of them were homosexuals. The two things seem to go together." This statement is particularly cruel. Because Hitler's plan for a great Master Race had no room for any homosexuals, many males from all nations, including Germany, were rounded up, forced to wear an identifying pink triangle on their sleeves, tortured and executed. Lesbians and other "anti-social" women, including working women, wore black triangles. During the 12 years of Nazi rule, nearly 50,000 people were convicted of homosexuality and most died in the death camps.

Back to Robertson. Late in 2005, he claimed that Hurricane Katrina was God's way of expressing anger at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for its selection of Ellen Degeneres as host of the Emmy Awards. Degeneres is lesbian; New Orleans is her hometown. Four years earlier, Robertson linked Degeneres to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, which took place just before the actress hosted the Emmy Awards.

His next comment is so looney-tunes it had to be included. But I do warn you if any of you are inclined to do what Robertson claims you will, I will instruct today's greeters to de-greet you and escort you off the premises. No Unitarian coffee for you. Here's the comment: "[Homosexuals] want to come into churches and disrupt church services and throw blood all around and try to give people AIDS and spit in the face of ministers."

Christian conservatives are not alone in trying to blacken the Rainbow

community. One prominent Muslim author concluded: "...Executing these sick and dangerous sodomites is much better and safer for the society than executing morality, chastity and virtue.... A sodomite is an evil habit, like alcohol."

We've touched on the media and fundamentalists. Let's move to the politicians. Don't say you haven't been warned.

Canada's 22nd prime minister, Stephen Harper, has consistently attempted to frighten people of various faith traditions into seeing gay rights as a threat to their freedom to practise their own religions. George W. Bush called for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, saying that it's the only way to protect "the most fundamental institution of civilization" from activist judges.

Across the Atlantic in Iran, two teenagers, one 16 and one 18, were publicly executed in 2005 because they were gay. State-sanctioned executions, sadly, are not uncommon in other parts of the world as well.

But not all is bleak. Listen to these words by Prime Minister Zapatero of Spain, the day his country passed legislation in support of same-sex marriage. "Today, the Spanish society answers to a group of people who, during many years, have been humiliated, whose rights have been ignored, whose dignity has been offended, their identity denied, and their liberty oppressed. Today the Spanish society grants them the respect they deserve, recognizes their rights, restores their dignity, affirms their identity, and restores their liberty.

"It is true that they are only a minority, but their triumph is everyone's triumph. Their victory makes all of us (even those who oppose the law) better people, it makes our society better."

You will note that gay and lesbian issues have been mainly addressed. The other groups that were identified earlier also face hurdles. For example, transgender people have a long way to go before they enjoy full equality. In 1998, during the Mike Harris administration, the Province of Ontario delisted sex reassignment surgery from the Ontario Health Insurance Plan, leaving four trans people who had already begun to transition in medical limbo, and dashing the hopes of many others. On Nov. 9, 2005, the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the province must pay for sex

reassignment surgery for three of the affected patients. But the tribunal stopped short of calling on Ontario to relist the procedure.

Consider some of the privileges we have as non-trans people:

Strangers don't assume they can ask us what our genitals look like or how we have sex.

Strangers do not ask what our "real name" is and then disregard our chosen name.

We don't worry whether we will be able to find a bathroom to use or whether we will be safe while changing in a locker room.

Our health insurance provider does not specifically excuse us from receiving benefits or treatments available to others because of gender;

We are not considered "mentally ill" because of the way we identify;

We do not have to run the risk of being physically or emotionally abused every time our gender identity becomes known;

And we do not run the risk of having previous volunteer experience or work history wiped clean when we undergo a name change.

The author of the sermon would like to think that attitudes about the trans community are slowly changing as the mainstream media give the subject more air time and ink. A movie called *Transamerica*, the story of a man transitioning to a woman, was critically acclaimed. *Maclean's* magazine has carried several positive stories about trans people. Even local media have tackled the subject. Education leads to understanding, which leads to acceptance.

The author describes about an encounter with a young trans man in 2005 that turned out to be a defining moment in her life.

She was marching with members of the local chapter of PFLAG in the Toronto Pride Parade, the first time she had participated in or even attended this riotous celebration. She and the other PFLAG members were the ones fully clothed and sensibly shod and she carried a neon green sign that simply said "I love my trans son."

The author had been told earlier that PFLAG is a beloved organization, but nothing had prepared her for the astounding, affirming and empowering

reaction. Enthusiastic bystanders, estimated to be one-million strong, cheered and clapped and encouraged them every step of the way. She said it was an ego boost to be received this way, but there was a tremendously sad subtext: so many Pride children are orphaned by bigotry that loving and supportive parents are considered the exception and placed on pedestals.

One young man grinned when he saw the neon sign and started jabbing his finger into his chest, indicating that he, too, was someone's trans son. The author couldn't resist breaking ranks with PFLAG and waded into the crowd, sign and all, to give this stranger a hug.

They embraced for a very long time, and then he whispered: "I wish my mom had been as understanding as you."

The mother's heart beating in the writer's chest cracked into a million pieces. The aching sadness and loss in his voice was unmistakable. And then that angry inner mama bear, which first came roaring out when their son was cruelly rejected by close "Christian" relatives, began to assert herself once again. By the end of the parade, the author had made up her mind: it was time to form TransParent, to coax the parents of trans children out of *their* closets so that they may share and celebrate their children's journeys.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once noted that, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He was absolutely right. Those of us who enjoy rights and privileges, some of them fresh and hard won, must never sit back while others are denied justice, equality and basic human dignity. It is simply not OK to pull up the ladder while others are still struggling to scale the wall.

And when we sing the words "O Canada, glorious and free", we should remember that while all of us are glorious, even fabulous, many of us are far from free. Some people are kept in closets, chained by fear, marginalization, bullies, bigotry and beatings. We must ensure that all of us are free to love whom we choose to love, free to be authentic, free to be fully human. And free to celebrate the brilliant and diverse colours of our rainbows.

Closing Words: (*John Cummins*)

"May we never rest until every child of earth in every generation is free from all prisons of the mind and of the body and of the spirit; until the earth and the hills and the seas shall dance, and the universe itself resounds with the joyful cry: "Behold! I am!"