

Celebrating the Rainbow Straight from the Heart

Address delivered by Joan Wiley

Unitarian Congregation of Niagara

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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: I chose this day to deliver this address because it is 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. Now, I have nothing against white geraniums, but just imagine a world without gawdy scarlet impatiens, subtle green hostas, sunny marigolds or 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 197 years ago 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, which I believe we are all a part, is a cause for boisterous celebration because of its rich diversity.

I'm here to speak today, two days before Valentine's Day, about what happens when the human heart is opened to diversity and new possibilities, new definitions, and new friendships. Like mine did. For those who don't know me and by way of introduction, let me say from the outset that I am as straight as straight can be.

My husband John and I are 29 years married (to each other!) -- have two amazing children. Our daughter is 19 years old. Our oldest child is 22; for the first 18 years, we loved this child as a daughter, and for the last four years as our son.

The experience with our son pushed the launch button that started me on a personal journey as a more active friend of the Rainbow community. On Dec. 21, 2004, I knew my life as a better friend had begun in earnest when I 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, I am a bear of very little brain, so I leave 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, my path is now taking me on a search for a life of meaning, and this search has led me straight, no pun intended, to the Pride community as a friend and ally. As a result, my life has been enriched immeasurably and I have gained much more than I have given.

Today, I am a member of the St. Catharine's chapter of PFLAG, a support system for families and friends of the gender- and sexual-diverse community, and I sit on the board of OUTniagara. I also have a close association with Transgendered of Niagara. But closest to my heart, I am the founder of TransParent, a support network for the families and friends of trans children.

There are many organizations involved in assisting or advocating for the Rainbow community in Niagara: this congregation, regarded as a welcoming and spiritual home to many; PFLAG; OUTniagara; AIDS Niagara; Transgendered of Niagara; Niagara Pride Support Services, which helps to establish Rainbow Squads in high schools; Brock Pride; the newly formed Niagara College Pride; the CAW LGBT committee; the fundraising group Imperial Sovereign Court of St. Catharines and Greater Niagara Region; and Team Niagara, which will be competing in the 2006 World OUTgames in Montreal this summer.

You see in front of you a flag, the Rainbow Pride flag. This is the very flag that was hoisted up the staff at St. Catharines City Hall on June 10, 2005, the first time in the history of St. Catharines that the Pride community was officially recognized with a flag raising.

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, a scant 25 years ago.

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 say in 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 makes 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 - the 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 just announced it is 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 Tiggly Winkle, Bert and Ernie, and that underwater miscreant, *Sponge Bob Square Pants*.

Bishop Fred Henry of Calgary, that hotbed of liberal thinking, 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 hideous. 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 last year, 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. New Orleans is her hometown. Four years earlier, Robertson linked Degeneres to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, which took place just before the Emmy Awards.

His next comment is so looney-tunes that I just had to include it, if for no other reason than for its pure comedic value. 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 concludes: 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.

So. We've touched on the media and fundamentalists. Let's move to the politicians. Don't say I didn't warn you.

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 practice their own religions. Closer to home, former St. Catharines MP Walt Lastewka repeatedly stated he was opposed to same-sex marriage before federal legislation was passed. 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 last year 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 I have spoken mainly to gay and lesbian issues. The other groups I 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, 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 November 9 last year, 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.

I'd like to think that attitudes about the trans community are slowly changing as well. A movie called *Transamerica*, the story of a man transitioning to a woman, has been critically acclaimed. Actress Felicity Huffman has been nominated for an Academy Award for her trans role.

Maclean's magazine has carried several positive stories about trans people.

Even our own St. Catharines Standard carried a full-page article last year about a young Niagara person who is in the process of transitioning.

Education leads to understanding, which leads to acceptance.

I'd like to tell you about an encounter with a young trans man last year that turned out to be a defining moment in my life.

I was marching with members of the St. Catharines chapter of PFLAG in the Toronto Pride Parade, the first time I had participated in or even attended this riotous celebration. We were the ones fully clothed and sensibly shod and I carried a neon green sign that simply said I love my trans son. I had been told earlier that PFLAG is a beloved organization, but nothing had prepared me for the astounding, affirming and empowering reaction.

Enthusiastic bystanders, estimated to be one-million strong, cheered and clapped and encouraged us every step of the way. It was certainly an ego boost to be received this way, but there is 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 my sign and started jabbing his finger into his chest, indicating that he, too, was someone's trans son. I couldn't resist breaking ranks with PFLAG and wading into the crowd, sign and all, to give this stranger a hug.

We 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 my 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 our own son was cruelly rejected by close Christian relatives, began to assert herself once again. By the end of the parade I had made up my 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. I think about that young man often, and I hope we reconnect at this year's Pride Parade.

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!"