

**Welcoming LGBT**  
**Rev. Rod Richards**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona**  
**08/09/09**

**Reading**

From an [\*opinion piece\*](#) by Jay Michaelson in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, reflecting on the August 1<sup>st</sup> shooting rampage by a masked man at a Tel Aviv gay and lesbian youth centre which left two people dead and 15 wounded:

So what should we *do*, apart from writing checks to...gay youth organizations? Well, here are three suggestions:

First, understand that anti-gay statements and actions *do* cause violence. Of course, this includes the outrageous statements that issue forth from some of our religious leaders and which should not be excused by post-hoc expressions of surprise...

Second, let's not use morality or the Bible to excuse ignorance or fear...

Finally, let's understand that the closet itself is part of the problem. It was heartbreaking to read that family members of one victim insisted that she was "just passing by" the meeting and "only there by chance." It was even sadder to learn that some family members of the injured have refused to visit their own children in the hospital. Can you believe it? Believe it. Now imagine what it's like to be that child.

That's the power of the closet. And that, alas, is why gay youth support groups remain necessary, even in 2009, and even in a comparatively tolerant country like Israel. Despite all the gains, there is still the stigma, and if I've learned anything in the years I've spent as an LGBT religious activist, it's that, for some people, it's always square one. So if you care about what happened in Tel Aviv, send clear, proactive messages at home that love is what matters, not the gender of your beloved.

**Sermon**

Imagine being teased as a kid...nothing new there, right? But imagine that the kids, when they really wish to hurt one another, use the names for *what you are*, that these are the worst insults they can find to hurl at one another. Imagine, from an early age, having to vehemently deny, daily, who you are in order to maintain your dignity...and paradoxically having your dignity stripped away in the process.

Imagine that you hear not only children, but adults too use those names, those names meant to hurt, in jest or in judgment. Imagine that even those adults who disapprove of the jokes, who silence the others, do so with an air of embarrassment, as if to say that it is just best not to talk about people like you.

Imagine that the bullying of the childhood playground is extended to the grown-up streets and that even many people who disapprove of such targeted harassment and even violence sometimes suggest that it wouldn't have happened if people like you had not been so "in your face."

Imagine your gratitude at the prospect of *being allowed to* serve your country in the military as long as you never breathe a word about who you are. And imagine being told that if anyone has the audacity to ask, to bring up the shameful fact, you have your orders: *don't tell!*

Imagine that this is the unspoken message in nearly every aspect of your life. Imagine the fear that you carry about losing your job. Imagine the fear that you carry about losing your friends. Imagine the fear that you carry about losing your church or synagogue or mosque or congregation. Imagine the fear that you carry about losing the love of your family—your own family--*if you dare to say who you are*.

Imagine hearing the discussions about *people like you* in the media. Imagine that cynical politicians and handlers use the discomfort with *people like you* as a *wedge issue*. Imagine having your relationships described—in religious terms, from the sacred texts—as an abomination. Imagine having your relationships being compared to sex with farm animals. Imagine having politician and preachers accuse you of not only personal immorality but of having an *agenda* to convert, to subvert, to pervert youth so that they will follow in your own twisted path. Imagine people being afraid of people like you being their doctor, their teacher, their minister...Imagine people being afraid of people like you who are afraid of people like them because fear can so easily turn to hatred and violence.

Imagine that your struggle to ensure legal recognition of a committed relationship with that person whom you love is seen as a distraction at best and a disaster at worst in the struggle for what really matters. Imagine that even supporters of your cause suggest giving your relationships a special category, a separate name, to distinguish them from “real marriages.” Imagine that each step along your way to civil rights is met with the fear of even well-intentioned people that “things are going too far.” Imagine even people you respect telling you the way things are supposed to be, the way families are supposed to look, and finding that none of this includes you.

Imagine that even many of those religious communities that open their doors to you have clauses in their welcome that accept “the sinner but not the sin.” We love you, but not who you are or what you do, they say. They offer prayers. They offer therapy. They offer cures.

Imagine that society offers to cure you of being you. Imagine the search for a gene that can be isolated, altered, eradicated, so that families can be spared the terrible trial of raising a person like you.

Wouldn't you wonder sometimes if they were right? Imagine living with that spectrum of judgment, from disapproval to disdain to despising, from vicious verbiage to brutal violence, directed toward people like you. Imagine wondering if you should change *who you are*. Imagine wondering if you *can* change who you are. Imagine wondering if you should just do away with who you are.

Imagine—if you accept who you are; if you celebrate who you are—being told that you are obsessed with *gay issues*. Imagine—if you accept who you are and join in the struggle for justice and equity being told to wait. Imagine being told to wait some more. Imagine being told to wait again.

Imagine.

This all may be familiar to you. You may be gay or lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and so you didn't have to imagine very hard. You may be heterosexual and still, of course, be very aware of the things I've mentioned. But being aware of it, thinking about it, is not the same as living through it, *surviving* it. It is not the same as *seeking understanding*.

Why do we embark on this Welcoming Congregation program for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender people?

Because all that I've mentioned continues to happen. Because religious communities play a primary role in the discrimination, injustice, harassment and violence that the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community continues to face. Because we want to welcome those who are among us, those who are waiting to join us, and those who cannot yet even imagine a religious community like ours. We want our welcome to be loud enough to hear, intentional enough to be real, and specific enough to matter to a community that has grown used to "don't ask, don't tell."

A [headline from the Associated Press](#) on August 5<sup>th</sup> reads: "Psychologists repudiate gay-to-straight therapy."

Addressing the treatment of gay people who find their sexual orientation in conflict with the tenets of their religious communities, Judith Glassgold, a Highland Park, N.J. psychologist who chaired the task force that rejected the efficacy of the "reparative therapy" championed by some religious groups, offered some other suggestions for people in this situation, one of them being to "find a faith that welcomes gays."

Find a faith that welcomes gays. If only such a faith really existed! If only there was a congregation like that right here in our very own community!

Unitarian Universalist minister, [Rev. Gail Geisenhainer, told this story](#) in her sermon at the 2006 General Assembly in St. Louis, MO.:

*I was forthrightly evangelized into Unitarian Universalism. I was 38 years old, living in Maine, driving a snow-plow for a living and feeling very sorry for myself when a friend invited me to his church. He said it was different. I rudely refused. I cursed his church. "All blank-ing churches are the same," I informed him, "they say they're open - but they don't want queer folk. To Heck with church!" My friend, persisted. He knew his church was different. He told me his church cared about people, embraced diverse families, and worked to make a better world. He assured me I could come and not have to hide any elements of who I was. So I went. Oh, I went alright.*

*And I dressed sooooo, carefully for my first Sunday visit. I spiked my short hair straight up into the air. I dug out my heaviest, oldest work boots, the ones with the chain saw cut that exposed the steel toe. I got my torn blue jeans and my leather jacket. There would be not a shred of ambiguity this Sunday morning. They would embrace me in my full Amazon glory, or they could fry ice. I carefully arranged my outfit so it would highlight the rock hard chip I carried on my shoulder, I bundled up every shred of pain and hurt and betrayal I had harbored from every other religious experience in my life, and I lumbered into that tiny meetinghouse on the coast of Maine.*

*Blue jeans and boots. Leather jacket, spiked hair and belligerent attitude. I accepted my friend's invitation and I went to his church. I expected the gray-haired ladies in the foyer to step back in fear. That would have been familiar. Instead, they stepped forward, offered me a bulletin, a newsletter and invited me to stay for coffee. It was so... odd! They never even flinched!*

*They called me "dear." But they pronounced it "dee-ah." "Stay for coffee, dee-ah."*

*I stayed for coffee. I stayed for Unitarian Universalism. Over time, the good folks of that church loved up the scattered parts of me and guided me from shattered to whole; from outcast to beloved among*

*many. And those folks listened to me. I and my life partner became their poster-children for the brand new Welcoming Congregation program. And they went on to provide important local pastoral and legislative ministries to gay folks in Down East Maine. We walked together and we helped each other to grow.*

I thought that was such a beautiful story of our potential. And I was especially glad that the next part of her sermon began with this:

*Please don't think the transition was smooth or swift. These were not imaginary super-heroes, these were human beings.*

She goes on to recount some of the struggles, the hurts, the misunderstandings that made her want to run away from her new home. She recounts the decidedly *unwelcoming* words that were spoken during one service at Joys and Concerns, her urge to retreat into her former cynicism about all religious communities, and the thoughtful, respectful, *covenantal* way in which members of the congregation responded to the words of that day.

You see, becoming a Welcoming Congregation to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community is not a once-and-for-all-time endeavor. It is not just a box that we check on the Liberal Religious Certification handout. It is not about perfection (thank god!) because we are not imaginary super-heroes but human beings...it is not about perfection but purpose. Not so much a *program* as a *process*, an ongoing process that we willingly engage to provide the welcome that we wish to provide to our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender brothers and sisters who are with us, those who are waiting, and those who we have not yet given a clue that we exist!

We will engage this process by honestly sharing experiences and perceptions. We will explore hidden assumptions so that we can make conscious and conscientious choices about how we wish to be together. We will risk saying the wrong thing so that we can learn to say the compassionate thing. We will identify the boundaries of our own awareness so that we may expand those boundaries in thoughtful practice.

The Welcoming Congregation is directed toward the LGBT community (and you'll be hearing that shorthand a lot, most likely)—it is directed there, but it is for all of us. It is an intentional expression of our covenant and mission. It is an adventure of the mind and spirit. It is a living-out of who we are and who we are called to be. And though we will meet the challenges imperfectly, we will meet them together with the confidence with which we meet all our challenges: the confidence that love will, always, guide us.