

Pride: A Celebration of Self

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD June, 2022

Years ago, I boarded a flight to travel across the country to Spokane, Washington. I was attending our denomination's yearly conference, General Assembly. The conference was woven together with worship, prayer, song, and reflection. And yet the most sacred moment to me was the Drag Queen Story Hour I attended, a mile away at a local bookstore. Drag Queen Story Hour is quite literally a time for drag queens to read stories to children. As I made my way down the sidewalk towards the long and exuberant line outside of the bookstore, a line filled with eager children and smiling parents, I knew I was in beloved community. I knew each and every person there was celebrating their true selves, and loving one another, even strangers, in a unique way because of the genuine vulnerability and joy shared throughout. The sidewalk was filled with folks of all ages, abilities, races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations with glitter and balloons and tiaras abundant. There were beautiful, precious drag queens winding up and down the lines of children and parents celebrating exactly who they were. Across the street, we were met with protesters donning signs of hate and shouting abhorrent words. What did we do alongside the bookstore? As their voices rose in hate, our voices rose in love; our voices rose in song. Songs from the crowd and the Queens were lifted up and love overcame hateful words and bigotry. Beauty prevailed. That beloved community we are always striving to create was present and proud at that bookstore in Washington.

This is the beloved community we see each year as we celebrate Pride. When I reflect on Pride, I am inspired by a celebration of self – of self-worth and self-love. I am uplifted by radical acceptance and brought to tears by a joyful and beautiful opposition to judgement, discrimination, prejudice, and bias. Today we celebrate blessings. Blessings of drag queens reading stories to children. Of people being true to themselves and bringing this truth to the world. Those blessings of LGBTQIA+ folks. And in this celebration, I see what is at the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith – inherent worth and love.

Pride also reminds me that a place of true joy can only be celebrated when sparked into being by an experience of true hardship. Pride marks the anniversary of the Stonewall riots – a pivotal moment in LGBTQIA+ history. When police raided gay bars and became violent, those in the gay community retaliated with demonstrations of worth, demanding they be able to live openly regardless of sexual orientation. This comes after decades of discrimination and labels of sinfulness and ostracization and marriage inequality and hidden sexuality and was followed by the plague of AIDS. When faced with hate, the demonstrators demanded love. When faced with bigotry, they demanded worth. And we commemorate this each year with parades and glitter and rainbows and joy. We rise together and celebrate with pride.

Author Jeff Foster reflects that “life will eventually bring you to your knees.” We have two options: we can “curse the universe, begging for a different life,”¹ or we can be brought to our knees because we are immersed in gratitude and awe and wonder at the life we live, overwhelmed by the true beauty that is our time on this precious planet. This is the life I aim to live, and the life I hope for each one of you. This wonder and awe and celebration is what I saw when immersed in beloved community outside that bookstore in Washington. I see this gratitude for self and life each year in the rainbows and glitter of Pride. May we each be blessed with such an existence.

Pride holds within it beautiful lessons we can all pull wisdom and inspiration from. Pride reminds us that we are each a blessing – we have so much to offer the world and hold so much inherent goodness within us. We have a chance to radiate with beauty while celebrating these pieces of us we are taught to hide; those pieces we were taught were shameful or bad. We have all that we need within us and when we bring this to the world, we shine. When we bring our true selves to the world, we offer a blessing to each person around us. I am reminded of Unitarian Universalist minister Elea Kemler’s understanding of a blessing and believe that I was offered these blessings by those radiant, confident drag queens. Kemler writes, “To bless something or someone is to invoke its wholeness, to help remind the person or thing you are

¹ Jeff Foster quote pulled from *Soul Matters: Worship Research 2022*

blessing of its essence, its sacredness, its beauty.”² In the expression of worth demonstrated in the drag queens, I found personal worth and beauty and sacredness. In their celebratory states of self, they blessed me, and my true self became acceptable and worthy of praise and celebration as well. This is a reminder of the goodness within – within each and every one of us.

I love Rev. Lori Walke’s parable of Pride. Amidst glitter and rainbows and celebration of self is heaven. Not heaven in another realm, but heaven here, among us all, where every soul is welcomed. With radical acceptance, hate and fear and bigotry dissolve. In this heaven on earth, we can be just who we are. We are called to co-create this with one another. We are called to accept each other, to radically welcome individuals of any identity. Those of any race or ethnicity. Of any age or weight. Of any socioeconomic status. Of any form of ability or disability. Of any gender or sexuality. Lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, asexual, intersex, those of many genders or no gender, cisgender or transgender, those who are questioning. When met with acceptance, self-worth and self-love fill that space within that previously held shame and sorrow. The kingdom of heaven is that space where “love wins.” Where each person knows they are a blessing. Each of you is a blessing. Let us celebrate this!³

This brings me to my theology of love. The love of the sacred, the love of the self, the love of the stranger, the love of the ostracized. This is what prevails. Loving each other – to me, this is faith. To me, this God of no names, this God of many names loves each of us for just who we are. We are invited to love each other and ourselves in this same vein. I believe this source of the sacred that is greater than anything we can imagine is an essence of love. We each came from the same source, no matter what our identity. We have common roots – no matter what those roots may be. We share a common source and, ultimately, a common end. Nothing could hold our web of life together stronger than these commonalities. And this reminds me that we are all siblings. We are all intimately connected in our web of life. As such, we are

² <https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/calling-on-wholeness/>

³ “Everybody’s In” by Rev. Lori Walke

called to heal ourselves and those we love by healing everyone in our midst. We love ourselves by loving each other.

We heard earlier a poet's exchange with her God, asking questions of affirmation, and receiving radical acceptance from her sacred in return.⁴ I believe our traditional Unitarian God would have offered this acceptance as well. I wonder how we can elaborate on this conversation. When any of us ask, "Can I wear this dress?" or "Can I love this person?" our sacred responds with vigor, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" When we ask, "Am I enough?" or "Am I loved?" she proclaims, "Sweetcakes, yes!" Our sacred treasures our true identities. When we are in need of affirmation of self, let us bask in this affirmation. Let us ask the trees or the ocean or the ancestors or the spirit of love or the being in the sky and hear "yes, yes, yes!"

And in this "yes" we return to this theology of love. Author and theologian Thomas Jay Oord writes of his own theology of love. Oord reflects, "To love is to act intentionally, in sympathetic [and] empathetic response to God and others, to promote overall well-being."⁵ What does this mean? We are called, each day, to act with intention. For each of our actions to be chosen deliberately. And for each of these actions to be grounded in sympathy and empathy for all of those in our midst. Love means we are called to make sure that each and every person is cared for and has the ability to thrive, regardless of identity. This is love. And its roots are in faith.

And we have another calling as a people of faith that was demonstrated to me at that bookstore in Washington. When faced with hate, we are called to respond with love. Love, in that moment at the Drag Queen Story Hour, was songs of joy filling the air to overwhelm the sounds of chants of hate directed at us from protestors. And I've done this before – at reproductive rights rallies, for example. Not meeting hate with more hate but meeting hate with music. Meeting hate with an affirmation of love and life and worth. Those affirmations

⁴ "God Says Yes to Me" by Kaylin Haught

⁵ *The Nature of Love: A Theology* by Thomas Jay Oord pg. 17

will always be more powerful. This persistent love ultimately ripples throughout our web of life.

I think of Pride and all of its blessings and wisdom through the lens of Unitarian Universalism. In our faith, each person has inherent worth and dignity. This does not leave room for judgment or bigotry. This does not leave room for hate or stigma but calls us towards love. This is why we are called to create that beloved community akin to what I observed and became immersed in at that bookstore in Washington – so that each person can be exactly who they were born to be. So often this worth is hidden under the shadow of prejudice and hate and we forget this worth within ourselves or we overlook this worth in others. Some of us have built barricades of sarcasm or anger or jealousy in response to judgment to keep ourselves safe. We have buried ourselves in the shadows afraid to open ourselves to the light. But this is not our true self. We peel these defenses away and see that true goodness that is our core – that has ultimately never left. How can we find this in others? How can we find this in ourselves?

This begins when we strip ourselves of labels forced upon us by judgment, when we see beyond stereotypes and stigmas. As we celebrate Pride, I know many of our siblings have faced judgment and stereotypes based on sexuality or gender and I hold that pain close. Others hear accusations of being a loser or stupid or lazy or selfish or ugly and with each hurtful word and each cruel and distressing action we put up barricades or we recess into ourselves and the celebration that is life is lost. I invite everyone to peel away these labels and replace them with one phrase: I am loved. Let us dispute claims of laziness with the phrase, “I am enough.” Let us replace the word “loser” with the phrase, “I believe in myself.” Let us replace the assertion of being stupid with the phrase, “there is goodness in my life,” or the accusation of being selfish by claiming, “I am beautiful. I believe in myself.” We can reclaim self-worth and self-love and the knowledge that we are each a blessing. This is our beautiful flower garden of humanity. This is beloved community.

There are other places I have witnessed microcosms of beloved community. I think of the work I have done with folks in support groups, people from every walk of life entering the same room with a common ailment and a common aim – to heal. Those from myriad backgrounds joining together in love and support to help one another on their journeys towards finding worth. Or the chapel in a hospital – family members and friends of victims of violence or those undergoing surgery joined together in prayer – people with a multitude of identities side by side as they journey together through fear and grief, offering solace and love simply through presence and a connection with their sacred. Beloved community forms when we are brought together by love and held together by radical acceptance. Where we heal and delight together. Acceptance and love abound. Sometimes our inner light goes out. We need one another to rekindle this.

So let us celebrate! Let us celebrate blessings. Let us celebrate those in the LGBTQIA+ community that bless each and every one of us simply with their presence. Let's celebrate that blessing that is the ability to be one's true self – to be loved and accepted for exactly who you are. Let us celebrate the blessing that is that genuine beloved community. Let us celebrate that love will always be more powerful than hate. That, together, we can thrive – that we can love ourselves and love and care for each member of our interconnected web. Today, let us celebrate!

May it be so, and Amen.