

## Pride Reclaimed

Readings: 'Queer' by Frank Bidart  
'Until We Could' by Richard Blanco  
'Demand it Courageously' by Julia Hartwig

A dear friend has two girls. They're middle schoolers now, but when they were preschoolers, their grandmother gave them a Noah's ark toy. It has the all animals and Noah's family. And an ark big enough for everyone to fit inside. It quickly became the girls' favorite toy. Like other preschoolers, these girls narrated the stories they played together. They took the biblical story that their grandmother had told them and put their own twist on it, making the ancient story make sense in their reality. "And then Noah went and adopted all of the animals from the shelter," one girl said. "And then," her sister chimed in, "Noah and *her* wife took them to the boat where they could all be safe and warm." *Noah and her wife*. Maybe it's because the robes on the plastic figures looked a lot like dresses. Maybe it's because Noah fits the patterns of female names to an unfamiliar ear. Anna, Dahlia, Maria, Noah. Whatever the reason, these girls were certain that *Noah and her wife* saved the animals.

Do you know what this means? It means we live in a world where children assume there is a lesbian married couple in the Bible! Sure, we know it's not every child who assumes this now, but the reality that there are any children that assume this is a profound and beautiful change. This is a new and wonderful world.

It has taken many to create this new and wonderful world. Activists and advocates. Lawyers and legislators. Politicians and regular people with no fancy titles or training. Millions of ordinary people who risked sharing the truth about who they are, who told their stories and transformed the hearts of others. People who lived their lives as authentically as they could manage. People who listened to and witnessed these truths and kept their hearts open and compassionate, who allowed themselves to be transformed. People who joined together to make real and lasting change.

There are so many stories about how people created this world where preschoolers tell stories about Noah and her wife, this world where adult men dress as ballerinas to show their acceptance of a boy who wants to be a princess. I am going to tell just one of those stories today. It's a classic. Some of you probably already know it.

The Stonewall Inn is a dingy bar on Christopher Street in the West Village in New York City. Now, it's a national historical landmark and attracts tourists. Then, in 1969, it was a dingy bar serving overpriced, watered-down drinks that was known in gay and lesbian communities for being a—relatively—safe place to gather. It was relatively safe. The police raided it at least once a month, despite the owners paying thousands of dollars every month in protection money to the police. There wasn't a crime being committed; the police raided because they could, because of the homophobia so prevalent at the time, because they knew that the people who gathered at The Stonewall Inn were too fearful to complain about police mistreatment. The police would come and the people gathered would disperse. Many who went to the Stonewall Inn were afraid of being arrested, afraid of what it would mean for their life and livelihood

if word got out that they were at the Stonewall Inn, where gay and lesbian people gathered.<sup>1</sup> It wasn't that long ago, but it was a very different time.

Then, there were a few groups of gay men and lesbians who had organized themselves and were advocating for what we now would call LGBT rights. They believed that safety was to be found through privacy – people should be left alone in their own homes or in semi-private “bottle clubs” like the Stonewall Inn.<sup>2</sup> The phrase “come out” hadn't been given its current meaning of telling someone else your sexual orientation. There wasn't a word for it because, with very rare exceptions, coming out wasn't something that someone with same sex desire did then. It wasn't that long ago, but it was a very different time.

That all began to shift on a late June day in 1969. On June 27, the police came to raid The Stonewall Inn, as they had done many times before. This time, it was different. This time, the people resisted. Some say that this resistance had been building for a while. Other raids at other gay and lesbian gathering places had gone less smoothly in recent months. Some say that the people at Stonewall that night were inspired by the increasing militancy of other social justice movements of the day. Some say the final push was the death of singer and actress Judy Garland, a woman so beloved by some in the gay community that the phrase “a friend of Dorothy” was a euphemism for being gay.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the reason, that night, the people at The Stonewall Inn resisted. They left the bar when the police arrived, but did not disperse. When the police came out of the bar that night, an angry crowd was waiting for them, yelling and throwing bottles and coins. The police were startled and retreated back inside the bar and called for backup. The riot squad arrived and tried to disperse the crowd with fire hoses. The people didn't leave. There was chaos. The police eventually got out of the bar and beat a number of people in the crowd. Police cars were attacked by some bar patrons. Meanwhile, a group of drag queens formed a high-kicking chorus line and sang together.

This new energy, this new resistance spread throughout the gay and lesbian community in New York City. The following night, people went to the bar again, the police came again, and confrontation and chaos ensued again. The police finally left at 4am, which calmed the crowd.<sup>4</sup>

These nights, known as The Stonewall Rebellion, The Stonewall Riot, The Stonewall Uprising, or Christopher Street Liberation Day, were the beginning of a shift in the gay and lesbian community. The gay and lesbian organizations in existence then had been advocating safety through privacy. If LGBT people kept to themselves and didn't bother anybody, perhaps they'd be left alone. After Stonewall, a new movement emerged, the gay liberation movement. They were not interested in privacy. As one historian of these times writes, “Gay liberation argued that safety and liberation were found only by living in, challenging, and changing the public sphere.”<sup>5</sup> They would not keep quiet anymore.

This new group of gay activists knew that their liberation was linked with the liberation of other oppressed people. They knew we are not free until we are all free. Many of these gay activists had been part of other movements for social change – the women's movement, the black power movement, the anti-war

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<sup>1</sup> Alsenas, Linas. *Gay America: Struggle for Equality*. New York: Amulet Books, 2008. Page 86

<sup>2</sup> Bronski, Michael. *A Queer History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011. Page 209

<sup>3</sup> Alsenas, 86

<sup>4</sup> Alsenas, 87

<sup>5</sup> Bronski, 209

movement. In that previous activism, they had kept their sexuality a secret.<sup>6</sup> In this new emerging movement, they wanted to be all of themselves, embrace all of their identities.

Though the word hadn't been invented yet, these activists were aware of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a concept that comes from law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term two decades after Stonewall. It is used to describe the ways in which forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, and classism are interconnected and cannot be understood or overcome separately from one another.<sup>7</sup> There was a lot of conversation about intersectionality related to the recent Women's Marches. The term was born of a legal case in which black women sued about employment discrimination and were told that they couldn't sue about gender and race discrimination simultaneously, but had to pick one. But that is not how our lives work. The sexism these women faced was linked to the racism they experienced. We all carry multiple identities – race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, national origin, class, and many others and the way we experience the world is based on the intersections and overlapping of all of those identities. No one is just their gender, or race or any one piece of their identity. The idea of intersectionality encourages us to see that all efforts to overthrow oppression are linked and all areas of oppression must be resisted together. This is where the women's marches faced some criticism, which for the most part, leaders learned from. If one is to be committed to improving women's lives, one needs to advocate for people with disabilities, as many people with disabilities are women; one needs to advocate for immigrants, as many immigrants are women and so on and so on. None of us lead single issue lives.

And the leaders of this emerging gay liberation movement understood this. In August of 1969, just a few weeks after the Stonewall Uprising, there was a national conference of gay organizations. These emerging activists attended and passed a resolution in support of other activist movements. They passed a resolution against the Vietnam War and in support of – and these are the words from 1969 – “the black, the feminist, the Spanish-American, the Indian, the Hippie, the Young, the Student, and other victims of oppression and prejudice.” The other social change movements of the time did not share this commitment to intersectionality. They didn't embrace and support gay liberation as much as gay liberation supported them. These gay activists often struggled to build coalitions with other groups.<sup>8</sup>

Coming out—telling the people in your life about your sexual orientation—became another key piece of this new gay liberation movement. Gay and lesbian people began to come out in larger and larger numbers, risking rejection by friends and family or being fired from jobs because of their honesty about themselves. And in those early years coming out was nearly always met with rejection. People created their own communities, often revolving around sanctuaries like bars – which is why it mattered so much—and was so deeply wounding to so many—that the largest mass shooting in modern American history took place in a gay bar, the Pulse Nightclub, last June.

Coming out – this honesty, this truth-telling mattered. Hearts changed – and when hearts change, laws change. In 1972, East Lansing passed the country's first non-discrimination ordinance that included sexual orientation. By 1976, 29 cities had them. In 1975, Elaine Noble, a lesbian woman was elected to the

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<sup>6</sup> Alsenas, 89

<sup>7</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 'Why Intersectionality Can't Wait.' *The Washington Post*. September 24, 2015. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?utm\\_term=.1e94b82b4361](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?utm_term=.1e94b82b4361)

<sup>8</sup> Alsenas, 90

Massachusetts State House. She was the first openly gay or lesbian person to hold elected office. By 1979, 20 states had repealed their laws against sodomy, laws that were often used to harass LGBT people.<sup>9</sup> In 1978, California voters decided on Proposition 6, which, if passed, would have made it illegal for lesbians, gay men, or anyone who was found “advocating, imposing, encouraging, or promoting” homosexuality to teach in public schools. The activists opposing Proposition 6, including Harvey Milk, the man whose killing inspired the song we sang earlier, used the slogan “Come Out! Come Out! Wherever You Are” to urge gay men and lesbians to talk to the people in their lives about why this Proposition mattered to them, how it would negatively impact them if it passed. And the Proposition failed.<sup>10</sup> The courage of those coming out Californians changed votes and changed history.

And one more important legacy of The Stonewall Uprising began on the first anniversary of the event. In 1970, there were Christopher Street Liberation Day parades held in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. These grew into the pride parades and pride festivals that we have come to expect every June. They are a chance to celebrate the LGBT community and feel pride in a community that has overcome so much.

A lot has changed in the nearly 48 years since the Stonewall Uprising. Then, coming out wasn't even a phrase our language. Now, 9 million adults in this country identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.<sup>11</sup> That is a lot of coming out. Now, 87% of Americans know someone who is gay, lesbian or bisexual.<sup>12</sup> And that courage to share one's story with others has changed our country. The Supreme Court overturned state laws against sodomy in 2003 and made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states in 2015. Coming out has a much lower social cost now—at least in many communities and in some families—than it did 48 years ago because so many have trod that path already. Now, more and more, people who come out are met with love and acceptance. We are in a world where princess boys are supported and preschoolers assume there are married lesbians in the Bible.

And we know this is not the promised land. We know things are not as good as they could be. We saw that this week when the Justice Department rescinded guidelines instructing public schools to allow transgender children to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity. We know that 40% of homeless youth are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender kids who were kicked out of their homes when they came out to their parents or were outed by someone else. People knowledgeable about this tell me that they suspect the percentage of LGBT youth among our homeless population here in Kalamazoo is likely higher than 40%, as we are a relatively progressive city in the midst of a more conservative region. Homeless LGBT youth might come here for acceptance, services, and community. And we know that it is not just our children who face ongoing discrimination. There are no national laws protecting LGBT people from discrimination in employment and housing. There are no state laws protecting LGBT people from

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<sup>9</sup> Bronski, 219

<sup>10</sup> Alsenas, 220

<sup>11</sup> Gates, Gary J. ‘How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?’ *The Williams Institute*. April 2011. Retrieved from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> ‘Vast Majority of Americans Know Someone Who Is Gay, Fewer Know Someone Who is Transgender.’ *Pew Forum*. September 28, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/09/28/5-vast-majority-of-americans-know-someone-who-is-gay-fewer-know-someone-who-is-transgender/>

discrimination in employment and housing here in Michigan either, though some cities, like Kalamazoo, have passed local ordinances.

Yes, there is much left to do, but before we go out into the world to do this and all of the other important work we are called to do, let us celebrate the courageous people, including the brave souls here among us, who have brought us this far. Let us celebrate the transforming power of telling one's truth and the transforming power of relationship.

May we all have the courage to share with the people in our lives the deepest truths of our hearts.

May the story of one night in June at the Stonewall Inn and the movement it birthed inspire us all to act with courage.

May we all know that none of us are free until we are all free.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.