

“A Time for Pride”
a sermon delivered by
The Rev. Dave Weissbard
The First Universalist Society
Central Square, NY
June 11, 2023

The Reading

“Why Teach Gay and Lesbian History?”

from **Becoming Visible**, Kevin Jennings editor

I was born in 1963. I grew up in rural North Carolina and realized in grade school that I was gay. I felt absolutely alone. I had no one to talk to, didn't know any openly gay people, and saw few representations of gays in the media of the 1970's. I imagined gay people were a tiny, tiny minority, had been and would always be despised for their “perversion.” Not once in high school did I ever hear a single thing about homosexuality or gay people. I couldn't imagine a happy life as a gay man. So I withdrew from my peers and used alcohol and drugs to try to dull the pain of my isolation. Eventually I tried to kill myself, like one out of every three gay teens. I saw nothing in my past, my present, or (it seemed) my future suggesting that things would ever get any better. . . .

As I was researching this book, I learned of a magazine called “One.” This was America's first gay magazine . . . This fact was, in itself, exciting – imagine there were gay people fighting for my rights and writing articles about their struggle a decade before I was even on this planet . . .

I was angry. How was it, I thought, that this history existed and no one had ever shared it with me? I thought back over my twelve years in North Carolina public schools and my four years at Harvard University, sixteen years when I never once learned anything in a classroom about gay people or gay history, and I was filled with rage. Denying me that history had nearly cost me my life, for gay invisibility had helped create the feelings of isolation that made me feel I wanted to end it all.

Maybe if I had known that there were people like me in Winston-Salem even before I was born, I might have felt a little better about myself and not spent so many years in self-hatred and self-destruction. Maybe if someone had taught me this “unimportant” piece of history, I would have made it through school a little more easily. Maybe if someone had taught this “unimportant” history to my brothers and straight classmates, they wouldn't have called me “faggot” and we could have been friends. Maybe if someone had thought this history was important, my life could have been very different.

Why teach gay history?

There are two main reasons. First, we, as teachers, must teach gay history because it is intellectually dishonest not to. There is a substantial gay history that we are just beginning to understand, thanks to the efforts of some remarkable scholars. Just as the curriculum has been revised to reflect the contributions of under represented groups such as African-Americans and women to our civilization, so it must be revised to tell the story of gay and lesbian people . . .

More importantly though, teaching such history may help our students to create a better society. Orwell wrote that “those who control the present, control the past; those who control the past, control the future.” When we who teach in the present choose to leave out the gay

and lesbian past, we are helping to ensure that homophobia and heterosexism are a part of our future. If our students, both gay and straight, graduate high school with no sense of gay people and where we have come from, then they will be less equipped to deal with the gay people they will encounter in their futures. If we can further their understanding of gay people through our teaching, the epidemic of suicide, gay-bashing, and discrimination that plague our society may be lessened. If we do not teach about this past, there is little hope that this plague will begin to die out.

The Sermon



Who are you?

I'm serious. How would you describe yourself to someone you have not met? Think about that.

For example, I would say, "I am an about-to-be 83-year-old stocky guy who is bald and bearded. I am a husband, a proud father of four daughters, and the grandfather of four boys and two girls. I am a mostly-retired Unitarian Universalist minister, and a progressive – socially and politically."

What would **you** say? Note some of what I did not say.

[right-handed]

I did not mention that I am right-handed. Now, that is not particularly relevant in the United States these days, but according to the Smithsonian Magazine's "Smart News," "Two-Thirds of the World Still Hates Lefties." I have not found justification for that assertion but an article in The Daily Beast does report:

Over time, what seems to have started as a concession to the messy realities of the human condition started to take on a life of its own. In Western society, left-handedness and even sitting to a person's left started to become associated with the demonic. The word "sinister" comes from the Latin for "left" and "dexterous" comes from the Latin for "right." In the 19th century, the physician Cesare Lombroso described left-handedness as a sign of savagery and criminality. This in turn led to the suppression of left-handedness. Children's left hands were physically tied down in order to force them to use their right hands for important tasks.

That was true in America in the past. Parents were distressed if their child favored their left hand and took steps to break them of the practice. It is estimated that something like 10% of people are born left-handed. The distress was, of course, scientifically baseless and it is clear why that concern has disappeared in the US. You can see why I might not bother to mention it.

[UU]

I did mention being a UU Minister. I believe that is relevant because declaring I am a UU says a lot about my values, although, admittedly, many people do not know enough about us to know what Unitarian Universalist means. Saying that I am a retired minister does show that my commitment to UU'ism has been more than casual.

[heterosexual]

Now we get to the meat of this. There are three reasons why I would not mention my sexual orientation. One is that if I did not specify otherwise, it is most likely that people would make the accurate assumption. Second, it is none of their business. The third reason is to specify my heterosexuality would imply I was afraid of the implications if anyone thought I was

gay, and that would be playing to their possible homophobia. In addition, if I needed to specify, that would suggest to any knowledgeable person that I might personally be in doubt about my sexual identity.

[UUs wrestling with the issue]

It will come as no surprise to you, I trust, that I have addressed the subject of homosexuality several times during my career as our association grappled with the implications of its commitment to “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Was it reflected in the policies and practices of our Association, churches, and members. Honestly, it has not always been easy. There has been a significant gap between our ideals and our actions in this regard, as well as in the case of racism. I won’t rehearse all the details, but let me point out that when I came into the ministry, candidates were required to take a psychometric exam intended, in part, to weed out potential ministers who were gay. We’ve come a long way over the last 58 years!

Over those years I began officiating at services celebrating the commitment of gay couples and, since it became legal, the marriages thereof. One of my memories is of the session of our UUA General Assembly when there was to be a vote on creating an office to address Gay Affairs. One of the prominent ministers spoke in opposition, expressing his concern that next we would be called upon to approve an Office of Bestiality, to which some delegate called out, “Bahhhhh.”

When the Rockford congregation was considering whether to seek recognition as a “Welcoming Congregation,” one which declares its openness to gay members, one of the old-timers in the congregation insisted that since everyone was welcome, there was no need to specify the welcome of those who were gay. He was made a member of the committee leading the consideration. After hearing the testimony of gays from the community as to the continued rejection and hostility they received from other churches, he became one of the most adamant supporters of making their welcome explicit, and we did.

The three congregations I served during my full-time ministry all had active gay male and female members. I have seen remarkable change in our movement as well as in American society over these decades. [It is obviously not written in stone, to which I will come back before we’re done.]

[personal perspective]

Let me say a word or two from the personal perspective. I specified that I have four daughters: two of them are gay and two are “straight.”

When she was little, my eldest daughter, Lisa, attracted so much attention, even from strangers, she thought her name was “Lisa pretty-face. She was cute, and charming, interesting, and bright. Strangely, boys didn’t pay a lot of attention to her. They may have picked up on some subtle clues of which her mother and I were not aware, although we were both very clear about our support of gay people. When I asked Lisa for her permission to speak this morning of her sexuality, I asked when she realized she was gay, and she said, “as long ago as I can remember.” She did have a date with a guy for senior prom and she went out with him a few times after. She told me that if other guys had asked her out, she would have happily accepted. She went to Bryn Mawr, the women’s college, and it was while she was there that she informed us she was gay. Lisa had a long term relationship with one of her classmates and a with couple of other women thereafter, and then, 38 years ago, she and Valerie had a glorious service of union, at which I and a former Catholic priest, co-officiated. It was subsequently followed by marriage by a county clerk when that became legally possible.

My middle two daughters, Shelley and Meredith, are more conventional, are in longtime marriages with guys, and are the mothers of five of the grandchildren I mentioned earlier.

And that brings us to my youngest daughter, Hilary, whom many of you know. Hilary has always been very sociable and has had many close friends of both genders. [I did think it unusual how many of the boyfriends later came out as gay or trans.] After her last breakup, she got together with Zack Dornton, a guy who had been a really good friend in her first year in college and who, unbeknownst to Hilary, had longed for her for in the intervening six years. [One of her teachers told her that he was shocked at her lack of awareness of Zack's feeling for her.] Hil and Zack became the parents of Finn and were married in this church three years ago. Those who are Hil's friends on Facebook know, in significant detail, that she has recently come to the realization that she has been hiding from her inner preference for same sex love. The joy she has found in that discovery is palpable. She and Zack are working on an amicable divorce with shared parenting of Finn. I have to say that I am moved by Zack's acceptance and support of Hilary in this difficult time. I am happy Finn has him for a father. You have the opportunity this morning to meet Emily, Hilary's new love, with whom she just shared their four-month anniversary.

So, I can tell you that my belief in love above all else has been tested and passed the test. By the way, this sermon is at Hilary's request and I have to say that, while I thought I knew quite a bit about homosexuality, I have learned a lot from the stack of books and articles that I have read to make sure I was up to date for this sermon. I am a tad embarrassed by the sermons I wrote in the 70's, 80's and 90's. While there is always more to learn, I now know more about same sex love than I have time to share this morning.

[Which reminds me: as most of you know, I normally preach the sermon I share with you on the first Sunday of the month, with the Watertown congregation on the second Sunday. I was not satisfied, after the fact, with my May sermon here, so I revised it significantly for the second Sunday in Watertown. I mention that because this morning's sermon is in essence a continuation of the last. It addressed the need for us to expand our circles of awareness and support to include people who might not have been included before, like those who are included in the LGBTQIA+ circle. I brought a couple of copies of the revised version if you would like one, and those attending on Zoom can email me at Rockbard@aol.com, and I will gladly send you one electronically.]

Returning to this morning's subject:

[Why the different ways of love?]

Why is it that some people love people of the same sex and some love those of the opposite sex, and to be complete, why do some love both kinds? The answer is that nobody knows, really. Some believe that the cause of our sexual orientation lies in biology: it's how we are born due to genes or hormones in the mother's system. Others insist our orientation is the result of life experiences - our family interactions and encounters in the wider world.

There is no causal explanation that is widely accepted. I suspect people will continue to search for the genesis of the reality, but I have to tell you that what matters most to me is the reality itself, not the why. I believe, as I always have, that there is not enough love and happiness in the world, so if some people find them in a different context than I do, that is no threat to me. That is not to say that the options are limitless - of course there are limits. I do not approve of relationships in which one [or both] parties are exploited or hurt by males or females.

[quiz]

Jennings, in his first chapter, suggests a “heterosexual questionnaire” which is designed to “illustrate the unearned privilege that accompanies Heterosexuality in a heterosexist society.” [I trust those who do not consider yourselves heterosexual will understand that this is not aimed to exclude you, but the questions may have a familiar ring.]

1. *What do you think caused your heterosexuality?*
2. *When and how did you first decide you were heterosexual?*
3. *Is it possible heterosexuality is a phase you will grow out of?*
4. *Is it possible that you are heterosexual because you fear the same sex?*
5. *If you have never slept with someone of the same sex, how do you know you wouldn't prefer that? Is it possible you only need a good gay experience?*
6. *To whom have you disclosed your heterosexuality?*
7. *Heterosexuality isn't offensive as long as you leave others alone. Why, however, do so many heterosexuals try to seduce others into their orientation?*
8. *Most child molesters are heterosexual. Do you consider it safe to expose your child to heterosexuals? Heterosexual teachers particularly.*
9. *Why are heterosexuals so blatant, always making a spectacle of their heterosexuality? Why can't they just be who they are and not flaunt their sexuality by kissing in public, wearing wedding rings, etc.?*
10. *How can you have a truly satisfying relationship with someone of the opposite sex, given the obvious physical differences?*
11. *Heterosexual marriage has total societal support, yet half of all heterosexuals who marry this year will divorce. Why are there so few successful heterosexual relationships?*
12. *Given the problems heterosexuals face, would you want your children to be heterosexual? Would you consider aversion therapy to try to change them?*

[history]

In our reading, Kevin Jennings wrote about how important it was to him to learn about gay and lesbian history – how he realized that he was not alone and people had dealt with feelings like those he experienced throughout human history.

The evidence is abundant that there have always been men and women who did not experience deep attraction to those of the opposite sex, but instead found true joy and love in the arms of men or women of the same sex as theirs and this has been true in virtually every time and place.

John Boswell in his book **Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality** points out:

Early imperial Rome may be viewed as the “base period” for social tolerance of gayness in the West. Neither Roman religion nor Roman law

recognized homosexual eroticism as different from – much less inferior to – heterosexual eroticism . . . Roman society almost unanimously assumed that adult males would be capable of, if not just interested in, sexual relations with both sexes.

Roman sexuality got messed up when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. [I believe an equally good case can be made for Constantine's conversion to have messed up Christianity as it brought politics into the church.] Actually, Boswell is among the historians who believe it is wrong to blame Christianity for homophobia as it was civil authorities who originated it. Actually, many gays rose to positions of power in the church.

I was intrigued to learn there was a significant change in the last 168 years. Same sex love was formerly something people did, but it did not involve their being labeled: there was no concept of there being homosexuals as a distinct category of person. Martin Duberman suggests there is "the problem of assigning 'gay' or 'lesbian' identities to past figures who lived at a time when those conceptual categories did not exist."

To say that there was no category is not to say that there was universal approval of homosexuality. In the Christian world, sex itself was a problem. Paul of Tarsus was, as far as we know, celibate. He considered sex as dirty and an obstacle to achieving God's kingdom. He urged people not to indulge in sex at all, but if they had to, to avoid the fires of hell, it had to be in the context of marriage and only for the purpose of reproducing - heaven forbid for the sake of pleasure. This is why the Roman Catholic Church and some fundamentalist Protestants oppose birth control – it is "unnatural." It interferes with a divine plan, as they understand it. When Paul speaks of unnatural sex, he means anything outside marriage and anything other than penile-vaginal intercourse - what one participant in a UU sexuality teacher-training course I led, abbreviated as "PVI."

There were laws in most if not all of the United States against engaging in anything other than "PVI" and the punishments like castration, were severe.

Interestingly, Germany in the 19th Century became one of same sex's most supportive countries. World War II had a positive impact on gays forming community. Males and females discovered in the military that there were others like them.

Jennings quotes a WAC officer wrote about her vision of things being better for gays. She said:

I use the word "us" for I have voluntarily drunk from the Lesbian cup and have tasted much of the bitterness contained therein as far as the attitude of society is concerned. I believe there is much that can and should be done in the near future to aid in the solution of this problem, thus enabling people to take their rightful places as fellow human beings, your sister and brother in the brotherhood of mankind.

[progress]

There was significant progress toward acceptance made in the 50's and sixties. One of the dark spots was the period of Senator Joe McCarthy's rise to power, partly based on his homophobic campaign, pushed by his legal advisor, Roy Cohn, a closeted gay who eventually died of AIDS. Interestingly, Cohn became the mentor of no less than Donald Trump whose homophobia he encouraged.

The repression of homosexuals by the government partly intensified as a result of McCarthy's pressure, helped to build the bonds in the community, which eventually led to the

1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn, the most popular gay bar in Greenwich Village. The riot was the signature event in the rise of the gay pride movement when gays collectively stood up against the violence of the New York City Police who had been paid significant sums of payoff money by the Inn's Mafia owners to turn their backs. A routine police raid turned violent and history was made. It is the anniversary of that event that is celebrated by gay pride parades, and now by the designation of June as Gay Pride month.

One of my favorites of the books I read this month is Jan Clausen's **Beyond Gay or Straight: Understanding Sexual Orientation**. Writing of her personal experience, she tells her readers:

As a little girl living in a white, middle-class nuclear family in a small northern California town in the 1950's, I had erotic fantasies involving adult women that I can now interpret as "lesbian." I also assumed that I would grow up to like boys and get married. As an adolescent, I had my first passionate sexual affair with a young man my own age. I can remember being anxious about whether I was playing the appropriate gender role

. . . As I entered my twenties, I became involved with the feminist movement of the early 1970's, and about the same time I began to make love with women. At 25 I fell in love with a woman who would be my lover for the next 12 years. Together we raised a daughter (biologically hers), helped found a lesbian literary magazine, and engaged in a range of political and cultural activism: everything from organizing support for the Nicaraguan revolutionaries known as the Sandinistas to publishing a group of feminist essays on Anti-Semitism and racism.

Throughout this time I considered myself a lesbian pure and simple even though I realized that I had never completely shed my capacity for physical attraction to men. ("It's not their bodies that are such a turn-off, it's their attitude." was one of my lines.)

Then, in 1987, I fell in love with a man, and my identity as a woman-loving woman seemed to shatter . . . What matters for you to know is that the transition I underwent has made me profoundly suspicious of the adequacy of any labels, including bisexual, for my own sexuality. I now live with my male companion, which makes me a "practicing heterosexual" in everyday life. Yet in terms of my social ties, intellectual interests, and political concerns, I move back and forth between gay and straight worlds.

In my work as a writer and teacher, I continue to be widely perceived as a lesbian (especially by heterosexuals) because I consistently speak out on lesbian and gay issues. I do so not only out of a commitment to justice and a concern for my gay friends and my lesbian daughter but out of the awareness that, no matter my future sexual choices,

My chances of living in a world that can understand my books and actions depend directly on the achievement of greater freedom for lesbians and gays. My complicated life makes me vividly aware that "homosexual" and "heterosexual" (though not, I think 'bisexual') are names for cultural as well as sexual categories.

Clausen points out:

. . .gay cultural historian Henry Abelove has recently argued Freud's bad reputation among later generations of gay rights advocates stemmed less from his actual views than from the ways in which his work as interpreted – or subverted – by homophobic American analysts. Their "scientific" perspective on homosexuality included the assumption that same-sex orientation was indeed an illness, as it was officially deemed

by the American Psychiatric Association in 1952. This diagnostic classification was abolished only in 1973 as the result of a well-organized campaign both inside and outside the organization.

I would suggest the abolition of that diagnosis was a sign of a new level of awareness on the part of the American public, as illustrated by the 1987 and 1993 marches on Washington for Gay, Lesbian and By Equal Rights and Liberation.

[in the courts]

In the 1996 case of *Romer v. Evans*, the US Supreme court ruled that laws could not single out LGBTQ people to take away their rights. In 2003, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, the court eliminated all sodomy laws in the United States in a vote of 6-3. In 2013, in *US v. Windsor*, the court eliminated the portion of the Defense of Marriage Act which defined marriage as “a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife,” which was followed in 2015 by *Obergefell v. Hodges* which made same sex marriages legal.

These cases reflect a change in the attitudes toward homosexuality in America. That reality does not, however, reflect a unanimous change. As I noted before, Germany, at the turn of the 20th Century represented one of the most supportive climates for homosexuality. Enter Adolph Hitler. Hitler realized that to achieve power, he needed to build support in the nation, and to best accomplish that, he needed enemies for people to hate. He chose Jews, Homosexuals and Gypsies as his targets, and, as we know, he parlayed that into the creation of the Third Reich. Under his leadership, Homosexuals were sent to concentration camps and crematories, along with Jews.

[falling back]

The Republican party in the United States has, in recent years, decided to learn from Hitler and awaken the sleeping, but not dead, fear of the “otherness” of Homosexuals, Jews, and people of color. “Don’t be ‘woke,’ go back to sleep” has been the message. The MAGA platform has been built on hate. New laws are being enacted across the US to restrict the rights of homosexuals and people of color. [The Human Rights Campaign reports that this year state legislatures had “More than 525 anti-LGBTQ+ bills with more than 70 signed] Teaching about the Gay and Black experience in America is being severely restricted in many states. Just as the right to abortion and the right to vote are being severely threatened by the Supreme Court, so is the acceptance of homosexuality being threatened. Teachers are outrageously being accused of “grooming” kids to be gay. There is increasing violence against gays, people of color, and Jews.

“Woke” is not as ambiguous a term as conservatives would have us believe. It is a matter of being awakened to discrimination against minorities in our nation – a rejection of the goals articulated in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and its amendments.

[Pride, now!]

Gay Pride month is more important now than ever. We do not have the luxury of complacency. Our brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and our democracy itself are being actively threatened. We dare not sit back in comfort. It is vital that we face the challenges and become allies who stand up and speak out. As our final hymn declares, we must “Stand on the Side of Love!” Our circle must be widened to actively include those who are living in jeopardy in this “Land of the Free.” I have brought some symbols of our support for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Queer community. I urge you to take and proudly wear one of these rainbow pins.