



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
CHURCH *of* GREENSBORO

Making Room For All: Coming Out Still Matters

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Rev. Ann Marie Alderman with Karen Madrone

This past Friday, October 11th, marked the 25th anniversary of National Coming Out Day. This day set aside each year for telling a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker, about your identity began one year after a half a million people descended on Washington DC in 1987 advocating for the rights to GLBT people. The theme for this year's Coming Out Day is: "it still matters".

Does it still matter? As, a lesbian, I have been receiving mostly "ho-hum" responses for years now...at least in the UU world! ...and from my family and friends.

Even this past spring when my wife to be and I booked a venue for our "marriage", the staff in Charlotte was mostly blasé...about our relationship and our ceremony...

Even the very conservative place where I went time after time to get the custom made invitations just right...dealt with me just like everyone else...

Gays and lesbians have come a long, long way in 25 years.

Yet, just last week, Robin and I went to the courthouse to ask for a marriage license. This, of course, is North Carolina and we knew the answer would be "no".

Even with that hurtful "no", I am quite aware that I benefit from privilege. Actually a lot of privilege. I feel certain I will not lose my job for engaging in an act of public witness...

I am in...we all are in...one of those "yet, but not yet" places...

The response to gays and lesbians desires for now to be legally married differs state to state. I left the Mecklenburg courthouse saying that "we will be back". I know that this denial, perhaps among the final barriers to legal equality for gays and lesbians will come down someday soon.

It will come down, because more and more gays and lesbians continue to come out, to ask for equal treatment, more and more will "come out" publicly at church, at work, at school, in the court rooms...



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The Human Rights Coalition says that now—25 years since the first Coming Out Day one of out of every two Americans has a gay or lesbian friend or relative or co-worker they are close to, that they know well.

That is a lot of progress in “just” 25 years. That is a lot of being known and accepted, welcomed into the circles that count... That is a lot of coming out as gay and lesbian. That is a lot of coming out as allies...

Yet, HRC, also says that for a trans person, someone born in the wrong body, someone whose gender identity does not match their body parts, the statistic is quite different.

Only one in ten Americans are close to a friend, a relative, a co-worker who is transgender.

It is a very different world for someone who has been and still is marginalized because of gender identity.

For those who are trans, the world can be a lonely, confusing, even violent place.

This ought to be a sanctuary for all those who are marginalized. We ought to be better than 1 in 10 here. Changing that statistic, by coming out as allies...not just welcoming...if “they” happen to show up... We ought to be out there inviting. We ought to be seeking...those who are on the margins. We ought to be engaging in the kind of relationships that will transform us...

I have participated in our denomination’s Welcoming Congregation program three times, in three different congregations. All three experiences were powerful...taught me things I did not know. One was transformative...

When I led the Welcoming Congregation program in the tiny UU church in Athens, Pennsylvania some 7 years ago, those of us who were/are gay and lesbian were transformed by the experience we had with our trans members. We learned just how much we as gays and lesbians—so long used to being on the outside, had been guilty of keeping those who were trans even further out... it was a painful learning.

This UU faith asks us to feel pain, sometimes. It asks of us to be not just tolerant of difference, but welcoming. To be radically welcoming: to offer hospitality to all, especially those who have been defined as “other”, who have been systemically disempowered and oppressed, pushed to the outer edges of society. AND to be transformed by doing so...

The Welcoming Congregation certification that UUCG has hanging on its wall, asks us to be in alliance with those GLBT local groups doing the work of dismantling oppression.

This is not just a day each year...

It is about seeking out those who are hurting, lonely, isolated and who are often daily threatened with violence.



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Next year, if I should ask you to raise your hand if you are friends with, love – respect – know the life story of a trans person, who is your relative, neighbor, co-worker, fellow congregant....I hope instead of 1 in 10, here it is 1 in 5...

- Rev. Ann Marie Alderman

I am going to start my talk with a confession: gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people can also be homophobic, biphobic and transphobic. It's true. I think those of us glbt people who are active and vocal have a façade of having all our stuff worked out. But, believe it or not, we don't.

When you are raised in this culture you are constantly reminded of the norm and that norm is held up as the correct way to be. Anything outside that norm, whether it pertains to sexuality, gender identity, physical abilities, race, class or any other category is considered to be "less than" and not given the same status as the norm. GLBT people, since we live in this culture, too, also have these beliefs.

On September 14, two friends of mine, Allison Woolbert and Debbie Duncan, came to our church and spoke about their life experiences, Allison as a male to female transgender woman, and Debbie as the wife of a male to female transgender woman. At the workshop, one of the ground rules was about recognizing our own internal biases. This ground rule reminded me of times in my life when my personal biases surprised me.

When I was a graduate student in Missouri, I worked as a graduate resident assistant at a local college. I was an out lesbian and everyone seemed to be fine with that. But an interesting thing happened. One day I found out that one of the resident assistants was a lesbian...and my first thought was..."I thought better of her than that." Thankfully my next thought was "I can't believe I just thought that!" That incident reminded me that even with everything I had gone through to accept my own sexuality, I still had issues with accepting others where they were.

When I moved to North Carolina in 2004 I played softball with a co-ed gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender softball league in Winston-Salem for a few seasons. Now, I clearly do not fit the stereotype of lesbians who play sports, have short hair, and know how to fix cars. I had never played softball in my life but I was willing to do whatever it took to make friends in the area. Thankfully a few people took the time to teach me how to throw a ball and I learned how to work with my weaknesses to become a decent player.

One of the great experiences I had with the league was getting my own stereotypes blown to bits. I got to meet gay men who fit lots of stereotypes our culture has of them (you know what they are)...and were also really fierce softball players. I was stunned. Actually, many of them have gone on to win regional and national competitions. I also got to meet gay men who were the absolute opposite of our cultural stereotype – big burly tattooed guys that at first I was kind of afraid of until I realized they were one of us. Who knew?



I feel that all of these experiences, and my involvement at this church, made a difference in my friendship with Allison. Allison and I met through facebook. Yes, facebook can be a force for good. I “met” Allison through a conversation she was having with Michael Tino, a former ministerial intern at this church. In spring 2012 I saw she was posting information about an event they were calling a Welcoming Congregation Summit. This intrigued me because as chair of the glbtq subcommittee, I’ve been wanting our church to renew our energy around actively living our Welcoming Congregation status.

Our church has been a Welcoming Congregation, a special status designated by the Unitarian Universalist Association, for at least ten years. Churches that are designated as Welcoming Congregations have undergone an internal study to increase their awareness of glbt issues. However, when our church became a Welcoming Congregation, the T for transgender hadn’t been added to the curriculum, it was added the following year. If you’ll notice on the sign in the foyer, transgender isn’t included. So when I saw the notice about the Welcoming Congregation Summit, I thought this would be a great opportunity to meet with other congregations, find out what they were doing, and bring some of that energy back here. There was just one hitch – this event was happening in Princeton, New Jersey on April 11, the same day as our Dance for Equality, an event we held here to raise funds to support defeating amendment one. So I got in touch with Allison and said that I really wish I could go but it wouldn’t work out. I found out that she is persistent. Then she told me they were doing a similar event again in the fall and would I like to come speak about our experiences here in our fight against amendment one? So I said yes.

It sounded like the craziest thing to do, I know. I flew to Newark New Jersey and stayed in the house of two total strangers at the time. Before meeting Allison, I had known a few transgender people but really only in passing. Staying in someone’s house is totally different than having a short conversation in the hallway. I’m not going to lie, there were moments I was uncomfortable.

First, because I had never met them before but also because I hadn’t spent much time with transgender people. But thankfully I have years of experience of being a Unitarian Universalist and I take the first principle of the belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every person very seriously. I’ve learned that if I’m uncomfortable with someone, it’s my issue, not theirs.

Many years ago a friend recommended the book [When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times](#) ([Shambhala Classics](#)) by Pema Chodron, a Buddhist monk. I have read it several times. I highly recommend her work. Another author I’ve learned a lot from is [Geneen Roth](#). She approaches life through a Buddhist and Jewish lens. What I’ve learned most in my readings and experiences is the importance of being truly present. Being present in the moment, allowing the other person to be who they are, as they are.

From [Geneen Roth](#) I’ve learned to use curiosity and kindness as a spiritual practice. So while I was with Allison and her friends, in a room full of all transgender people but me, I asked myself, “What am I feeling? What is it about this person or this situation is causing me discomfort? How can I be more present for them?” I have found the question, “I wonder why?” to be helpful in times when I’m having an uncomfortable response to someone or a situation.



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At times during the course of the weekend I was reminded that gay and lesbian people haven't always been welcoming to transgender people and I allowed myself to just be there, without being defensive in responsive, and just listen. And I realized they were right. Prior to going to this Summit I was aware of the gender spectrum and the sexuality spectrum but I hadn't had my assumptions tested. When Allison said she was bisexual, I had yet another stereotype blown to bits!

The song the choir sang just now "Would you harbor me?" asked the same question over and over again, only with different groups of people. An alternative to the question is, "Would you be an ally for me?" All the time I feel like Allison is asking me, would you be my ally? Would you stand with me and my transgender community when the chips are down? Will you remember me when a transgender person is attacked, raped and killed merely for their gender expression? Will you help raise money for organizations that work to end discrimination against transgender people? Will you remember that transgender poor people, people of color, and who have a lower socioeconomic status are treated disproportionately worse in our society? Will you hold national gay and lesbian organizations to account when they dismiss the concerns of transgender people? Will you make sure that transgender people are welcome in your home, your life, your church?

Friends, as someone who is white, passes as straight, fits the gender expectations of women in our culture, and has a college education, I feel strongly that I have a responsibility to come out as an ally, to harbor, those who are less than in our culture. And this church does, too. I challenge each of us and our church to take a public stand for those who cannot come out themselves. Whose lives are in danger due to their gender expression. Sit with this idea for a moment. Ask yourself, "What am I feeling? How can I be present to this challenge?" I ask you to sit with the discomfort of being challenged about your assumptions. Ask yourself what can I do? What can my church do? What can we do as a community to be welcoming to all? How can we be radically welcoming?

- *Karen Madrone*