

50 Years After the Stonewall Riots: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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This week we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Inn riots – an uprising in New York City that came to be known simply as “Stonewall.” It was an insurrection, a demand for equality, and the next step for a movement that has changed our society forever.

Stonewall began an international movement because patrons who frequented the bar and in previous raids had been brutalized, publicly humiliated, and arrested had had enough. This time they resisted and two days of bloody confrontations with the police ensued. Earlier this month the current New York City police commissioner apologized for the violent conduct by the police at the time. Better late than never, I suppose.

It’s fitting I should be speaking about this topic here, in the very room where I first attended a Unitarian Universalist service – and a humanist one at that. It was as if the clouds parted that morning and I saw the light. I had found a religious community where I felt at home.

Stonewall didn’t happen in a vacuum. It was in the context of the civil rights movement’s struggles and successes that Stonewall took place. It was preceded by the courageous actions of men and women in the 1950s and ‘60s who challenged the status quo by picketing in public in Washington, DC, when thousands of homosexuals were fired from their government jobs, a practice that continued decades longer.

In the aftermath of Stonewall, sexual minorities demanded their equal rights, too, in ways they hadn’t done before. In this ongoing, half-century fight for liberation and human dignity, there’ve been actions and events that were good, bad, and ugly.

Rev. David encouraged me to speak in a very personal way about these past fifty years. From individuals being fired and publicly humiliated in 1969, to the legality of same-sex marriage and a serious presidential candidate who’s gay in 2019, we’ve come a long way, baby!

Clearly there remains much to be done to achieve true HUMAN liberation, where all are equal, as reflected in the first principle of Unitarian Universalism: we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. There’s no asterisk at the end of that sentence. Every. Person.

Reflecting on these last five decades has been challenging, indeed. I’ve now reached the age where I need to be careful strolling down memory lane, lest I fall and break a hip doing so. Viewing current documentaries and others from the 1960s has induced painful recollections of the way we were. I’m going to share some things here today I’ve never spoken about publicly. Frankly, this is scary for me, but if I can’t feel safe here being who I am, I don’t know where I can.

First, I need to address the issue of language. LGBTQ is one of the acronyms most frequently used these days for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer people. At the time of Stonewall, gay was often used generically to include more than just men. Lesbians increasingly wanted to be recognized separately and bisexuals were eventually added to the mix.

Transgender individuals were referred to as “transsexuals” then.

“Queer” was an epithet in 1969, and many people my age still cringe when hearing the word, but now, what was a slur has been appropriated as a more inclusive term and “queer” encompasses a range of sexual identities including gender fluidity and non-binary individuals.

There was a lot going on during the summer of 1969 besides Stonewall. The two nights of violent protest on June 28th and 29th may not have gotten much attention here in flyover country, but the rebellion was the catalyst for a movement of international proportions.

The events that captured the public’s attention soon after Stonewall were the first landing of humans on the moon in July, the Manson Family murders and Woodstock the following month, and more anti-war demonstrations and marches after that.

I turned 21-years-old the day after the riots ended. I’d never been to a gay bar myself and I was afraid to go to one, however curious I might have been. I didn’t know anything about Stonewall then. I was more concerned with coming to terms with my own sexual identity while an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota.

Most people today can’t imagine how frightening, dangerous, and isolating it was to be gay back then. My own fear was palpable when I lived across the street from nearby Loring Park in the late ‘70s, site of this weekend’s Pride festival, where a young man was gay-bashed and died.

A couple of years after that my then-partner was abducted because he was gay, robbed, and had his throat slashed while working out of town. Thankfully, he escaped and

fully recovered – physically and emotionally. A close friend was similarly murdered in Hawaii less than a decade after that. For many of us who came of age in the ‘60s, some of that fear of being openly LGBT remains.

If you heard anything about homosexuality at all 50 years ago, it was almost always negative. If you were a homosexual, you’d be considered mentally ill or sinful and depraved or criminal - or all three. Before the Internet you often had to go to a library to learn about this so-called “deviant” behavior and the pertinent material was often locked away and had to be requested through the librarian, exposing you to possible judgment, ridicule or worse.

I eventually found useful information in the University’s Medical School library, but it wasn’t encouraging. If I wanted a decent future, I’d have to change or lead a secret or double life, so I went to a therapist at the student health service to be cured. When that was unsuccessful, depression and thoughts of suicide resulted. I felt guilty, ashamed, unlovable, and totally alone.

Shortly after my birthday and failed attempts at being straight, I met someone who was completely comfortable being gay and whose family loved and supported him just as he was. This was life changing for me. A glimmer of hope. Maybe I could be gay... and OK.

I became more deeply involved in Unitarian Universalism and entered Harvard Divinity School in the fall of 1970. I was encouraged by the passage of a resolution at the UU General Assembly earlier that year. It supported equal rights for sexual minorities. We were the first religious denomination to do so. This was surely a good thing.

Soon after arriving at Harvard, I attended a conference on homosexuality and religion. I learned later a number of those attending were UU ministers and headquarters staff. One of the presenters I met was a fellow grad student named John Boswell – or Jeb – as his friends called him.

After earning his doctorate at Harvard, he continued to be a medieval scholar and head of the history department at Yale University. He authored dozens of books, two of which were of particular interest to LGBT individuals: *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* was the first, *Same-sex Unions in Pre-modern Europe* came later.

Jeb shared with me some of the research he'd already done that later appeared in the first of those landmark volumes. It helped me challenge assertions by evangelicals and other conservative Christians who use THEIR interpretation of the Bible as justification for discrimination, condemnation, and even advocating death for homosexuals.

Along with white privilege, male privilege, and heterosexual privilege, we have to deal with Christian privilege. This is based in part on the erroneous belief that this country was founded as a Christian nation and the tenets of Christianity should be valued above all others and the basis for our laws.

Those who claim to interpret the Bible literally have no sense of context and ignore the practical reasons in ancient times for condemning those who were “spilling their seed” on the ground or otherwise not contributing to the gene pool and reproducing within their nomadic Hebrew tribe. Without sufficient scientific understanding, this made sense... then.

During my first seminary year I took part in the training and field testing of our original UU human sexuality curriculum, *About Your Sexuality (AYS)*. It was intended for junior and senior high schoolers in our religious education programs. I helped introduce AYS to congregations and parents of would-be participants. I also facilitated AYS with students themselves. Among the benefits to me personally were gaining confidence and feeling at ease talking about sex without embarrassment. I also felt more comfortable with my own sexuality.

AYS viewed homosexuality as a viable alternative to heterosexuality and a natural phenomenon. The district attorney in Brookfield, Wisconsin filed suit to prevent a local congregation from using the program because of its explicitness. The suit was thrown out of court because of separation of church and state. Well, we won that one. Creating and implementing AYS was surely another good thing that UUs could feel proud of.

In contrast, a very bad thing for me was learning from a UU minister who helped develop AYS, that the General Assembly resolution supporting equal rights did not apply to ministers or those preparing for the ministry. I was told if the powers that be ever found out I was gay, I'd never get a congregation. I heard horror stories about ministers who had lost their jobs. It was like a punch in the gut. I wondered what in the world I'd committed my life to. I felt discouraged, depressed, and betrayed.

A few months later I read Dr. George Weinberg's book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, one of the first books to reject the idea, prevalent in the psychiatric profession, that homosexuality was a psychological disorder. Weinberg, who was

heterosexual himself, was the person who coined the term “homophobia”: an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuals. as well as self-loathing on the part of homosexuals themselves.

The decade after Stonewall propelled organized gay activism forward as never before. Gays were gaining visibility. Articles questioning prevailing attitudes toward homosexuality were published. Beginning in 1973, homosexuality was no longer considered a mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association both affirmed that “same-sex sexual and romantic attractions, feelings, and behaviors are normal and positive variations of human sexuality regardless of sexual orientation identity.”

When I came back to the Twin Cities the following year to work at the U, I also returned to FUS to participate in a very discreet LGBT support group. There was so much fear by those involved that the group was a virtual secret and initially called

“The Invisible Group.” It remained such a secret that no evidence of its existence has been found in the FUS archives.

I subsequently became the minister of the White Bear UU Church. I was still in the closet, so I let the congregation get to know me before coming out as gay. I was relieved it wasn't an issue for the members and I was deeply touched by their acceptance and support. Fortunately, L, G, B, T and Q who are out today can serve openly in our congregations. I didn't have the same good fortune with some other congregations after that, but I was able to have one of those ousted gay ministers participate in one of my installations in California.

The 1970s were years of increased activism, visibility, and greater acceptance for sexual minorities, but the '80s brought new terror, discrimination, and death in the form of HIV and AIDS. We had a president who didn't even mention the deadly virus for more than five years as the sick and dying dramatically increased in numbers. It was gay men and IV drug users who bore the brunt of the devastation caused by the virus in this country.

Both groups could be easily dismissed and their plight ignored because of their low social standing. Self-proclaimed morality monitors like the Rev. Pat Robertson and Rev. Jerry Falwell condemned gays for bringing on this plague themselves and incurring the wrath of God.

An HIV diagnosis was seen by most people then as a death sentence because there were no effective treatments and the only drugs prescribed, like AZT, were more likely killing people than saving them.

By the middle of the '80s I had moved to Southern California where I witnessed gay men wasting away and dying long before their time. It was heartbreaking to visit them at home or in the hospital or hospice, their health failing in ghastly ways.

Later I had to comfort their loved ones and conduct their funerals and memorial services. Some people I knew lost a hundred or more family, friends, and co-workers. This was most definitely an ugly thing.

By the end of the decade people were encouraged to get tested for HIV so they'd know their status and not pass on the virus. I learned I was HIV positive. I was actually quite calm when I got the news. I told myself, “You tested positive. That doesn't

MEAN you're going to get sick. It doesn't MEAN you're going to die from AIDS. It just means you're positive." That was my self-talk going forward.

Thirty-one years later I'm still here... and I keep hearing Elton John singing, "I'm Still Standing." In fact, I'm considered a long-term nonprogressor: I've never been sick, I've never taken any medications, and I most likely can't pass the virus on to others. For the past 12 years I've been a research subject at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) because of my super immune system. I now fly to Maryland three times annually to donate blood cells. Researchers there believe that 24 of us long-term non-progressors from around the country with the same genetic characteristics may hold the key to creating a viable vaccine and possible cure for HIV and AIDS.

The '90s saw the introduction of new drugs that finally were effective enough to offer the possibility of having a normal lifespan. Many anti-LGBT laws remained on the books, but the official "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy on military service by gays and lesbians, was instituted by the Clinton Administration in 1994, ending years of witch-hunts that sought to ferret out those who were gay or lesbian. I witnessed those efforts in San Diego, a major military town.

Fortunately, gays and lesbians are now able to serve openly in the military, but transgender men and women willing to die for their country are still fighting to serve because of our current president.

The new millennium finally brought court rulings favorable to LGBT individuals and same-sex marriage became the law of the land. Of course, Minnesota was ahead of the curve when the voters approved marriage equality in 2013.

It's incredible how attitudes and beliefs have changed in recent years. I give a lot of credit to young people who experience the world in such a different and more inclusive way. After marriage equality prevailed, I heard a number of them ask, "What took so long?" I'm grateful the Internet and social media have lessened the feeling of isolation, especially for the young.

So, where do we go from here? There are powerful forces in this country that would reverse the progress we've made. In the face of continuing prejudice and discrimination toward sexual and other minorities, we need a revolution of consciousness and Unitarian Universalists can lead the way.

Our allegiance to rational thought, our faith in the truths revealed through science, and our use of reason, rather than blind acceptance of myths and supernatural wishful thinking, will move our society forward. Stepping up and taking responsibility in our individual lives for making freedom and justice real for all people can be our legacy. Let us continue to commit ourselves to advancing true HUMAN liberation for all.