

“PRIDE is Resistance”

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First Church in Boston

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Yesterday Boston celebrated its 56th annual Pride parade. The first Pride parade I ever witnessed was by accident. At the time, I was 22 and trying to move some stuff out of an apartment in Minneapolis where I had been living. However, on that rainy, June day, I discovered that my street was part of the Pride parade. I watched mesmerized as soggy, smiling drag queens tossed condoms like candy from their perch atop colorful floats. Joyful music blared from unseen speakers. It was a *party*!!

Having grown up in a conservative religious culture from birth through college, at 22, being open to the LGBTQ community still felt new to me. The turn began the summer after college graduation when I volunteered at a liberal Christian retreat center. There I encountered gay and lesbian folx, including parents with children. Building everyday relationships with them changed my religious and moral framework—*loving* people became a higher ethical priority than adhering to questionable interpretations of ancient scriptures that judged their behavior as sinful. Then, when I moved to Minneapolis, my framework further expanded when I met a woman who identified as bisexual. To this day, I clearly recall her saying, “I fall in love with a person, not a gender.” Again, what mattered was *love*.

Ever since the transformative experiences of that time, I have never considered joining a religious community that was not welcoming to LGBTQ folx. For me, I began to perceive LGBTQ folx simply as people seeking authentic self-expression and meaningful sexual connection the same as I was. They simply experienced gender and sexuality differently than I did. As Lady Gaga would sing many years later, I believed they were “born this way.”

Let me pause here to define a few terms as they are commonly used in current discussions from colleges to Reddit. **Biological sex** refers to the “sex” identity of male or female assigned at birth. Although I note that according to the [Intersex Society of North America](#), there is enough ambiguity in about 1 in every 2000 births that a specialist in sex differentiation is called in. Assigning biological sex at birth is simply not 100% clear.

Gender refers to the social or cultural identity and expression of a person as male or female, masculine or feminine. Often biological sex and gender have been conflated—the biological sex assigned at birth is assumed to be the gender you will express in society. In other words, if your birth certificate says “male,” then you are expected to identify as and

act “like a man.” For many folx, this works. Those who continue to identify with the gender assigned them at birth are described as *cisgender* (where *cis* means “same” in Latin). But for some folx, as they come into their own sense of self, the assigned gender doesn’t feel like it fits. People who identify with a gender other than assigned at birth are described as *transgender* (where *trans* means “across” or “beyond”). And some people as they come into their sense of self reject being identified by the binary choice of male or female, choosing instead to identify as *non-binary*. Still others choose other language to express their experience of gender.

As a separate matter, **sexual identity**, or sexual attraction, refers to sexual desires and actions. How a person identifies in their *gender* identity does not determine who they may be *sexually* attracted to. In other words, you can identify in your gender as a woman or a man and be sexually interested in men or women, in both, all, or neither. Multiple possibilities exist.

But none of this is what I was taught growing up. Growing up there were just two genders—male and female—and only one way to be properly sexual . . . with a person of the opposite gender. It was wrong, a perversion even, to change gender identities or to be sexually attracted to a person of the same gender. And yet, even before I met openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender folks, as a budding feminist I questioned gender expectations for myself. As a young girl, I was a *tomboy*. It mattered to me that I could do everything that my brothers and the neighbor boys could do—riding bikes, climbing trees, building forts, skateboarding, and more. *And* I enjoyed playing dolls, learning to sew, helping my mom garden, and other “feminine” stuff. Likewise at school, I chafed against gendered expectations of what kinds of classes I might do better at because I was a girl. I enjoyed advanced math and science classes even as I received awards in English and Language arts. As a philosophy major in college, I often found myself as only one or two women in a classroom of men. I mused, “could critical thinking really be gendered?!”

So, by the time I graduated college, I was pretty skeptical about rigid gender expectations that sorted the world into “male” and “female”, “masculine” and “feminine.” I had also grown suspicious of the conservative religious culture that turned to *certain* verses in scripture, reinforcing not only *different* gender roles for men and women, but a *hierarchy* of men over women as well. I wrestled with continuing to believe in interpretations of an ancient text that so clearly conflicted with my lived experience and values of equity. While questions of gender were not the only reason I started to push back against conservative interpretations of the Bible, they were definitely part of the mix that made me question how to interpret ancient texts and what authority I was willing to give them.

Can you see where this is headed? I couldn't at the time. At the time, I just had questions. I just felt tension between what I was living and what I had been taught to understand about the Bible, gender, and sexuality. To resolve that tension, I searched and found more liberal ways of reading ancient scriptures that put texts into social context. I learned to listen more for the ethical values and spiritual principles woven throughout the text, not just the rules that show up in one verse or another (while often ignoring other rules and verses).

Following this liberal path would eventually lead me to Unitarian Universalism. Within our UU religious tradition, I find a long willingness to question settled interpretations of ancient scriptures, testing them against lived experience, modern science, and spiritual insights from different religious traditions. And I find a deep commitment to asking how *love* manifests in how people act towards one another—prioritizing right relationships over “correct” interpretation.

In short, we are part of a tradition that is willing to question. We have shown ourselves willing to question orthodoxy such as the idea that God is a trinity or that the sun revolves around the earth. We have questioned what many considered to be settled fact—such as challenging the moral acceptability of enslaving people or by embracing the science of evolution over against long-held views of Creation. Again and again, we have questioned our religious and moral frameworks based on new knowledge and new voices expressing their experiences.

For the last fifty-plus years, we have wrestled deeply with questions about sexuality and gender identity. When Unitarian Universalists were surveyed in 1967, over 80% of respondents thought homosexuality should be discouraged.¹ However, by July 1, 1970, the General Assembly of the UUA passed a general resolution denouncing “Discrimination against Homosexuals and Bisexuals.” In subsequent decades, the UUA published affirming messages in their curriculum, supported staffing for an Office of Gay Affairs, and developed a “Welcoming Congregation” program in 1989. By 2000, more than 25% of UU congregations were designated as “Welcoming” with that number rising to over 50% of congregations in 2006. I could not find more recent data, but Google AI says Unitarian Universalists are one of the most LGBTQ-friendly denominations in the U.S. today. (*So it must be true?!*)

While UU congregations—and First Church Boston—have become widely welcoming of gay, lesbian, and bisexual folks, some congregations continue to wrestle with whether and *how* to be more inclusive of transgender, nonbinary, and other “queer” identities—which is to

¹ 1967 survey by Unitarian Universalist Committee on Goals
<https://www.uua.org/lifespan/curricula/resistance/workshop15/history-uu-lgbt-support>

say folk who ask for the freedom to live beyond fixed expectations of gender and of heterosexuality.

In our reading, UU minister [Paige Getty reflects](#) on her own sense of being “queer” writing,

My queerness, though, is about more than who I’m actively involved with, romantically or sexually. ... It’s about mindset and attitude and intention. It’s in the rejection of WASPy gender norms and in the deliberate choice not to assume or pressure a particular form of romantic relationship in the lives of the children I’m privileged to raise.

I get this. Like Rev. Getty, I appear like a simple, straight, cisgender woman in a heterosexual relationship. But part of me has long identified as queer, which is to say I feel as if I often live in playful, deliberate resistance to mainstream, or normative, expectations of gender and sexuality. My gender expression can vary from the highly feminine of today’s makeup and dress to a more masculine truck-driving, flannel-shirt wearing expression when I’m camping. I take pride in both. And, after my divorce in 2002, my experience as a single mom awakened me to the many ways society expected parents to be part of a heterosexual marriage. Indeed, this became the topic of my masters’ thesis. Consequently, I became hesitant to remarry, but I also wanted to be in a romantic, sexual relationship. As such, I was not sure if I *could* be a minister in any tradition. In my first conversation with a UUA staff member about becoming a UU minister, this was one of my key questions: would being in an unmarried partnership harm my ability to become ordained or be settled in a congregation? He said no and here I am.

This welcome to my own queerness—to my own particular resistance to heterosexual norms—is no small part of why I am a UU minister, *your* minister today. Its also why supporting LGBTQ issues—and interns—has been important to me. (All five interns I have worked with identify as queer in some way.) I know that embracing transgender, nonbinary, and other queer identities is not without struggle. Still, so many of you have graciously included pronouns on your nametags—one way we can acknowledge that gender identity can be chosen and expressed in many different ways. I am also grateful for how many of you are trying to honor the use of they/them pronouns for Ebonié, the pronouns they have chosen for themselves. Personally, as someone who has chafed under rigid ideas of what it means to be “male” or “female”, I appreciate the choice of people who seek to identify as non-binary. Speaking only for myself here, I understand a nonbinary identity and the use of they/them pronouns as a powerful way to resist all the harm that has been done by rigid, hierarchal ideas of gender, in short, by the patriarchy.

LGBTQ PRIDE is resistance. It is resistance to millennial-old ideas that can narrow possibilities for what it means to be embodied. It is resistance to messages that restrain how we might understand ourselves as well as whom we might love and how. It is resistance to policies of discrimination and hate that would deny healthcare to diverse bodies, legal protections for families of many kinds, and safety to simply, authentically *be*. PRIDE is resistance to theologies that diminish a person's dignity rather than affirm their particular beauty.

PRIDE *is* a party. Even on rainy days. Even as so many civil rights and protections are under threat. Because PRIDE is resistance to the hate and a full-throated affirmation of love, dignity, and joy for being beautiful. On this PRIDE weekend, may we recommit to the journey of being an ever-more welcoming faith tradition.

Amen. Ashe. Blessed Be.