

Pride In the Face of Hate: LGBTQ+ Identity and Fascism
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, March 12, 2023
Connor Kelly

Sometimes it's hard to have a big heart. It's hard to be sensitive. It's hard to care so much in a world where people don't think you should exist.

I think I speak for many of you when I say that Unitarian Universalism has given me a gift in my interpersonal life, a desire to strive for mutual understanding. Conflict resolution is in our blood. To allow both sides to talk honestly, to put aside debate tactics and logical fallacies and try to reach a point of agreement.

In this day and age, It's hard to be someone focused on having fair, even, scientific, compassion-based discussions. It's hard to be sensitive and having to bend over backwards to defend and explain, willing to give grace that others take advantage of.

I think we have all either had or been witness to hateful interactions in recent years where there is no possible attempt of understanding from the other person. To see blatant hostility and ignorance with the express reason of upsetting you. Taking something that is a point of pride, of something that you care about - science, logic, truth, love, identity, freedom - and making it a source of ridicule. "Triggered Snowflake" What an asinine concept. Ha ha, look at this person who cares so much about something, I made them upset. We live in the age of post-ironic detachment, to care about something is so lame. Calm down, why are you so upset. I don't want to be upset, I want to be happy and to do so I need to defend my happiness and that of those in my community from those who would seek to take it and destroy us.

Gender and sexuality is the battlefield of the culture war right now. When you're gay or trans, the personal is the public. Gender is a central element of human interaction, And you're a hot button issue.

When I started taking testosterone around 2016, many people didn't even know what trans was. Now, In 2023, everyone knows, everyone has an opinion. And the ignorance is astounding. There are people out there who genuinely believe that schools across the nation are putting litter boxes in bathrooms because students identify as cats. Really. How can you reconcile caring so much about the truth and wanting to fight for understanding when coming across an impenetrable wall of hatred and conspiracy? You cannot control these forces, you cannot logic someone who hates you out of their ideology because they didn't logic their way into it. They are more emotional than you are. It's funny to be categorized as overemotional when hate is the strongest emotion there is. The amount of hate for our LGBTQ+ community scares me.

Our worship theme this month is anticipation. Anticipation can be a wonderful feeling, but it can also be a horrible dread that you have to navigate. When you are someone familiar with history, you get a sick feeling in your stomach when you see the attacks on the LGBTQ+ community and the rise of fascism. You see patterns. You feel helpless. How do you approach this fear of the future, and the feeling that you are powerless to stop it? And even if you're able to find that temporary peace, the problem doesn't go away, it keeps coming back. How do you do it day by day? Step by step. Conflict by conflict. Battle by battle.

If you've been gay or trans on the internet, or are familiar with far-right vitriol, one phrase you might be familiar with from transphobes is "Define Woman," or less commonly, "Define Man." It's one of the few attacks that they have in their arsenal, reiterated over and over, what they believe to be a gotcha to trans people. "These gender freaks are so stupid. They think they can change reality. They're so confused they don't know what basic words mean. A woman is a woman, duh."

Let's use this bad-faith argument as a portal of understanding. What is a woman? A car can be a woman, a ship is a woman, a nation is a woman, Liberty is a woman. In French, a spoon is a woman and a fork is a man; gender is such a human part of understanding reality but extends beyond our humanity because it is not simple biology. Womanhood is an experience. A woman is a person who knows from their heart that they are one, end of story. A woman is a woman.

Language is not stagnant. I can't do much with a degree in linguistics, but I know enough to get annoyed when people do language wrong, and seeing people get up in arms about grammar and pronouns drives me up the wall. Language is meant to describe the world that we live on, not impose our reality onto the universe. To try to conserve a world that doesn't exist through language.

"Define woman" is such a limiting phrase. Define Magic, define God. Why use dictionaries when we can use poetry? What is there to lose in opening one's mind a little? To approach the world with an open heart of understanding? Scared they might like it? They can't give an inch because their whole house of cards comes crumbling down.

Fascists claim their way to be the natural, proper order, yet as we see, they must impose their will to keep alive a dying way of life and stop the progress of society in its tracks. Gender is something we all have, it pulls the strings of our meat puppet bodies, a boundary that by its existence calls upon itself to be explored.

To quote, "The woman who needs to be liberated most is the woman in everyman, and a man who needs to be liberated most is the man in everywoman." This quote is from Magnus Hirschfeld, premier sex scientist of the early twentieth century, often called "The Einstein of Sex". To understand the importance of Hirschfeld's work we need to visit his time, the Weimar Republic period in Germany from 1919, to 1933, which, for those of you that don't remember, is directly before and during the rise of the Nazi party. Germany was in ruin from world war one. It was a dark time and a hard time, but people found beauty in that grit. In Berlin, we see a massive queer Subculture, and a society experiencing unprecedented progressive growth. Cabaret, party, gender exploration, trans people out in public, freedom, FUN! If the kids think emo and goth is a new thing, let it be known that German expressionism did it far before Hot Topic.

It is during this time period that Hirschfeld, a gay Jewish man himself, formed and founded the Institute of Sexology in 1908. The Institute was a beacon of scientific and social progress, being both a massive archive for research, a location of discussion and debate, and the source of many scientific innovations in the fields of gender. Exhibitions and displays of sexual traditions from around the world and history, anthropological and historical archives. They offered sex education to the general public on contraception and venereal disease, as well as gynecological exams and marriage counseling. Hirschfeld himself built a massive catalog of work covering all sorts of these topics, from gender history, biology, eroticism, sexuality. It was the first trans clinic in the world, performing the first modern sex reassignment surgeries. Facial feminization and

masculinization surgeries, hair removal through x ray technology. Transgender people were on staff. It was a wonderful place.

I'm sure you can guess what happened next.

In history class, those adults who may have already learned this, you may have discussed the excesses of the Weimar Republic. Why do we use that terminology? What does it imply? That there was somehow too much, and pushback was inevitable? That it was deserved? Are we using the Nazi's own terminology?

This "excess" of sexual liberation was pointed to as the reason that the empire fell. Within a single generation, progressiveness bred a generation of reactionaries, the Nazis. The study of gender was categorized as a Jewish science. Furthermore, the Nazis were concerned that gay behavior was becoming more acceptable.

I find it fascinating that the question of whether gay was spreading was a factor of the Nazis, because we see the same arguments being made today. That is to say, I can argue against the past and present.

Firstly, homosexuality is as ancient as the human race. Even looking for a few samples pointed to more and more examples than I could possibly name up here- I took the liberty of printing out and sharing these stories since there is no way I could begin to describe just how many LGBTQ+ we know of in history, and those are just the people that were out. Any sexuality or gender identity imaginable, it has been around since before humans could write.

Reading between the lines, and questioning why there are more gay people now than before, is that we have gone past gay liberation in modern society. We are out of the closet. Of course there's more gay people now. Just as well, that at the time in Weimar Germany, gayness was being discovered, especially in Germany. It's where the term homosexuality was invented.

Homosexuality as a trend or social contagion is wrong, rather, humanity is discovering itself. We've learned new things, new technologies of gender and transition. This is why fascists are for ignorance. Both things can be true; that gender and sexual identity is something innate and people who defy those norms have always been around, and also, with the LGBTQ+ liberation, there are more gay people, especially among the youth, but not because of indoctrination, rather that more people feel comfortable coming out or experimenting with their sexuality and identity who might not have been able to in times when it was forbidden. That the human experience is changing and socially opening up, the age of Aquarius, whatever you want to call it.

This is specifically what Nazis were and are afraid of. Change. Hirschfeld, among other leading gays, argued against this social model, that being gay is biological. As the Nazi party grew, solidarity among the gay community began to unravel. You see gay men pointing to trans women and drag performers as being the true problem - "fairies." That their gayness was scientifically inherent but they're not like those other freaks, who chose to go against gender norms.

You see gay men joining the Nazis, willing to throw their comrades under the bus. Against Jews, socialists. Hirschfeld himself became a proponent of race science. Do you think this saved these men once the time came for them? Do you think the Nazis accepted them?

It's sad to say but I still see these sentiments in the LGBTQ+ community today. Exclusionary sentiments. Gay far-right Republicans. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists. And we ourselves might be engaging in unconscious biases without even considering the implications. The idea of

respectability, “More people would be willing to be on our side if we didn’t push the gay issue so much. We need to tone it down.”

Reaching out a hand to the right, no. It’s bending to their will. Being “one of the good ones” gets you nowhere. Because they’ll just ask more and more until they’ve taken everything away. Nothing to them is good enough until you are no longer gay, or gone.

Don’t defend yourself. Cringe is dead. Don’t change yourself or expect others to change to fit into nazi standards. Don’t let them turn your joy into shame. Non-binary identities, Neopronouns, new genders, hormones, women in drag, drag storytime, these are points of contention in the LGBTQ+ community, “they’re asking for too much; they’re ruining it for the rest of us.” “Too much, excess.” The fight for gay struggle is a fight for humanity. Cynicism is a poison that will leave us weak and divided, which is what they want.

On January 30th, 1933, Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. On May 6th, early morning, a brass band accompanied a large group of men to Hirschfeld’s Institute. They broke in, and over the course of the next few days, this storm of Nazis destroyed the building and looted around 25,000 books and journals, burning them in a massive bonfire. Medical journals, anthropological research, art, letters, all of it gone. Dora Richter, the first trans woman to undergo reassignment surgery at this clinic was most likely killed in this attack. The only thing they didn’t burn were the lists of names.

Hirschfeld was in another country at the time, and could only watch on the news as his life’s work was destroyed. On this he had to say, “where they burn books, in the end they will burn humans too.”

Losing gay history is inherent to gay history. It’s always been that way. Either through secrecy - gay people not being able to share their love to the world, trans people passing too well - or through eradication. Think of how many more gay elders we would have today, maybe in this very room, if not for the AIDS crisis. The LGBTQ+ community has been killed through the medical institution in the past, and new legislation on the horizon seeks to do it again. By denying trans people lifesaving medical intervention, the ability to transition, they hope to remove trans people from society.

To be gay is to struggle. Gay happiness has always come with gay sadness. But it’s not our fault, and it’s not the way things should be.

Fascists may use God when convenient but the one I’ve met is kind. We may not talk about God much in this church, and it may be bold for me to speak for God, but God loves gay people, God loves us. Gayness brings me closer to God, to transcend the limits that human society has put on us to touch the divine, to engage with God in the act of creation to become a new person. Gender is beautiful and delicate and divine.

It’s hard to be sensitive, it’s also life’s greatest joy. You may not be able to change the world but you can resist. To not become poisoned by cynicism and lie down. You don’t have to accept it. Just because caring so much is hard doesn’t mean that you should stop caring.

We may teach respect and kindness here as UU’s, but there is a caveat for Nazis. You do not need to be respectful, kind and patient with someone who is trying to kill you. You don’t need to be a well of understanding to people who will drain you dry. Trans rights means trans wrath. Defend what you love. Stand up for those in your community. Make a stink. Because sometimes to be

happy you have to be mad. To love is to fight for what you love, and this community has a lot of love. Now is the time to use that power.

Sources

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/berlin-story>

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-forgotten-history-of-the-worlds-first-trans-clinic/?amp=true>

<https://history.washington.edu/research/publications/sex-and-weimar-republic-german-homosexual-emancipation-and-rise-nazis>

Laurie Marhoefer (2015) *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis*. University of Toronto Press.