

## Gay All of a Sudden

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In the 1938 classic *Bringing Up Baby*, Cary Grant has cause to open the front door of a home wearing only a woman's highly feminine robe. When asked why he was dressed in such a shocking way, he does a little hop and says, "I just went GAY all of a sudden."

I have felt a little bit that way recently.

Now, I have been out to myself as certainly not straight since middle school. I was desperately in love with my best friend. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for her and when her mom was dying I helped with almost every aspect of my friend's life, including letting her copy my homework since caring for her mom took all that she had. So, pretty gay. But I also had a boyfriend. And by age 19 I had a husband.

I divorced at 23 and came out to my family as gay. In graduate school by then, I went on to become a leader in the campus queer coalition and to help a human sexuality course with an annual speaker panel that I liked to call Gays on Parade. I also passed as a man and so effectively that the gay guys in Chicago's Boys Town hit on me. Again, pretty gay.

Over time, though, as both I and my career grew, that initial emphasis on out-ness faded, taking a back seat to the work of paying off student loans and wondering what it meant to feel like God wanted me to be a pastor. When I ran a Habitat for Humanity affiliate, I learned to balance my personal integrity with the mission of the organization, a mission that often took me into highly conservative Christian churches. I never closeted myself or my wife, but I felt that *no one's* marriage really need be a central issue at work. I brought the affiliate out of millions of dollars of debt, while building a record number of homes with the help of many of those churches, corporate donors, and city government. A memorable home dedication included the local lesbian choir and a men's group from the most conservative church in our community; they had worked side-by-side to help the family build their home.

Of course, my marriage couldn't be anything but a *major issue* when I began my work as a pastor. My childhood denomination rejected me on the grounds of my sexuality. My new-found denomination, the United Church of Christ, had (and still has) only limited room for LGBTQIA+ people. Nationally only 35% of our churches are what we call Open and Affirming (ONA) and in Iowa the number is a disappointing 15%. In my search for a church, I found that some congregations wanted to use me as evidence of their politics, a token of their self-interest. In my first church, which had been ONA for 20 years but had never had a gay pastor or a female lead pastor, I was regularly reminded of how lucky I was that they had made an exception for me.

It was all very frustrating. I didn't want to be the "lady pastor" or "the gay pastor." I just wanted to be afforded the same deference and given the same space to do God's work as the legion of

straight, white, male pastors that had gone before me. In the extra work I had to do to get through the door of an institution—the Christian church at large, which not only closed doors against me, but was and remains the primary perpetrator of spiritual and physical violence against queers—I came to mute my own acknowledgment of the genuinely powerful witness of a female-embodied, same-gender-loving preacher.

But I am living into it now.

In the last year, I've spoken at an ecumenical Ames Pride worship service, a high school gay-straight alliance conference, and the Iowa Governor's Conference on LGBTQIA Youth. I recently helped to organize an Iowa UCC LGBTQIA pastor's group. One week after the United Methodist Church denomination voted to be more condemning of queer people, I was scheduled to preach at a Methodist church in Ames as part of an established ecumenical partnership. When I did, I named both the sin of their decision and the sin of my own denomination's slowness to affirm the biology and humanity of me and people like me. As the national climate regarding queer people has become more and more hostile (and more and more lethal, particularly for transwomen of color), I have become gayer and gayer in my work.

And then earlier this week a man who lives next door to my church tore down my church's Pride banner and set it on fire, going on to proclaim on television that it was his honor to "execute vengeance" on us, that his violence was a "blessing from the Lord."

On the grand scale of assaults, this is nominal. We have not (so far) had to endure anything like other houses of worship that experienced outright slaughter while being targeted for who they are and how they worship: the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin, Mother Emanuel AME, Tree of Life Synagogue, and the Al-Noor or Linwood Mosques. So the temptation is to write this man off as a crank who might have been on drugs at the time of his vandalism, and pretend like everything will be fine.

But nothing is fine now, and it never has been. There is nothing that queer people can right now take for granted in terms of physical safety or legal protections, and that will not get any better unless churches like mine remain insistently queer-affirming. By being queer-affirming, we are affirming all other marginalized groups because the thing about us gay people is that we are everywhere. We are present in all races, all socioeconomic statuses, and all religions (and none), and are from all nations. There is nowhere on God's Earth that we are not.

And that is because we are of the Earth, just like cisgendered heterosexual people. Despite Carey Grant and the insistence of the homophobic majority, none of us just went gay all of a sudden. None of us have chosen to be how we are; our genes have done that for us. Genes that we received from our biological parents, who in turn received them from their parents. What we have chosen is to be true to those ancient genes, as well as to our hearts and spirits.

If your LGBTQIA+ spirit is feeling a little battered these days, and especially if your body has been, I urge you to seek out a faith community like mine (and some others in town). Don't be

put off by "God-talk" or "weird songs." Underneath, behind, and through both, you will find a community of people who not only tolerate you, but see and cherish all of who you are. God set a rainbow in the sky as a promise of eternal peace for all people. Ours will fly again with it soon.