

**Coming Out in Faith: Whose Are We?
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Every now and then, my faith in humanity is restored. One such faith restoration event occurred 24 years ago this Tuesday. I was among half a million people who participated in a March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. Flying across the country to Washington, I tried to guess who else was on the way to the march. At the hotel, it seemed that heterosexuals were in the minority. In the subway, rainbow regalia bloomed on the platform and filled every car. Chanting and singing enlivened the march, and counter protesters were few and far between.

At the end of the march, on my way back to the hotel, I sat on the floor in the Washington, DC subway station. I leaned against a pillar, felt the throb of aching feet, and felt a sense of communion with other marchers. These were my people. Later that day, my exuberance turned to dismay as I realized my wallet was gone! How would I get back to California with no money and no identification? 1987 was a more innocent time for air travelers. Friends loaned me money, and somehow I managed to board the airplane without any identification whatsoever. Imagine that!

I wondered about the person who found my wallet. Would it be another marcher, a queer person who might return it to me? Would it be someone antagonistic to the marchers, perhaps someone inconvenienced or disgusted by the spectacle? I might never see my wallet again. Shortly after my return to California, the phone rang. A woman had found my phone number through Directory Assistance, made possible by the address on my driver's license. She found my wallet! She mailed it to me, and everything was still in it – cash, credit cards, driver's license. The sexual orientation of the caller seemed irrelevant. It was enough for me that she was ethical and kind. Perhaps “my people” were ethical and kind, regardless of the movements of their hearts and the movements of their bodies.

In the months following the 1987 march, organizers came up with the idea of a national day to celebrate coming out of the closet. National Coming Out Day (October 11) continues to promote a safe world for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender people to live truthfully and openly. This year, I have done my part. As you may know, I now have a monthly religion column in the

Inland Valley Daily News newspaper. In yesterday's column, I came out as bisexual. Some religious traditions affirm only heterosexuality and punish those who do not toe the line. Thankfully, Unitarian Universalism welcomes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender congregants and ministers.

There is a paradox at the heart of sexual orientation. On the one hand, it is an integral part of our self concept and cannot be changed on command. On the other hand, it is but one of dozens of facets of identity. Family life and work life and life as a friend and life as a volunteer often hum along without explicit reference to sexual orientation. None of us are single-issue people. All of us deserve a welcoming spiritual community so that our joys may be doubled and our sorrows may be halved. This congregation is such a community.

A congregant asked me a great question: Why did you make it a point to come out as bisexual in the article instead of just identifying as part of the LGBT community and leaving it at that? One reason relates to the pride of precision. Tomorrow is Indigenous People's Day (otherwise known as Columbus Day). Indigenous people might identify as Native American, though identifying with a particular tribe is felt as a more powerful facet of identity. Identifying as European American may be accurate and the label of choice in some contexts, though identifying as being of Irish or African or Swiss descent communicates more to the listener and to the speaker. Being specific reflects pride.

Another reason for being explicit about my sexual orientation is related to the desire for fair treatment. Invisibility is not neutral. Invisibility serves the status quo, and the status quo typically serves those who wish to maintain privilege. This might be the privilege that attaches to heterosexuals relative to non-heterosexuals or it might be the privilege that attaches to gays and lesbians and heterosexuals relative to bisexuals. Invisibility reinforces stigma and unfair treatment. Visibility erodes stigma and unfair treatment. Invisibility overstates the contributions of those in the cultural mainstream and understates the contributions of others.

As you know, I am a science fiction fan. I think of coming out as "decloaking." A spaceship that is hidden is cloaked. When decloaked, the spaceship appears. In encounters with

adversaries or with people of unknown intent, a cloaking device is a handy thing to have. LGBT people sometimes cloak themselves in a closet (how convenient that “cloakroom” is another word for closet). At other times, straight people seem to have their twitching fingers hovering over the cloaking device switch. They seem to be very eager to cause LGBT people to disappear from view.

The religious lens of Unitarian Universalism allows us to see the status quo, its beneficiaries, the disadvantaged, and how things change over time. This summer, the Unitarian Universalist Association published a book titled *Coming Out in Faith: Voices of LGBTQ Unitarian Universalists*. (The Q stands for queer and it stands for questioning.) An essay of mine was one of the 15 essays selected. Contributors ranged in age from 80 to 17 and included lay people and clergy.

We were asked to address these questions: How has Unitarian Universalism affected your life as an LGBT person? How do UU churches still struggle with understanding the lives of their LGBTQ members and with LGBTQ issues beyond the sanctuary walls? How do you take your faith into the wider world as an LGBTQ person?

One poignant story is that of Beth F. Coye, who spent 21 years as a U.S. Navy officer. She was one of the Navy’s first female commanding officers. She identified as lesbian but kept her sexual orientation quiet. She writes, “But my sexual orientation kept interfering with my job satisfaction and obstructing my dreams . . . I discharged at least eight young men and women ‘for cause of homosexuality.’ Each discharge tore at my heart. I was sending home young competent sailors again and again.”¹

She resigned from the Navy in 1980, frustrated with the career barriers faced by women. She collaborated with six other authors on the book *My Navy Too*, which was published around 1997. She was not sure whether to list her name as the primary author. “Navy experts had advised me that it was unclear whether military retirees were subject to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT)

¹ *Coming Out in Faith: Voices of LGBYQ Unitarian Universalists*, Susan A. Gore and Keith Kron, editors, Skinner House Books, Boston, p. 28.

policy; my pension and benefits might be jeopardized.”² Her Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Tom Owen-Towle, counseled her, “Beth, take courage.” She later learned that retirees were not subject to DADT, and today Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell is history! Imagine what her career might have been if sexism and heterosexism had not constrained her choices.

Another story which touched me was that of the Rev. Jonalu Johnstone, who served the James Reeb UU Congregation in Madison. It is a congregation that was started by the large Madison congregation, and James Reeb UU Congregation was intended to welcome LGBT people, in particular. In being asked to conduct services of union for lesbian couples in the area, she came to know working class lesbians, “bar dykes.” Rev. Jonalu writes, “Entering those lives taught me more about class and addiction than I had ever learned in seminary or workshops. I came to understand the destructiveness of internalized homophobia and how it can play out in addiction.”³ She also got to know women for whom butch/femme gender roles were important, in contrast to the “androgyny” prevalent elsewhere in lesbian circles.

Though I am deeply honored that my essay was selected for publication, I do not want to share its highlights in a narcissistic way. I trust that the message of hope from my story is pertinent to anyone who feels misunderstood and who struggles for fair treatment. I am among the minority of people of all sexual orientations who identify as being open to having more than one concurrent intimate relationship, with the knowledge and consent of the other partners. This is a facet of my identity in the same manner as being bisexual is a facet of identity. These facets of identity remain with me, whether or not I am in any relationship at all.

I wrote about my experiences in the ministerial credentialing process. Ministerial credentialing involves documenting relevant education and experience, and it involves being interviewed by two powerful committees. Those interviews have a high-stakes feel because each committee gives a stamp of unqualified approval, a stamp of qualified approval, or a stamp of disapproval. “If you can’t stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen. Oh, and by the way, you have no idea how hot it is in the kitchen!” That is how I interpreted the feedback from the committees.

² Page 31.

³ Page 124.

I was distressed about the obstacles that I saw as being placed in my way, and I talked with my seminary advisor. I have mentioned him before. He has had his own challenges along the way. In my memory of that conversation, I am crying. My advisor struggles to decide what to say and how to say it. He speaks of a story in the Hebrew Bible.

“The heroes of the story are Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman living in Persia, and her cousin Mordecai, who raised her as if she were his daughter.⁴ Esther was taken to the house of the King of Persia, to become part of his harem. The king loved Esther more than his other women and made Esther queen, but the king did not know that Esther was a Jew, because Mordecai told her not to reveal her identity.”

“The villain of the story is Haman, an arrogant, egotistical advisor to the king. Haman hated Mordecai because Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, so Haman plotted to destroy the Jewish people . . . The king gave the fate of the Jewish people to Haman, to do as he pleased to them. Haman planned to exterminate all of the Jews. Mordecai persuaded Esther to speak to the king on behalf of the Jewish people.” “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

“This was a dangerous thing for Esther to do, because anyone who came into the king’s presence without being summoned could be put to death, and she had not been summoned. Esther went to the king. He welcomed her. Later, Esther told the king of Haman’s plot against her people. The Jewish people were saved.” My advisor repeated, “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? Remember your people.”

Esther is every one of us. Every one of us belongs to at least one group of people who are misunderstood and mistreated. The misunderstood facet of our identity might relate to race, color, ethnicity, age, ability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other well known facets of identity. The misunderstood facet of identity might be less well known. Even the most powerful person imaginable has one or more than one facet of identify which is misunderstood.

⁴ This telling of the story is found here: <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday9.htm>.

Every one of us is Esther. We must help each other re-frame our situation from victim to person with access to the power structure. Though we may not feel powerful, we have access to relational power. As the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators remind us, “We are the 99%.” To the theological question “Whose are we?” I answer: We belong to the misunderstood and the mistreated with whom we share facets of identity. We should ground our compassion in this. Compassion for “everyone everywhere” can be blown away in the wind. Grounded compassion will not blow away.

We can treat the claims on us by the misunderstood and mistreated as an invitation or a demand. Experienced as a demand, their claims may cause our anxiety to rise. In response, we can run faster and faster in the spinning wheel in the hamster cage of our life. Experienced as an invitation, the claims of the misunderstood and the mistreated can lead us into a spacious life of exquisite depth.

May we listen with an open heart to the experiences of others. Who knows but that we have come to our royal positions for such a time as this. May we bring into consciousness our motivations, accept our shortcomings, and begin anew each day. May it be so!