



## Sermon

*after a dramatic reading of "We Might As Well All Be Strangers" by M.E. Kerr*

Once upon a time (a couple of years ago), there was a woman. This woman was a beloved member of a small but thriving church we'll call, for the sake of brevity, First Church. This woman, who for the sake of specificity we'll call Our Hero, went looking for ways to learn more about providing care for the members of First Church, whom she knew to be people in need of a pastoral presence from time to time with the usual personal illnesses, family problems, and economic issues you find in any group of human beings. Our Hero approached the parish minister of First Church and asked if the minister thought it would be a good idea to attend a workshop put on by the Stephen Ministry people, whose national offices are over in St. Louis. The minister, who'd had good relationships with several individual Stephen Ministers in the past, assured Our Hero she should go for it.

So one day Our Hero signed up online for a workshop to be held in Maryville. The next day, she received a phone call from a lady in the Stephen Ministry office who called to inquire about her application. Why had she signed up? the lady wanted to know. Our Hero said she was looking for ways to learn more about providing care for the members of her small but thriving First Church. Asked if it was, in fact, a Unitarian Universalist church, Our Hero said proudly, yes it certainly was. And the lady proceeded to tell Our Hero that Unitarian congregations were not welcome in the Stephen Ministry program. Our Hero was stunned, and said that she only wanted to learn more about caring but perhaps she should not attend the Maryville event. When the woman heard that, she seemed relieved, quickly agreed, and hung up.

Rejected for who she is. Turned away for being who she was meant to be. Cast out for being open and honest and forthright about it.

Where is the justice in that?

National Coming Out Day is now held each October, but its significance mustn't be missed at any other time. If you look around and listen even a little during October or any other day of your life, you can hear 'coming out' stories of all kinds: the unexpectedly touching and wholeheartedly sweet ones; the ugly, profane, scary ones; the hate-and-ignorance-filled ones; the 'wish-I-had-that-person-for-a-grandmother' ones.

Coming out -telling other people that you are lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgendered (LBGT) -seems never to be easy in this culture and in this society. As strange as it seems, even in this day and age, you can still lose your job if your boss finds out you're gay. If you go leaping out of the closet, you can still be turned away from job interviews or promotions. It's still the case unbelievably in 2009 that some parents ostracize their children when they learn they're gay. Coming out can be expensive in all kinds of ways, there's no doubt about that. But living in the closet, living as someone else, living a lie, can cost you oh-so-much more, can keep you from becoming whole.

Now I know it may be dangerous, even fool-hardy, for a person of the dominant orientation to speak on this topic - today or any day. But it can be dangerous and insensitive as well to pick on one person of an alternate orientation to speak for the entire universe of LBGT folks. So wishing rather to be fool-hardy myself than to be insensitive toward someone else, I will stand here, give it my best shot, and see what happens.

As a person of the dominant orientation, I have never exactly had to come out as a heterosexual. But many people of other orientations have come out to me. And having heard so many of those stories, it seems to me there is often a struggle long before that actual coming out moment, a struggle that may be similar to what I had to face as an adolescent when uncertainty, fear, and a vague longing was all I had to go on. Of course, some people have told me they knew who they were attracted to from the time they were four years old: it was always obvious to them who they noticed and how they watched them and what was going on inside their heads and hearts and through the rest of their chakras. Some people, though, have said they had to get into their teens, their twenties, or even later before they could say for sure that, yes, they were attracted to one sex or another or both. Others, sadly, are persuaded by culture or



upbringing that what they do in fact feel is so despicable and abhorrent that they couldn't possibly be feeling it and so they try to ignore it or put it aside for awhile or shove it away completely.

So often, this time of discernment about oneself is not easy or comfortable. Some people act out, some submerge themselves in hobbies or separate themselves in other ways. I've known a child to walk the playground at school all alone, crying, unable to articulate at the time that he had the very strong feeling that he didn't fit in anywhere. I've also known a child to work very, very hard to try to appear to fit in everywhere in order, he now knows, to cover the feeling of not belonging anywhere.

For myself, I remember spending a lot of time as a young teenager, sitting alone in the backyard in the evening, staring up at the stars, wondering what this feeling was, wondering what was going on deep inside this thing that I think of as 'me.' As I think back, rationally and scientifically, it was the chemical rush of a flood of hormones in my circulatory system. Then, however, it was a gentle wind tickling the hair on my arms. Then, it was the twinkle of a million billion stars as far as I could see. Then, it was a soft tingling sensation asserting itself somewhere along my spine. Sometimes it was like a billowy, chiffon hint of a presence; sometimes it was like a freight train. No wonder it takes so long to figure it out!

And once you've figured it out, what do you do with it? Do you run out and start telling other people what you've found? Or do you keep it to yourself until you've figured it out a little better? How do you share with them what's going on deep inside that thing that you think of as 'you'?

I was stumped about how to talk about all this coming-out stuff, so I did what I usually do: I sent off for help. The Human Rights Campaign mailed me a couple of packets of material they put together for their Coming Out Project. There were pamphlets: A Resource Guide to Coming Out, A Straight Guide to GLBT Americans, Coming Out As Transgender, Living Openly in Your Place of Worship. There were bumper stickers, posters, even balloons. I received a form on which one can join the Human Rights Campaign; they say their organization has 600,000 members and supporters, which sounds pretty good. But then they also say that Focus on the Family has 2 ½ million members, the Christian Coalition 2 million members, and they put the total membership of right-wing organizations working to defeat pro-equality legislation and to support anti-LGBT candidates and causes at over 5 million people. Which no longer sounds pretty good – it sounds pretty ominous.

But politics aside, what help is there in all this? The good help I see is that these Human Rights Campaign pamphlets offer advice on being open with yourself, deciding whether to come out to others or not, building a plan to tell other people, and then, once you're out of the closet, how to live openly on your terms. These pamphlets affirm that it's normal to feel scared, confused, uncertain, as well as to feel exhilarated, empowered, and proud during the coming out process. The pamphlets counsel transgendered people to weigh both the risks and benefits of coming out, and they counsel straight folks to be real with their feelings of uncertainty and misgiving, at the same time reminding straight people of what a gift they have been given that any person would have chosen you as someone trustworthy enough to come out to.

So there is help and support for some, at least. Regrettably, the social services in the region where my congregation lives leave much to be desired, and maybe its true here where you live, too. Too many people fall through the cracks in the system: for the economically challenged, many single-sex shelters are reluctant about admitting openly gay clients, and transgendered people are too often left out altogether.

Fewer services is only some of what people who are coming out have to face. M.E. Kerr's short story, "We Might As Well All Be Strangers," brought to life earlier by Carol Jose and Susan Stafford, is one of several 'coming out' stories in the book *Am I Blue?* And these stories say: There is no way to know what will happen in the short term when people decide they want to live openly and honestly and forthrightly with themselves and with the rest of the world. When those people come out, the ones they come out to are faced with accepting the whole truth, accepting some portion of the truth, or denying that there is a reality other than the one they make up for themselves. In the long term,



however, openness and honesty and forthrightness can lead to wholeness and can be their own reward. How is it possible, then, to negotiate this morass of issues and ideas and feelings and come out whole on the other side?

Let's go back to where we started today with the story about Our Hero and First Church and the door that was slammed shut without ever being really open.

You could tell from the story that Our Hero is a woman of character and caring, someone who goes way beyond the call to help others and to see that things get done well and completely around her church. What I didn't tell you was that Our Hero is a woman who was new to ecumenical and interfaith work, someone who may have only recently come to the challenge and the joy of working with people who differ from her religiously in quite significant ways. Maybe she's been in transition in this sense for a while -not knowing herself to be drawn this way, never recognizing herself to possibly be oriented, if you will, to people of a different persuasion.

It's regrettably easy in some Unitarian Universalist congregations to believe that nothing orthodox, especially nothing Christian, need ever cross your path; some of us can live denying that the rest of the world exists for a long, long time. And it's such a shame.

But here is a woman who was taking the huge risk of coming out in a way, risking who she is -in large part, for the sake of others, really. And in sharing what is of deep importance to her -the way she sees the world, the way she is in the world, the way she expresses herself in the world through her religious affiliation -when she shared that deepest part of herself, she was rejected, she was turned away, she was cast out for being open and for being honest and for being forthright.

So when the parish minister -whom you probably have guessed by now was me -heard this story from Our Hero, he -I flogged myself for a time for unknowingly sending Our Hero into the lion's den. And then I wondered. And then I got indignant. And then I called the Christian church where the Stephen Ministry program was to be held. I suppose I expected a fight, but when I laid out the tale to the parish minister at that church, he got indignant, too, and assured me his attitude toward the Stephen Ministry people had been changed, and he suggested I call the national Stephen Ministry office in Saint Louis -which I was about to do anyway -to get to the bottom of the mystery and to give them a piece of my mind. When I called the national Stephen Ministry office, I spoke to a very nice man and told him about my parishioner who had been rejected, turned away, cast out by one of his own people. He was very nice and said he had been talking to a Unitarian Universalist woman from Kansas City just the week before about a very similar issue and he understood how open we were to diverse theologies and to people of different orientations and persuasions, and while he was personally very much in sympathy with our way of openness in religion, he regretted that the Stephen Ministry organization was made up of people from over a hundred denominations and some of those denominations would not look kindly at sitting around a table with people who were so open and so he's sorry, the Stephen Ministry program is closed to Unitarian Universalists, and oh by the way don't worry because we're also closed to Mormons and Jews and Muslims.

He was very nice. And so was I. And when I got off the phone, I got mad. I got very mad. And I wanted justice.

How could a bunch of church people who profess to follow a Galilean peasant who spent his entire ministry reaching across gender and class and racial and ethnic boundaries -how could those people reject and turn away and cast out people who came to them simply asking to learn? I wanted to cry out from the rooftops, I wanted to start a campaign, I wanted to march on the Stephen Ministry office and demand justice.

And I thought about all those who've come out to me.

And I thought about all those who've been oppressed.

And I thought of the number of people who've been rejected and turned away and cast out for being who they are.

And I thought about how many have been spit on and beaten and tied to fences and left to die alone.



And I was ready to fight for justice!

And then I thought of the girl, Allison, the daughter who came out to her mom in the reading from Am I Blue?, and when the mom shot back at her all her frustrations and uncertainty and misgivings about the whole subject of the daughter's sexuality, the daughter stood her ground, stayed right there, remained connected, kept talking, kept asking questions, stayed in the conversation and listened, really listened to what her mom had to say, not because she thought what her mom said was right but because she knew that what her mom said was real. And isn't that what she wanted from her mom all along? A real connection, a real relationship, a real reconciliation, to know and to be known, to know we're not alone in this world.

And I thought of the Galilean again, the one who was hungry and thirsty for righteousness. He, too, wanted justice. But he knew that justice is not revenge, he knew that justice is not retribution, he knew that justice is not even necessarily victory. Justice is simply when people are treated fairly. And where justice is achieved, reconciliation is then possible.

Isn't that what we all want? Isn't that what the child wandering the playground, crying, wants? Isn't that what I wanted in my backyard so many years ago and to this day? Real connection, real relationship, real reconciliation, to know and to be known, to know we're not alone in this world. Without that, we might as well all be strangers.

If we wish to be authentic, we cannot be about achieving victory over others. If we wish to be genuine, we cannot seek the annihilation of those who would reject us, turn us away, or cast us out. If we wish to live open and honest and forthright lives, we cannot ask unconditional surrender from those who don't understand us. Justice demands that every person be treated fairly under the law and we should stop at nothing less. But, the end result of real justice is not a winning and a losing. The end result of justice is reconciliation, which is the whole reason for coming out in the first place -to know and to be known, to be connected once again, to be whole.

So may it be.