



Story, "Maya the Lost Child" by Margo Fallis. <http://www.electricscotland.com/kids/stories/australia1.htm>  
Sermon

This morning, in the spirit of the congregational vote on becoming a Welcoming Congregation that will take place in about an hour, I ask you to indulge me in sharing with you the story of my first ever Pride Parade. If you're not familiar with Pride, it's a big deal in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer Community. People will ask, "Are you ready for Pride?" kind of the way we ask, "Are you ready for Christmas?" Pride usually takes place in June, and in a world that still tells gay people that they are unnatural and shameful and dirty, Pride is about saying, "Here we are with our friends, our partners, our families, and our self-worth, proudly declaring that we belong in this world." To use our children's story, it's saying, we belong in the pouch.

The story begins in August of 1994 when I moved to Toronto to start graduate school. I chose Toronto because I wanted to live in the city with the largest gay population in Canada. I grew up on a farm, went to high school in a small town, and completed my bachelors in a small city that felt like a small town. I wanted to come out and I didn't think that would be possible anywhere but Toronto. So off I went, ready to start a brand new life. No one knew me. I had no history and I hoped to build a new me, free and ready to live.

Well, was I ever in for a shock. Moving from a small city to downtown Toronto is kind of like moving from Rolla to New York City. It's really really expensive. It's really really full of people. And it's really really fast. And the fashion! I didn't know there were so many different shades of black. And I didn't know that it was the biggest faux pas to wear sneakers for anything but jogging. The mode of the day in 1994 was black leather shoes and boots. Within the first three months I replaced my whole wardrobe, and I threw away all my sneakers and scoured the second hand stores for black leather shoes and boots. And I have to admit, to this day I wince when I see people wearing sneakers in public, and that includes my partner. But my transformation had to be perfect. The makeover had to be complete, because ....

I was after girls. If I was going to have a chance for this new life I had to fit in. I'd held back on what I knew was true about me for almost ten years and I wanted to make up for lost time. I was 24, I was free, and I was woman!

So I put on my black clothing and my black leather boots and I went to the women's book club at the library. I went to women's coming out groups at the gay and lesbian center. I hung out at women's coffee shops in the gay ghetto. I even hung out in the power tool aisle at Canadian Tire, which is kind of a cross between REI and Ace Hardware. I was waiting to meet women, desperately hoping that my black leather boots would draw them in like moths to a flame!

But there was one big problem. Cruising women isn't at all like cruising men. Cruising men is easy. Just stand still, and someone will eventually build up the courage to make a move.

I know it's a terrible stereotype and I'm sorry to make you guys sound pathetic, but we all know that men are socialized to do the asking and women are socialized to be the wallflowers at the school dance and wait for Mr. Right to show up and say, "Where have you been all my life?" Right?

Go to a lesbian bar some night. What are you likely to see? Hundreds of women hugging the edges of the dance floor, checking out everyone else's Doc Martens, dressed in the newest shade of black, trying desperately not to look desperate, waiting for someone to ask them to dance! You know which women have the best time at lesbian

bars? The ones who know that they're walking into a place filled with women desperately waiting to be asked to dance!

I thought I could move to Toronto and just start this new life. But it was more like going back to high school. They actually say that about people when they come out. No matter how old you are, it's like you have to learn all over again who you are going to be. A fifty-year-old man will come out and date exactly the kind of person he learned not to date when he was dating women. Because you've held it in for so long, common sense just goes out the window. I was used to feeling really radically out there and desirable before I came out, but in Toronto I felt plain jane and normal. I couldn't get so much as a date, and I don't think it was because I didn't have the right shade of black or shiny enough Doc Martens.

Being welcome in the pouch isn't just about who is already inside it. It's about your own self. Are you ready to be welcomed in? Can you accept yourself? Can you trust acceptance when offered by someone else?

I did start to make friends, very slowly, and we started going to the bars and I was no longer standing alone. I was standing with all my other wallflower friends! And once in a while we got the courage to go onto the dance floor, and I always made sure I danced facing the mirror so that I could be sure I wasn't dancing like a dork. I wasn't getting any dates, but I was having fun and I felt more at home.

And then summer came and my new friends started talking about Pride. Are you ready for Pride? What are you wearing for Pride? Who are you doing brunch with on Pride? Are you marching in Pride? Pride is a huge deal. I learned that you have to plan for your pre-Pride parties, who you're having brunch with, who you're marching with or where you're standing to watch the parade, and then where you're going to party after the parade. It's become a whole package. So I worked on my schedule and my outfits. That Sunday I woke up early, changed my outfit three times, and at long last made my way downtown on the subway. I was so scared. What if I hated it? What if I didn't fit in?

The subway arrived at the Wellesley station and I climbed the stairs to the street, and there, at the top of the stairs, in all her muscle bound six foot five toned glory, in a studded black leather skin tight dress, big blond wig, five inch heeled thigh high boots, thick makeup and a cubic zirconia crown, was the first drag queen I had ever seen! And she looked down at me and smiled and said in the deepest bass voice, "Aren't you just the cutest thing!" I thought to myself, "Oh my God! Is this who I'm going to be marching with? This freak? That's it, I'm done. I am going home. I don't belong here because I am not a freak. There is no room for me in this pouch!"

There are moments when all of us will have cause to wonder if there is room for us in the pouch, or if we're in the right pouch, or if we want anyone else in the pouch. And sometimes the problem is the other people in the pouch, but sometimes the problem is us. Our prejudices, our fears, our insecurities, make us blind to the fact that we actually belong, and in our fear we try to make the pouch smaller so that we don't have to change or stretch.

For many years, this congregation danced around the possibility of doing the Welcoming Congregation Program. This is a program developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association that helps congregations to understand lgbtq issues, to be more welcoming of sexual minorities, and to be allies for equality. In the 22 years since the program launched, there have been people in this congregation who really wanted to do it, but the time just never seemed right, until this last year, when a committed group of lay leaders called Love First, empowered by their desire to build a social justice ministry, said, "We will do it. We will make this happen. It is time." That group assembled the largest teaching team we have ever seen, and over four months, offered the program, which over half of this congregation participated in.

I want to talk just briefly about some of the interesting things I witnessed during this process. I found it fascinating who was nervous about the program and who wasn't. Most young people, and by young I mean under 40, straight

and gay, were hardly nervous at all. Their take was, “This is a no brainer, it’s about time, let’s get the ball rolling.” There were some heterosexual people who were nervous about the program. Would this make us a gay church? Weren’t we already welcoming? Why lift up one group over another? None of these concerns were spoken to me, which makes sense. Since I identify as a sexual minority, I wouldn’t be perceived as a safe person to share these concerns with, and I get that. I hope you had someone empathetic to listen to you.

By in large, those most nervous about the program were older members, and by older I mean 40 and up, who identify as sexual minorities. These were the people most afraid of a backlash. These were the people who would often ask to tone things down for fear that going too far would jeopardize the process. And I don’t think this is surprising. Those individuals have had the most experience of being not welcome in the pews, or of being welcomed with conditions, usually unstated. So there was a real fear that we were opening a Pandora’s box, and even though they were thrilled to do the program, there was still this fear that heterosexual people weren’t really ready for this, and something bad would happen.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith of welcoming. We tend to be a bunch of religious outcasts and misfits, unable to find a home in mainline religious traditions, and we bring our complex religious and spiritual needs, some of which we don’t even have words for, to this place, hoping for acceptance, thrilled when we get it, but often wondering if we’d be welcome if we really showed it all! Realistic fear. It is a deeply human thing to fear rejection should we show our true selves. But, this is the thing. We come here looking for acceptance, and we won’t really find it until we become the ones doing the accepting, until we are the ones with open arms. Then you have found home. No matter if you are new or a long term attender, you are already a gatekeeper, so it is everyone’s spiritual task to be the one that says, “You are welcome here” and to do our personal and institutional homework to be able to do that. Our vote today to become a Welcoming Congregation is an opportunity to recognize our power as gatekeepers and our responsibility to open the door far and wide. Our liberal religious tradition asks for nothing less. This is what we have always been about in our 500 year history.

So what happened at the top of the stairs at the Wellesley Subway? With her smile, that drag queen was the gatekeeper opening the door, and in that instant, I had a choice - to accept the welcome or to reject it, and to reject it wouldn’t have actually meant rejecting her, but rejecting myself. She wasn’t a freak, and neither was I. One of my new friends was waiting at the top of the stairs, and she took me by the hand and said, “You come with me.” And there were my friends, and that Sunday, surrounded by more than a million cheering people, I marched in Pride and was changed forever.

Are you ready to be changed? Are you ready to be accepted? Are you ready to be a Gatekeeper? The promise of our liberal religious tradition is that unconditional grace and love can be a handshake and a smile and sometimes a simple vote away. May it be so. Amen and blessed be.