

## Opening Words: National Coming Out Day

Step aside Cher and Madonna because Judy Garland still stands as the first and ultimate icon among the LGBTQ community. Her life of turbulence, struggle and survival (personally and professionally) have given LGBTQ individuals a diva to identify with.

*Over the Rainbow* will always be synonymous with Judy Garland. The song takes us to a place, somewhere, where those “dreams that you dare to dream” come true. For the LGBTQ community that dream has been one of acceptance, equality and integration.

My own coming out as a gay man occurred some 40 years ago, at the age of twenty. It was the early 1980s, and during my sophomore year at the University of Hartford I felt enough clarity and courage internally and sensed enough support externally to begin the process of coming out.

A counseling psychologist at school was of great assistance to me. He was supportive, affirming and knowledgeable. He gave me educational material to read, which I later shared with my Mom (she too was undergoing the transformation from fear to acceptance). I had recently left the seminary and still identified as Catholic, so the counselor, Tony, referred me to the LGBTQ Catholic support group Dignity. A few years down the road I became the Hartford chapter of Dignity’s president. Not only had I found a supportive community in which I could come out and thrive socially, but one that led me to many years of LGBTQ activism.

When I look back at this period of my life, two sets of opposite emotions surface. One set is liberating, joyful and proud, and marks my experience of leaning into my own truth and authenticity—my coming out.

By contrast, the other set of emotions that surfaces reflects my pre-coming out phase: my early life marked by secrecy and silence, shame, fear and denial. It’s no wonder we call this phase being “in the closet.” It’s dark, lonely and often terrifying.

I resist looking back at the pre-coming out phase of my life. I’d much rather relive and focus on the joyful coming out part: the journey that led to acceptance and self-love, the catharsis, the transformation—all of that joy and celebration.

National Coming Out Day is an annual day of awareness observed on October 11<sup>th</sup> to support anyone coming out as LGBTQ, gender-non conforming and non-binary. It celebrates the anniversary of the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1987. The march stands out as an important part of LGBTQ history because hundreds of thousands of people participated and because of its focus on AIDS activism.

My 24-year old version of myself was there that Sunday in Washington. Although I had been to Gay Pride events in NYC and Hartford, it was my first National March on Washington. For over a year, anticipation of this event and its potential impacts had been building among my friends and fellow activists—warriors in this movement. The march was the culmination of many days of rallies, political forums, lobbying and civil disobedience on the steps of the US Supreme Court.

Today, for some, coming out is no longer a big deal – it can be a simple matter of correcting someone’s assumptions about you, or introducing your partner. But for others, coming out is still a huge challenge.

Coming out is not a one day event, and National Coming Out Day isn’t a day to force people to come out, or to shame those who haven’t done so. Homophobia and transphobia are powerful societal biases. Yet, while coming out can be daunting and scary, it remains the most powerful means of breaking down the barriers we face as LGBTQ, gender non-conforming and non-binary people.

While we honor National Coming Out day as it relates to sexual orientation and gender identity, we want to broaden the concept of coming out—of becoming— for today’s worship service. To be inclusive of all the ways we recognize parts of ourselves or aspects of our lives that we are called to accept and eventually reveal to others.

Sharing our authentic selves with others is not always safe or easy. We need to discern how we will speak our truths to others in healthy and affirming ways that enhance self-acceptance, self-compassion and self-love.

Oscar Wilde, the witty, flamboyant writer who lived in the latter half of the 1800s and was ultimately jailed because of his sexual orientation summed it up best: *“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”*

## **Come out, Come Out Wherever You Are**

### **Unitarian Society of Hartford**

**Rev. Bob Janis**

**Sermon October 8, 2023**

**(Associated prayer, following)**

You try to remember the good stories. You've read about them, searched for them on the internet. Maybe talked to one or two people.

And you try to remember the good stories. Candice was scared of going to her Mom for months, and when she finally did, her Mom she just wanted her to be happy and immediately went out and bought a Pride flag. Lesley's Dad knew before he ever had to say it; he walked in and gave him a big hug, said he would always support him and love him, and if he ever wanted to talk about anything, he'd be there. Rhett's eight grade teacher picked up on the fact other kids were calling him a boy, and asked what he name he wanted him to go by, helped him gain confidence in who he was.

You try and tell your good stories, too. And they're true stories (all of those are – only the names have been changed)<sup>i</sup>. But there are other stories, and they're true stories, too. Stories of rejection. Isolation. Pain. Sometimes physical or emotional violence.

You just don't know what can happen. You want to think there's a new life ahead of you. Because this not being out – hiding who you are – you're starting to realize just how hard it is, how much it's taking away from you to not be who you are, to not be free. But you just don't know what can happen. It's terrifying. You're what, 13? 19? 52? At any age, this is just so hard. How do you tell people a truth as near as your palpitating heart?

This Coming Out Day, we honor those who have made, are making, will make, or maybe even can never make that incredibly courageous step of coming out. Often it's not just one step, but many, coming out to one person and then another, each one a moment of breathlessness, a gulp, a wondering just how to say it...

Many people have told me you never really stop coming out. When do you tell the other coaches on your kid's soccer team you're gay? You're not *hiding* it anymore, but it doesn't have to be the first thing you say to somebody, surely? And should it really matter?

As Michael said, for many people, coming out is still a really, really big deal. It nearly always provokes anxiety, even if you're pretty sure that you'll get a receptive audience. And for some

brave souls – in some families – in some parts of the country...well, it's no wonder people wait years. Maybe a lifetime.

To come out is profoundly heroic. It takes great courage. It's an act of authenticity and self-expression, but it's not merely an individual act. Those who dare condemnation and ridicule in the pursuit of simply being really who they are not only save their own lives, they may well just save someone else's. As more people come out boldly, it gets a little easier for people in subsequent generations. Someone sees an example of a life well lived, of authenticity and vulnerability and power, and is inspired to go towards the light.

It may be the glorious, fabulous light of Christopher Street or the Castro District or it may be the light of the personality of one, single queer person who makes you think, "I can't be them, but maybe I can be me."

I want to suggest that coming out is a part of all of our lives – LGBTQIA+ people, but everyone, to some degree. We all could be said to have some degree of coming out, now and again, some drive to authenticity and self-expression.

Now, I want to be a bit careful about this, because there is something uniquely courageous about LGBTQIA+ people coming out in a society that is still hostile to LGBTQIA+ people simply being who they are. And a quick glance at the headlines will show we still live in a very homophobic world.

I never want to trivialize the enormous courage of coming out as an LGBTQIA+ person. "Coming out" as, say, a Yankee fan in Boston is simply not the same thing.

However. I think most straight people in this room, if they thought about it, would be able to identify some time in their life where they felt like they were hiding some important part of themselves. Keeping something back. And they wanted, on some level, to the truth about who they were, to live their life out loud, but they felt like it was enormously risky to do so.

So many people struggle with addiction and worry about telling anyone about it. So many struggle with the wide range of very human predicaments that fall under the umbrella category of "mental illness": depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, paranoia – and wonder who they can possibly share this with. It could be some event in the past you don't know if you want to drag to the surface again – maybe you were imprisoned, divorced, abused, accused – the list goes on. Maybe, like Audre Lorde, it's a trouble diagnosis you don't know who feel comfortable telling about. Whether it's worries about the future, or something shameful, painful, unsettling in our past, we all have things we are hesitant to come out with. We all have aspects of ourselves that are very true but sometimes unspoken.

Or, perhaps, always unspoken. About ten years back, I quoted a statistic in sermons – I don't have the citation on this, but feel free to fact check. Pew Research asked people how many people in their lives could they tell their deepest secrets to. In around 1990, the modal answer – the most popular answer – was 2, and the mean, the average was something like 2.6, I think. Americans, on average, had two or three people in their lives they could tell anything to. Their confidants. Fast forward to the 2000s, the mean was about 1, 1.2, something like that. And the mode was 0. When people were asked, how many people, in your life, could you confide in, the most popular answer was 0. I don't know for sure, but I doubt it's gotten much better in 2023. We are more isolated than ever before. We aren't coming out wherever we are. We're hunkering down. <sup>ii</sup>

The Wizard of Oz has long been iconic for the gay community and others. Part of it is the fabulous Judy Garland, of course. But then there's the movie itself. Dorothy – living a difficult life on the farm – is transported to a world of color and vibrancy of life, the land of Oz where she can find self-expression, discover who she really is. And she finds some friends. They aren't like her – not exactly – but they are all searching for something, and they all want the best for one another. (Have you ever heard a better description of a community of allies?) The tin man, the scarecrow, the cowardly lion and Dorothy discover that it's no use cowering in fear, they are called to take a risk: the risk of revelation, the risk of facing their dangers together. And so, they embark on the Yellow Brick Road.

When they get to the Wizard, the head honcho of Oz, he instantly solves all their problems. Just kidding, of course he doesn't. The self-acknowledged expert, if anything, only gives them more challenges, has them going off on his errands to solve his own difficulties. Power often works like that, doesn't it – the powerless end up running someone else's errands, solving someone else's problems as well as their own.

In the end, though (do I need a spoiler alert for the Wizard of Oz?) in the end the four brave adventurers discover – with the help of the Wizard, who's not all bad – the four brave adventurers discover that the answers were within them the whole time.

They already had courage. Smarts. Compassion, and a home you could click your heels, <> imagine, and instantly go back to.

The Wizard of Oz is a fantasy, and in real life we cannot click our heels and instantly solve all our problems. However, the Yellow Brick Road process has something to it. "Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are", as the good witch sings to the residents of Munchkinland. Come out. Face your fears. Share your truth. Make some allies, make some friends. And embark upon that long road, that road of discovering yourself. And you may help others along the way.

I'm speaking this sermon as the Palestine and Israel, the Holy Lands of three of the world's major religions, are once again engulfed in war. I do not have a solution to the Middle East Peace Process this morning. All I can do is state the obvious: *we need to learn how to live together*. The stakes simply could not be any higher. The consequences are immense.

The negative consequences are immense, as we know. But so are the positive consequences...the opportunities for liberation. We heard, in Michael's stirring words this morning, what a difference it makes to come out of the closet – that “dark, lonely, and often terrifying closet.” On the other hand, when we find the courage to “lean into our own truth and authenticity” – and a community that accepts us for who we are, rejoices in us, allows us to be ourselves. To be whole.

The incredible courage of the gay person, of the lesbian woman, the transgender, bisexual, nonbinary, or queer in coming out, can, and should, inspire all of us. We can liberate each other. We can save our own lives, and one another's

We can do that for one another. We can liberate ourselves – by our own courage, daring to live out loud – and we can do that for each other, by listening, getting to know each other, celebrating each other.

It's a lifelong process. Audre Lorde had already long since come out as a lesbian when she wrote that reading we heard earlier. She had had many decades to negotiate being a black woman in a society that didn't always appreciate, respect, or even acknowledge black women. There is a entire process of coming out, of daring to live out loud, when it comes to the racial divides of our fractured country.

And in the reading<sup>iii</sup>, Audre Lorde faces yet another type of coming out: sharing the truth of her cancer diagnosis, with all the fears and emotions it brings up for her. She discovered many of the same things that she had discovered as a Black Lesbian poet: that silence wasn't helping her. That speaking out, even speaking out in her vulnerability, was empowering. That she needed people to hear her. That she was not only a casualty of her situation, but she was also a warrior – ready to speak up on her behalf, and for others, too. But when you speak your truth, and when it is heard, something changes.

What about you? Is there any truth you need to share with others? I'm not saying you have to. No one can tell you to. It's not so much a moral imperative as a calling, a desire to not be alone in your suffering. And also not to be alone in who you are, the fullness of who you are, but to have others, maybe a community, that celebrate *you* and allow you to be who you really are.

And all of us need to build that community. Here at the congregation, and in the wider world. All of us need to build that community of authenticity, where people can speak their truths and not be all alone in the world. The stakes could not be any higher. Come out, come out wherever you are.

It's a beautiful world out here, in technicolor. Let's welcome all the colors of the rainbow. Let's switch the lights on. Let's live life out loud. It's so much better than hunkering down in our dark, dank closets. Come out, come out, wherever you are. And let's find the path to peace, together, fully who we are, every step of the way.

Amen, fam, and blessed be.

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<sup>i</sup> From <https://whenicameout.com/> , <https://lgbtrc.uci.edu/resources/coming-out-stories.php>, other websites, and “**Authentic Selves: Celebrating Trans and Nonbinary People and Their Families**”

<sup>ii</sup> As I say, I've lost the footnote for this study – if anyone can find, much appreciated!

<sup>iii</sup> Audre Lorde, from <https://electricliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/silenceintoaction.pdf>

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## **Matters of The Heart**

### **Turning Inward**

Gathered in this place of hope,  
this community where we bring our burdens and our cares,  
this living symbol of diversity under one roof,

And as we gather, war rages yet again  
in the Middle East.

Our hearts, which have broken before, our breaking again.

We would be one with all those  
who have been taken from homes,  
and are behind bars, held at gunpoint, uncertain of their fate.

We would be one with all those  
whose buildings are rattled by bombs and explosions,  
who hold their little ones close and  
await the next catastrophe.

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Our hearts are with all those mourning their loved ones this morning, whose loved ones have been ripped from them by the terrible forces of war.

Our hearts are with all those who do not know what has happened to those they love, are waiting for information,

And do not know what their own fate is, either.

We are reminded for the umpteenth time of the supreme awfulness of war.

We howl with those who mourn. We hope for peace, and we resolve to try to bring peace to this world through the instrument of our own lives.

On Indigenous People's Weekend, we think of the first peoples of the land we are on now, the people here for so many millenia, some of whom are still here.

We think of the violence which was involved in the meeting of the first Europeans and the people of Turtle Island.

With the thrill of discovery, for those who sailed Westward, if only this thrill was accompanied by compassion, and curiosity about other people, and a determination for honest dialogue, for really seeing and hearing the other, well, it would have been a vastly different story.

But that is not the story that happened, and we are determined to tell the truth,



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tell the real story,  
even though it breaks our hearts.

A broken heart can heal.  
Bodies blown apart,  
people's killed,  
these do not heal.  
But a broken heart can heal.  
And the telling of our stories  
helps heal a broken heart.

May the telling, and the heartbreak,  
open the way  
towards something new  
and better  
in centuries to come.

Finally, this week is National Coming Out Day,  
and we reflect on a different kind of conflict.  
It's a conflict within ourselves, sometimes,  
a conflict of authenticity,  
and it's a wider conflict of repression, and homophobia,  
and, sometimes, sometimes, integration  
and respect and joy.

We hold in the sphere of our compassion  
All who are coming out to loved ones about their sexuality,  
or are contemplating coming out,  
or who have come out, courageously,  
and are dealing with the aftermath of that decision,  
or those who can never come out.

May they be held in the arms of love.

May they be viewed as beautiful and lovely and good,  
which they are.

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May they be given tongues of fire  
to speak their own truth to our world,  
may we be given arms of love  
and ears of welcome,  
to receive their truth

Fully and receptively.

Help us to hear one another.

Help us to hear each other  
into the fullness of life,  
into the ways of peace.

May we practice peace together.

AMEN