

## **Respect the Rainbow**

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By Greg Monk**

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Good morning, everyone! Lots of rainbow colors this morning – don't we all look pretty! That was just in case anyone was still questioning my credentials for being up here this morning. My name is Greg Monk, and my partner Cameron and I currently lead the Rainbow Connection, a team based here at All Faiths to address concerns for the LGBTQ and allied community. And it's an honor and a privilege to be sharing with you all this morning.

First, a little of my story. My sister, who was and remains my first ally, outed me to my mother in my early 20's, during a fight. She was trying to convince my mom that she needed to relax her ultra-conservative religious values– mostly because my sister was quite happily “living in sin” with a boy herself, and wanted mom to accept us both. I think she figured if mom could face me being gay, then my sister having sex before marriage would be a cake walk. But that didn't go as planned. My parents never came around, which pretty much ended our relationship.

I joined the Marine Corps, largely in part because my mother was dating a former Marine at the time, and I think I thought if she liked him, maybe she'd like me more if I was one, too. Clearly, I hadn't thought that plan all the way through... This was during “Don't ask, don't tell” – a policy that seems eerily familiar here in Florida of late – but unfortunately when they attempted to issue me a top-security clearance for the work they wanted me to do, they asked – and I told.

They didn't kick me out immediately – I said my homosexual experience was just an experiment. I didn't mention it was on-going. But attitudes changed rapidly. I was introduced to the term “blanket party”, at which I was the guest of honor. That's when your fellow Marines sneak into your barracks at night with laundry bags filled with bars of soap, boots, etc., quickly wrap you in a blanket as you sleep, and begin swinging those bags into your body as hard as they can. The blanket, besides muffling the sound, prevents too much overt bruising on the surface, so the offenders avoid getting in trouble. And who was I gonna tell anyway? I knew which way the wind was blowing. I served my country for nearly 5 years, no regrets. But after that night, it was the single longest acting performance of my career.

My first college roommate was another young gay man who had fled to our city because his previous roommate, another gay man who was HIV + was stabbed to death on the steps of the HIV Clinic he was leaving after picking up his medications. I have other personal stories, including what it's like to attend the memorial service of a man of color I was dating, and having to sit in the back because his family didn't know. But I still consider myself to be very lucky – Turns out, Gloria Gaynor was right. I did survive, and today am surrounded by friends and a family of my own making who don't mind at all that I'm a friend of Dorothy.

I'd also like to give you a little history on the rainbow flag. The different colors within the flag were meant to represent togetherness, since LGBT people come in all races, ages and genders, and rainbows are both natural and beautiful. The original flag featured eight colors, each having a different meaning. At the top was hot pink, which represented sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow signifying

sunlight, green for nature, turquoise to represent art, indigo for harmony, and finally violet at the bottom for spirit.

It was first showcased at San Francisco's Gay Freedom Day Parade on June 25, 1978, commissioned by Harvey Milk. The only other recognized symbol for gays at that time was the pink triangle, first worn by gay men in Nazi concentration camps, but the artist wanted to move away from the dark imagery of the Holocaust, and find a more inclusive symbol.

After the design was unveiled, participants of the parade proudly waved the new symbol in solidarity. The artist then took the design to Paramount Flag Company, which sold a version of the flag without hot pink and turquoise, and indigo was replaced with blue for practicality purposes, giving us the more popular 6 colored flag we see today.

As our community became more inclusive, adding gender identity and other diverse groups, additional variations of the pride flag have been created; I'm aware of some 30 variations, and there may be more. Adding brown and black stripes denotes gay people of color; pink, light blue and white stripes denotes transgendered people and many other variations – each one proclaiming, "We're here, too – we exist, and we want to be recognized and respected."

Which brings me to the title of the message this morning. Respect for the Rainbow. Now I have no doubt that I'm talking to a sea of allies, and a few others under that rainbow, too. So I want us to ask ourselves, what does respect really mean? Is it enough to be willing to accept them for who they are? Does it mean being willing to fight for them, to advocate on their behalf? I think in part, yes.

But I believe it also means to be willing to learn about them, to try and understand where they are coming from, so that I can really understand what I'm fighting for. And that can be challenging, even for us underneath the rainbow.

I identify as a man – my pronouns are he/him – who happens to be attracted to other men. But I'm very comfortable as a man. I am secure enough in my sexuality to admit to jealousy when I see all the lovely variations of style and color that you ladies get to choose from in the clothing stores. I might even admit to - on occasion – sneaking across the aisle to snatch a colorful wardrobe piece just because it looks fabulous, even if all the buttons are on the wrong side. It's like driving in the UK.

But, I'd like all the men here this morning to imagine, for a moment, what it would be like if your mother marched you into Macy's, herded you into the junior misses department as a young man, and demanded that you put on a dress for school the next day. And imagine that when you asked to cut your hair short, or wear pants and a boy's shirt, that they got angry, and hissed at you, clearly embarrassed by your conduct, "that's not an appropriate choice." So you had to go to school the next day, wearing a dress. Even I'm not that bold.

I wonder if that's what it's like for a transgendered person, who looks in the mirror every day to see someone that no one else will acknowledge looking back at them. I can't imagine the internal torment. But I can try.

My dad told me years ago, "Never judge anyone until you've walked a mile in their shoes... That way, you're a mile away, and you have their shoes. He had an odd sense of humor, my dad. But I believe the message to me was still clear – to

get to really know someone, maybe I need to take some time to look at the world from their point of view.

Some years ago, I came across a training on homophobia, by an educator named Brian McNaught. During this training, he did an exercise that I thought was powerful, and I'd like to use the rest of my time to recreate it with you. So try to visualize this scenario in your mind – feel free to close your eyes if it helps.

Whatever your current sexual orientation is, for the purposes of this exercise we are all going to pretend that we are heterosexual. But that we live in an all gay world. Pretend that judges, doctors, priests and rabbis, are all gay. Your teachers and parents are gay. Your employer, your landlord, the characters in every movie and tv show; pretty much everyone you know is gay. As a young child, you were placed in a gay household by your church because society has determined that there were too many children growing up in unwanted heterosexual households as the result of teenage pregnancies and too many cases of child abuse, and that children grow up better with gay parents, since that's the appropriate way to be in a loving relationship.

As you grow older, you learn there's this thing in society called heterosexuality, though you don't understand yet that that means you. It's a big, scary word with this big H at the beginning of it, that adults talk about in whispers. You find out there's books about it at the library, but it's in a special section behind a locked cage that you're not yet old enough to be allowed to read.

On the streets there's a slang term for heterosexuals. They call them breeders. They're just people who live in sin and make babies and it's a dirty word. You see T-shirts with slogans like, "make love, not breeder babies."

You're still a young child and of course you want to be loved because everyone wants to be loved. You want your parents to love you just as much as they do your brothers and sisters. And of course you want your siblings to love you too.

But even at an early age, you begin to realize you were different from your siblings. You watch TV with your brothers, and they all get excited and begin giggling when the male star takes his shirt off. Your sisters get the same way when the female star shows up in a bikini. But as a young child, you feel nothing, just sort of empty inside when the same-sex star appears. You get excited when the opposite sex ones show up. But your brothers and sisters don't. And you begin to understand that even though you look like your siblings, you eat like them, laugh like them, there's something different deep inside of you.

Even though you don't get understand how serious this difference is, you instinctively know that you can't really tell your brothers and sisters about it or your parents, because they might make fun of you – or even worse, they might not love you anymore.

You've heard your parents tell breeder jokes at the dinner table. Just like the ones your friends tell at school. Then you realize it's probably not OK to talk to them about how you are feeling either, because you just might be one of these things they called breeders.

You pray to God. You say, God I've been really good and I've tried to follow everything you've asked me to do, but I have these feelings and I don't know what to do with them and I don't know who to talk about with them and I'm scared. Please God take them away. If you take them away I'll do whatever you want me to do. I'll join the clergy. But instead of the feelings going away, as you

grow older and enter puberty they just get stronger and you become more confused and frightened than ever.

You go into the restroom at school and someone has written on the wall in magic marker, Chris is a breeder. No one talks to Chris for two weeks. Chris sits alone in the lunchroom even though they might not be a breeder, everybody says that Chris is. Chris's social life is ruined.

You go to church, and the pastor reads from the Old Testament and condemns heterosexuality. And you know that this is something you should not be feeling, that it's unnatural and wrong and there's something wrong with you. Maybe you need to see a doctor, but you are too scared to tell anyone how you're feeling. So you say nothing – and begin to hate yourself more and more.

You go to prom, with a same-sex partner, because everyone is, and you hold your partner tight on the dance floor, while they whisper in your ear, "Isn't this nice?" And you feel – nothing. Maybe even a little icky. But you pretend to have a good time, even though there is no connection to this person at all. You try drugs and alcohol to numb the horrible pain of being alone, disconnected, but it only works for a little while. You even consider ending your own life.

You are walking down the street, and you pass a gay man, getting a gay magazine from a rack, and he elbows you and points at a heterosexual magazine, tucked way in the back where the little kids can't reach them, and says, "what you think of that?", as he shakes his head in disgust.

After he walks away, you grab a copy, and two gay magazines to hide it in, and give your money to the gay cashier, who you can't look in the eye; thankfully, she says nothing. You hurry home, lock the bedroom door and open the magazine, to

read about people who are just like you – and there’s an ad for a bar not too far away, a breeder bar, where heterosexuals can meet.

You decide to go and find out for yourself if this is where you belong. It’s not in a part of town you would go to otherwise; they don’t give licenses to breeders for bars in the good parts of town – but you go, anyway.

Someone of the opposite sex smiles at you inside, and eventually the two of you make your onto the dingy dance floor. You talk. Holding them in your arms feels...right. Though you feel guilty for feeling that way. Finally, you’ve found someone who gets it, who feels just like you do. This is what you’ve been missing – this connection, with someone who wants to be with you as much as you want to be with them. You start dating – in secret, of course.

Ultimately, you decide to move in together – not get married, because that’s only for gay people. You see in the news that heterosexuals are organizing to try and pass legislation to allow them to marry, but the backlash gets meaner – you start seeing bumper stickers like, “kill a breeder for Christ.”

In some countries, they are doing just that – hanging heterosexuals in the village square, for daring to feel just like you do. You know, because you’ve seen the horrible images on CNN – still see them at night, when you close your eyes, sometimes. You and your partner get an apartment with two bedrooms, even though it’s more that you can easily afford; your stuff goes in one bedroom, theirs in the other, just in case someone comes over.

One day, you walk into your apartment building, and a neighbor you’ve barely met asks asks, “Hey, did they make it? How are they doing” – and you have no idea what they are talking about. You find out the most important person in your



life, the one you've finally connected with, was taken away to the hospital that morning, and no one let you know. Because you aren't their emergency contact.

You rush to the hospital – but the doctors won't let you into the room. You can only watch from the outside through a plate glass window as the family gathers around your loved one – not acknowledging your presence at all.

You are afraid even to show too much emotion in the waiting room, while the life of someone so precious to you hangs in the balance – or the doctor might suspect you are more than just roommates, and maybe they won't work as hard to save their life. You wait, helplessly, in that cold, sterile lobby on a hard plastic chair for word that no one will give you, hoping against hope. You can't even pray – after all, maybe God is punishing both of you for being heterosexual.

How did that make you feel? Take a moment, and reflect on that. Although this exercise was from the 80's, and much has changed – much hasn't. And many LGBTQ folks will tell you how much they identified with that exercise from their own personal experience – I certainly can.

I suspect that even younger people will relate, sadly now more than ever, as it feels like the tide is turning backwards on LGBTQ acceptance. For our allies, the stories in our current news cycle are a call to action, a time of anger. For many LGBTQ people in our community, it's a time of fear.

The Supreme Court will soon hear another case of a Christian business owner suing for the right to refuse service to gay patrons based on their religion. I expect they will win. They've even hinted at rolling back gay marriage. Florida teachers are removing safe space rainbow stickers from their classrooms, for fear of losing their jobs. Last month's Pride parades were marred by several attacks and

planned attacks; some folks are going back into their closets as a result. And much of this isn't news to you.

The misperceptions surrounding us don't help. Popular myth #1 – gay men are predators, trying to indoctrinate young boys into their perverted “lifestyle”. No. The vast majority – somewhere around 80% - of sexual predators are men who identify themselves as straight. Myth #2 – Lesbians are women who've had a bad experience with men, so turned to women. They just need the right man to “straighten” them out. To the straight guys out there, I hate to burst the male ego bubble, but these gals haven't settled for 2<sup>nd</sup> place. They really don't want you. And while we are on the subject – I don't either. We're good. And Myth #3 – transgender people are really gay people in disguise, dressing up and pretending to be the other sex, so they can get what they want into bed. Nope. The gender we are attracted to, and the gender we see in the mirror are two completely different sets of wiring. Not related in any way.

It's the one thing about adding the T to the LGBT rainbow that I've sometimes struggled with, because I worry that it helps to perpetuate this myth. But we welcome them under our rainbow, too, because we all need a home, a place where we belong – and where we can connect.

As we decide how we, as warriors of social justice, will respond to all of this, I'd like to suggest, in the spirit of respecting the rainbow we all see threatened, that we take time – not only to educate ourselves on what we are fighting for – but who we are fighting for. Speaking up is important... but listening matters.

May it be so.

*On her way to church one Sunday morning, the UU minister noticed a young child in the parking lot of the nearby Catholic church, with a box and a sign: "Free kittens, from a good Catholic family!" She smiled to herself, mentally wished the child good luck, and went on her way.*

*About the middle of the week, she saw the same child, with the same box, outside the Methodist church, this time with a sign that said, "Good Methodist kittens! Absolutely free!" Impressed with the child's tenacity, she went on into her board meeting.*

*Finally, the next Sunday, the child was in her Church's parking lot, with a new sign reading: "Unitarian Universalist kittens! Free to a good home!" This time she stopped to chat.*

*"Weren't you outside the Catholic church last Sunday?"*

*"Yes."*

*"And on Wednesday, weren't these Methodist kittens?"*

*"They sure were."*

*"Well, how come they're Unitarian Universalist kittens now?"*

*the little girl replied, "Cause today their eyes are open!"*