

Reflections on Silence and Reflections on Human Rights and Civil Rights

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I give a number of presentations each year regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth to teachers in schools, to pre-service teachers at Central Michigan University, and at education conferences, and I often title my presentation "Break the Silence." This title has a personal meaning to me, speaks to what is still happening in too many schools, and needs to be challenged by faith communities. I will address the first two in my Reflections on Silence and then let the Rev. Joseph Summers speak to the third with his Reflections on Human Rights and Civil Rights.

Part 1 of Reflections on Silence. I did not come out to myself until I was 34, nor for most of that time did I have any thought that I was gay. I was very active in high school and college, busy with schoolwork, choir, student council, etc., and I dated platonically several times in each. I really wasn't very interested in boys and dating, and if I did think about that scene, I figured I was just a late bloomer. However, in my first year of teaching in 1970, I fell in love with a woman, perhaps more likely hormones awakened, but definitely not a wise move considering she was an alcoholic, but, as is so often the case, love is irrational and blind. I was not blind for long, though, and quickly got out of the relationship, if I could even call it that. I really didn't know what this experience meant, but I knew I had to talk about it with someone, so I shared with my revered mentor, the librarian at Kalamazoo College. Her response was, "Oh, Norma, you don't want to get involved in that life style." So, I didn't. Because of what she said and because of the messages about homosexuality current in the 1970s, I was scared of what I might be, so, in essence, I fled into a marriage. One of the boys I had dated in high school asked to see me over winter break, we went out five times, and on the fifth night, he asked me to marry him. And, thinking that I was in love, I said OK. Looking back, I know what I did; my unconscious thinking was that if I was married, of course, I couldn't be a lesbian.

I remained in the marriage almost seven years, because it's easier to get into a marriage than to get out of one (What would my parents think?!). However, each year the psychic pain became greater, not so much for myself because I still didn't know I was a lesbian, but rather for my husband Howard because I simply couldn't bond with him in all the ways that married couples should – romantically, sexually, emotionally, affectionately. On the last day of my seventh year of teaching, I made an appointment with a therapist to sort out my sexual identity, and I was very lucky because over the course of almost a year, she helped me sort out my feelings and come to a comfortable understanding that, indeed, I was a lesbian and there was nothing wrong with me. Although Howard and I had separated earlier with my statement to him that I just didn't want to be a wife – pretty lame but the best I had at the time - after I came out to myself, I shared that information with Howard, and we are now the friends that we always should have been.

But I wasn't going to tell anyone else. This was 1980, and I was not going to take a chance on losing my teaching job in a small, fairly conservative, middle class town on the west side of Michigan. Little by little, though, the silence that was keeping

me a prisoner inside myself needed to be broken, so I made the decision that my best bet that someone would still love me even if she knew this about me would be my sister. However, in the moment that I shared with her that I was a lesbian, she said that I could never see my niece and nephew again, that to her I was now a perverted, sick person. So in 1983, the closet door that had dared to open a bit, now slammed shut again for me. And, except for an occasional very close friend or two with whom I shared and who accepted me, I was silent for a long time. My identity was Norma, the teacher.

When I moved out to Colorado in 1991 to do my doctoral work, my intent was that my identity would be Norma, the graduate student, and then later, Norma, the professor. That changed in 1992 when the citizens of Colorado voted to deny lesbians and gays protections against discrimination, calling them “special rights” (although it was ultimately thrown out as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1996). Long story short (or you could be here for another hour), my coming out, my finally breaking my silence for good, occurred in a UU church in Greeley, Colorado, in April 1993 when I spoke in front of the congregation as an openly gay person, terrified before I walked through the doors to speak and finally free of my own prison by the end of the worship service.

Part 2 of Reflections on Silence. However, this silence about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and issues still reigns in far too many of our schools in the United States today. This silence occurs in two primary ways. In too many schools, GLBTQ young people don’t feel protected nor safe. Teachers, who typically address name-calling, don’t know how to do so appropriately when the comment is “that’s so gay” or they hear other homophobic or transphobic remarks. In the 2017 National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, 60% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, and 45% because of their gender expression. Seventy percent heard “gay” used in a negative way frequently or often at school, and 60% heard other homophobic or transphobic remarks (for example, “dyke” or “faggot” or “tranny”) frequently or often at school. The study also reports significant percentages of times that GLBTQ students experience verbal or physical harassment or physical assault at school. I have the report with me if you would like to know more specifics.

Equally silencing is the fact that, in far too many of the schools in the United States today, GLBTQ students never see themselves in the curriculum. Yes, they can see themselves in society – music, movies, pop culture. But they need to see themselves in the curriculum of our schools; this offers them hope that they too can lead productive lives. Just as we have done with African Americans, Hispanic Americans, people with disabilities, and women, schools need to, and can, appropriately incorporate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender history, literature role models, and topics into the curriculum. When schools do this, they help all young people understand that GLBTQ people live and work among us and have contributed to our society. It begins to challenge the misinformation so often found in society. It can erase stereotypes and prejudices that have often led to verbal and physical harassment, thus helping young people to be able to think critically and deeply about their own experiences and those of others.

Now, you may wonder why I chose to speak about this issue of silence, specifically today. That is because this coming Friday, April 12, is the National Day of

Silence, and I wanted you to be aware of its existence. Started at the University of Virginia in 1996, and now supported by GLSEN, the National Day of Silence is a student-led movement to protest bullying and harassment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students and those who support them. The Day of Silence illustrates to schools and colleges how intimidation, name calling and general bullying have a silencing effect. Participating students take a day-long vow of silence to highlight the silencing and erasure of LGBTQ people at school, and students often organize an assembly or rally to help others understand how to make their school more LGBTQ-inclusive. The Day of Silence has reached students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as those as far away as New Zealand, Singapore, and Russia, and more than 10,000 students register their Day of Silence participation with GLSEN every year.

Part 3. Reflections on Human Rights and Civil Rights. I want to share with you now the challenge a Christian minister gave to a gathering of primarily Christian folks at an Inclusive Justice Conference on October 19, 2018, regarding their responsibility as Christians to address LGBTQ issues. Hear now the words of the Rev. Joseph Summers, pastor of the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

I want to talk today about Human Rights because I think the concept of human rights is a framework that can enable us to effectively struggle with those who want to use religion as a basis for discriminating against people. It can also help us to move beyond debating which group does, or does not, deserve to have their human rights respected because the very concept of human rights is that it's something everyone shares—simply by virtue of being human. This also is an important topic because our constitution, despite all its radical flaws, was one of the leading human rights documents of its time, but it has gotten so watered down over time that the United States has perhaps less recognition of human rights than almost any other Western industrial nation.

We often think of the Civil Rights movement as arising from the faith community and that's true. But it's equally true that the Civil Rights Movement lit a fire under the faith community in terms of calling congregations into the struggle for human rights. I think we are needing to light a similar fire under our faith communities today because to a significant degree our faith communities don't understand what the struggle for human rights is all about.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all (people) are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights. That among these Rights are the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

What we hear in our nation's Declaration of Independence is that the government of the United States is to be based on the principle of recognizing and honoring certain human rights that are not based on citizenship, race, class, sex, country of origin, sexual orientation or gender identity, but simply based on being human. In my view, this makes our nation's and the State of Michigan's continued denial of protections against discrimination for people who are LGBTQ fundamentally unconstitutional.

Our constitution also says that everyone is to have equal protection under the law. This should render any kind of lack of protection against discrimination for people who are LGBTQ —illegal.

We are also a country meant to be founded on certain moral principles, including caring for the vulnerable. This makes the actions of those in our government who continue to harass and demean people who are LGBTQ—immoral.

When in the history of this country citizens have seen their government act in unconstitutional, illegal and immoral ways, they have recognized their need to witness against these actions, to act to protect the vulnerable, and to demand our government respect the principles on which the well-being of our nation rests. Our country depends on a delicate balance between the public and the private, between the collective and the individual, and within this framework faith communities have a particular obligation to witness when our core values are being trampled on by those seeking economic or political gain.

This is what we saw when people stood up against the unconstitutional, illegal and immoral slave trade through the Underground Railroad. This is what happened, when through the Civil Rights Movement, people stood up against the unconstitutional, illegal and immoral state of affairs that characterized Jim Crow. This is what happened in the Sanctuary Movement when our government was refusing haven to those people fleeing the violent governments our government had help to impose on their countries. This is where we are still today when in various parts of our county, including Michigan, it is still legal to fire someone, to refuse to rent a house to someone, to refuse to provide public services to someone—because they are LGBTQ.

Tragically, often this kind of discrimination is justified in the name of Christianity. This is so ironic because it was the teachings of Jesus that partly laid down the foundation for the concept of universal human rights when he said that whatever you do to the least of your sisters and brothers, whether they be hungry, homeless, sick, persecuted, or in prison, you do to me, you do to God. That teaching means that whatever we think of someone else, we are to treat them with dignity. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” that Eleanor Roosevelt helped compose, is an articulation of what it means to honor the fundamental dignity of others. For me this means that if your church doesn’t stand for human rights—it’s not the church of Jesus Christ. Just as we once challenged churches to recognize how racism was incompatible with Christianity, so too, we are needing to challenge churches to recognize that denying people their fundamental human rights, because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, or for any other reason, is simply not compatible with following in the way of Jesus.

The concept of human rights and the vision that our civil rights should be a way of protecting and honoring our human rights is central to both our religious traditions and our democracy and yet I think we so often we see our religious traditions and government not honoring them. For me this means our spiritual renewal and our political renewal are intimately linked and interconnected. The public face of love is justice, so don’t tell me you are loving your neighbor as yourself if you are unwilling to extend to your neighbor the same protections you have for yourself. That’s simply hypocrisy. If you don’t want to be legally discriminated against because of who you are, or your beliefs, you need to demand that others not be legally discriminated against because of who they are, or their beliefs. That’s simply justice and equality. You don’t have to like me, or agree with me, to insist that my basic human rights be honored and respected—that’s the basic responsibility of every citizen who desires to live in a nation

with liberty and justice for all. It's a message we need to challenge our different faith communities to understand and honor by standing with those who are being persecuted until we are able to overcome the evil that is being done in our name.

Thus end the words of the Rev. Joseph Summers.

As Unitarian Universalists, including as our own UU Fellowship of Central Michigan, collectively we have been vocal, we have not been silent, in our support of LGBTQ people. We have both affirmed and promoted at least two of our UU principles: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; and Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. However, as I close, I want to challenge you as individuals to be vocal, to not be silent. When the Equality Act comes up for a vote in Congress in Washington, DC; when amending the Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act comes up for a vote in Lansing; when any other legislative action comes up that hurts or supports GLBTQ people, will you call or write your Senators and Representatives to voice your concerns and/or support? When any conversation occurs where your voice could make a difference in support of GLBTQ people, will you speak up? Will you break the silence?