

Queer Creativity

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If you were at the Carole King music Sunday service a couple of weeks ago, you may have heard me reference a song I wrote in response to “You’ve Got a Friend.” The music, I said, was lovely, the lyrics insipid. Now it’s time to say a bit more about that song. What made the lyrics so bad was that they were so hopelessly general: “Hey friend, whoever you want to be, whatever you want to see, I’m right behind you. Hey friend, before you go take the earth, remember what life is worth, don’t let it blind you.” Seriously. And why was the lyric quite so mediocre? Because it was in the closet. The song was for a then-closeted acquaintance and the year was 1982 and even in New York City I could not simply write what was on my mind. I couldn’t out my friend and I couldn’t say plainly what I meant because when I had come out at high school that year almost everyone in my academic year simply stopped talking to me and the pain was just too great. My friends at the time, most of whom were singers, thought the song was awesome and we made a fairly high-quality recording of it which I still have, harmonies and all. Ironically, the two singers turned out later in life to be homophobic. One, after some kind of religious rebirth, called me up to try to argue me out of my “lifestyle.” I’m not kidding.

I start with this awkward story because I think it encapsulates a number of aspects of queer creativity. First, queer creativity is born out of difference and thus does not always look like creative versions of the stories of heterosexual people. Second, historically, queer creativity has had to use a certain amount of subterfuge, to “tell all the truth but tell it slant” as Emily Dickinson wrote. Dickinson, by the way, almost certainly experienced romantic love directed toward women so perhaps she knows something about telling all the truth but telling it slant. And here I’d better add that plenty of great art and music and writing have been closeted; unlike my early attempt described above, all sorts of creative works that tell all the truth but tell it slant are simply superb. Third, queer creativity is, at least some of the time, born out of pain and struggle. My stumbling lyric of support for someone who was coming out more slowly than me was not a celebration of queerness but an extended caution. The final line of the chorus, “It helps to have a friend who knows the score”, was a warning as much as anything else. And fourth, while queer creativity may be born out of pain, it is the great gift and strength and grace of queer people that so many of us have been able to turn our pain into music, art, acting, writing, dance, and fashion among other creative arenas. I’ll spend most of my time today talking about these four aspects of queer creativity, say a bit about creatively queer spirituality and then comment on the creativity of social justice work, ending with a comment on my creative work today, which is, I hope, much better than “Hey, Friend.”

First, while sexual and gender minorities share a lot with heterosexual and cisgender people – cisgender being the opposite of transgender – our lives differ in important ways, and these differences are reflected in our creative work. We have to deal with homophobia and heterosexism in their various incarnations, with the kinds of self-hatred we may feel and the kinds of self-destruction we may practice, with being in the closet both in terms of our own self-understanding and in terms of what we tell others, with coming out to ourselves and others, with our familial relationships, friendships and dating relationships, with the impact of HIV/AIDS on our community, and indeed with the connections and complexities of the LGBT community or

communities. It's not that no one else struggles with having secrets that are hard to share. It's not that no one else suffers from HIV/AIDS. But for all of these issues, there are experiences that are mostly or entirely particular to lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, and transfolk.

Our creative responses to these issues cut across a wide swath of art. For homophobia and heterosexism, violence against gay men, and estranged families, one could do worse than watch Harvey Fierstein's heartbreaking plays, such as *Torch Song Trilogy* and *A Catered Affair*. Tennessee Williams wrote effectively about gay self-destructiveness, while such pre-Stonewall works as *The Well of Loneliness*, *The Boys in the Band*, and *The Children's Hour* gave us characters who could never be happy and who, if they were lesbians, sometimes ended up dead. But on a happier note, recall the disco-era song "I'm Coming Out" performed by Diana Ross. Yes, the song was about coming out the way we think of it. But not because Diana Ross was bisexual or lesbian. No, she got the idea for the song after observing three different drag queens all dressed as her at a New York dance club. The song remains a standard at post-Pride parade parties around the world.

AIDS gave us *The Normal Heart* and a wide range of AIDS documentary books and movies; for poignancy, see *We Were Here*; for righteous activism see *United in Anger* or *How to Survive a Plague*. And for romantic relationships, we can hardly do better than that old chestnut *La Cage aux Folles*, a movie and a musical, about the challenges of a gay male couple when the son of one of them, conceived during a night of heterosexual folly, falls in love with a woman whose father is a violently homophobic politician. This is not the sort of thing with which most straight couples have to grapple. Or consider the movie "Imagine Me & You", a marvelously bad lesbian flick which begins with the premise that a woman walking down the aisle at her own wedding (to a man) notices and falls in love with the female florist who has provided flowers for the wedding. All's well that ends well 94 minutes later – yes, I checked – but again, this is not a typical heterosexual narrative.

Closets and coming out have most recently featured powerfully in the graphic novel turned Broadway musical *Fun Home*. *Fun Home*, which won five TONYs this year including Best Musical, tells the true story of butch lesbian Alison Bechdel's life as a child recognizing her difference, her powerful coming out experience at college, her attempt to tell her parents about her sexuality, and her father's horrific suicide after his life as a closeted gay man is fully revealed to his family. *Fun Home* is actually the second queer-themed musical to win Best Musical recently; the energetic and joyful *Kinky Boots*, which features a drag queen, won in 2013. These wins suggest to me that the differing experiences and stories of queer people are increasingly receiving both popular and critical acclaim in the US, which is wonderful news indeed.

Fun Home and *Kinky Boots* are both quite direct about the sexuality and gender identity of their queer characters, but this has not always been the case. Precisely because queerness has been so devalued and targeted, queer creativity has often had to use a certain amount of subterfuge to tell its stories.

Consider the 1962 play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", written by gay playwright Edward Albee. The play centers around the breakdown of a dysfunctional heterosexual marriage, involving the couple's son who may be absent or may be dead or may, in fact, be completely

fictional. As we follow Albee's play and the bewildering story of the nonexistent son, we may come away thinking, this couple looks awfully like a gay male couple might have looked in 1962 – the way they bicker, their strange relationship with the outside world, the question of why they don't have children. Was Albee really writing about a heterosexual couple? Or was he writing, in the only way possible in 1962, about a broken relationship between two men?

Then there's Gertrude Stein's book *Tender Buttons*, which is about many things including the aforementioned tender buttons. All sorts of speculation has taken place about what the tender buttons represent, most of which is not fit for a pulpit. Stein's sexuality, at least, doesn't require any speculation at this point.

Moving even further back in time we encounter the grand old poet of America, Walt Whitman, whose lyric images of nature and society can still inspire. Read enough Whitman and you'll come across the word "adhesion". It doesn't mean sticky tape or even how a society hangs together. It is, rather, a reference to love and sex between men. But one definitely had to do a little reading between the lines to figure that out back then.

Queer people also found their stories in heterosexual places and reinterpreted them to create new meaning. In 1969, the year of Judy Garland's death, where could queer people be truly free? Only somewhere over the rainbow. And thus, the term to describe a fellow queer person, "friend of Dorothy." The point was not that Dorothy Gale the character was anything other than heterosexual; the point was that she had given voice, soaringly and beautifully, to a deep yearning ache shared by queer people all over the country. Later, queer people would also sing, "Come out, come out, wherever you are" but not exactly in order to meet the young lady who fell from a star.

Finally, consider Lorenz Hart, a brilliant and prolific mid-century Broadway lyricist who was also a closeted gay depressive alcoholic. Hart wrote stunning lyrics before dying young after disappearing on a bender. His song "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" includes the lines "couldn't sleep and wouldn't sleep until I could sleep where I shouldn't sleep." Yes, a female character is singing it about a man in the musical *Pal Joey*. But the fact that a gay man wrote that line in 1940 suggests perhaps a touch of identification with the conflicted female lead. Or take Hart's line from "My Funny Valentine", "Your looks are laughable, unphotographable, but you're my favorite work of art." A sympathetic character being attracted to someone she shouldn't find attractive. Sounds kind of closeted to me.

Hart's story reminds us, as does Bechtel's and Albee's and Fierstein's and all of the AIDS writing, that queer creativity is, at least some of the time, born out of pain. You may wonder why we used *The Unicorn Song* as a reading rather than, say, having Phoebe and me perform it today. And the answer is, we couldn't get through it without crying.

Lesbian feminist Margie Adam has written what, on the surface of it, is a lovely, beautiful, positive, affirmative song about having a creative imagination. The music is delightful. But the song carries a lot of sadness within it. "When I was growing up my best friend was a unicorn." What does that say about the narrator's relationship with other people? Why wasn't the narrator's best friend another little girl or a little boy? Is this story a matter of making the best of

a lonely childhood, of turning feeling different into something positive? Of course, creativity is about having the ability to see something because you believe in what you're seeing. And of course, loving is believing in the ones you love. But still, for those of us who had lonely, isolated childhoods because of our differences, these are bittersweet sentiments. A recent New York Times article referred to the "creativity and grit with which gay people responded to stigma and persecution," and that seems exactly right to me. The creativity and grit is a blessing. The stigma and persecution is, and was, a moral horror.

But today, on Pride Day, while we don't ignore the stigma and persecution, we celebrate the creativity and grit. Somehow, amazingly, whether from pain or from an irrepressible spirit of love and hope, or from the working of the grace of the universe, many, many queer people have been able to turn our pain into creativity and offer the world incredible music, art, theater, writing, dance, fashion, and other forms of beauty. How did this come to be?

For starters, it seems to have long been the case that creative venues welcomed people who were a bit different to their worlds. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Bloomsbury Group to theaters around the world and through the centuries, there's been room for the slightly bent. Who would not go where they would be safe, where their creativity could be expressed, and where they might even meet a partner?

My father has proposed an additional explanation. Dad is unimpeachably straight but his years in theater as a songwriter and his family connections to many classical musicians have led to his knowing lots and lots of queer people. Discussing this sermon recently, he surmised that if a person is not allowed to show the world the truth of who they are, and if their needs and yearnings cannot be expressed in normal ways, their reality will find other ways to enter stage left. Okay, I am taking a little liberty with his words here. But I think he's correct. If you can't come out yourself, your creativity will come out for you. Your truth will come out for you.

Thus it has been for actors from Sir Ian McKellan to Lily Tomlin, Matt Bomer to Cynthia Nixon. For artists from Keith Haring to Robert Mapplethorpe and fashion designers from Giorgio Armani to Gianni Versace. For dancers from Rudolf Nureyev to Bill T. Jones. For composers and lyricists from Aaron Copland to Stephen Sondheim. For writers from Auden to Vidal and Bechdel to Woolf. And I'm hardly scratching the surface. So many people have brought their native talent and their response to oppression and their political vision and their campiness to bear on their creativity, and all of us have reason to be grateful.

But queer creativity is not merely about showtunes and short stories. There are elements of queer spirituality that also partake of a certain kind of creativity. Not that my spirituality is necessarily so different from yours, but my relationship with it might be a bit different as a person who has been told by society for decades that queer spirituality is an oxymoron. So, I've picked some music today to suggest what queer spirituality means to me. "Gathered Here" references mystery, struggle and power, three elements with which queer people of faith must wrestle in a homophobic society. "We Give Thanks" lifts up gratitude, a spiritual fruit – so to speak – that is particularly meaningful to queer people. To get through society's crap, to have it drilled into you that God hates you and you are not inherently decent and to be able to reject that and find something holy in the universe – that calls for a lot of gratitude indeed. And so, I give thanks for

this precious day, a day in which I know my worth and my gifts and of course my failings. And I give thanks for all gathered here and those I love who are elsewhere, and for this time we share together so that we may grow in wisdom and compassion. Today's centering music represents another kind of queer spiritual creativity. The wonderful song "Swimming to the Other Side" by lesbian feminist Pat Humphries was written as an inspiration and soul-refresher for progressives working against the various injustices of the world. For me, the song is a reminder that spirituality and politics are never separate but always must inform one another – something with which most spiritually identified queer people would probably concur. We need spiritual grounding to keep us going politically, and we need political action to replace suffering with flourishing and despair with faith.

Social justice work itself is, of course, creative or it would be a grim and depressing affair indeed. This is not only true of LGBT activism but we certainly have our history of bringing a certain pizzazz to the work. Consider the first night of the Stonewall riots, June 26, 1969, one of the first times queer people fought back against police harassment and violence. Most of us who know a little about the riots know about broken windows and trapping the police in the bar and such; a bit less well-known is the response of a group of flaming gay men, drag queens, and transwomen who formed a kick line like the Rockettes and sang, to the tune of the Howdy Doody Show theme song:

We are the Stonewall girls. We wear our hair in curls.
We don't wear underwear. We show our pubic hair.
We wear our dungarees above our nelly knees

Imagine being queer in a time when you might be arrested and have your name listed in the newspaper, when you might have been locked up in an asylum or be lobotomized, when you had to be circumspect in ways that many of us can't appreciate today. Imagine having to congregate in a bar run by the Mafia that didn't even have running water. Imagine routine blackmail and entrapment, and imagine hundreds of respectable men committing suicide when their secret was revealed. That riots such as the one at the Stonewall Inn happened at all is amazing. That anyone had the wherewithal to come up with a kick line and make up parody lyrics is nothing short of astonishing.

Lesbian feminism was not without its creative activism, but a more recent example that I also love comes from the organization ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, who protested complacency in the face of homophobia, mistreatment, and death in hundreds of places and a variety of ways. My favorite demonstration took place on September 14, 1989, when seven members infiltrated the New York Stock Exchange and chained themselves to the VIP balcony to protest the high price of the only approved AIDS drug of that time, AZT. Burroughs Wellcome, the pharmaceutical company that sold AZT, had set a price of about \$10,000 per person per year for the drug, which almost no one with AIDS could afford. Once chained to the Stock Exchange balcony, the ACT UP members displayed a banner that read "Sell Wellcome." A few days after the protest, Burroughs Wellcome lowered the price of AZT by almost half – still raking in an unconscionable profit but at least making the drug accessible to more people.

I began today by talking about an early and not very good song of mine. I'd like to end by mentioning that all the good creative work I do now, in writing and music and academic research, all comes out of my queerness. The religious writing and music comes out of my teenage struggle to find a spirituality that could be at one with my sexuality. My attempts to do anti-racist education come from my intuition that, though the details are almost entirely different, racism is exactly like homophobia in its devaluing and degrading of people in ways that block flourishing and lead to suffering. And my work on developing an ethic of flourishing began with the insight that principles, religious doctrines, values, and political priorities, however well-intended, are less important than the well-being of actual human people walking around on the planet – an intuition I got from years of encountering religious objections to queer people's flourishing. So today, while I still regret that very early and not very good song, I am delighted to strive to work on thoughts and write music and lyrics that are meant to be healing and inspiring for all, and that emerge directly from my own queerness.

As we sing "Standing on the Side of Love" now, let's think of it not just as a political song, and not just as a spiritual song, but as a work of creativity. The bright new day it calls for has yet to fully arrive. We are birthing it, creating it, helping it to come into being, so that someday we may, all of us, fulfill the vision divine. Amen and blessed be.