

The Paradox of Inequality and the Paradox of Welcome

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June 26, 2013 was a normal day for me. I went to work, fed the animals, watched TV, all the usual stuff. And June 26, 2013 changed my life. With the Supreme Court's overturning of part of the Defense of Marriage Act, I got to feel just a little bit more like a whole person, not a second-class citizen but someone worthy of respect, dignity, and fair treatment.

You might ask, how can both things be true about a single day? How can it be both a normal day and a life-changing day? And the answer has to do with the fact that I am both an individual and a member of a group that experiences social penalties because of my sexuality. Individual Amanda had an individual kind of day. I couldn't even tell you what I ate, it was so humdrum. But queer Amanda had an emotionally powerful day involving lots of tears and celebrations and perhaps just a little more time on Facebook than usual.

This is what I call the paradox of inequality, and I've come to call it that in honor of a poem by the African American lesbian feminist poet Pat Parker. Here are the first two lines of her poem entitled, "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend":

"The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black.
Second, you must never forget that i'm Black."

That's Pat Parker's paradox, and I think it holds up for all kinds of systematic inequality. She's writing about racism but it could easily be sexism, ableism, class inequality, or homophobia. Since all social inequality involves attacks on the inherent worth and dignity of people in devalued groups we could talk about any or all of these but since time is short, I am going to stick to homophobia and its flip-side process, heterosexism.

So, what does Pat Parker mean by that challenging pair of statements? Each of us, it is safe to say, is like no one else and at the same time like some other people and also at the same time like all other people. During our month of focusing on story [at High Plains], we can think about this human complexity in terms of stories.

Each of us is unique, like no one else, because we have had unique experiences and therefore have developed unique stories. Just as our fingerprints identify us, so do our stories. I think this is part of what Pat Parker means when she says to forget that she's Black. She is, after all, so many other things as well, all made up of her personal experiences and the stories she has woven from them. My personal experiences have led me to love music and cats, to be shy when I am not performing in some way or other, and to read voraciously. And unfortunately for my partner Phoebe, to not enjoy gardening very much. These things may not be completely distinct from my sexuality but they are not in any way reducible to it.

Each of us is also like every other person on the planet in the common needs we share – the need for food, for shelter, for love, indeed the very need to make meaning and tell stories. I may have every recording ever made of the musical *Godspell*, or at least I did at least count, and you may

listen to jazz or classical or nothing at all, but we both seek connection with other people. We both need to make sense of our lives. We both need to nourish our bodies and get enough sleep to get up the next day. And this is true for all of us. I think this is the other thing Pat Parker might mean when she says to forget that she's Black. Because Pat Parker might have a different skin color than I do but we share basic common human needs that transcend skin color.

So far, I haven't said anything that liberal religion does not already affirm. We know that life has its battles, sorrows and regret for everyone. We probably agree with the quote attributed to Plato that we should be kind to each other because everyone we meet has a hard struggle. Some of you know the Buddhist story of Kisa Gotami and the mustard seed. Kisa's child had died and, in her grief, she went to the Buddha and asked him to bring her child back to life. The Buddha said he could only create the medicine to do so with a mustard seed that Kisa had obtained from a household that had not known death. Of course, Kisa could not find such a mustard seed because every household she approached had known death in one way or another. We nod at this story; we understand. Suffering is a common human experience. Fortunately, joy is also a pretty common human experience.

But that is only part of the story. Why does Pat Parker say that we must never forget that she is Black? Because there are also ways that each of us is like only some other people, and that includes the social groups into which we find ourselves born. In some ways, Pat Parker simply has more in common with other African Americans than she does with me, even though in other ways she and I share experiences because of our queerness that she does not share with straight African Americans.

To be a member of a group penalized by social inequality is to face challenges not faced by those on the privileged side of the same inequality, to face devaluation and danger on a regular basis. Here are some of the challenges I face as a bisexual person in a same-sex relationship living in a heterosexist and homophobic society:

- I grew up convinced somewhere deep inside that God hated me, despite the fact that neither my family nor I were religious.
- While things with my parents are fine now, they were so bad initially that I became deeply depressed and contemplated suicide.
- When I came out in high school in tenth grade, everyone else in tenth grade stopped talking to me for two years.
- As a teenager and young adult I made unhealthy and dangerous sexual decisions to prove to those around me that I liked men. The problem was not that I didn't like men. The problem was the problematic ways I went around proving it.
- I've lost a job and a living situation because of my sexuality.
- I've been harassed while walking with a same-sex partner in places ranging from Ohio to New York.
- I had a job for years in which my boss asked that I not mention my sexuality or my partner.
- I cannot legally marry in the state of Colorado, meaning that more than one thousand federal benefits and statuses are not available to me.
- I was terrified to move to Colorado Springs, since we got here the year after the Pride Center was torched in an act of arson and a lesbian was murdered on the street.

- I still hesitate to come out to my neighbors because I don't want things to be difficult between us.
- There were a number of days when it seemed the Supreme Court might release its rulings on DOMA and Prop 8. Each of those days, I woke up with a sick feeling in my stomach, having barely slept, terrified of the possible outcome and angry that yet again other people got to determine the value and outcome of my life.
- In the Facebook follow-up to the Supreme Court decisions, I have encountered all kinds of people online who have never met me and don't know me but are quite sure I am a sinner and that our country will fall apart because of people like me. In case you weren't aware of this, queer people are so powerful that we are responsible for every natural disaster since Stonewall. Sorry about that.

My life story is deeply shaped by all of these stories. I am who I am because I've had these experiences, and I had them because I am not heterosexual. I might play "This Little Light of Mine" on the piano with great vigor, but I'll tell you, there have been times the light within me has been dimmed. I know I have that voice still and small inside me, but there were years I couldn't hear it because the white noise of self-hatred or the hatred of others drowned it out.

And yet. Some of my skills and moral values and positive identity also come from my sexuality. As a lonely teenager I spent a lot of time at the piano and you can judge for yourself whether the outcome was good. I also went on a religious quest in response to my frustration with religious homophobia, and eventually that brought me to Unitarian Universalism. I think that's been a pretty good outcome. I've made wonderful friends because of my sexuality and found a great life partner who happens to be female. So, a lot of my story, and my stories, are positively interwoven with my sexuality too. The good and the bad, it's all there. And it is deeply connected to my sexuality. Had I been straight, a lot of my story, and my stories, would have been different.

So that's the paradox of inequality, the stories I share with no one, with everyone, and with members of my queer group. What is the paradox of welcome? Simply that, for all of you in this congregation to welcome me fully, to affirm my inherent dignity and worth, you must first forget I'm queer. And then you must never forget I'm queer. If you honor the stories that I tell you that are unique to me, I will feel listened to. If you lift up the stories that we all share in common, I will know that I am part of a beloved community. And if you take seriously the stories that I tell you that derive from my queerness, if you laugh with me and cry with me over those parts of my life even though you have not yourself experienced them, I will feel safe. And feeling safe, listened to, and part of a community is the most wonderful welcome I can imagine. I of course owe the same to all of you, as individuals and as members of groups that have been devalued or targeted, and I will always do my best to make good on that debt.

This year's Colorado Springs pride theme is "the summer of love" in honor of Colorado's passing the civil unions law earlier in the year. Love here refers to the romantic love of a couple. But there is another kind of love that I believe undergirds the beloved community that we are working toward being. Carter Heyward, a lesbian Episcopal priest and theologian, has written: "...loving involves commitment. We are not automatic lovers of self, others, world, or God. Love does not just happen...Love is a choice...a willingness to be present to others without

pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity – a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives.”

Each of us has the opportunity to choose that conversion to humanity, that willingness to work with others to heal a broken world and broken lives. And that has a lot to do with the stories we choose to take up. Rev. Beatrice’s July newsletter column points out that our religious inheritance as heretics is because of our ability to see a different story. That’s true in our thinking about inequality as well. We can engage the stories of people in devalued groups and if we are not in such groups, we can create stories in which we are allies, part of the solution rather than part of the problem where possible.

Where is our holy church? Here, in our telling of stories and our listening to stories. In our acknowledging that all stories are complicated by a larger world that benefits and penalizes us in complex ways. And in our healing, the healing we experience here and the healing we offer to others in all their paradoxical pain and beauty. May we each partake of this holy work with passion and joy and, of course, pride. Amen and blessed be.