

Its Pride time! That means a festival and a parade and lots of parties and all sorts of festivities where LGBT people and supporters can take part and show their gay pride.

I have to admit, I'm not much of a parade person or, dare I say it, a 'pride person'. I don't get it. And I don't feel guilty for not getting it. But since I've been invited to speak here this morning as part of those festivities, I thought I better find out how (or even if) I and my story might somehow fit into the grand pride narrative.

You see, I used to see it as part of my calling to tell my story, the story of my faith journey travelling through a homophobic, and in hindsight, somewhat abusive Christianity in the hopes that it would somehow make a difference. And I believe in some small way it has.

For now though it feels more painful than helpful for me to relive the experiences, to continue the storytelling. The question for me then becomes 'why bother'? Why keep telling the story?

I'm no longer a stakeholder in the struggle within Christianity for equality. So why keep going on about it?

I've left the Church and my only hope for it is that it either changes or dies but that it somehow breaks the bonds of its self-imposed ignorance and irrelevance in this quickly evolving world.

The world is not waiting for Christianity to catch up and nor should it!

I feel a great sense of relief to have, after all these years, parted ways with Christianity and all religion for that matter after a lifetime of being immersed in it.

And yet this morning, here am I.

Don't worry though, I know you're Unitarians and that you don't have the hang-ups about sexuality that other denominations do! However, in my childhood church in Colorado we were very suspicious of Unitarians. We were Pentecostals so actually we were suspicious of everything and everyone that existed outside the walls of our tiny white church with a tall steel steeple.

In a town of about a hundred and fifty thousand (at the time), our congregation was made up of a couple of main families who inter-married and then there were a good number of strays out on the fringe of all of that. People who wandered in looking for some hope, maybe somewhere to belong.

This was small town Colorado and my mother being from New Mexico had no family in this town. She was a struggling twenty-three-year-old single woman - actually she was a struggling twenty-three-year-old widow with two small fatherless boys riding on her heels. My father had committed suicide shortly after I had turned a year old and my mother was still pregnant with my little brother.

We were some of the lonely strays who wandered into that small white church looking for something - a sense of belonging. And these people took us into their homes and adopted us. They fed us and took care of us. And as I continue with my story, I don't for a moment want to understate or even for a moment sound like I'm crapping all over that profound spirit of hospitality that those folks graciously offered us. Like most relationships it started out with a hopefulness. But... that hopefulness and the relationship would deteriorate over time and like the other strays who were not part of these founding families, I believe we eventually became targets - something to be controlled as part of their love for us.

As I begin to grow over the years, members of 'the family' and elders of the congregation would voice concerns to my mom about my mannerisms and my way of being. Apparently the "concerns" were that I wasn't being my gender correctly, the way an 11-year-old boy should be. I wasn't "masculine" enough in other words, I wasn't growing into a proper man. I had been exhibiting "feminine" traits probably because I was growing up without a father.

When I turned thirteen I pierced my ear which I knew was going to be a problem in our church. And as I predicted soon following, the sermons preached from the pulpit were about how homosexuals pierced one ear so that they could easily identify each other on the streets so they could go into alleyways and parks and engage in sodomy. I immediately ran home one Sunday after church and looked up the word 'sodomy' in the dictionary and thought, "WOW, that's what its called." And as an adult I had both ears pierced..... as a protest.

Life was becoming increasingly nightmarish living under this fanaticism and I dreaded each and every worship service. Worship services were held on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, Tuesday evenings, and Friday evenings. My dread of the worship services was the fear that either I or my mom would be publicly called out by the minister in the middle of a hellfire and brimstone service to be "prophesied" to as did happen on occasion. It could be an extremely humiliating and de-humanising experience.

I was onto this game though early on. I knew what this prophecy business was all about. They weren't pulling any wool over my eyes. I knew they were claiming they had some divine direct line to the almighty who appointed them as moral judges into everybody's business so they could control the lives of the members, especially the fringe ones - the ones who weren't related or in the inner circle - the strays. If you were doing something one of the ministers didn't like - BEWARE because he or she might call you out publicly to deliver the dire warning from God - one that usually involved a prediction of punishment if you didn't submit.

One Sunday night at a packed service my thirteen-year-old self was called into the aisle by the pastor. It seems God had showed the good reverend through some mystical vision that I wasn't living a proper Christian life and that I had been playing serious games with God by doing this and that this was my last warning and the punishment for continuing on this path was "God withdrawing his spirit" from me. In other words casting me out with no chance of redemption.

So the pastor and the elders offered to pray me through this sinful way of being. Thankfully, I've always been a discerning kind of a creature and therefore as I said, I was on to this game. I knew what these people needed to make themselves feel they had succeeded in this game of control. They escorted me to the altar and as they begin to lay hands on me and pray for me and speak in tongues, I let the tears pour and I let them deliver me from my

sin. I cried, I spoke in tongues, I gave them everything they needed. Ain't no one can fake deliverance like I can! It's a survival technique. I knew this whole production was tied up with their suspicions about my sexuality. So once they felt they had prayed the gay away, I hoped my life with them would become more tolerable.

But eventually our little family had been through enough of these experiences to gather up the courage to escape the clutches of this fanaticism. My mother grabbed me and my brother and we fled that little white church with the big tall steeple.

Now...fast forward to New Zealand in the early 2000's and I'm now living in this country with my former partner who is Kiwi and of course bringing all that religious baggage and insanity into that relationship because you can take the boy out of Pentacolism but it takes a hell of a lot of work to take Pentacolism out of the boy.

I eventually find my way into St Matthew-in-the-City Anglican Church.

Why bother with Christianity after all that you might ask. I knew in my heart and in my own prayerful study of the Gospel that my experience of Christianity thus far was not what the Jesus message was about. I knew the Jesus message had been hijacked by fundamentalism!

And what I found at St Matthew's was that I had never received such non-judgmental love in any church setting like I did there. It was and is a real and genuine concern for the 'Other' that I found in that congregation.

So with some encouragement and guidance from the clergy there, including your own minister Reverend Clay Nelson, I embarked on the next stage of my spiritual journey which set the healing process in motion. My recovery from fundamentalism had begun

I enrolled in the Bachelor of Theology degree at the University of Auckland wanting to learn how to think critically and how to experience the Gospel the way it was meant to be experienced. I immersed myself in progressive Christian theology. After awhile I felt like I was growing and thriving! I can't deny that it was an extremely painful process at times trying to let go of old wounds and old beliefs. There are many things I still haven't let go of, but I'm working on them.

As I evolved I realised that I felt a 'calling' to be part of the ministry of that church especially to people who may have had similar experiences of fundamentalism and carried around the hurt - and there are a lot of us. And the congregation there also recognised a calling for me and soon I was on a regular preaching roster.

I presented myself to the then Bishop of Auckland as a candidate for ordained ministry. But alas, the journey doesn't usually happen as you want it to or as you expect it to. It reminds that someone once said, "expectation is the root of all heartache" and I feel I have a profound understanding of that lesson.

I was refused entry by the bishop as there was a quiet discrimination policy being implemented. It had been put into place by New Zealand bishops under pressure from conservatives and fundamentalists threatening to split the church in half. The policy was to

not allow a gay or lesbian person into the process to test their calling if they were in a same-sex relationship.

Having had enough of fundamentalists dictating to me and people like me what I could and couldn't be, I decided to become part of the struggle for equality in the Anglican Church.

I'm mostly known in Anglican circles for bringing a Human Rights complaint against the Anglican Bishop of Auckland for locking me out of the process that might have lead to me becoming a priest because I was in a same-sex relationship.

The bishop won the case in the Human Rights Review Tribunal but he admitted something no other bishop in New Zealand had admitted thus far, that the practice of refusing gay people entry into the process for ordained ministry was "discriminatory". Of course he then argued that religious organizations were given an exemption to discriminate under the Human Rights Act and the Tribunal agreed with his argument.

After the decision was released, the bishop said, the Tribunal's decision "correctly identified the balance between individual human rights and the autonomous nature of the church in a way that ensures freedom of religion." Which sounded to me like, "we're pleased our religious right to treat people as less than human has been re-confirmed by the Tribunal."

Our team decided not to appeal the decision because our point had been made. We had shined a very bright light on what had been happening quietly and we felt good that we didn't let it go unchallenged.

When all was said and done, I realised I could no longer be part of an institution that argues against human rights rather than leading the way in promoting the respect, care and dignity of the human person. In other words, once again fanaticism chose to pray the gay away but this time, I didn't have to fake deliverance. I felt like I had been once again extricated from the quicksand of fundamentalism.

And that's a small part of my story.

And thinking about how all of this might fit into meaning-making for a 'pride people', I think for me, Pride must be a time for storytelling, telling our experiences about how we came to be a pride people, not proud of being gay because we had nothing to do with that but proud of all we've overcome to see the day where we can openly be ourselves and without shame, without needing anyone's permission.

Storytelling can be a painful act but it has the power to transform us and to release us from whatever holds us prisoner including the past, including religious fanaticisms. It has transforming power for the teller and the hearer.

I leave you with this poem by a modern day poet. To me, it sums up the essence of what it means to be a Pride People;

No more holding back.  
No more pleasing you.  
No more making myself  
small to make you more.

I am here and I am going  
to take up space. I am  
going to live. - Dele Olanubi

Amen.