

Be Who You Are and Say What You Feel: A Reflection for National Coming Out Day 2015

Rev. Jan K. Nielsen

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So I love these words of wisdom from Dr. Suess:

"Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind."

I hear truth in those words. I would like to think I that I live by them, mostly, but I know I haven't always. There have been times when I haven't felt free to be who I am and say what I feel because some of the folks who would "mind" had power over me.

Whoever you are and whatever your journey, maybe you've been there too—with people and in places where you didn't feel the freedom to be who you are and say what you feel. As my life flows on, I can now see that all those people who "minded" who I was or what I said, no matter how powerful they may have seemed, really don't matter anymore to my soul. But that understanding came to me only by taking the long view—by looking back, over time.

On this first Sunday in October 2015 we gather here in solidarity with all who identify as lesbian or gay, as bisexual or transgender, or queer or questioning—as we prepare to mark that international day of civic awareness, National Coming Out Day, next Sunday the 11th of October. We're beginning our celebrations early so that we might make this whole next week a time to honor the courage it can take in this world to be who you are and say what you feel, especially when the world tries to tell you that who you are, in body and in spirit, and what you feel, at your core, is not okay.

Today I am thinking of two women who, though they passed from this life a decade ago, remain close to my heart. Alma, my mother's oldest sister and her friend, Lucy left Missouri and set out for California where they made a life together and would remain devoted to one another for the next 66 years, until they both died in the same year, six months apart. I never heard any in the family use the word "lesbian," but somehow I knew that Alma and Lucy, both of whom I called "Aunt," were as much a part of one another's lives as any of the pairs I called "Aunt and Uncle." Some referred to them as "old maids" or "career women" but everyone in the family admired them; Alma and Lucy were beloved. They were the family celebrities and they were my heroes. They showed up for Thanksgiving in Joplin wearing sharp suits, clothes than to my young eyes looked like something from Vogue magazine, but were more likely from Sears or Penney's. And these women were independent; they asked no one for their bread and butter and they answered to no one. I wanted to be like them someday.

It was only after Alma and Lucy died when we cleaned out their home that I found the poetry they had sent one another and I knew in my heart that theirs was a long and powerful love story. To this day, when I think of long-term commitment between loving partners, theirs is the union I remember first. And only now, years later, I am beginning to understand something of the spiritual courage it must have taken to live as they did - not at all in what Anna Quindlen so aptly names "lockstep" with the wider culture, but also the pain of keeping their love for one another, in many ways, a secret—the burden each must have carried because of all the times and all the ways they could not be who they were or say what they felt. Alma and Lucy, all these years after their passings, are still teaching me what it means to be human. I honor their memory on this day.

My own journey has led me through the sometimes troublesome waters of living on the less powerful side of complicated identity issues like gender and class, but never have I have known the challenge of not feeling free to be who I am in a way that is basic to one's being nor I have had to muster the courage to stand up and let a sometimes hostile world know that I may not fit someone else's view of what is "okay."

It was one of our spiritual ancestors, Ralph Waldo Emerson, himself a Unitarian minister, who once said, "The preacher deals out to the people his (or her) life—life passed through the fire of thought." As I thought about our gathering on this day, it seemed only right that I should share the pulpit with someone who can deal out to you something of his own life—passed through the fire of his thought—and so I invited to our pulpit someone who knows firsthand what it means to say to oneself and others—this is who I am and this is what I feel, and someone whose capacity for thought and reflection I have come to admire. It is my honor today to share our pulpit with one of our own, Tucker Steinmetz.