



Do you remember your first visit to a gay bar?

I know I do. A group of us would carpool from Vassar College over to the Congress tavern in downtown Poughkeepsie every Monday evening. Congress was one of the oldest bars in Poughkeepsie, family owned and operated. In a notoriously dark and desolate part of an economically downtrodden town, Congress was decorated like a hunting lodge, complete with taxidermy busts of deer and big horn sheep. The only clues to the community who found itself most at home at Congress were the rainbow flags, Barbie dolls and brightly colored beads which hung from the ceiling.

The Congress was open to everyone, but mostly gays, lesbians, and transgender people seemed to call it home, at least on Monday nights. Monday might seem like a strange time to head out on the town, but it was college night at the Congress. They served spaghetti and soft drinks, and welcomed us warmly. For one night out of the week, college night, kids like us crowded the bar asking for endless glasses of water and pumping the jukebox full of quarters to keep the room moving.

I remember the worst thing was for the jukebox to run out of coins, and the whole club would fall silent. I also remember the drama, the who had a crush on who and who hated who which was mostly contained under the surface of our campus interactions and would boil over into the bathrooms and backrooms.

While we had our campus LGBTQ spaces, Congress was the only place we could really be visibly gay and see ourselves as a part of a wider LGBTQ community. I remember watching the older gay men move gracefully around the pool table, watching the lesbians flirt, and sometimes fight, with each other, especially as it got late and the drinks had been adding up. The Congress Tavern was a whole world unto itself, a community bonded just for the night. There was a fleeting feeling of freedom, accentuated by the fact that we knew that at the end of the night, everyone would return to our separate lives and struggles until we would meet at the Congress again.

Throughout my life, I've always delighted in gay bars, whether its small town joints like the congress or big city dance clubs. When I became a minister, I turned in my Saturday nights for early Sunday mornings, but the gay bar has always had a special place in my heart. For many people in our community, the gay bar more than a watering hole or social gathering place. It is a sanctuary, a haven, and a community center. Some might

even call it church. After all, the gay bar is a place where many GLBTQ people experience the welcome and fellowship many can't find in a church community—we know that even as we sit in church this morning, houses of worship have historically excluded gay people and many still do. Far before the internet or dating applications, it was the gay bar that queer people flocked to for community, love, fun and acceptance. And then there is that indescribably transcendent experience that can happen when you are swept up on the dance floor, engulfed in your favorite song singing along at the top of your lungs.

Poet Danez Smith has an awesome poem about his first experience at a gay bar, comparing it to a religious awakening:

*this gin-heavy heaven, blessed ground to think gay & mean we.*

*bless the bouncer who knew*

*this need to be needed, to belong, to know how*

*i know not which god to pray to.*

*i look to christ, i look to every mouth on the dance floor,*

*i want my new god to look at the mecca i built him & call it damn good*

*or maybe i'm just tipsy & free for the first time, willing to worship anything i can taste.*

Every time I go to a gay bar, I witness this awakening happening with young people LGBTQ people coming into their own for the first time. Feeling free to be themselves and to love themselves. I can actually see the sanctuary being created and discovered anew. I actually feel that here too, as we welcome in members to our church who have never felt accepted in a religious space.

I think that's why last year's Pulse shooting in Orlando Florida hit home so so deeply. As free and safe as we can feel, there is a some small part of us that knows every time we gather together as a LGBTQ community, we know there is some kind of a risk involved—and not just a hangover—but a real vulnerability. Of course, there is always that personal risk of rejection—but now, more than ever, there is a heightened risk of being a target of violence.

Fifty years after Stonewall, Pulse was every queer person's worst fear come true. A Latino gay night Pride night out turned into a bloody nightmare by a lone gunman claiming connections to Islamic terrorism, killing 49 Saturday night revelers in the worst mass shooting on US soil. Many suspect that the gunman himself was

wrestling with his own feelings of same sex attraction, perhaps perversely and horrifically turning his self-loathing on a community he felt separated from by religion, culture and identity.

One year after the Pulse shooting, the Orlando LGBTQ community is rebuilding itself even stronger after the terrible tragedy. We come together on this Pride Sunday to remember each of those lives who perished in their quest to feel free, and to feel loved, if only for that fleeting one night. We remember the survivors who dare to live out and proud after being the targets of such terrible homophobic violence. And we remember the victim whose homophobic father refused to claim his son's body.

In these moments of remembering such violence, and in the face of an administration which is actively working to undo our community's hard fought advances, it can sometimes feel as if we are losing ground. And then Pride comes along to remind us of the sea of queer humanity who is loving and fighting and refusing to turn back. When we come together in the sanctuary of progressive community, we can feel it in our bones that love is stronger than hate, stronger than fear, even stronger than death. Love wins, again and again. Last summer, after the Pulse shootings we gathered on city hall and pledged to come out into the streets in even bigger and bolder numbers than we had before, even when our Pride festivals were under active threat. Why? To show that we will not be intimidated, we will not be victimized, and we will never going back in time. We will only keep moving forward, gaining more strength and power.

What if that moral bending towards justice, that evolution of history towards progress, what if that arc is actually not an arc, but a rainbow, appearing first dimly through storm clouds, then shining brightly, with every color we can imagine, the rainbow, one united human family. We are bold. We are beautiful, we are sacred, and we are proud.