

America Is So Gay! – October 12, 2014

by **David Green**

When I was in college I was planning to attend a Halloween costume party. I wanted to dress up as something both funny and scary, so I decided to go as Nancy Reagan.

I went over to my parent's house and told my mom I needed to borrow a dress and a pair of pumps and some of her makeup. I explained what I was up to, but I could tell it bothered her. We were looking through her closet for something that would fit me, and she stopped and said, "Dave, aren't you afraid if you go out dressed like a woman, people will think you're a...homosexual?"

I loved to tease my mother, so it crossed my mind to make a confession to her. But I knew if I did, she probably would've had a heart attack right there in the closet. So instead I assured her I would not be the only guy at the party wearing a dress, and somehow that made it okay. She even helped me put on my makeup.

My mom was a wonderful, caring person, but also highly religious. And I have no doubt that at that time in her life, like many people, she believed homosexuality was wrong, a sin. It was something to be feared and even condemned.

But before she died several years ago I had a theological discussion with her. Among other things we talked about homosexuality, and it turns out she no longer felt that way. She was still a very religious person, but her understanding had changed. Her favorite TV show was "Will and Grace." I thought that was pretty remarkable, and asked her what had happened. She said, "It was nothing sudden. I just got to the point where I finally believe God loves everyone just as they are, and God wants everyone to be treated with justice."

In many ways, I find a striking similarity in the evolution of my mom's attitudes and beliefs, in a relatively short span of time, and what I witness happening on a much broader scale in our society.

It appears that in a period of just a few short years, America is becoming more accepting, more proactive, waking up to the need to ensure equal rights – legal justice – for our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender citizens.

Just this past Monday, the US Supreme Court announced it would not hear a marriage equality case in the near future. It turned down several appeals of lower court rulings that voided bans on same-sex marriage. On the one hand, it was a disappointment to those who've been waiting for the Court to declare marriage equality a constitutionally protected right. On the other hand, the decision can be seen as yet another victory for LGBT rights, as we've seen a number of developments throughout the week.

We'll discuss that some more in a minute. But stepping back for a moment and taking in the big picture, I didn't expect this kind of thing to be happening in my lifetime. It almost takes my breath away, and I don't think it's just me who feels that way. I'm very grateful for it, amazed by it, and to be honest I'm a little bit frightened.

Don't get me wrong – I'm thrilled by the changes we're seeing. They're long overdue. But I'm also aware of the lessons of history: social change perceived to happen rapidly very often results in an opposite reaction. A strong response – and in the minds of those responding, a corrective action – to what is seen as a threat.

It's impossible to pinpoint the date in ancient history when the first person feared or hated another person for being homosexual. We know in many societies, from the Greeks and Romans to some Native American cultures, homosexuality was just understood as a way of being. Not a threat to social norms or religious beliefs, not a moral or ethical issue.

But what you and I still deal with today is the lingering residue of cultural and religious ideas that resulted from early misinterpretations of scripture. In a nutshell, when you read the Bible in context, it really does not say gay people are bad. The problem is, once something's put down on paper, it becomes the subject of interpretation. And interpreters always have a bias.

If that bias is fueled by the desire to gain power and authority through religion, it's almost inevitable that you find things – or people – to label as evil. Any movement – and religious movements in particular – thrives on having an enemy, real or perceived.

As Christianity became a dominant force in western civilization, one of those enemies was homosexuality. Until the turn of the last century, few religious thinkers bothered to openly question that idea, because by that time, the bias against homosexuality was deeply ingrained. It was simply understood – even by people who were not particularly religious – that homosexuality was at best not normal, if not downright evil. That attitude was a given.

So, there's no way of knowing when and where the first gay person was condemned or oppressed or attacked or suffered any kind of injustice. We only know it's been happening for a long, long time, and religion has been the prime culprit.

But when we look at recent history, at how and why attitudes have changed and continue to move forward at a rapid clip, there are some key moments we can point to. Of course, we don't have time to mention every person or event that caused positive change. But there are a few that caused people to question their assumptions, and – like my own mother – helped folks realize that everyone should be valued and loved just as they are, and everyone deserves equal justice.

In 1948, Alfred Kinsey wrote *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. He followed in 1953 with *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. His research showed that 10% of men and 6% of women were what he termed, "more or less exclusively homosexual." Those figures were astonishing: far higher than anyone previously believed.

In 1969, on June 27 in New York's Greenwich Village, a police raid on a gay bar – the Stonewall Inn – resulted in patrons fighting back and sparked three days of rioting. The Stonewall riots galvanized activists, and brought widespread public attention to the need for equal rights.

By 1973, the American Psychiatric Association officially removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

That same year, in San Francisco, Harvey Milk ran for city supervisor as an openly gay man. He lost that first election, but his courage and eloquence – and the fact he eventually went on to be first openly gay person to hold office in a major American city – fundamentally changed the way many people viewed homosexuality.

But starting in the early 1980s, the HIV/AIDS pandemic is understood as the event that did more than anything else to cause the huge shift in attitudes we see today.

As a human tragedy on a massive scale, it was actually a series of connected events. From the chaotic and confusing early days of the crisis, to increased homophobia and hate crimes, to government inaction, to brave activism, and a public outpouring of compassion.

On the one hand, AIDS focused public attention on what many thought was a particular group of others. On the other hand, it was intensely personal. It forced people out of the closet, and to talk to their families. It was heartbreaking and infuriating and scary as hell. People we knew and loved were dying.

In the early 90s I was serving a Christian church in Austin. One of our members was an Austin police officer named Michael. At church he volunteered with our children, and was kind and compassionate.

When he started getting sick, and was in the hospital, the walls of his room were plastered with brightly colored hand-painted get-well posters from all the kids at church, who couldn't understand why their friend and teacher wasn't getting better.

He told me he could not be open at work about being gay. There were people who knew, but still there were some, he thought, who couldn't handle the idea of a gay man being a cop.

At his funeral, we were escorted to the cemetery by every motorcycle officer on the force, leading the way and closing down every busy intersection. The American flag that draped his casket was folded and handed to Michael's partner by the chief of police. The chief wept along with the rest of us, and told me, "He was one of ours."

There are a lot of stories like that. There is nothing good about AIDS.

But there is great good in the way many people responded; in the change that occurred in hearts and minds. For so many Americans, it was the first time to truly be awakened – to no longer see gay people as some abstract "other," but as part of us.

It was the first time so many everyday folks embraced the reality that gay people are everyday folks, and understood the distinction of sexual orientation should never diminish or dehumanize or be the cause of discrimination in any way.

None of that is to play down the hard, persistent work of activists who continue to remind us of that truth. In many cases, as an outgrowth of the AIDS crisis, of the experience of working together in a common cause, it made sense to apply those same organizational and political skills to achieve new goals of equal rights.

But interestingly, when it comes to marriage equality, the pioneers have not been gay-rights organizations – at least not initially – but individual couples. In 1990, without the backing of any organized group, three same-sex couples sued the State of Hawaii for marriage licenses. In 1993, the case went to the Hawaii Supreme Court. It issued a preliminary ruling in favor of the plaintiffs, suggesting the law made them victims of discrimination. That ruling didn't make it a done deal, but it started the ball rolling in a huge way on a national level.

A negative response adopted by many states and even federally, was the rise of so-called Defense of Marriage acts, which defined marriage as only between a man and a woman. Because after all, that model has had a smashing success rate of 50% thus far!

But that kind of reactionary legislation has continued to backfire, overturned as unconstitutional again and again, in states, and just last summer, by the US Supreme Court. Supporters of Proposition 8 in California – a ban on same-sex marriage – have also been turned away. In at least six states, attorneys general have refused to defend their state marriage bans.

In Texas, we're still waiting for marriage equality. On February 26, a federal judge ruled in favor of the freedom to marry in Texas, and respect for out-of-state marriages to be recognized in Texas. The decision was quickly appealed by Gov. Rick Perry and Attorney General Greg Abbott. And the case is still making its way up through the courts and appeals process.

But elsewhere, at least prior to last Monday's decision, it's legal for same-sex couples to get married in 19 states and the District of Columbia: eight states by court decisions, eight by legislative votes, and three by popular vote.

As I mentioned before, this week the US Supreme Court refused hear appeals by five states that had placed stays on lower court rulings in favor of marriage equality: Indiana, Oklahoma, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin. Six more states will also be bound by the ruling: Colorado, Kansas, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia and Wyoming.

So, within weeks, many of these stays will be lifted. That means in 30 states – and for hundreds of thousands of additional Americans – same-sex marriage will be legal.

But wait – there's more! It's confusing to keep up with, but Nevada and Idaho may be next. Every day brings a new development.

All of this late-breaking news is in addition to the fact that the president of the United States has endorsed marriage equality. We have an openly gay US Senator, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin. Annise Parker is now serving her third term as mayor of Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city. She won her last election in 2013 with 57% of the vote, over eight other candidates.

Laws and politicians are one thing, but when it comes to our culture, a huge sign of acceptance is that we now have openly gay professional athletes. Jason Collins plays for the Brooklyn Nets and Michael Sam plays for the Dallas Cowboys. Imagine that: an openly gay Dallas Cowboy.

Surveys show that not only is acceptance of gay marriage on the rise. The younger one is, the less inclined they are to be homophobic – and that happens to correlate with lower levels of religious affiliation. Anecdotally, when I talk with just about anyone under the age of 40, they have a hard time understanding why any anti-gay bias exists.

My daughter Natalie is a good example. She's 25, and hearing her talk I realize she's been exposed to homophobia – but she refuses to turn a blind eye to it or tolerate jokes about gay people – anymore than she would tolerate racism. She belongs to perhaps the first generation for whom homophobia is an aberration, and not at all accepted behavior.

But it's not just Natalie's generation. Her attitudes represents what happens when gay and straight people actually know each other, are friends with each other, work with each other, belong to the same family, and can – at long last – recognize our common humanity. And, understand that we do best as a human family when we simply love and accept people for who they are.

Again, not so long ago, I would've never imagined such things in my lifetime. That America is so gay.

When I was preparing what I was going to say today, I met with John Hintz. Not only is he a good friend, he's a wealth of information. We talked about how far and how fast change has come, but also the ongoing challenges we all need to be aware of.

In Texas and many other states, it's still perfectly legal for your employer to fire you for being gay, or to create a hostile work environment. A landlord can refuse to rent to a same-sex couple. There's the issue of the full faith and credit clause of the US Constitution not being followed – not having your marriage performed in one state legally recognized in another. If you are getting married in a state where same-sex marriage is legal, it's still okay to be denied a service, if your baker or florist or photographer claims their religious beliefs would be violated.

Using religion as a means or as an excuse to discriminate is already shaping up to be the next major hurdle. Religious conservatives continue to react and fight back, and they will for some time to come.

For you and me, the question is, what can we do?

The obvious things include speaking out, showing up, voting, and continuing to grow a Fellowship like this – where everyone is welcomed and embraced.

The positive evolution of our culture is happening fast.

To illustrate that, I'd like to show you a short video. It's actually a commercial for a travel company.

[Click to watch video.](#)

Think about how far we've come. A major travel company produces a short film illustrating the reality so many families are experiencing today. The journey of understanding they're taking. It's an affirmation that this kind of change is good. On the one hand, expedia.com obviously wants you to use them to book your travel.

But they're also saying, "We, a large American corporation, in the business of making money – like so many corporations we are affirming and supporting this shift toward justice and equality. It's the right thing to do, business-wise, and morally." And anyone who does not get this – any individual, any organization, any business, any community, any church – is simply on the wrong side of history.

The side our children and grandchildren will read about in history class one day, and they'll wonder, "What were those people thinking, that this was even an issue?"

But we also know, even as this happens, we cannot take that future for granted. Every one of us – in our day-to-day living – must continue to be advocates; ensuring that everyone is valued and loved just as they are, that everyone is welcomed here, that everyone is treated with justice, that everyone can realize the promise of America.

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