

Commentary

The Right to Presume

by Larry Wolf

I just don't get it when people (gay and lesbian people) tell me that they don't go to Gay Pride events because it's too political for them. Politics has nothing to do with it. Gay Pride is a chance to surround yourself with a positive community without having to go to a ghetto. It allows you to enjoy the opportunity to presume, if only for the day, that all the people you meet are supportive of who you are.

I thank Queer Nation for daring to presume that we can be ourselves—any day, anywhere – and organizing kiss-ins at shopping malls where couples kiss in public, or invading straight bars, or otherwise acting like we really do have all the social rights of heterosexuals. By being on the edge, they help move the middle ground for all of us.

It's not just the radical fringe or those with nothing to lose who can share in this. Many of us ordinary folk have experienced the same thing. It happened in Washington, DC in 1987 all Columbus Day Weekend, when half a million gays, lesbians, and our supporters arrived (as many people as live in all of Vermont!).

Riding on the Washington DC Metro you could presume that the woman across from you was lesbian, that the man was gay,

and best of all, be correct! It was wonderful when the couples standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial having their pictures taken were all same-sex couples. It was almost inconceivable that you could walk down the Mall holding hands with your lover and be cheered rather than jeered.

It happens, to a lesser extent, every year on Pride Day in June (different days in different cities so that you can go to more than one). What's so powerful about the experience is not that it's sexual, but that suddenly the entire world appears to have gone gay, just like you and me.

It also happens here in Vermont. Last year in Montpelier it poured all morning; the roads turned to rivers, yet several hundred people paraded through the streets. People showed up not with their picnic baskets, but with hot pink umbrellas and waterproof boom-boxes to cavort through the streets. Onlookers waved from the stopped cars. Everyone was smiling. We must have looked ridiculous out there in the rain.

Later (after the sun had come out and dried up all the rain), sitting in a cafe with friends, you could share a knowing grin of recognition when others came in to eat. That night you could see *Longtime Companion* at the Savoy, the movie house filled with more of those faces – people who knew when to laugh and when to cry.

Contrast that with our more usual experiences. Last weekend, my partner Craig dared to wear a T-shirt with the words

“Safe Sex” on it. He became a lightning rod for hatred, attracting verbal abuse from a couple of preppy jocks out for Spring Fling. They shouted, “I don't care what they say, you're still a freak!”

Sunday afternoon, walking down Church Street (remember how beautiful Mother's Day was? Warm. Sunny. Who could feel anything but love for his or her fellow human beings?), there was more abuse, this time from three black men.

It makes me blind with rage that while people of color are occupying the office of the President of UVM (including gay people of color – or has everyone forgotten that last year a black man was rejected by a fraternity for being gay) and insisting that the university provide more cultural diversity in its academic and social programs, members of our community continue to be harassed.

Burlington is not often a safe place for gay people. But for one day it will be, at least when we celebrate the twenty-second anniversary of the Stonewall riots, when the drag queens who turned on the cops because there'd been one too many raids on a gay bar started the modern gay movement.

Pride Day is not just a chance to pick up someone new or to bump into an old friend, but a chance to be open about your sexual orientation and rewarded for that openness.

Come and join the party. The good feelings may help you get through the year.

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