

Every Breath I Take - a "Coming Out Day" Sermon was a sermon given by Rebecca Weinreich, a BCC member, at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Los Angeles where she was invited to speak on the day before the national coming out day.

**Every Breath I Take
"Coming Out Day" Sermon
By Rebecca Weinreich
at the
Unitarian Universalist Church of Los Angeles**

October 10, 2004

Is anyone here familiar with the superhero Spiderman? Over the past few years, several new Spiderman movies have been released so he has a whole new following among school age children.

Actually, Spiderman is the same age as I am; both of us were born in 1962. Can anyone recall the name of Spiderman's alter ego? (Peter Parker) What about his love interest? (Mary Jane.) These comic book characters were depicted in as American a fashion as possible. Peter Parker is white, 5' 10", 165 lbs, with short, brown (not black) hair, hazel eyes and freckles. Black hair might have been too ethnic. Mary Jane is white, with blond hair (which was and still is considered a more feminine hair color), alabaster skin and rosy cheeks. In subtle and not so subtle ways, Spiderman, Peter Parker and Mary Jane were all portrayed as as American as American can be, with the subtext that American is good.

My older daughter Shoshanah is in first grade at a public school a few blocks from our home in Los Angeles. About 60% of the children who attend the school are Asian or Asian American; many of them are not native English speakers. Although Shoshanah has not seen the new Spiderman movies, she has seen a wide array of T-shirts and backpacks, sneakers and lunch boxes, computer games and toys all emblazoned with the comic book characters acting out their comic book lives. Last month when we were heading home after school, Shoshanah started talking about Mary Chang. "Who is Mary Chang?" I asked. "She is Spiderman's girlfriend," Shoshanah explained, patiently. "Honey, Spiderman's girlfriend is Mary Jane," I responded. Staring at me with a gentle mix of consternation and disbelief, enunciating very carefully, Shoshanah replied "It is Mary Chang, Mommy." Shoshanah found no conflict in the fact that a blond, alabaster skinned, blue eyed, overwhelmingly Anglo woman would be named "Chang".

I think most adults would notice, maybe even be surprised if they met a blond, light skinned, blue eyed woman named Chang. "Must be her married name," we might tell ourselves, looking for a way to bring these 2 disparate facts into harmony. Looking for another category into which we could place her. It seems to me extremely hard to simply say to ourselves, "Huh. That's a new one on me" and leave it at that. We

seem to feel more secure if we can build and superimpose a structure onto her. We may feel more comfortable in a world where everyone we meet can fit into a category with which we are familiar; where it is only a matter of finding the right category, the right box.

I am a Jew and a first generation American, both of my parents having been born in and then having fled Eastern Europe when the Nazis invaded their home countries. My father is from Vilna which, at the time of his birth, was part of Poland. My father grew up in a segregated world where everyone he knew was a Jew. Of course there were Poles, but (as happens in segregated societies) my father had very little interaction with them. In the world of his childhood, Jews filled every walk of life. The plumber was a Jew, the train conductor was a Jew, the ditch digger, the pick pocket and the moving men were Jews. My father grew up being able to instantly identify a stranger on the street as a Jew or a non-Jew.

Then a funny thing happened. His family escaped and ended up in New York City. Overnight he lost the ability to identify Jews. All of a sudden the “Jews” he spotted in New York turned out to be Italians, or Greeks, or Spaniards. It was only later that he realized the problem. In Vilna there were only two choices: Jews (who had dark hair, dark eyes and so forth) or Poles (blond and blue eyed). In New York, there were third options and fourth options and tenth options. My father’s assumptions didn’t hold true in this new environment.

I am a lesbian and a mother of two. I am a lesbian mother of two Every Breath I Take. I am a lesbian mother of two when I stand in line for groceries and when I buy shoes and when I go to work and when we take walks in the park. I am a lesbian mother of two when I travel and when I stay home, when I eat out and when I cook, when go hiking and when I sit on the couch with the remote control in my hand. I am a lesbian mother of two Every Breath I Take.

Three days ago, this past Thursday, I was a parent volunteer, accompanying 140+ first graders on a field trip to the Los Angeles Zoo. The children rode on buses; the parents drove their own cars. Because it felt more sociable to car pool, I offered a ride to Solomon’s mother, a woman I had never met but with whose child I played every day when I brought Shoshanah to school. We chit chatted about work (she was a nurse), multi-lingual families (she is Jamaican, her husband is Nigerian), other cultures (her husband had expected to enter into an arranged marriage) after school programs and homework. Of course, we talked about the children. “Shoshanah is so tall,” she said. “Is her father tall?”

So there it is. She did not ask “Are you a lesbian?” She asked about my daughter’s height. She expected there to be a father. After all, most people would. Most people would know that not all dark haired people are Jews. But my father and Solomon’s mother and, I dare say, most of us, are products of and limited by our own experiences and expectations.

“Shoshanah does not have a father,” I said. I think to myself, I can’t stop there. She will get another vivid, albeit equally wrong vision of our family, one in which the father ran out on me and the baby. “I am a lesbian and have a female partner,” I offer, brightly. Then I realize I have not yet answered the question. “She has an anonymous sperm bank donor,” I say. I decide I have said enough so I do not add “Maybe he was tall.”

“Oh,” she says, casting about. There is silence. We still have a long drive to go to get to the Zoo. “I had some issues with that,” she states, firmly but not aggressively. We talk some more. It turns out she knew a gay male couple with a daughter. She was relieved to find out that they talked about their child having two fathers instead of having one play the role of the mother. I said we had two mothers, no fathers, and she seemed to think that was OK. I felt I had pretty done well, gotten the message out without any confrontation, handled a potentially awkward situation. I had lived through it. I thought about Jamaica and Nigeria. I thought about being Black in America, I thought about all the things I thought I now knew about Solomon’s mom.

Five hours later it was time to leave the Zoo. Even though she could easily have gotten a lift from one of the other parents, Solomon’s mom readily got back in the car with me. We talked about the Zoo and where to get healthy snacks for the children. And then: “You know,” she started. Here it comes, I thought. I centered myself. Prepared to respond to questions about sperm banks. Took a deep breath. I almost missed it when she said “My sister is a lesbian. She lives in Florida. With a Jewish partner.”

Ah, preconceived notions. There they were again. Solomon’s mom and I had had to spend the day looking at each other and not realizing what we were seeing, in order to understand that we could see each other just fine, if we didn’t close our eyes.

Tomorrow is the 17th Annual National Coming Out Day. The holiday commemorates the then largest demonstration ever for Lesbian and Gay rights. The march was on Sunday, October 11, 1987 in Washington DC. I am proud to say I was there. So were 500,000-1,000,000 others, depending on whose estimate you accept.

One thing that was so profound about the experience was the way it shattered the myths we all hold about what is a lesbian or gay person. The gender stereotypes, the political stereotypes, the familial stereotypes, racial stereotypes, socio-economic stereotypes. All you had to do was open your eyes to have those preconceived notions shaken, if not upended. Here we were in the capital of the most powerful, wealthiest, most privileged country in the world, singing and dancing, smiling and chanting, couples, families and singles, old, young, all shades of color, from myriad backgrounds, brought together because we or people close to us shared one central characteristic, one fundamental truth, that our sexual orientation was different than the majority’s sexual orientation.

Importantly, even though that minority sexual orientation brought us together that day, that one characteristic did not limit us. To the contrary, we came to the March to say to the world and, more importantly, to one another, that we are three dimensional, full, complete humans. We span the spectrum of humanity along the axis of size and color, background and education, family structures and professions. We include lovely, warm people and annoying, obsessive, obnoxious people. We include thoughtful people and people who don't like to think too much. We include enthusiastic people and passive people, people who are searching and people who have come to a halt, people of faith and people who have lost hope and all sorts of people in between.

As obvious a concept as that may be, and as often as we say it, we still expect people to conform to our preconceived notions of what they are. Thank goodness for Shoshanah. Did you notice that in the stories about my father and Solomon's mother and me, each of us was tripped up when faced with a reality inconsistent with our preconceived notions? For my father it was that in New York, people who looked like Jews might not be Jews. For Solomon's mom it was that a tall child like Shoshanah did not have a father. For me it was that Solomon's mom, a Jamaican woman whose Nigerian husband believed in arranged marriages would recognize and disclose that her sister was a lesbian living with a Jewish woman in Florida. Only Shoshanah was not surprised, by Mary Chang's Asian name and blond hair. Shoshanah, and others like her will change the world.

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A few months ago I was in Battery Park in New York with my two children, Shoshanah and her younger sister Ashira. It is a big district for dog walkers and the children eagerly engaged all the dog owners in conversation, including bringing up Los Angeles quite a bit. "Are you in New York for vacation?" one woman asked. "Well," Shoshanah explained, "My other mother had to go to a conference, so we are at the park with this mother," gesturing at me. I smile at the woman, my stomach tightening. The woman looks at me, startled, puzzled, thinking and then ... she gets it. "Well," she says slowly, thoughtfully. "I'd say you are very lucky." If Shoshanah had had a parent of each gender, had referred to her father with me standing there, no one would have batted an eye. Just by being herself, just by stating the truth, her truth, she bridged a gap, offered her hand to a perfect stranger, showed her a less common view of the world. She also highlighted that coming out happens everyday in everyday, a never ending challenge of correcting others' misunderstandings.

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At a basketball game a few months ago, the girls and Tara (my partner of more than 15 years) went to buy snacks, including 3 hot pretzels, each almost the size of Ashira's head. As Ashira industriously lifted the tray and started carrying it away from the counter, the concessionaire observed "That's a lot of pretzels." "That is because my other mom - the one still in our seats - wants a pretzel too. The others are for us," Shoshanah responded, not missing a beat. According to Tara, there were wide smiles of delight on the faces of many of the other moms in line. If Shoshanah had

said that her dad liked to eat pretzels, 30 seconds later no one would even have remembered the comment. Instead, Shoshanah opened a door, shone a light, pointed out her world to perfect strangers. Came out as a child of lesbian parents. Challenged pre-conceived notions, just by talking about pretzels.

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For Mother's Day, the girls each made two arts and crafts projects, whereas each of their class mates made only one. I proudly display the works of art in my office. A woman walking by one day while my children were visiting complimented their handiwork. "Will you make something for your dad for Father's Day?" "We don't have a dad. We have two mothers," Shoshanah responded, as simply as if she were asking the time.

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There is no context in which my orientation does not arise.

Job Interviews: When I moved here in 1991 after having practiced law in Boston for 5 years. "What brought you to Los Angeles?" "My significant other wanted to get her doctorate at USC. So here we are." Would they ask further? Would it become an issue? Would it cost me an offer? If I had said "My husband" or "my boyfriend" wanted to go to USC, I would not worry that others might pull back or close down or reject me.

Every form ever written asks "Married/Single/Divorced/Widowed". There is no box for my category: Deprived of Basic, Civil, Rights.

The legal ramifications of this country's false assumptions bear repeating:

We have to adopt our own children.

We do not get to visit each other in the hospital, unless we had the foresight to draft powers of attorney and health care directives.

We pay more for car insurance, health insurance, club memberships, rental cars.

We cannot file joint tax returns

We do not automatically inherit from one another.

Because we cannot marry, international couples are never safe from the INS and threats of deportation.

And on and on and on.

The good news is that people change and things change. Throughout her pre-school days, several of Shoshanah's friends (ages 3 and 4) asked Tara or me "When am I going to get a second mother?" The 5 year old daughter of some good friends threw a terrible tantrum at a restaurant about a year ago. "I WANT TWO MOTHERS! ASHIRA HAS TWO MOTHERS. SHOSHANAH HAS TWO MOTHERS, EVE HAS TWO MOTHERS, MATT HAS TWO MOTHERS! I WANT TWO MOTHERS!!!" She has a mom and a dad and, in her book, that just was not measuring up.

So I will leave you with this. I am a lesbian mother of two. I may even be the only lesbian mother of two you will recognize today. But I invite you to think, to consider, to wonder, to imagine. I dare say, I will not be the only lesbian mother of two you will see today.