



What is Gay Pride, Really?

In a year when a television actor calls a colleague the dreaded “f-word” — a term as offensive to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals as any racial or ethnic epithet is to other oppressed groups — it is important to look at what “gay pride” is and what it means today as gay pride events are celebrated across the country this month.

Historically, “gay pride” has been denoted as having three main principles: People should be proud of their sexual orientation

(synonymous with sexual identity) and gender identity, i.e. the gender with which a person identifies; sexual diversity is a gift; and sexual identity and gender identity are inherent and cannot be intentionally altered.

The term was first coined in description of the 1969 Stonewall riots that took place in New York City following the police raid of a gay bar in Greenwich Village. The riots began on June 28, 1969 and went on for several days, setting forth the worldwide gay rights movement that continues to strive for equal rights for the LGBTQ community today.

But, what does “gay pride” really mean? Aside from 10-second clips on local television news programs focusing on the most outlandish celebrants one day each year, members of the LGBTQ community often retreat to the heterosexist societies in which they live for the remaining 364 days.

How can members of the LGBTQ community abide by the principles of gay pride in today’s society when, although it may be less acceptable than it had been in years past, homophobic slurs continue to be used by many in prominent positions — from government officials to some members of the clergy?

Recently, a colleague recounted going into her local hardware store, located in a gay-friendly community in Brooklyn, to exchange an item her partner had bought in error. Approaching the counter, she stated, “I need to exchange these. My friend bought the wrong ones.” By referring to her long-term partner as “friend,” this woman

admittedly minimized her relationship in favor of assimilating into the dominant culture. When her toddler son heard his mother refer to his other mother as her friend, he innocently blurted out, “Mommy, she’s not just your friend.”

Is this colleague any less prideful than the individual who may have chosen to refer to their same-sex partner as “wife” or “husband”? Not at all.

LGBTQ individuals have grown accustomed to censoring who they are for myriad reasons, including personal safety, to the degree that such self-censorship occurs unconsciously and automatically.

Sexuality and gender identity remain two hot-button topics. I have often heard people wonder about the unconfirmed sexual identity of others, asking, “Do you think he’s gay?” Responding, “Why don’t you just ask,” is typically met with the reply, “Well, I don’t want to offend him if he’s not.”

The underlying message there is that to be perceived to be gay, and not be, is offensive. For both the LGBTQ community and its straight allies, continuing to censor oneself around the subject of sexuality and gender identity perpetuates homophobia and serves to keep people who are not heterosexual “in the closet.”

At their core, people generally want to be accepted by those around them — their families, their peers, their loved ones. When one’s sexuality or gender identity is at the root of dissension, individuals seek acceptance elsewhere.

In working at Center Lane, a drop-in center for LGBTQ youth in White Plains, N.Y.,

I was exposed to adolescents at different stages of their coming out processes. Some were completely out at school and at home and accepted by their parents. Several were from cultures where homosexuality is viewed as sinful and feared rejection and displacement from their families if they were to come out.

Yet, most walked through the doors with their own sense of pride in who they are, even amid the process of figuring it out. Witnessing these once-alienated youth come together to form bonds with their peers in an accepting and non-judgmental environment was both heartwarming and enlightening. I am sure I learned more from them than they could possibly have learned from me.

“Gay pride” is a credo whose expression is much more personal to each individual than celebrating once a year by marching in or watching a colorful parade. However one chooses to express gay pride should be respected in the context of that individual’s beliefs, culture and environment.

For information on LGBTQ activities and services in Connecticut, go to <http://ctgay.org>.

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