

## **Reading**

### Why We Remember Stonewall

By LA Johnson

The Stonewall Inn is a sacred place for many in the LGBTQ community. Fifty years ago, a raid and series of riots outside the New York City bar helped launch a civil rights movement.

Back in the 1960s, many bars in New York City were controlled by organized crime. Often they operated without proper paperwork, and corrupt police would collect monthly bribes to turn a blind eye.

Sometimes, police would arrest all the patrons in retaliation for not getting their "dues" on time. Gay and lesbian bars were easy targets because they had no legal protection. City laws made gay bars illegal, and wealthy patrons were often extorted. The dingy, rundown bars were frequently raided. People didn't really stand up to the police.

That is, until one night ...

A fight started. Nearby bars emptied out as patrons heard the commotion, and more people joined in the fight. Others fled for safety. Soon the crowd turned into a mob. Police sent in reinforcements and crushed the protests. But what began that night didn't end there.

The following days saw more protests. The movement became a "coming out party" of sorts in the streets of Greenwich Village. One year later, organizers commemorated the event with the first "Pride" parade. Stonewall was not the first rebellion, by far, in the LGBTQ movement. But over the years, many civil rights activists began coordinating their efforts and celebrating that hot summer night as "the first."

And Stonewall did change the lives of many people around the world. Like Michael Levine, who was there that night and, as he told Story Corps in 2010, came out because of it.

There would be accomplishments, and setbacks, in the years to come. But many people who were there say that Stonewall marked the moment when they found their voice.

## **Sermon**

This past June, I found myself standing amidst a sea of color, vibrancy, and an unapologetic celebration of one's identity. It was my first Pride event, and while I was happy that I'd decided to come, I also felt a sense of trepidation about what might occur.

Threats of violence are ever-present in the LGBTQ+ community and while my uneasiness is typically kept in check through my regimented daily dose of anti-anxiety meds, it was still peaking through as I made my way through the crowds of colorfully dressed people to find where the church had set up our tent.

I haven't always been on the right side of history. I grew up in a very new-age religion and left that to become an evangelical Christian in my teen years, which helped me form the opinion that gay people had a choice- one that made them sinners in the eyes of a just god. I held onto this belief until I met my wife. She was on the progressive side of Christianity and believed that gay people were born that way, something I'd always written off as an excuse they made for living in sin.

So there I was, making my way to the UUCE tent at the Elgin Pride event and I was doing my best to tamp down my fears and insecurities about the day. Would there be violence? The watchful police presence helped assuage some of my concerns, but it didn't erase them.

A few months before I'd come to the same area for a Ru Paul's Drag Race watch party with my good friend Jamie; something I'd admitted to them was far outside my comfort zone. When they asked why, I didn't really know how to respond; I was pro-drag, in as much as I think people can live their lives as they want to, but I'd only ever once seen one person in drag, and I was about 10 years old when that happened, which was nearly 30 years ago. Was that going to be an issue for me? I didn't think it would, but I still felt weird about it.

So back to the Elgin Pride event; I was anxious, but I was there. I helped set things up, I put a rainbow bandana on my hat, I walked in the parade, and handed out pride beads. All in all, I had a great time. When we got back to the tent, I grabbed a quick bite to eat, made a lap through most of the tents, and then, when my anxiety could take it no longer, I left.

There was a sense of shame I felt as I drove home that day. I consider myself a fierce advocate of the LGBTQ+ community. An ally and a friend to any who need me or my help. I wear a pride wristband, I have pride-themed shirts, and I have my new pride-themed glasses. But even with all that, there was still that sense of shame- that feeling that I didn't do enough.

While Pride month is a joyous and necessary celebration of the LGBTQ+ community, it has led me to reflect on what comes after. How do we, as allies, continue to uphold the spirit of Pride, not just in June, but every single day of our lives? The first UU principle is, to summarize, that every person has inherent worth and dignity. This is truly what brought me to this church, and I'll be honest, it's the only principle I can remember by number. That means that every person, no matter their orientation, gender identity, and yes, even beliefs, has worth and dignity.

I play a lot of Dungeons and Dragons. I was scrolling through Facebook one day when I saw a post from a guy in Naperville asking if there were any local DnD games he could join. I quickly went to his profile and mildly stalked him- didn't want any weirdos joining my DnD group afterall- but I quickly determined he wasn't outside an acceptable level of weird, so I sent him a message. I'd also noticed that he had a little girl about Cora's age, so I thought we could always start out with a play date so I could meet the guy before I invited him to a game.

I was surprised to find out that his little girl had actually decided that he was a little boy instead. He was 5 years old and they had changed his name from Tova to Wolfgang when he came out to his parents.

I was a little taken aback by this; wasn't five a little young to determine if someone's trans or not? I had a five-year-old at the time, and she was decidedly a little girl.

This was easily my first exposure to a trans person, and this five-year-old helped shape my worldview drastically.

When I worked for Chase Bank, I had a friend that I worked with named Ryley. Now Ryley was a lesbian, and someone who I'd known for a few years at that point. I saw them in the hall and was talking with them one day, and after I got back to my desk, a coworker who sat across from me tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Hey Paul, I've got an awkward question."

Being the person I am, one who's always up for an awkward question, I said, "Sure, what's up?"

"You know that person you were talking to in the hallway, Ryley? What's her- I mean his- I mean, uhh, what I'm trying to ask is, what pronouns, I guess, does she -I mean they- use?"

I laughed a little and said that I'd heard through the grapevine that Ryley might be trans, but why don't I just ask directly and find out? So I messaged Ryley right then and there and asked. Turns out Ryley was now using he/him pronouns. Funnily enough, right after this interaction, I saw a flier for a "lunch and learn" session on pronouns a few days later. My coworkers and I ended up attending and learning a lot, including that non-binary was a thing and that Ryley had almost always felt like he wasn't a woman, starting when he was about five years old.

I bring all this up, my shameful feelings at Pride, my exposure to a drag queen at the Ru Paul's Drag Race watch party, my introduction to Wolfgang, and my reintroduction to Ryley to simply say this; change and understanding often starts with a single step outside of our comfort zones. It's in those moments of discomfort, in those encounters with the unfamiliar, that we find opportunities to grow, learn, and, ultimately, deepen our commitment to upholding the worth and dignity of every person.

As I reflect on my journey, from my first Pride event to my ongoing learning about the experiences of those in the LGBTQ+ community, one term comes to mind - allyship. Allyship is more than a label we adopt; it is an active and ongoing process. It's about more than just showing up at a Pride event or wearing a rainbow wristband. It's about consistently showing up for the LGBTQ+ community, in words, actions, and attitudes.

Being an ally means using our privileges to advocate for those who are marginalized. It's about making a conscious effort to listen, learn, and lend our voices to causes that may not directly affect us but impact the dignity and lives of others.

But what does allyship look like? How can we embody this role in our everyday lives, not just during Pride month, but throughout the year?

Let's start with simply being an active supporter. Participate in Pride events. Support LGBTQ+-owned businesses. Contribute to charities that help people in those marginalized communities. Be there for your LGBTQ+ family, friends, and neighbors and show them love, respect, and acceptance.

I may have felt shame at not doing more with this year's Pride event, but it was a start for me. I did something. I made a first step, and next year, I'll take more steps.

Next, try to educate yourself. There are lots of books, workshops, and trainings out there that can help you become more informed about what the LGBTQ+ community faces. A few good places to start are with the books *This Book is Gay*, by Juno Dawson or *The Savvy Ally*, by Jeannie Gainsburg.

I haven't read these books yet, but they're on my list of books to read and I'm excited to dive into them. I've attended trainings, and I've talked with trans and non-binary friends about their experiences, so I have part of it down, but I can do better. I can do more.

The next step is harder, but check your privilege. We need to use our privilege as cisgender heterosexual people to advocate for and support our LGBTQ+ brethren. I am a cis straight white male, I have more privilege than most, and I need to use that privilege to advocate for those who can't. I need to use that privilege to be a voice for those who are too afraid to or can't speak up.

This last one is the hardest, but we need to speak up. Whenever we see discrimination, hate speech, or bullying, we need to speak up and out against it in any form we see. We need to stand by our LGBTQ+ family members, friends, and neighbors and say this will not be tolerated. Not in our house.

Literally this week, my daughter made a comment to my mother-in-lawmember about trans people. It was a comment made in passing, no big deal, but the family member confronted me about it, and told me that, and I quote, "We do not discuss trans people in this house. I will not have it." I was so taken aback by their words, that I just said ok, and I've been thinking about it ever since.

I can't pretend trans people don't exist for the sake of my family's ego or sense of propriety. I can't pretend that it's ok to erase a whole group of people just because it makes my family uncomfortable. I should have stood up to them then, I should have said we're not trying to make them feel uncomfortable, but Cora has trans friends, and she has every right to discuss them and their decisions with me any time she wants to.

As a parent, I have a responsibility to raise my kids to be kind, loving, and compassionate. As a parent, I have a responsibility to raise my kids to speak out against injustice and inequity. As

parents, and frankly, as members of this church, we all have the responsibility to raise the next generation, and if we don't do it right, what will that mean for our world?

Allyship isn't comfortable. It isn't a walk in the park. It's a deliberate choice you make every day to stand up for those who have been marginalized. It's a commitment to challenge your own biases, to confront injustice when you see it, and to strive for inclusivity and acceptance in all facets of life. It's about amplifying voices that are often silenced and constantly learning how to better support those who face oppression. It's not always easy, but it is always necessary. So I challenge you, as I challenge myself: step out of your comfort zone and into the shoes of an ally. It's in these shoes that we can walk together towards a more accepting, compassionate, and just world.

Your first step doesn't have to be a big one, but it does have to move you forward. Only by moving forward can we as a community continue to grow.