

Welcome and Greeting

Prelude

Opening Words: “A Place of Belonging and Caring”

by Kimberlee Anne Tomczak Carlson

It is not by chance that you arrived here today.

You have been looking for something larger than yourself.

Inside of you there is a yearning, a calling, a hope for more,

A desire for a place of belonging and caring.

Through your struggles, someone nurtured you into being,

Instilling a belief in a shared purpose, a common yet precious resource

That belongs to all of us when we share.

And so, you began seeking a beloved community:

A people that does not put fences around love.

A community that holds its arms open to possibilities of love.

A heart-home to nourish your soul and share your gifts.

Welcome home; welcome to worship.

Chalice Lighting: Anais Nin

And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

Opening Hymn: Will all who are able and willing, please stand and sing

No. 347: “Gather the Spirit”

Covenant (in unison)

Love is the teaching of our church;

The quest of truth its sacrament, and service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom,

To serve humanity in fellowship, to the end that

all souls shall grow in harmony with the divine –

Thus do we covenant with each other.

Hymn no. 123 “Spirit of Life” Hymn No. 123: “Spirit of Life”

Story for all Ages: “*And Tango Makes Three.*”

Introduction to video

The week we’re in a bit of a liminal space in terms of national events. Last week called attention to banned books and next week opens with coming out day.

Today’s service is meant to examine the intersection of these two events. That intersectional space lives in issues of representation and which groups should control access to stories and images.

The American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom reports that in the **whole year** of 2021, there were 729 challenges ranging from Obscene content to books that do not have a happy ending. These challenges involved 1,597 titles.

So far at the time of this report in August 2022, there have been 681 challenges involving 1,651 books. This year is set to surpass last. The only state with more challenges than Pennsylvania is Texas (source: Keystone).

Of the top 10 most banned books from 2021, five have LGBTQ content.

Of those ten, eight have authors or characters who are people of color or BIPOC.

The ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom noted a focus on demands to remove books that addressed Racism and Racial justice or those that shared the stories of Black, Indigenous, or people of color.

Quick research suggests that all 10 titles are for young adults. It makes sense that political groups work hardest to silence books offering representation and information to or about those most marginalized by our society. Young people who are well informed, feel welcomed, and well represented in society typically grow into happy, healthy, and well-informed voters.

The efforts to control access to stories begins young. We’ll be sharing a reading of “*And Tango Makes Three.*” This 2005 children’s book has been on the banned list 8 times. The story of Tango, a young penguin, is based on actual events. The challenges argue that this story is “unsuitable for children, has homosexual overtones, and is anti-family.”

Please show video reading of book.

For young people growing up with same sex parents, representation matters. Stories in which we recognize some part of our own experience allow us to feel accepted and valued. For children from other family structures, shared stories help build understanding and empathy.

A Principled Response

Offering

Now is the time for our offering. The offering is a sacrament of the free church. By giving each week, we not only keep the lights on and support the programs of this congregation, but we remind ourselves that generosity requires action on our part. The offertory affirms our commitment to this congregation's important presence as a liberal religious community in the Susquehanna Valley.

Those participating online may mail your donations to UUCSV, 265 Point Township Drive, Northumberland, PA 17857 or by clicking the PayPal icon on our website at uucsv.org.

This morning's offering will now be received. May it be joyfully given.

Sharing of Joys and Concerns –

We gather here as community, sharing our lives,
celebrating together the joys and laughter and
supporting each other through sorrow and sadness.

You are invited to offer your joys and concerns.

Responsive Reading: “Our Common Life is Enriched”

from the UUA Worship Web

Please join us by reading the bold italicized responsive passages.

We are grateful for the gift of our lives and the gift of other people in our lives.

Each of us is created with dignity and worth.

We are called to love one another and to do nothing to others that we would find hateful to ourselves.

We honor the many ways that people live and love.

Our common life is enriched when queer, transgender, bisexual, lesbian, and gay people can come out – sharing the gifts of their orientation and gender identity.

True justice flourishes when all people can live and flourish.

We suffer when LGBTQ people are oppressed, excluded, or shamed by religious people who overlook the fundamental call to love one another.

Love does not exclude. We are all worthy.

May we work to build a world where all people are celebrated and loved.

We celebrate diversity as a blessing that enriches us all.

Will all who are able and willing, please stand and sing

Hymn No. 6: “Just as Long as I have Breath”

Message: “We Read Banned Books”

Linda:

We’d like to personalize this discussion of banned books and representation for a few moments. Our relationship with books has been one of discovery and nurturance, -- intellectual, emotional, and relational discovery and nurturance. To celebrate National Coming Out Day and to do some old lesbian representation, we’re going to share short versions of our coming out stories.

In 1982, I was a very young, very lost, and very alone 25-year-old, and that is the year that things started to fall in place for me. The woman who helped me come out (not as generally understood or expected) was my boss and friend at the Texas Tech Bookstore, Anne Towery. At 25 I’d worked with her for over 3 years and I continued to work with her off and on for another 12 years. Through those early years, she witnessed as I crashed and burned through several relationships with different men, and she set me up on a number of truly atrocious blind dates.

My feelings around these experiences swung from a sense of desperation—as in, will I ever get this right? – to feelings of resignation as I felt destined to live the rest of my life alone. The strand of feeling that lingers clearest in my memory is a thick twist of failure and falseness because all of my romantic relationships to that point just never felt right.

Anne knew my reading habits since we often worked our way through various publisher catalogs together to determine popular book stock for the store. One day, she cautiously approached me with a book catalog she thought might be of interest to me. Since she knew I was pretty fearless in my reading, her hesitance gave me pause. The catalog was from Naiad Press one of the only companies at the time that, as the byline suggested, published books by women for women. Curious, I placed an order limited only by my budget.

The books arrived in a plain brown wrapper with no return address to guarantee discretion as promised by the publishing company. Little did I anticipate the impact those books – *Curious Wine* and *Desert of the Heart*—would have.

These stories brought me hope in a way I had never before experienced because they cracked the world open for me and allowed me to see for the first time where I might fit.

At the same time, I experienced a constant undercurrent of anxiety because my reading suggested there was a skill set and a language I did not have.

For example:

Gaydar? Is every LGBTQ born with this superpower? It's a little like X-ray vision that allows LGBTQs to identify one another in any kind of situation or setting. This was an important ability in the early 80s as coming out was a still developing concept.

Was it possible I was in the wrong line when that gift was handed out, or was it possible mine is just broken? And if broken, where exactly does one go to get this fixed? All questions left unanswered, so I've managed to limp along without this superpower. My strategy is to invite others to tell me who they are which has, admittedly, been uncomfortable at times but, trust me, relying on faulty gaydar readings often results in even more potentially awkward interactions.

The novels also suggested there was a developing language specific to the lesbian community. The coding for identifications within the LGBTQ community was, and is, a tsunami of confusingly reclaimed words and acronyms.

If you are part of this community, you know we consider one another family. In addition, depending on choices one might be crunchy, flannel, vanilla, you might sing in the choir, you might be soft or stone or gold star, or just a bd which is what I was in those early moments—just such a baby. I wondered if I had been buying the wrong cereal and somehow missed the necessary magic decoder ring because I was feeling a little overwhelmed by all I did not know.

I went with what I knew and pored over all 12 massive volumes of Books in Print. My intense search did not offer up a *Lesbianism for Dummies* or a *How to be a Healthy and Happy Lesbian in 12 easy steps* (sidebar, today, a book like this is available. I can't speak to its helpfulness as I want to think I'm past the point of needing to pay \$16.95 for this information). So, I began ordering every book I could find that had Homosexual, Gay, Lesbian, or any other promising search term I came across.

I immersed myself in the works of – I'm going to offer a list here which is by no means comprehensive—the list is long because part of my world and who I am and the fact that I can even tell this story rests on the shoulders of these women who took unimaginable risks in doing the work that was important to them and has proven important to me and to many others – Alice Walker, Ann Bannon, Lee Lynch, Cherrie Moraga, May Sarton, Gloria Anzaldua, Rita Mae Brown, Barbara Smith, Adrienne Rich, Jane Rule, Lillian Faderman, Bonnie Zimmerman, Judith Graham, and Mary Daly to name a few of the many.

And then, it was time to go out in the world. I stopped waiting and joined every LGBTQ group I could find in my Texas community – both of them.

Within months, I was on the board of the local Lesbian/Gay Alliance, and I filled in as the second Vice President when the Texas Tech Gay Student Group was going through the state legal system to gain official recognition which involved some media exposure. My parents and siblings were forced to address my lesbianism with their friends and co-workers because some of the group meetings were on the evening news. So, in effect, my entire family came out with me. They were not quite as exhilarated by this experience.

I came out as if I had nothing to lose because I felt as if I had everything to lose. I did not want to live in a world where I could not be honest about who I am and who I love.

In the years that followed I had my first romantic relationship with a woman which was a spectacular failure, but then I met a woman in one of my classes who read and talked about books as much as I did – talk which continues today 38 years later, and I'm hoping for another 38 years although by then I'll be 103, but you know, good couple goals. I marched on Washington for LGBTQ rights- twice. I organized and participated in several Lubbock pride events. Wanda and I co-owned a women's bookstore in the heart of our conservative Texas Panhandle community.

I have been called “disgusting, just, disgusting” by a woman who looked like someone's sweet little granny as I stood shelving books in our store, and I have been hugged by the distraught parents of a young woman struggling with her sexual identity – parents who just needed someone to hear their fear and their love for their daughter.

Over time, What I've learned is that I don't have to set the world on fire with my anger and activism. I do have to show up and live a good life as honestly as I can. I don't lie about who I am but I also don't come out to every person I meet. When I do come out, in whatever way I come out, it is my choice. Usually, a choice I've given careful consideration because I do know the potential risks of my honesty. I do not come out to shock or to anger or to challenge or to influence. I come out because I want to be honest about an important part of who I am.

Wanda:

I feel like I might be about to embark on one of those “I walked 5 miles in the snow to get to school” or “back in the day” stories as our students would say, which to them means it happened five minutes ago but nevertheless, I hope you will indulge me in a brief walk down memory lane. Now of course, I can blame much of this story on my mother because she taught me to read at the age of 3 and then patiently spent many hours shuffling me back and forth to the library to squelch what I'm sure was my incessant whining about not having enough books to read. But my dad isn't completely off the hook because his explorations often involved

investigating what was around the next bend in the road or over the top of the next hill. So, I credit him with teaching me how to be curious. Not surprisingly these two qualities put together gave me what I suspect most parents strive for, and that is to provide their children with resources and skills needed to negotiate life challenges. As I continue to recognize the many ways in which I am privileged, I think we often forget to acknowledge having loving and supportive parents as one of those categories.

So as Linda suggested, we think it is important to tell our coming out stories, and I obviously agree, although it is kind of like when someone asks us when our anniversary is? I have to respond with, which one? because we have many depending on what we are celebrating, and we do like to celebrate! Coming out is similar in that it is not a one time event, and I would argue is not something unique to LGBTQ people. I think of coming out as sharing a story that involves taking a risk of some kind where it is necessary to assess potential consequences, intended effect, and ultimately levels of trust. To listen to and share difficult stories of any kind, we must trust one another.

When I was 19 and a sophomore at Gettysburg College, I had several experiences that led me to become more curious about why all my close emotional relationships were with my female “best friends” and I had no particular interest in dating men. So, I did what I always did when curious, I went to the library (and yes, began my investigation using an old-fashioned card catalog). Back in those days there was a check out card in each book indicating the name and date of the last person who had checked out the book. So even checking a book out of the library with gay or lesbian in the title involved some risk, but I bravely carried this bright orange book to the front desk and checked it out. No, not this particular copy, I didn’t steal the library book because I knew I needed my own copy as this quickly became one of the sacred texts of my youth. In the back of this 1978 groundbreaking resource manual entitled “Our Right to Love” was a list of feminist bookstores, the closest of which was The 31st St. bookstore in Baltimore. We did not have GPS back in those days and I don’t think I even had a Maryland map, but being young and fearless (some might say naïve), I jumped in my car and headed to the street in Gettysburg named Baltimore pike trusting it would take me to Baltimore and that once I found a numbered street I could navigate my way to the correct address. I was lucky and somehow found the bookstore without much difficulty and anxiously made my way inside to find exactly one shelf with lesbian novels, probably about 15 or so, and about a dozen records of women’s music. Having no point of reference, I randomly selected one of each and shyly made my way to the front to pay for them. The title of the book I selected was “This is Not for You” by Jane Rule, and as I handed over my cash, the “older” (she was probably 30) lesbian woman at the cash register, smiled at me and said, “Ah, but this is for you.” Clearly this woman’s “gaydar” was working because this was one of the first times, I felt safe, seen, and accepted by someone who knew nothing about me except that I was obviously curious and had questions. I chuckle now as I refer to that semester as my “field work” as I most definitely became what anthropologists would call a “participant observer.” I learned a great deal that semester and got quite an education very little of which occurred in any

formal classroom. In fact, I never heard the word “lesbian” spoken out loud in a college classroom until I was a senior and then was in a sociology of deviance class. I was privileged to have money to buy many more books and records from the 31st st. bookstore and after I exhausted the resources on those shelves, I also might have stretched the truth just a bit when I told the librarians who began wondering why I had so many interlibrary loan requests, that I was doing academic “research.” Fortunately, they never asked for what class? I will be eternally grateful for the librarian who put that first resource manual on the Gettysburg College library shelves. Had Banned Books week formally existed then, I’m sure that book would have made the list! It is truly hard for me to imagine what my identity search might have been like, had I not been able to find these books. Remember, this was 1979. There was no internet, so no Google. Our congregation was not formed until 1991. We did not become a welcoming congregation until 2005. There were no rainbow flags flying in the Susquehanna Valley back then and finding gay communities most frequently happened only by word of mouth and knowing the carefully guarded entrances to bars. For those of you who have watched the new “League of their own” tv show, that portrays an accurate depiction of gay communities in earlier years.

So, by now, you are probably wondering, why is she going on about all this ancient history? In part, as a reminder, that what we see today in terms of media representation and access to resources and materials is relatively new. So yes, we have indeed, “come a long way!” But, and this is a big but...we are now in the midst of some very concerning trends.

Closing thoughts:

The Trevor Project offers more on why coming out stories and banned books deserve our attention.

This suicide prevention organization’s most recent survey asked 34,000 LGBTQ young people aged 13 to 24 about their current mental health. I don’t know the specifics of the survey population but trust that group represents a cross section of the young LGBTQ population at large, and I suspect that number remains low in terms of a true sampling of LGBTQ youth population.

Of the group surveyed:

45% (that is 15,300 LGBTQ young people) considered suicide in the past year

14% (or 4,760) made a serious attempt in the past year

Reasons for these feelings and attempts are numerous:

Lack of family acceptance or support

Forced or the threat of forced conversion therapy

Lack of access to professional health care

Bullying in all its forms and sources.

The fact remains that any loss is too much.

In reviewing the material, I noted an item that touched the difference representation makes to LGBTQ youth.

89% of LGBTQ respondents feel good about seeing LGBTQ representation in movies or on tv

77% feel good when popular musicians identify as LGBTQ

74% feel good when other celebrities identify as LGBTQ

71% feel good when other celebrities advocate for LGBTQs

Representation in print media was not included in the survey results but those at Trevor Project acknowledged the importance of reading and books as their most recent fund-raising event was a back to school 20 minute a day reading challenge. It's been uplifting to see all the posts from young people reading books they find meaningful. A relatively large number of those books can be found on the banned or challenged book lists.

What can we do? It's not my intent to be heavy handed here as I know how engaged and welcoming this congregation is – but the service wouldn't feel complete without these final points.

What we can do – all of us?

- Support our RGL and OWL programs because informed and represented youth grown into informed, engaged, healthy, and happy young adults who make a difference.
- Support our libraries and librarians and school boards
 - Check out a banned book or any book
 - Volunteer
 - Be kind to a librarian
 - Support your local school boards
 - Be kind to them
 - Consider running for a place on them
- There are many important organizations we're happy to share with you. Email us, or Visit with one of us after the service.
- Consider joining the "FreeMomHugs" group on Facebook. For LGBTQ individuals rejected by their families, this group of moms and others offers virtual hugs, vital support, and helpful advice. I believe is some training required. I know there is training required to work with the Trevor Project.
- Attend local pride events.

- We are grateful to every person from our congregation who has helped staff the UUCSV booth or who has attended previous pride events. While the Trevor Project reports 71% of LGBTQ youth feel good when celebrities who are not LGBTQ advocate for them, I suspect 100% would feel good seeing and interacting with people from their own communities. People they trust will advocate for them because they attend and support pride events.

Closing Hymn: Will all who are able and willing, please stand and sing Hymn 1021: “Lean on Me”

Closing Words: “The Purpose of This Community is to Help Its People Grow”

By Erik Walker Wikstrom

If you are who you were,

And if the person next to you is who he or she was,

If none of us has changed

Since the day we came in here –

We have failed.

The purpose of this community –

Of any church, temple, zendo, mosque –

It to help its people grow.

We do this through encounters with the unknown – in ourselves

In one another,

In “The Other” – who ever that might be for us,

However hard that might be –

Because these encounters have many gifts to offer.

So may you go forth from here this morning

Not who you were,

But who you could be.

So may we all.

Extinguishing the Chalice: A reading by Duke T Gray

The blessing of truth be upon us,

The power of love direct us and sustain us,

And may the peace of this community

Preserve our going out and our coming in,

From this time forth, until we meet again.

Postlude

Announcements