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Why Parade?

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Why Parade?

Kim Ranger

My friend Milt suggested that I write about the same question asked one time of him: “Why parade?” That is, why do queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) people feel the need to make public their identity? The questioner, whom I know also, is a kind man, but he still has trouble even saying the word “lesbian,” which he often pronounces “less-bian,” perhaps a subject for another essay altogether.

I thought of our actual gay pride parades—I’ve marched in Ann Arbor and Chicago, and watched my friends parade in Toronto. I never marched in my hometown, Kalamazoo (do they have a parade?), nor in Grand Rapids (there was a march here a few years ago, I think, from the celebration at the Monroe Amphitheater to the Mayor’s office?). The Ann Arbor march was small, going from the University of Michigan campus quadrangle to the President’s office. Nothing was achieved; the President didn’t appear. His staff told us he wasn’t in, but the march leaders believed the President was there. Part of that particular parade included walking through a wooden frame set up as the “closet door”—we all marched out of that invisible closet and felt powerful.

The Gay Pride Parade in Chicago, 1995, was a wonderful event. It was well-organized. The crowds stayed on the sidewalks, so the street was clear for the marchers (in Toronto, the crowd floods into the street right up against the edge of the parade and it is impossible to get a good view unless you’re in the very front of the crowd). My friend Ed and I arrived later than we’d planned and missed our group’s departure from the designated corner, or so we thought. We started halfway through the parade and strode alongside the marchers up to the front of the parade, no mean feat since the parade itself moved along at a quick walk. It was the fastest-paced parade I’ve ever seen! Almost exhausted on that hot June day, we sat on the sidewalk in the shade to wait until our part of the parade caught up to us. We watched more than half of the parade go by, then joined the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Task Force of the American Library Association, the oldest GLB professional group in the United States (25 years in 1995!). I helped carry a banner, “Dykes on Books” for the rest of the walk. I felt immensely proud that day—it was a beautiful parade, full of strong and diverse people who were united for a brief time and purpose. I saw the TV cameras and realized I could be on the national news. Although I made no effort to be interviewed, neither did I avoid the cameras, as I do in Grand Rapids at our pride festivals. I always worry that my grandmas will see the local news and could spot me there more easily than in the huge crowds likely to be shown on the national news. I still haven’t come out officially to my grandparents and probably never will. I don’t think I’m alone in this kind of thinking—I have friends who attend celebrations in Lansing but not here at home, to avoid the possibility of being seen by co-workers, friends, or family.

Why parade, even if not in one’s own city? For the sense of solidarity, unity, pride in oneself and one’s group. It is a time to feel free of the restraints and constraints that are part of our ordinary lives. To honor our total identity through celebrating a part that much of society refuses to celebrate for or with us.

The other day, two of my colleagues dropped behind me to watch how I walked. My good friend told me that I walk as if I’m ready for anything, as if I’m ready for a fight. “I am,” I replied. I learned early in childhood that I had to be aware of my surroundings constantly—who was walking near me, what kind of threat they might pose, where I might run to, from whom I might seek help. I went to an inner-city school where to bump into someone—or even to allow someone to bump into me by not getting out of the way quickly enough—could mean my getting beaten up. Those lessons have never left me, although usually I’m not consciously

aware of that scanning process except when I'm in a potentially threatening situation. As a child, I never would have fought back.

As an adult, I'm not sure what I'll do in any situation. I'm certainly not as controlled as I was when I was younger. I've developed a confidence in my ability to defend myself physically. I know I'm capable of breaking a strong man's arm if I'm startled; I know my anger will rise to the surface and I'll fight with all of the adrenaline-enhanced fury and cunning of any trapped wild creature. But, as I explained to my friend, my walk is also part of being a lesbian and being comfortable in my body. (Yes, this is a generalization but not a stereotype. We don't all walk the same way, but there is often something identifiable in our walk, although there are some non-lesbian women who share it.) I know my walk has changed since I began going to both a massage therapist and a chiropractor. Lifting weights in front of a mirror helped me change my posture. Boxing lessons affected the way in which I carry my shoulders. But my walk is in itself a parade—every day I carry my identity clearly for those who have eyes to see it. My walk is not just my means of transportation, it is an expression of myself; it incorporates all of my aspects and moods.

Can a single person constitute a parade? Is it a parade every time I take a walk? I hope so. Many people's love and care have helped me achieve this walk and the freedom to express myself in this particular way. When I walk my walk, I march in my own parade every day.