

“Love Is as Love Does”

OCTOBER 9, 2016

Evelyn Hooker died twenty years ago next month. Her death here in California passed relatively unnoticed, but those of us looking for modern heroes and heroines should take note: Evelyn Hooker was a thoughtful, scientifically-minded person who made a difference. She earned her PhD in clinical psychology in the 1930's and—after a series of interim appointments—began teaching at the University of California Los Angeles. It was at UCLA that Dr. Hooker began studying gay men.

At the time, “science” was pretty clear in its attitudes towards homosexuality. Physicians, psychiatrists, and psychologists agreed: homosexuality was a mental disorder requiring treatment and a cure. Since virtually all the homosexuals whom professionals studied were either institutionalized or seeking help, it wasn't hard to prove that such people were sick and disturbed.

Evelyn Hooker was the first professional to assemble a group of nonimprisoned, nonpatient gay men and to match them with a group of heterosexuals with similar demographic characteristics. She then administered a group of standard psychological tests to each group and asked a panel of professionals—kept in the dark as to the identities of the subjects—to evaluate the results. Much to their surprise they were unable to tell the homosexuals from the heterosexuals and rated the gay subjects high in personality development and emotional adjustment.

Hooker's research, begun in the 1940's and continuing throughout the 1950's and 60's, shattered conventional wisdom. In 1967, she became Chairwoman of the National Institute of Mental Health Task Force on Homosexuality. In 1969 NIMH published their findings in a report. And in 1973, the American Psychological Association deleted homosexuality from its diagnostic handbook.

At about the same time—1970—delegates to the Unitarian Universalist Association's annual General Assembly passed a resolution calling for an end to discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals.¹ Then, in 1984, GA delegates passed another resolution affirming Services of Union for lesbians and gay men and asking congregations to support their clergy who performed such rites. I was at that General Assembly, held in Columbus, Ohio. I recall a conversation I had with an older straight male colleague immediately after the vote. “Are you going to do Services of Union?” he asked me. “Sure.” “Well, I won't,” he said. I was surprised, as the whole issue was a fairly simple one for me. I'd spent most of the 70's and early 80's in the San Francisco Bay Area. I'd attended seminary there, and seminaries—with their focus on ritual, interpersonal sensitivity, and care for the dispossessed—have probably always attracted a reasonably high percentage of gays. And I was into *theater*, since junior high.

1. A subsequent (1996) resolution expanded this to include transgendered people.

Theater, of course (like ministry), has its prima donnas, but it has all kinds of other people, too. Including

- the desperately shy,
- the marginalized, and (of course)
- the artistic.

But what binds theater people together, it's always seemed to me, is a remarkable *emotional expressiveness*. They're poetic and imaginative. While working late into the night building a set or arranging the lights, conversations tend to be emotionally honest and forthright. One finds out what's on others' minds, and in their hearts. Moreover, as Mel Brooks said of the theater in one of his movies, "without...Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals, there'd be no theater." So it was that in theater I got to know plenty of gay people, worked closely with them, and loved them dearly: hard-working, creative souls who were, to those who knew them, out-of-the-closet. So for me, to hear a colleague in ministry choose not to do Services of Union made no sense at all.

The mid-1980s also saw the coming of AIDS and the beginning of TV evangelists, starting with Pat Robertson, using "the homosexual threat" to raise money and mobilize volunteers. The key issue for the Religious Right seems to be choice. How very ironic! Regarding homosexuality, the Religious Right says choice is a good thing and should be exercised: people have a *choice* not to be gay. The scientific research suggests otherwise: that psychological, biological, and bio-chemical predispositions toward one or another sex are genetically linked and present from birth.

In a certain sense, the whole debate comes down to the Calvinist/Fundamentalist vs. the Unitarian Universalist view of human nature and divine intention.

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| • Restrictive | vs. | Opening |
| • Self-condemning | vs. | Self-affirming |
| • Following the law | vs. | Following one's heart |
| • Repression of feelings | vs. | their Expression |

The thing is: we may be different from our neighbors in lots of ways other than who we partner with or marry. We may not believe the same as they do on gun control, abortion, the environment, economic policy, or capital punishment. But none of those differences seem to matter as much to those on the Religious Right. The Religious Right does not seek to ostracize such people from society and invalidate their rights to be who they are.

This reveals a key difference between conservative evangelical and the old Universalist understanding of both human fulfillment and of God's plan. Conservative evangelicals believe that while anyone can be saved, *once you've been saved* conforming to a church-ordained social code can only follow. We believe that salvation (i.e., health, fulfillment, and spiritual growth here in this life and perhaps an occasional epiphany about the next) has been granted already and there's nothing holding you back *becoming fully yourself—except you*. In other words, God's not going to ask me, when I get to the Pearly Gates, "Why weren't you more like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Henry David Thoreau?" He's going to ask me why I wasn't more like Stephen Furrer. Our whole theology, then, is

about learning to *be* authentically ourselves, learning to *love* ourselves, and about learning to *share* ourselves openly and with confidence. I'm not talking about narcissistic self-absorption; I'm talking about giving in to our inner creative and imaginative impulses—in particular when they lure us in the direction of mature, reciprocal love.

It doesn't take a genius to recognize the wisdom of such an understanding; it's common sense.

Learning to trust one's true inner nature and honestly begin sharing it is the heart of religious education and religious growth. For many within the GLBTQ community, because of all the right-wing condemnation and fear of being shunned by their families, trusting one's inner nature and sharing it can be very hard.

So it is that many gays and lesbians stay in the closet. That is, they hide their affections. They suppress their feelings. Which is completely natural and understandable; all people, whatever their affectional preference, suppress some of their feelings. Everyone does this. Culture demands it; we repress our thoughts and our feelings for the sake of social tact and probity. It's healthy, however, to remain in touch with your repressed feelings because the trouble is: repression only works part way; sooner or later, that which is repressed pops up. Indeed, the more energy one puts into repressing his or her true feelings, the more counter-energy the psyche expends releasing it.

Sigmund Freud, writing a century ago,² dubbed this inner dynamic the "Return of the Repressed." What's been repressed cannot be abolished by repression; it tends, rather, to reappear, and in a distorted fashion as a form of a compromise between the wish and the impulse to repress it. Freud, to be sure, considered repression a normal part of human development; indeed, the analysis of dreams, literature, jokes, and "Freudian slips" illustrates the many ways that secret desires continue to find outlet in perfectly well-adjusted individuals.

When we go through trauma, however, or are thwarted in love, or for some reason remain fixated on earlier phases of development, the internal conflict between one's wishes and their repression can render a person pretty conflicted internally. Freud uses the example of a young woman who arrives at her sister's bedside moments after she died. Looking up at her brother-in-law, the first thing that pops into her head is, "now that she's out of the way, he can marry me." Acknowledging her fondness for her brother-in-law, however, especially at the moment of her sister's death, is unacceptable to her, so she represses it, and sinks into depression—until she goes into therapy, recalls and integrates the fleeting, repressed feelings, and begins to live her life again, no longer tormented by unconscious inner conflict.

² "The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis," Sigmund Freud (1910)

Depression, however self-defeating, is one way—a very common way—that people cope, unconsciously, with deeply repressed longings. Another stratagem is what psychoanalysts call “alternative sexual discharges.”

This is what’s going on when you have closeted gay men who, simultaneously, vilify homosexuality. Former Senator Larry Craig and former Representative Mark Foley come immediately to mind. However, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI from 1924-1972, is kind of the archetype³ of this type behavior. As Anthony Summers points out in his book, *Official and Confidential*: “J. Edgar Hoover's public attitude on homosexuality was normally at least condemnatory, often cruel.” Despite smearing others as homosexual, including the Unitarian Presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, Hoover appears to have been gay himself. His life insurance policy named his FBI assistant Clyde Tolson as his beneficiary. In life, the two were virtually inseparable; Hoover and Tolson rode to work together, ate lunches together, traveled on official business together, went to social functions together, and vacationed together. They’re buried side by side.

Or consider the Reverend Ted Haggard, leader—until ten years ago—of the millions-strong National Association of Evangelicals. Haggard was forced out as senior pastor of the 14,000-member New Life Church in Colorado Springs after a former male escort alleged they had sex repeatedly and that Haggard used methamphetamines. In a statement read at the church the following Sunday, Haggard essentially confessed. Meanwhile, up until his dénouement he had been actively campaigning against marriage equality.

It’s a familiar pattern, this *Return of the Repressed*, wherein a natural enough impulse, because of its incompatibility with certain ethical and aesthetic standards that one feels compelled to maintain, is repressed. Keep this up long enough and it can create a kind of inner schizophrenia, where the repressed part of one's personality becomes walled off. It's still there, inside, but so repressed that the individual doesn't even know it—and ends up projecting it outward (along with other negative or “destructive” forces it mingles with below consciousness) on targets “out there.” A good therapist can help, but as long as we’re only talking about dreams, jokes, and “Freudian slips” none of this really matters very much. It gets serious, however, when we’re talking about vociferous condemnation and even criminalization of those who bear our projections. Such people do need therapy, but typically don’t seek it until their increasingly anxious repression fails, and they’re exposed as hypocrites.

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³ *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* by Anthony Summers, published in 1993, contains allegations of cross dressing. These allegations are based on information from Susan Rosentiel, who with her husband Lewis attended a 1958 party which involved some tomfoolery and some gorgeous blonde boys. These allegations are sketchy, but have been confirmed by others, including Mafia figures who claim to have had incriminating photos—photos that blackmailed Hoover into denying there even was a Mafia until the late 1950’s, following the breakup of a godfather’s summit by local police and state troopers in Apalachin, New York.

The “Coming Out” process is often fraught with pain and anxiety. Many gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are rejected by their friends and families, or, worse (in a way), patronized with the suggestion that they’ll “grow out of it.” If your 20-year old told you she wanted to be an astronomer, would you say, “she’ll grow out of it” or “if he just meets a good schoolteacher or librarian, he’ll be okay”? Of course not.

For the last dozen or so years the big issue in this whole debate—especially here in California—was the freedom to marry. Of course, the issue of who one can and cannot marry has changed many times already. Anti-miscegenation laws, passed to prohibit interracial marriage, were, at one time or another, on the books in 47 of the lower 48 states. Out-of-caste marriage is still taboo in India. Polygamy is illegal in America, but common practice elsewhere. The point is, who society permits you to marry has never been etched in stone; not by the authors of the Bible or by anybody else. It’s a matter of social convention and has undergone numerous transformations over centuries and from place to place. In America the freedom to marry was denied homosexuals until fifteen months ago. “No longer may this liberty be denied,” Justice Anthony M. Kennedy wrote for the majority in the historic decision. The transformation of Justice Kennedy’s thinking on this subject is interesting. In dialogue with his clerks some years earlier Justice Kennedy is reported to have said that he didn’t know any gay people...only to be corrected when they pointed out the excellent former clerks who’d worked for him over the years who were just that. It was then that he began to reframe the whole debate.

Marriage equality is not an issue of special privileges, but of equal rights. And of allowing—indeed encouraging—people to live not in fear of condemnation, but openly and honestly with themselves—and those they love.

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There is incredible complexity and beauty in life and people’s lives are far more complex than who they happen to partner with or marry. In a world all too bereft of love and support we should be *encouraging* any folks who are trying to be there for one another, not condemning them. But we know this; Our California UU congregations have been leaders in recognizing and affirming GLBT rights from the beginning, from the ‘50s actually. And now it’s the law of the land. Celebrating that wonderful liberalization is called for. Our congregation has sent strong contingents to the annual AIDS walk in Los Angeles for years. In two weeks—October 23—Pacific Unitarian Church will be walking in support and solidarity again—I commend that witness and all who choose to join it. This coming Wednesday, October 12—only four days from now—is National Coming Out Day. If you are friends with anyone, or related to someone who you know is struggling with the sexual identity or who recently came out, this coming Wednesday and the following few days are a good time to let them know you admire them and that you like who they’re becoming.

Our PUC Search Committee and a dozen or so others spent yesterday in a *Beyond Categorical Thinking* workshop, helping them open their minds about the many talented

people making up our Unitarian Universalist ministry—some of whom are gay, or lesbian, or bisexual, or transgendered. Some may be overweight. Some learned English as second, or third language. But all of them deserve a fair chance.

May it be so. May it be joyously so. Amen...and Namaste.

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