

Promise Song

I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression. I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day.... I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise song.

Jean Toomer, speaking to a prostitute in *Cane*

I wish that someone had spoken words like these to me when I was twelve. I needed someone who could really see me and not try to change me. I needed to hear someone tell me that I was fundamentally OK in order to counteract the fact that my peers would have annihilated me if they had known my secrets. Perhaps I could have curled up in the acceptance Toomer's lines express and not gotten lost in a labyrinth of self-hatred. And maybe I would have been able to breathe into the hope that someday the world would embrace my differences rather than obsessing on ways to destroy myself.

Even in the best of circumstances, it's hard to forget the power of the stigma attached to being gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgendered. To grow up queer is to grow up different. And in junior high or middle school, different is definitely not good. Even though things have changed for more recent GLBT teens, I still hear horror stories about the way GLBT kids are treated. One student, for example, had to have a friend check the bathroom and make sure that it was empty before going in because his peers threatened to beat him up if he went in when they were there. The administration's "helpful" response was, "hold it until you get home." Another student told me that she'd been followed into the girls' room and humiliated by a teacher for using the "wrong" bathroom because the teacher thought she was a boy. Other students have told me that they felt like they always had to look over their shoulders lest a neighbor or classmate decided that it would be great fun to "smear the queer." For those of us who, in addition to being queer, bore other stigmas such as being poor, non-white, or being a sexual abuse survivor, the pain of adolescence was even worse.

Most people translate the stigma(s) they bore in childhood and adolescence into a toxic form of shame. As a result, given the fact that most of us picked up more than our share of shame, many of us feel like we are fatally flawed and react to ourselves with a sense of self-loathing.

Most of us have used a number of strategies to push down or ignore this toxic shame. Denial is often top of the list: "Who me? Lesbian? You've got to be kidding! I just get stupid every time I try to talk to the girl who sits next to me in history class because the fluorescent lights in the classroom make me dizzy."

When our truth snaps us out of denial, many of us, at least at some point, took evasive action to keep this truth under wraps. We latched onto partners of the opposite sex to prove our normalcy. We shrouded our relationships in secret, stumbled over pronouns and avoided holding hands with our partners in order to keep strangers from attacking us and/or friends, family, and/or co-

workers from rejecting us. We wore gender appropriate clothes and adopted gender appropriate ways of walking to hide our gender transgressions.

This toxic shame has even led some of us to disavow parts of ourselves and put down others who reminded us of those parts of ourselves that we reject. As a consequence, we judged other LGBT folks for not acting “straight” enough. Some of us even participated in gay bashing to either keep others from guessing our secret or to act out our self-hatred.

Like a cancer, the toxic shame that many of us picked up in childhood or adolescence about being different spreads through our whole system, leaving us feeling, at a core level, that we are somehow flawed, rotten, or just somehow “wrong.” Lost in this spin, we believe that we are unworthy. We struggle with intimacy because, we think, “If people really knew me, they’d dump me in a heart beat.” We put a great deal of energy into hiding our true selves in order to avoid that kind of rejection. Guided by an internal self-repeating tape that chants, “If only I made enough money/had enough success/looked good enough, I could prove my worthiness.” Many of us work our asses off because of this tape to prove our worth. Unfortunately, to quote Melissa Etheridge, “It’s never enough,” so we drink, use drugs, shop, work out excessively, seek sexual encounters, and/or engage in a hundred other less than healthy endeavors in order to distract ourselves from the pain of feeling like we just don’t measure up.

But what if we understood, not just with our heads but with our hearts, that the cultural conserve that leads others to reject us is flawed? What if we truly believed that we could find a place in the world where we could be our true selves? What if we lived as if the day that Toomer spoke of so eloquently already existed? What if we lived the promise song?

No matter how the people who make up your world react to you, you are absolutely and completely acceptable, even if some of the ways you act your pain are not. The more you can accept yourself, the more you can live into a world that accepts your true self. There are people who, if given the chance, can accept you as you truly are. And at least when the people who can’t move past their own fear and baggage reject you, you can put your energy into people who do accept you.

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