

So Different

Why am I so different? Why am I different from you...from the collective "us" that the frightened populace is trying so desperately to protect? I struggle to understand what makes me seem so threatening and sinister, but then I remember that there was a time when I didn't understand people like me either.

I never imagined I would become part of a minority group. Before, I never had to stretch uncomfortably against the constraining, ill-fitting labels given by society. I enjoyed the previous descriptors of "good mom", "great student", and "hard worker". Somehow, I can't seem to embrace my new titles: "pervert", "anti-God", and "deviant", to name a few.

We all know that things are not always what they seem. I seem so very different to people, and, in some ways, I am. I may not look the same as you, talk the same as you, or see the world the same as you, but I think that we are more alike than people know...or care to admit.

I wasn't always different. I used to fit the societal mold. My white skin, still married parents, and Baptist upbringing gave me perfectly rounded edges for the hole I've been expected to fit. I succeeded in school, was faithful to church, and got along well with everyone. I married a decent man and had beautiful children. I started college with the idea that I would follow my dreams when my children were grown, to have something fulfilling to do as an empty nester. I became accustomed to the privilege of not having to fight for acceptance. I didn't know the pain of being rejected and deemed unworthy of common decency and civil rights.

I am now a divorced mother of four young children, working a minimum wage job and mowing yards on the side to make ends meet while I go to school-not to aid in one day chasing my dreams, but to equip me to support my family. My family now includes my partner, Amy, and her two children.

I was very scared when my marriage deteriorated, and afterward found myself on my own for the first time in my life. My saving grace through this difficult period of my life has been falling in love with the best friend I've ever had. Ironically, my *fall* from grace has been falling in love with the best friend I've ever had. It was comforting to have my partner with me to navigate this new territory, but it was absolutely terrifying to think of people finding out the nature of our relationship. I was worried about what people would say, what they would do, and what affect it would have on my children. In some cases, I worried needlessly, but, in others, my fears came true.

Through it all, I've managed to hammer out a new normal for me and my blended family. My partner and I live with our six children. She stays at home with my youngest child, and I go to college and work during the day. Outside of work, school, and my second job, my days consist of taking our kids to football practice, piano lessons,

and Cub Scouts. We like to go hiking, and the kids love going to the playgrounds at our local parks. We have five children and me in school, so homework occupies a good portion of our evenings. We are a little on the nerdy side, and often spend evenings having a family chess tournament. We are all avid readers, and enjoy dinner conversations about Harry Potter, Narnia, and Wimpy Kids. Our faith is very important to our family, and we are active in our church, where we attend twice a week. Our kids fight like cats and dogs sometimes, and we are constantly trying to keep track of who is grounded or losing allowance. Chores are a constant struggle, and we have never had every room clean at the same time. We run out of milk, and we forget to take out the trash. We worry about finances, get into arguments, and cry over family members who are sick. We sit up at night with sick children, and we beam with pride when one of us does something well. We are painfully, wonderfully ordinary in almost every way.

Being in a same-sex relationship is, of course, different than being in a heterosexual relationship. For starters, if you are in a straight relationship, a large segment of society doesn't automatically think you are a bad person. Generally, people are happy for you when you find someone who loves you, respects you, makes you happy, and shares your worldview. They rejoice with those who rejoice, and they look forward to a permanent union between people so perfectly suited for one another. Love is a good thing. Love is the best thing! Love is the thing that everyone so desperately wants for their loved ones. This is almost universally true, unless that love happens to be between two guys or two girls.

I would like to propose that love is always a good thing. It is good even when it seems so other...so different.

The operative word in our lives is "almost". We are almost ordinary. We are almost accepted. We almost have the same rights and privileges as the rest of the American public. Before I found myself in the position of being unable to marry the one I love, I never thought it was that big of a deal. Before I worried about my life partner being barred from my hospital room or, God forbid, my deathbed, I didn't know what a burden not being able to legally marry could be. Before I heard a statement about an "underground railroad" to whisk away children from their gay parents applied to my children, I didn't understand the fear that people in same-sex relationships feel when faced with the intolerance and bigotry of the Far Right. As a generally compassionate person, I thought I had a good idea of what it must feel like, but now I know I didn't. How could I? I had not walked a mile, or even a yard, in the shoes of a gay American.

Recently, I've begun my new journey in those shoes, and I believe they will eventually take me to a good place. I look back into our not so distant history as a nation, and I see other groups of people who faced discrimination. The biggest opposition to marriage equality in the United States is from the Religious Right, who proclaim that their religious beliefs teach that same sex marriage is wrong, and that our country's laws should follow their belief. It seems an almost impossible challenge to change anyone's mind about issues of right and wrong. However, it was just forty-five

years ago that the U.S. Supreme Court said that black people and white people really were equal, and therefore should not be banned from marrying each other. The Supreme Court stood up for equality, and love prevailed. Knowing that the Religious Right of that time period was against interracial marriage and felt that it was wrong for a white person to marry a black person, it gives me hope that justice will once again proclaim a gay American is no different than a straight American and give all Americans the right to marry whom they choose.

Today, instead of fearing and hating each other because we have different skin colors, religions, ethnicities, and belief systems, Americans have predominately come to celebrate our diversity. We have learned that it is our differences that make us stronger. Our varied talents and skills have made us great. Our children now learn that we are more alike than different, and that all our many differences make us beautiful. The newest generation of Americans is seeing more acceptance and more genuine appreciation for diversity than ever before. This gives me hope. It gives me hope that I will not always be seen as inferior, and that my family will be acknowledged and protected along with all the other American families. I have hope that with each passing year, people will see me...and those like me...for who we really are. Not just our labels. Not just a stereotype. I hope that they will see the person beneath the label. I hope they will see the love behind the relationships. I hope they will see that we are really not so different after all.