

Since this is pride month, this week I've been looking into the history of Pride in Albuquerque. While I was at it, I learned that the state of New Mexico has a really layered history of sexual liberation and oppression.

In the time before Europeans arrived, in this land it was already widely understood—among Navajo and Pueblo cultures, that gender was not an either/or, binary thing. There were third and even fourth genders. But Christian colonizers sought to impose a different view. They removed children from their families in order to indoctrinate them and disrupt and dismantle the old cultures. And they persecuted anyone who did not conform to their strict categories of male and female.

Meanwhile though, in some of the same decades in which this cultural violence was still taking place in the early 1900's, at that same time gay, lesbian, and transgender white people from other parts of the US were actually coming to New Mexico. They came to form artist communities where they could be free to express themselves. People like Georgia O'Keefe and Mabel Dodge Luhan. It also happened that sometimes there would be ranches in New Mexico that were headed by two New Mexican women and no men, and that was understood and accepted. The women would just be referred to in the community as *las tias*, or *las comadres*. Semi-familial names that simultaneously acknowledged and glossed over the women's relationship.

So there was liberation, and oppression, and liberation. And then there was oppression again, as the security state took root here.

It arrived in the 1940's in the form of Los Alamos and Sandia National Labs, which brought with them the policies of the federal government. Those included policies to eradicate homosexuals, supposedly for the long-term security of the country. This was the period of moral panic known as the Lavender Scare. As the federal government purged lesbian and gay people from its institutions, it normalized persecution of them, that impacted New Mexico, eroding what had become a localized culture of acceptance.

So it happens that, despite New Mexico's history of sexual and gender diversity, by the time the Stonewall riot happened in New York City in 1969 and launched the Gay rights movement, many LGBT people in Albuquerque had been living in the shadows and/or persecuted and they were tired of it.

The next year, in 1970, Albuquerque's first gay organization was formed at UNM.ⁱ Gay Liberation, the group's name, was eventually changed to Juniper. Juniper then helped get the Metropolitan Community Church started. That is a church explicitly for the LGBT population. And in 1976 people from Juniper and the church organized the first Pride march.

According to PJ Sedillo, the author of a book about the history of Pride in Albuquerque, that first march was a pretty informal event. There were no permits, no petition to city council or anything like that. Instead about 25 people set out from an afterhours bar called The Warehouse, marched several blocks along central avenue, and then dispersed. That was it.

Two things strike me about the image of that first parade. First, imagine marching as a gay or lesbian person, in a time when that was considered very radical, with only two dozen other people. It would have taken a lot of courage.

And second, it is remarkable how actions that may seem small at the time—only 25 people, and apparently no media coverage—can wind up contributing to social transformation and liberation.

We have made many gains in New Mexico and beyond. Would those first marchers have believed that forty years later, the pride parade would be an annual event that draws thousands of spectators? That churches, local businesses, politicians, and banks would line up to participate and show their support? What success. What a thing worth celebrating.

And. We are still learning.

For one thing, I think even most progressive people still try to sort sexuality and love—and therefore people— into certain boxes. And the thing about boxes is they tend to be pretty rigid, while most things human are softer and more dynamic.

Several years ago, one of my colleagues, the Rev. Gretchen Haley, published a really beautiful blog post about her experiences of love.ⁱⁱ She is married to a woman today, so people think of her as a lesbian, and she says she gets tired of correcting them, and sometimes doesn't bother. It feels like having to come out again and again.

In her post, she reflects on her past loves: there was a boyfriend who had moved away for college; and there was the woman she also had a romance with, a woman who was openly in another, more long term, relationship with another woman. Sometimes the three women would all go out together. "We didn't really know what we were doing, if anyone else had ever loved like this," she writes. "It was the mid-nineties, pre-Ellen." They were in uncharted territory. "We didn't mean to be so radical in our loving," she says, "but there we were."

Love and sexual orientation and gender identity are like that—they aren't about being radical. They are matters of the heart and of the spirit.

Gretchen went on to help with the two women's commitment ceremony and to witness the birth of their first son. They still count each other as family.

Later she fell in love with a man again, this time a good friend and he loved her back but he was gay. There they were.

And then she met the woman who would become her wife. Whenever she saw her, Gretchen says, “I had this image of loving her until I was an old, old woman, and hoping I never had to not be with her.” And now they are married, and they have two kids and a dog.

Although my own love stories are different, there is a lot I could relate to in Gretchen’s words. And maybe there are things you relate to, as well.

Loves that don’t fit in a box. Loves that do. Some people are consistent in the type of person they are attracted to. And some people fall in love with and partner with only one person for their whole lives. But, as Gretchen eloquently puts it:

for many of us, love and desire is a lot more complicated across our lifetimes. There are relationships we just cannot have words for, that mean more to us in many ways than the relationships we do have words for. We surprise ourselves with desire for people that we would’ve never expected at other points in our lives. Some of those desires we act on; many of them, we do not. Love changes and grows and fades and evolves – because we do. Living things change.

When love is portrayed in mainstream culture, it still tends to fall back into an old, really specific narrative about it. It goes like this: after you come of age, you date, you fall in love, you get married, you probably have kids, you stay together ‘til death do you part, and that’s what success at love is. Sometimes this is called the relationship escalator.

In fact, the marriage equality movement kind of embraced that narrative, too. As conservatives raised the alarms about gay people wanting to change marriage, the marriage equality movement put forth a new image of marriage that looked strikingly unchanged, save for one thing: gender.

That’s why, when one of the first same sex couples to get married ended up getting a divorce, I think it caused this weird moment of, “Wait... *did* we really succeed if gay people end up divorced?”

The problem is the disconnect between the old, heterosexual cultural narrative about romantic love, and all of the other ways love actually works. The LGBTQ community, having already been outside of the mainstream, has always included unconventional arrangements and love stories, and the rest of society could learn a lot from that diversity. Instead, mainstream society has held onto that old norm. What’s funny about this is that the gap between diverse queer loves and who we think of as “everyone else” is not actually that wide. Romance movies still pretty much all feature that relationship escalator. But in real life, people are more creative.

I’m thinking about some of the love relationships I’ve observed just in my own extended family, and how different they are from one another.

My husband’s parents have been married for almost sixty years. They’ve shared a lifetime and they are each other’s world. Pretty sweet. Pretty traditional. And pretty unusual these days.

My own parents are divorced—and no one is sorry about that. Their love brought me and my sister into the world (I call that a win), and then they were no longer compatible and now they are each partnered with people who are perfect for them.

Then there's my grandfather, a proud conservative, who has had a girlfriend since I was a little kid. They dated—and spent weekends together— for about thirty years before they finally decided to share a home. They've never married. This is not traditional. Also, the girlfriend? She is my grandmother's cousin. And after my grandparents divorced, and he started dating her, they all got along fine and cared about and were happy for each other. And I think everybody was happy for them.

Beyond my family, I've observed short and long, monogamous and non-monogamous, gay, straight, and trans loves that were authentic and caring and unique to the people in them. I've known self-identified straight people who fell in love with people of the same gender, and self-identified gay people who fell in love with people of a different gender.

I can think of someone who has lived with their spouse and a person who is referred to as their 'roommate' for decades. It appears the three of them love each other very much, even if the exact nature of their relationship has not been openly discussed.

And sometimes a person comes out as transgender, but stays partnered with the same person they've been with for years.

In these and so many other examples, our labels start to fray and not fit very well. Living things change. We are multilayered, dynamic, and adaptive, and it's okay not to fit in a box.

Love is love. We aren't so different from one another in the end. And what's true is that our liberation is interconnected. When one person is free to love who they love and to be their authentic self, we are all freer. And when, because of prejudice, a person is not free to do so, then none of us is truly free because we are living within that same jail. It's just that not everyone has tried the door.

Therefore, in all of our work for love and liberation, whether it is centered in sexuality, gender, race, or all of the above, let us our make circle of concern ever wider, until no one is left out.

ⁱ Referenced in Sedillo, PJ. Solidarity Through Pride: 40 Years of GLBT Pride in Albuquerque 1976-2016. (p 17). And in Biro, Jordan. "Uncommon Knowledge: A History of Queer New Mexico, 1920s-1980s." Dissertation. UNM. Sept 1, 2015. (129)
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ⁱⁱ You can find Gretchen's full blog post here: <https://revgretchenhaley.wordpress.com/2015/02/23/a-conversation-begins-with-a-lie/>