

Holiday: PRIDE!

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by Kadin Henningsen on Friday June 19, 2009

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A Story:

When I was a kid I used to spend my afternoons at the local recreation center. I would play board games and shoot pool with the other local kids. At the far end of the main room was a carpeted pit where I would often hang out with my twin sister and talk with others or do homework. One day this kid came in I didn't recognize, and I pretty much knew most of the kids that came through the center. He had cut off jeans and dirty white sneakers, freckles and a tangled mop-ish mullet of blonde hair. He walked in and joined us in the pit. He wore a worn black t-shirt. Written in uneven block letters on the T-shirt with white-out/liquid paper were the words "AIDS KILLS FAGS DEAD." Now, this was the late 80's and in Lincoln, Nebraska, at the age of 12, HIV/AIDS hardly registered on my radar outside of Ryan White and Donahue. And Fags? I didn't get it. But somehow, deep down, I knew on some level that this word Fag was talking about me. I don't know this kid's name, or what has become of him but he's followed me around for almost 25 years like an albatross.

I spend a great deal of my time thinking about responsibility. As a transgender person, what is my responsibility to the trans community? As a Jew what are my responsibilities to the Jewish community? As a queer Jew, what are my responsibilities to the queer Jewish community? What are my responsibilities to the world at large? How I approach these questions comes from my time in art school. While I was in college I took two very different classes from the same professor. These classes would radically alter how I approach the world and my own philosophy about my role within the world. The first class was on The History of Censorship. Now this class wasn't about censorship in the Banned-Book-Parental-Warning-Label kind of way. It was a class that looked at how things, people, events, and so forth are represented. It was about how to look at a narrative and ask yourself, "What is Missing?" and considering "the missing" what does that say about the narrative? Studying Torah gives me these kinds of skills as well. Every Thursday night here at *Beth Chayim Chadashim* I join some of my closest friends to read the

week's Torah portion. We look at the words on the page and try to make sense of what's being said by what's NOT being said.

The second class was called The Artist in Society. We spent a great deal of time looking at artists and discussing their role as regular people and as artists with in the larger picture. Constantly we were asked, what is the artist's responsibility? What is their responsibility to art, to their immediate community, and to the world at large? These questions often made me ask "What is anyone's responsibility to anything?" Here is my answer to that question? And I think it applies to everyone, not just artists. Find what is missing, and reflect that missing element back to the world in a truthful way. When I reflect on this idea of telling truth in a powerful way I often think about the artist Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam War Memorial. Here is an artist who having no political ideology saw something missing and told the truth about it and in the course of doing so radically changed peoples' perception about how we viewed the Vietnam War, and how we "memorialize" these kinds of events. But how did she get to this place where she could tell her truth about the world as she saw it?

When you go to wage war in your Land against an enemy who oppresses you, you shall sound short blasts of the trumpets, and you shall be recalled before Adonai, your God, and you shall be saved from your foes. (Bamidbar 10:9)

Short blasts.

Short blasts are constantly around us. And they come in many forms. For me, the short blast would come in the scrawled words "AIDS KILLS FAGS DEAD," although it would take me a rather long time to hear it. Some times though the short blast is more subtle. For Maya Lin, it was the simple call for designs for a new memorial. The short blast begs for a response. And how we respond is key. Maya Lin hears the short blast and looks at the war in which she is memorializing. She sees a war that has divided a nation and devastated families and asks "What is missing?" What she discovers to be missing is healing. The memorial, when approached from the south east appears to be this deep wound cut in to the soil of America. But when you approach, you see something very... Jewish. A Kaddish list. In the reflective surface of the granite, you are confronted with your own ghostly image over the engraved names of people no longer with us. These names stitch together this deep cut and start to heal the wounds left behind, leaving us with not a deep gash, but a scar on the landscape of America. This scar, and all scars, are a gestural mark of healing against a surface and they all have a story. As you look at your own reflection on the granite where past meets present ask yourself what is missing. Look at the names and ask, "Who is this person?" and, "What is their story?" I do this every Friday night here at BCC. I look at the names on the backs of the chairs, on the tree's memorial plaques, and I listen to the names on the Kaddish list. I ask myself, "Who are these queer



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Jews?” “How did they get to BCC?” And, “What is their legacy that I should carry with me?”
What is missing is a story, multiple stories.

In the midst of our own struggle, a sort of civil rights war, we must look at what is missing. The LGBT Civil Rights movement has polarized this country. It has left scrapes and cuts on not just the California landscape, but the American landscape. The short blasts have been calling us to respond. They call the names of Matthew Shepard, Brandon Teena, Harvey Milk, and Del Martin. The blast calls out to us through a gut wrenching decision by the California Supreme Court. But how will we respond? Just like we do when we turn toward God during the High Holy Days, on this our other High Holy Day, Pride Shabbat, we take with us words. It is time to stop fighting and to start healing. We should go one step further than Maya Lin. We should go forth with not just the names of our LGBT brothers and sisters who are no longer with us but with their stories as well. We must suture these deep wounds with words. We can begin to heal hearts and minds by patiently stitching together all of our stories. I firmly believe it is my responsibility to tell MY truth. The story I told at the beginning is just one small stitch in a much larger narrative. All of us, as LGBT CPAs, doctors, artists, librarians, teachers, and so much more, have the responsibility to tell our truths. I invite all of you to share your stories, to tell your truth.

Tell your truth in whatever way you are able. Tell it to us here at BCC. Tell it to your families. Tell it to your coworkers. Tell it even to the strangers among us. Tell it to who ever will listen and don't stop telling it.

It is our responsibility to win back this unjust civil rights war and start healing this country, not with anger, not with violence, but with words, with stories. Because in the end, as the poet Muriel Rukeyser has famously said, “the Universe is made up of stories, not atoms.”

Shabbat Shalom



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