



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## **“From Shame, to Pride, to Wholehearted Living”**

Richard L. Warren

June 25, 2023

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Reed, my husband, and I have attended UU for several years. We joined about a year ago. Got married last October here. Now humbled and honored to speak. And during Pride month.

Frederick Pride Celebration was yesterday and we of UUCF were present. I'm in gratitude for those who planned, showed up and shared our embracing Unitarian Universalist story on Carol Creek.

Gay Pride Month is a time to celebrate achievements made, honor heroes and heroines who have led – even risked their livelihood and lives. And yes, Pride is now a festival, flags, proud professional and social organizations, owning who they are, owning their story. Such it was yesterday.

During this sermon, I will reference Brené Brown, Ph.D.LICSW a researcher on shame, resilience and the wholehearted living. Her work can be found at [BreneBrown.com](http://BreneBrown.com).

As we experienced Pride – we get a glimpse of people being Wholehearted. In the words of Brené Brown – “Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to

wake up in the morning and think, no matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.” I am worthy.

Noting the cultural, historical, and even legal achievements made is important as part of the Gay Rights Movement. It is a MUST with any oppressed, minority, ethnic, cultural group to claim their identity and their equal right to be part of society. And this is an emotional – psychological shift as well. A shift from the internal messages “I’m not enough, I am unworthy, not good enough. I don’t belong.” And external messages that denigrates, dehumanizes – we hear in the extremist voices that say, “you are unworthy, you don’t belong.” Whether the voice within or from the critics - these are the voices of Shame.

Shame, defined in the research of Brené Brown, is “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” Distinguished from guilt – which is “I have done something wrong.” Shame is a deep basic emotion. We all experience it. Shame correlates to depression, anxiety, addiction and even suicidal ideation and death by suicide. Not surprising and yet shocking, research by the Trevor Project, a GLBTQ+ Youth Advocacy organization, estimates 41% of gay Youth have seriously considered death by suicide. And yes, too many succeed.

Shame must be resolved to achieve wholehearted living.

Ponder your own stories of feeling shame. You, me – having moments where we feel flawed, unworthy of love and belonging. We all have it – experienced it. For women, shame shows up frequently as what a women SHOULD be according to

social, community, religious expectations. For men, shame shows up as “don’t be or appear weak.”

Gay men and women have those shame experiences too and **shamed** for being Gay, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Queer, Trans. Matt Cain, author of the Secret Life of Albert Entwistle, speaks to this shame in these words: “Maybe (we feel inadequate, feel shame) because straight people have never been made to feel ashamed of who they are. Maybe because it’s never been illegal to be straight.” Gay folk hold shame differently and are shamed for whom they choose to love.

How do we move to wholehearted living? The path is the same for all of us. This psyche-soulful-emotional work to overcome shame does not happen magically. I wish it did. The Magic is in .... Mentors who guide. Therapist may help to heal. Knowing the journey and embracing the Gay ancestors. Friends and Family that just love. Communities, like ours, that are guiding and embracing.

In all it is about Courage. The root of the word is “Cor” which means “heart” and courage means “to speak one's mind by telling all one's heart.” Courage - is the way to Wholehearted Living. Courage to --

- Claiming our Story – Who we are. Saying this is who I am. These are my values. This is me.
- Sharing our story with those we trust, who affirm us. In so doing we build and join community of shared souls, share values, shared purpose.
- Living courageously which includes silencing the critic – both the inner voices that say, “who do you think you are that you can be/do that/be who you are” and the outward critics that seek to demean. And then living

courageous and yes – Purposefully in who we love, in what we do, in all who we are.

It is a journey to “claim self.” There will be challenges. Yet there is no other path to finding joy, hopefully contentment, connection – and yes love. **(End Slide)**

Speaking of this love, Alice Walker has written: “I have learned not to worry about love; but to honor its coming with all my heart.”

Over the decades people have chosen courageous wholeheartedly living. Communities have formed. We see them at Pride events, yet they flourish year-round. Shared interests. Shared vocations. Shared beliefs. Pride in being Gay Police, Nurses. Lawyers, Firemen, Teachers, EMTs, all occupations, yes ministers too. Spiritual communities like ours. The news and certainly the haters focus on the Drag Queens, Men in Leather, The Dykes on Bikes – and the Gay Community is that and so much more. The diversity of Pride Organizations is – in my lifetime of being – just a miracle. There is even a Gay International Square Dance Organization with local groups and an annual inter-national Square Dance convention – in Ottawa in a few weeks hundreds will show up to “dose e doe”...my husband being one of them.

In 1980, I was having a spiritual awakening that I was gay. I was enrolled at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. Within a few years I would be ordained a Presbyterian Minister. (I pulled out my liturgical garb for today.)

One of my first times in a Gay bar, I met Leonard Matlovich. Leonard had served 3 duties in Vietnam and been awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. He loved his country. He loved the military. In 1975, he challenged the military by writing his commanding officer informing him that as a proud Air Force Sergeant he wanted to

continue to serve, and he was a homosexual. He was dismissed from the military yet won his case in 1980 when a Federal Judge ruled that the military had not proved their case that being a homosexual was a not a detriment to service. (Imagine that!!). It would take another 35 years for what Leonard paved the way to be policy. Leonard subsequently resigned thinking the military would find some way to remove him and then made it his life mission to advocate for Gay Rights and later AIDS funding. Here he was in front of me in that bar – A gay hero, on the cover of Time Magazine, a man who was owning his story, living boldly, and had spoken early that evening at a gay rights event. He moved from person to person – coming to me, kissed me on the cheek and we chatted of gay rights.

I did not feel proud. I felt the deep experience of believing that I was flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. Though I had been kissed by the man who had been on Time, I could tell no one because it would reveal who I was. Shame.

1981 was the year the First AIDS case. Soon 100s, even thousands of gay men were dying or dead. It was called the Gay Cancer. The hate extremist voiced it was just due for the sodomites, God's punishment- their attempt to shame not only the Gay Community but people who were sick and dying due to a virus.

Viktor Frankl, writing from the madness of the Holocaust, reminded us that we don't get to choose our difficulties, but we do have the freedom to select our responses. Meaning, he argued, comes from three things: the work we offer in times of crisis, the love we give and our ability to display courage in the face of suffering. ... we all have the option of asserting our own dignity, even to the end. In 1988, Leonard

Matlovich died of AIDS. His grave does not have his name though it reveals his story, intones his values and his legacy “When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing 2 men and a discharge for loving one.” His legacy of wholehearted living.

Let me reflect a bit how as we claim our individual dignity, come to together as a community – being wholehearted, change happens.

Meeting the AIDS crisis, the Gay Community and its allies came together to serve, to heal, to make change. Fund raisers for medical care, food, housing when the government did nothing. The community educated about the disease, promoted safer sex practices – advocating for the masks of the day – condoms – and even forced business to shut down where unsafe sexual practices were occurring.

There were also radical, militant members of the Gay community. ACT UP being one. Their motto was Silence = Death. At that time treatment for AIDS was almost non-existent. The medical community was following the research model – slow, methodologicistic that might take years to approve a treatment. People were dying. ACT UP members protested, loudly, militantly. They ridiculed and condemned politicians and they targeted one scientist – Anthony Fauci for the failure to respond. Besides the militant bravado – AIDS Activists and Dr. Fauci and others were meeting regularly and talking. Dr. Fauci has said in a recent interview: *“I put aside the confrontational behavior and the attacks on me and listen to what they were saying, And what they were saying was making perfect sense. It made me feel if I were in their shoes, I’d be doing exactly what they were doing.”*

Wholehearted living – courageous living sometimes calls for assertive, even aggressive steps. Because of this activism, Dr. Fauci and others changed the

Government/Medical community's rule that a scientific study must be completed before a medication could be used. The rule change allowed for emergency use authorization and "right to try medication" while a study was being done simultaneously. The impact was that AIDS Medications were made available. People began to live. The impact of the change made by AIDS Activist then has implications even for today. When covid occurred – the government, and we know Dr. Fauci was involved, authorized emergency use of the vaccines and antivirals that saved thousands. Thank you - Act up!

"We get to choose our response to a crisis." In 1984 when what caused AIDS was unknown, 6500 Gay, bi, men enrolled in a study by NIH. Most were motivated by wanting to make a difference in this pandemic and most believing they had the virus and would be dead soon. The study was called the Multicenter Cohort Study – in Baltimore/Washington called "Study to Help AIDS Research Effort (SHARE)." It was a 4-year study to determine what caused AIDS – within months the virus was identified. Yet that study, which I'm a part, continues 39 years on-going. It has informed the understanding of HIV and treatment. And more broadly, this study and others, has informed the understanding of disease, immunology, virology. Dr. Fauci said earlier this year reflecting on his life and his research, like the MAC study, said: "understanding of HIV lead to understanding of (all) diseases in the 21st-century." Beneficially Impacting us all.

And all of us are facing yet another crisis – really one we've faced all along yet seems to be more virulent. Over 450 bills have been introduced in recent months seeking to curtail and enact punitive laws against the Gay community. Regressive

policies that would deny liberties and rights are being proposed. Voting rights restricted. And there is physical violence, in 2021 50 Trans citizens were killed. In 2022, 38 Trans Citizens were killed.

“We don’t get to choose our difficulties, but we do have the freedom to select our responses.” We can choose to be Wholehearted.

An estimated 22 million Gay, Lesbian, Bi, Trans, Queer citizens have moved from the discomfort of concealing a vital part of them – who they are and who they love. It is one’s own personal crisis – out of shame – to pride – and to wholehearted living - engaging in lives from a place of worthiness.

As we all do this, we live lives of worthiness. We make a difference with others. And yes, from that worthiness we impact for the good of society.

Oh, the guy kissed by Leonard Matlovich on his way to becoming a Presbyterian Minister. I do and continue to do my personal work. We all must. I eventually got married, moved to Frederick, have joy at being part this Unitarian Universalist Community. My life work as a therapist, workshop leader, life-leadership coach has been about guiding people out of the stories that diminish – shame – to wholehearted living.

I know we, here at UU, model wholehearted living. When someone comes, we welcome. They see our colors in the atrium. They experience in our time together - To paraphrase Frankl’s words “to love, to be, and display courage.” That is the way to Wholehearted Living.

Whether here in person or you with us virtually – Live Wholeheartedly. Live in Pride. May it be for each of us, may it be for all of us.



