

Discos, Divas, and Walking Down the Red Carpet
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I am a homosexual. I've been one all of my life. But please, don't be fooled. I haven't always been this suave, hunky piece of gay man you see before you today. Coming out of the closet took a lot of hard work. It took a lot of years, and yes, it took a village. A neighborhood. A Gayborhood, if you will.

Coming out is one of the hardest things in a life to do, and for me, it was no different. But I was lucky. When I finally admitted my sexuality, I had friends and family who helped me make the transition from being the person I pretended to be, to becoming the person I was -- a whole being, filled with good and bad qualities alike who just happened to be gay.

However, before I get ahead of myself, I'd like to admit that this is my story, and it is far from a universal tale. No one coming out story is the same as anyone else's. But by examining my journey to self-acceptance, I hope to draw parallels for every person's life – LGBTQ or not.

That being said, allow me to go back in time. To 1970, to be exact, one year after the Stonewall riots. Although at that time, I doubt I even knew the riots even happened. But it was that year when I admitted – to myself, at least – that I was “that way.” Once I had acknowledged that, all that was left for me to do was to discover what being “that way” meant, to me and to others. I'd guess that most adolescents turn to movies, records, books, or even their parents to help them navigate their way into the world of adulthood. Being gay in 1970, I had no one. I knew no one who admitted to being queer. And pop culture wasn't very helpful on that count, either. One of the top grossing movies was *Love Story*, a tale of a boy and girl who... Well you know that often-told story.

The Beatles released *Let It Be*. Yet, for me at thirteen, that song touted messages I didn't want to hear. “When all the broken-hearted people living in the world agree, there will be an answer, let it be.” I didn't want to wait around until everyone in world came to an agreement. And I certainly didn't want to be broken-hearted. Now I know what you're thinking. *It was 1970, for heaven's sake. Nothing was gay at that time.* But there was a lot of homophobia.

That year, Los Angeles's police chief, Ed Davis, opposed his city's first pride parade. He said, “As far as I'm concerned, granting a parade permit to a group of homosexuals to parade down Hollywood Boulevard would be the same as giving a permit to a group of thieves and murderers.” In the press, the New York Post described gay men as “slim-waisted freakcreeps.” With all that happening, I was a long way away from taking pride for being gay.

And much to my sadness, I realized that perhaps I'd never have a family of my own, but I decided I still could have a life. All I needed to do was keep my mouth shut and not reveal too much about myself, lest someone discover my secret.

Yet, it was a transformative period in my life, nonetheless, because something remarkable happened. At the University of Minnesota, a law student was overwhelmingly elected class president. His name was Jack Baker, and for his campaign poster he wore blue jeans and six-inch high heels. The caption on the poster read, “put yourself in Jack Baker's Shoes.”

His victory made the local news for weeks, with students of every kind celebrating a blow to the establishment! And I realized there were others, just like me, who wanted to celebrate who they were. And the other people -- the so called normal ones -- the only reason they gave a damn about what other people were, was because they wanted to make sure nobody confused them with the "slim-wasted freakcreeps."

And I also figured out that everyone was a freak, to some degree. So I had nothing to worry about, except possibly having the bejeebers beaten out of me by someone who wasn't as enlightened as I was.

All I had to do was survive five more years of school. But I didn't live those years out in quiet desperation. I went to movies. Lots of movies. *The Godfather*. *What's Up Doc*. *The Poseidon Adventure*. Yet one particular film stands out for me, the musical *Cabaret*.

While that movie really can't be considered "gay" *per se*, when you read between the lines, you come up with a film as queer as a three-dollar bill. It's about an Englishman, Brian Roberts, who has an affair with the charming and salacious Sally Bowles. He also has a relationship with the handsome and refined Baron Maximilian. When I saw Brian's relationship with Maximilian unfold in the film, my jaw dropped. That was me, up there on the screen. I must have returned to see that movie twenty-five times, by myself, of course. I'd pay my admission for the first showing, and then sit through the next three showings until they threw me out because it was no longer matinee time. But each evening, I came out of that theater, singing to myself. "What good is sitting alone in your room. Come hear the music play. Life is a cabaret, old chum. Come to the Cabaret."

Now you might wonder why I'm spending so much time on the early seventies, when I haven't even gotten to the Divas or Discos yet. But in this day and age, it's easy to forget how society kept gay men and women in the closet.

Then life turned around for me. In the fall of 1975, I entered the theater program at the University of Minnesota and I was in gay heaven. I was encouraged -- no, I was cheered -- into coming out of the closet. Because at that time, the theater department wasn't just welcoming to gay students; they rolled out the red carpet for them. And I gladly strolled down that runway.

Most gay men's introduction to gay culture at that time happened inside a gay bar. I'll always remember my first experience going to a gay bar. After class, a classmate invited me to go with "a bunch of the guys" to "a club." "If you'd like to go," he said. "You don't have to go, if you don't want to."

The thing was, I wanted to go. With all my heart. And, in theory, I knew what I was going to. The premiere gay nightclub in the twin cities: The Gay 90s. I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I'd heard all about the 90s. They played the newest, trendiest music. It was the place to go if you were a gay male. So we donned our shiniest polyester shirts -- unbuttoned to the navel -- and put on our platform shoes to celebrate the newest, trendiest music sensation: Disco.

At the 90s, the mirror ball twirled all night to the tunes of ABBA, The Bee Gees, and the fabulous Silver Convention singing their musical classic, Get up and Boogie. And upstairs, the show bar featured female impersonators and drag queens in the cheesiest productions, pretending to be Judy Garland, Lauren Bacall, or the queen of divas, Barbra Streisand.

That night I willingly joined the gay tribe, to be with others of my kind and celebrate who I was. There was also a rainbow of other people, just like me. It didn't matter that they grew up with different heritages, or in different economic classes. Or even if they had different musical tastes. (Believe it or not, there are many gay people who don't like disco.) Yet we all had one thing in common. We were gay. Or the "L" word, or any other letter in the acronym.

After I graduated from the University and did a year internship, I was hired to work at the Milwaukee Rep, one of Wisconsin's professional theaters. I was on my way, professionally. Yet personally, I was also worried. Coming from the cloistered world of the University, would I find friends, people that didn't mind me being what I was?

Not to worry. I quickly discovered that birds of a feather stick to together. And for some reason, theater is a nesting spot for many gay men. At the Rep, after a long week of performances, we all went to the Park Avenue. A high-tech disco bar that miraculously turned gay on Sunday evenings. It was the place to see other guys -- and to be seen by other guys.

And as you probably guessed, finding a parking place near the bar would have taken an act of Congress. We usually had to park about a mile away and walk. On one particular night walking to the bar, we ran across this young man. We had seen him many times before, but never knew his name -- only that he was a seven or an eight on the scale of hotness. Yet at this time, he was far from handsome. He was bloody. He had been beaten when he got out of his car. We ran over to him to offer our help or to call for the police. He begged us not make that call -- or even phone his parents. He didn't want them to know. And to our shame, we quickly agreed not to make those calls, either. The reason we so quickly agreed wasn't because we wanted to honor his wishes. There was a part of us, deep down inside, that didn't want to risk being beaten, too. Or experience the same kind of treatment that so many queers had experienced before us. In 1981, I left Milwaukee to go back home to Minnesota. This time to work on a revival of *Annie, the musical*. And each tomorrow, the sun came out. Or so I heard. My friends and I were creatures of the night by that time. After each performance, we'd run over to the bars. Life on the bar circuit was a constant Cabaret. We left our troubles outside. So- life was disappointing? Forget it! We had no troubles at the bars! At the bars, life was beautiful.

But life did go on outside of the bars. And so did our troubles. On July 3, 1981, the New York Times ran an article with the headline, "RARE CANCER SEEN IN 41 HOMOSEXUALS." The AIDS epidemic had begun. Gay men started recoiling in fear. So much was unknown about the disease. In fact, many physicians around the country refused to treat infected individuals. And those that did treat AIDS patients faced eviction from their offices. And mortuaries followed suit, refusing to take care of the dead. Gays started to fight with each other about how to handle the nation-wide health crises. We were living in a Catch22 situation. Did we try to preserve the sexual freedoms and political gains of the 1970s? Or did we risk losing those gains to a disease that the President of the United States was refusing to even mention?

Then, in 1983, a remarkable musical opened on Broadway. *La Cage Aux Folles*, written by Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman. It was based on a French movie farce and won six Tony awards that year, but it garnered far better accolades from the gay community. It's the story of a gay couple -- a manager of a queer nightclub and his partner, a drag queen, and the madness that ensues when their son brings home his fiancée and her ultra-conservative parents. The manager wants to "straighten up" for his son's future in-laws. It's the drag queen who refuses to kowtow to convention, stating that he is proud of who he is and refuses to change for anyone. He sings the Act II number that brought down the house each night.

I am what I am
I don't want praise I don't want pity
I bang my own drum
Some think it's noise I think it's pretty
And so what if I love each sparkle and each bangle
Why not try to see things from a different angle
Your life is a sham
Till you can shout out I am what I am

That song soon became an anthem for gay pride, when singing diva Gloria Gaynor turned it into a Disco hit. In fact, after Annie each night, we would insert Gaynor's cassette into the tape player and listen to the song over and over again. In many ways, it gave us permission to celebrate our uniqueness.

It's 35 years later, now, and going out to the bars no longer excites me. I've been married to the love of my life, Francisco, for almost twenty years. And in fact, we've been married three times, because each time a new law granted us a few more rights, we made sure we were at the church altar or the courthouse steps to claim them. But each time we said, "I do," I couldn't help think how our lives would have been different if the world around us had been different. How I would have been different if I didn't have the theater or gay bars as an outlet to find acceptance.

Many people will say that that time has come. Society is much more welcoming and accepting. LGBTQ kids have many places to come of age at. Gay Community Centers. Even gay sports clubs and welcoming churches. But considering today's social and political climate, young people can still find it hard to express themselves. So I'd like to challenge everyone here: create a circle of acceptance that the theater and gay bars gave me. Roll out the red carpet for somebody else, not only accepting and welcoming their differences, but truly celebrating who they are, and what makes them truly unique.