

PRIDE SUNDAY: “Dress Up, Drag, and Deadly Politics”

Beacon UU Congregation

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One of the most fabulous titles for a book I’ve ever seen is this one: Who Does This Bitch Think She Is? Doris Fish and the Rise of Drag by Craig Seligman. The book was published in February of this year and a month later, in the face of growing, sometimes violent and increasingly political backlash against the American drag community, Seligman wrote an article for Time Magazine with an equally compelling title: “You Just Don’t Silence a Drag Queen.”

He begins the article with a story about the infamous Doris Fish, who was flown from California to Pittsburgh to appear on the daytime talk show Pittsburgh 2Day. He recalls that “the studio audience was wide-eyed, and for good reason: Doris walked on in a red-fringed halter top, purple skirt, cobalt blue opera length gloves, gold platform shoes and grapefruit sized earrings under a teased blonde wig.”

At first the host, Jon Burnett, treated the interview as if it was a gag. Yet, after some initial banter, Burnett turned serious and asked: “How do kids look at you and what kind of example are you setting, and do you worry about being an example?” Doris answered smoothly, “Oh yes, certainly. I like to think that I have set a positive example to let children know if they want to be drag queens it’s a perfectly all right thing to be.” Drag queens and kings, like Doris, had not imagined they would be social activists in 2023. For today, we can see how much drag – for all its glamour, drama, and fantasy – is now also a political act.

Of course, drag has a long history. One could argue that its been around for centuries, certainly since Shakespearean times right up through Vaudeville, Southern minstrel blackface shows, Burlesque, underground clubs, and mainstream PRIDE events. The name may derive from an acronym: “Dressed as a girl” or from the practice of long skirts work by male performers dragging on the ground to hide their manly legs and feet. Drag is not a sexual or gender orientation. . It is a creative form expression of identity and soul.

Decades ago, Doris was hosting drag shows in San Francisco while Lypinska, Ru Paul, and Lady Bunny were doing the same in New York, Atlanta, and elsewhere. And these shows were not and do not attract only LGBTQ audiences. Cis gender and straight folk were flocking to them, too, because the shows were terrific and hilarious, and they didn’t misunderstand the intent or project their ideology onto this unique form of entertainment.

Seligman tells us that Doris's face (if not his name) became familiar to the public through the dozens of greeting cards for which he modeled, in a series of loony or glamorous guises. Suddenly, middle class Americans were getting anniversary cards with a drag queen on the front.

With the advent of AIDS in the '80s, drag queens went from being the pariahs of the queer community to its heroes. They showed up on AIDS wards to entertain patients and raised money at thousands of benefits. Homophobes were proclaiming that gays got what they deserved and that drag queens were perverts. But drag offered its members an antidote to isolation and loneliness and in many cases, rejection from their families and religious communities.

But drag never went underground. In fact, just the opposite. Drag is everywhere in 2023...not just basement clubs in the East Village. Drag story times, bingo and other events are commonplace. The Ursula character in *The Little Mermaid* was modeled after the renowned drag queen, Divine. Ru Paul's Drag race and *Pose* are mainstream, award-winning TV programs. Billy Porter wore an evening gown to the Oscar and Tony award broadcasts. And the increased visibility has brought heightened scrutiny and threat.

We're living in a horrific moment of resurgent homophobia. Seligman laments that "like antisemitism, it will probably never die out, and opportunistic politicians and hate groups will always find the specter of queers and queens a handy way to get a crowd riled up."

And riled up they are. GLADD, the world's largest LGBTQ media advocacy organization, reported 166 incidents of anti LGBTQ and drag protests since 2022. False rhetoric was deployed against performers in campaign ads for the 2022 midterm elections, and the rhetoric escalated to violence in the firebombing of a Tulsa OK donut shop that had hosted a drag event. Equality Texas reported an armed confrontation in San Antonio. Hate groups such as the Proud Boys have latched on to a new target, as have white supremacists and extremist groups.

The list of 2023 incidences alone is chilling, many with an overt threat of violence or bombing. I'll lift up one that happened right here in Arizona. Bookman's location in Tucson postponed its drag story time after an evangelical church pressed to get the event cancelled and the Proud Boys offered them "extra security." Because someone who is dressed essentially like Dolly Parton wants to call bingo number or read *Goodnight Moon* and spread some joy. Not to mention, modeling self-acceptance and individuality.

GLADD has also been tracking legislative proposals in 14 states that aim to restrict or ban drag, including Tennessee's SB0003 which was signed into law but the law was put under a temporary restraining order and just last night, it was deemed unconstitutional. A win, for now. These laws seek to ban minors from drag events and formally classify them as "adult entertainment."

Not surprisingly, there is pending legislation in the usual suspect states – Kentucky, Texas, Missouri. But take note, Arizona has three bills pending and we cannot let these laws pass.

- SB1026 Restricting the use of state monies for drag shows targeting (their word) minors
- SB 1028 Prohibiting drag performances in public spaces
- SB 1030 which would define establishments that host drag shows as “adult-oriented business.”

Drag performers – kings and queens, queer and straight, of all gender orientations are showing up at state houses to testify. They are the genies who will not stay in the bottle. Will it matter? Hard to say. But we must show up, too, with our voices and our votes.

This notion that drag damages, infects, brainwashes and grooms children will not stand. Drag performers are not sexual predators. Need I explain that you can’t turn a child or anyone else queer by exposing them to LGBTQ people or drag performers. It doesn’t work that way. When you examine the root of these legislations and objections, one can detect how they firmly based on gender norms influenced by the most toxic forms of masculinity and femininity in our culture.

In her sermon, “Listening to Drag,” the Rev. Meg Barnhouse notes that “one of the songs often performed in drag shows is called “What Makes a Man a Man?” The male performer presents as a woman, but during the song, takes off the wigs, the pads, and reveals himself (not to nakedness, but to his maleness). The object of the performance of this song is to underscore the agreed upon elements of gender expression that most of us learn. Barnhouse notes that “many women could recall being instructed to run like a girl, laugh or sit in a ladylike way. In her own personal experience, she remembers her mother telling her to turn the steering wheel delicately, with a pretty bend of the wrist.

She was also admonished not to beat a boy in ping pong or chess and that men needed to be taken care of in the bedroom. She writes: “She was my gender performance coach, My Dad, too.” Barnhouse lifts up the playful subversiveness of drag when she notes that Drag queens celebrate but also mock that gender performance. They see it as the social construct it is.

I can’t help but see the irony in the handwringing over drag in the very states and communities that groom its members in the most toxic forms of gender. Look at this photo of the Proud Boys at an anti-drag demonstration.(show photo) If this isn’t a perverse form of grooming I don’t know what is. Our culture is brimming with lost and angry white men looking for someone to rage against.

As we’ve seen, they’ve found their targets of hate in people of color, the LGBTQ community, Jews, liberals, and now, the drag tribe more than ever. Their message is: This is what it means to be a red-blooded American man. Men don’t wear dresses, even

on the stage, and women don't masquerade as men. Imagine how unsure you would have to be of your own identity in order to threaten to firebomb drag performers. But, let's not leave out the grooming of girls by women in our culture. In my humble opinion, if we want to prevent the grooming of children, we might start with toddler pageants (show photo) Enough said.

Here at Beacon UU, we have made a deep and consistent commitment to be a welcoming congregation. Every week, I say these words this pulpit: "Whoever you are and whomever you love, you are always welcome here." On June 17, we will march in the Flagstaff Pride parade and some of us will cheer from the sidelines.

We'll wave rainbow flags and we'll carry a "Side with Love" banner. I'm proud of us for making this decision and for the enthusiasm that has already been shown. I believe there is more Beacon can do in the coming year and beyond – establishing our congregation as a truly safe space for the LGBTQ and drag communities here, through programs, groups and hosting events, and then broadcast that hospitality more publicly and broadly. We can continue to offer our OWL program to youth which presents realistic sexuality education and affirms individual expression.

We can live the spirit of PRIDE in October or February or May. Let's organize in opposition to the heinous legislations I mentioned earlier. We can demonstrate the bravery of the men in Joanne Crawford's UU congregation who showed up with painted fingernails to support the boy who had been bullied in the story we heard earlier. This is our moral and spiritual imperative.

Everyone should have the right and freedom to become themselves. In her poem, Now I Become Myself, May Sarton offers a testimony to that process:

She tells us:

"Now I become myself
Its taken many years and many places.
I've been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces.
All fuse now, fall into place
From wish to action, word to silence.
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gather into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant."

Friends, if dress up has become deadly, we need to be the brave bitches who say, "Not today, honey!" Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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