

“National Coming Out Day: When We Are Who We Are”

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday, October 11, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

As a girl who was raised Catholic and then ran very hard in the opposite direction for a long time, I surprised myself by going to confession in 2011. I call it my last one, but I suppose one should never say never. I had chosen to go on a solo silent retreat at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, VA because I was at a crossroads. I was missing something I couldn't name. I missed church, yes, but I missed most of all that greater sense of connection to something larger than myself. It was a lonely feeling. When I saw the opportunity was offered to see one of the resident monks for confession, I hesitated, but then slowly took the pencil tacked to the bulletin board by an anchoring string and wrote my name into one of the available slots. At the appointed time, I went to the small office in the church building designated for this purpose - no hiding in a darkened booth for this confession! I didn't remember all of the forms or prayers that were required of me. I went in, sat down, told the monk I wasn't sure how to do this, and promptly burst into tears. I unspooled a laundry list of items that both seemed to require confessing and rambled that I didn't even believe in the idea of sin. As I cried myself out and began to settle down, the monk calmly handed me a box of tissues, and when I could hear him, he said, “All God requires of you is that you become the woman he meant you to be.”

The monk couldn't tell me, of course, who that woman was. That was my own work to do. Who was I? Who was I to be? Who did I want to be? Was that the same as the person I was supposed to be?

I didn't tell either of my parents about this confession. My father was already dead and I felt that my mother, who was still very much a faithful Catholic, wouldn't understand that fundamentally, one thing I came out of that confession knowing was that I was *not*. Not Catholic, not really Christian at all. Searching. Seeking.

In less than a year, I had found Unitarian Universalism, and I understood that while I do not believe in destiny, I do believe in patterns and messages and giving attention to things that are clearly asking for my consideration. In the same way I left that confessional full of doubt, I left my first UU service full of certainty that *whoever* I was “supposed” to be, this was a good place to try to figure it out.

In 2014, I had lunch with my mother not long after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Obergefell v Hodges* had made same sex marriage legal in the United States. My mother, knowing that I had volunteered with Marylanders for Marriage Equality, asked me: “Why is it so important to you?”

“It’s important to me because I want all the people I love to have the same rights that I do,” I answered, while feeling a deep sadness that she had to ask that at all. “I want everyone to have the same rights.”

What followed was a tremendously difficult conversation. I am proud of both my mother and myself for staying in it, for staying honest, but ultimately we came to a point where I had to ask her, “Does this mean that you object not on legal grounds but on moral ones, that you honestly believe that if gay people are allowed to marry that that will be harmful for society as a whole?” And she said, “Yes.” And as my heart broke, I said, “I’m sorry you feel that way. And I don’t think I can talk about this with you any more.” She...didn’t exactly agree, but was eager to turn the conversation in a different direction.

And that’s where it lay, and where it always will. Even as I went through an extremely long and drawn-out self examination and kind of coming out process of my own, I did not share any of this with her. It is one of my biggest regrets since her death, that I never had the courage to revisit that conversation, to tell her about my journey of self-understanding that has led me to claim a queer identity, to acknowledge my bisexuality, my curiosity, my questions and my ever-evolving sense of who I am and what love, and loving, means to me.

I never let her know my true self.

“six vampires sip sangria
and read Sappho’s fragments

and no, this does not mean they
have stopped hunting us, but it
means we have chosen joy and
taken a photograph to remember
it, to share it

the vampire sees themselves reflected

for the first time on Instagram and

cannot stop smiling”

I fell in love with [this poem](#) by queer nonbinary poet E.J. Schoenborn the instant I read it. If one wants to fall down a rabbit hole of vampire lore, you might find that the theory that the use of silver in photography had any effect on whether a vampire could be picked up on film or not is definitely the subject of debate. (Amongst those who debate such things)

What is not the subject of debate is the joy that can come from seeing ourselves reflected, fully and accurately, for the first time.

How many of you have seen pictures of yourself that you like? Please be honest, no one will think you are vain if you admit this! You’re all beautiful! I have certainly seen pictures of myself that I don’t like - the kind where some tiny flaw stands out larger to me than it would to anyone else - but I have also seen plenty that I do like - that I love. One thing I have noticed is, no one takes a better picture of me than someone who loves me. Not that a random photographer can’t occasionally catch a wonderful shot, nor that every single photo any given beloved takes of me will be high art, but in

general, I have observed that those who look upon me with loving eyes are best able to capture what they see. Sometimes it is not even something I can see in myself.

National Coming Out Day was started in 1988 by psychologist Robert Eichberg and activist Jean O’Leary, on the theory that if more people knew people who identified as LGBTQIA+, the fear and “othering” that were so often done to that community would lessen. Many queer activists at the time “did not want to respond defensively to anti-LGBT action because they believed it would be predictable. This led them to establish [NCOD](#) to maintain positivity and celebrate coming out.”

Over the nearly 40-year history of National Coming Out Day, the relationship of American culture with LGBTQIA+ identity issues has undergone some huge swings. From its inception during a time when the AIDS pandemic was devastating a generation of queer folks, particularly gay men, with a reprehensible lack of action on the part of national public health authorities and leadership, all the way through the struggles and triumphs of the civil rights movement that led to that 2014 Supreme Court decision legalizing same sex marriage, and tragically to our current historical moment in which queer beloveds, most particularly our trans neighbors, are once again being vilified and made the target of hatred and of harmful legislation that often advocates for the outright elimination of that particular identity.

Not all of us identify as queer, of course. But I suspect that all of us have had times when we have kept quiet - about who we are, about who we love, about what we believe. We may have kept quiet out of fear - for our very lives, or for the lives of those we love, or both. We may have kept quiet out of shame. We may have kept quiet because we felt in the moment it was easier to maintain the status quo. We may have kept quiet because we chose to build a bridge in a challenging relationship. We may have kept quiet to protect our ability to protect others.

All of this goes to say, especially in this day and age, that there are many valid reasons that some people choose not to come out, or to come out only to selected trusted people or groups. Even a person who might have lived “out” for some time might seriously reflect on the need to go back “in” for a myriad of complex and overlapping reasons.

“To pray you open your whole self
 To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
 To one whole voice that is you.
 And know there is more
 That you can’t see, can’t hear;
 Can’t know except in moments
 Steadily growing, and in languages
 That aren’t always sound but other
 Circles of motion.”

Joy Harjo’s expansive, loving poetry is so often about opening. The one, whole voice that is you - though I shared [this poem](#) initially to honor Indigenous People’s Day, it also rang true to me for National Coming Out Day here in [the year of Our Lord twenty-and-twenty-six] 2026.

There is what we understand as our whole self. Then there is knowing that there is more we don’t know yet, that we can’t see, that we can’t hear. Coming out, learning the self, learning to trust the story of the self with others, is not a single decision that happens in an instant and never changes. It is a constant path of discovery, of curiosity, of courage.

It can take as much courage to guard parts of your identity, or parts of someone else’s identity, as it can to reveal them. It can take courage to engage in the hard reality of safety, and who can access it and who cannot, and the hard reality that there is never a 100% guarantee of safety for any of us. That does not mean we cannot try. It takes courage.

“Like eagle that Sunday morning
 Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky

In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.”

There is beauty within each of us, within each of our stories, whether we are out or in or in-between, whether we are curious or questioning or struggling with harmful theologies that were leveraged against our true, beautiful selves. I want you to know, dear ones, that there is room for you here. For all of you. This takes courage. We will all make mistakes. Be open, let us all pledge to be open to learning when we might have made a mistake, to be open to hearing and receiving the full stories of others without judgement, to be open to the messages of Love that move within each of us.

Let us reflect that beauty in one another. However much of someone’s story you are trusted with, however much of your own story you choose to share, find those people who will reflect you truly. Who will reflect you with love. Who will show you a picture of yourself that is true, beautiful, and whole.

So may it be.