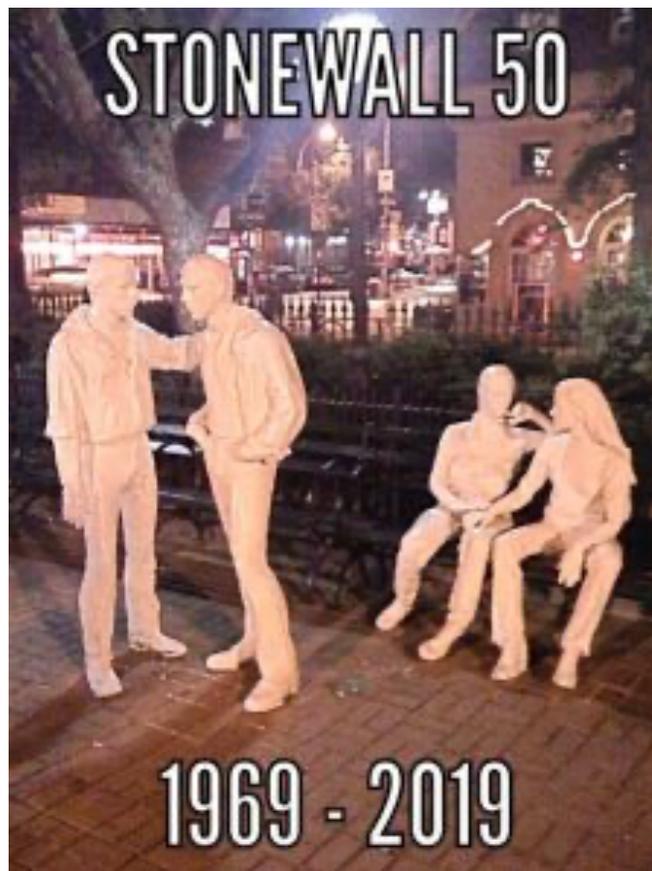


SCOUNDREL TIME

ESSAYS

Stonewall at 50: Still Making Our Place

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“We have to read this new book for book club,” my friend Michael told me during a fall afternoon call in 1994, back when people still telephoned each other without texting first. I was 32 and Michael was a role model for me at the time – in his early 40s, dashing, russet-haired and could pull off a turtleneck in winter better than anyone. He was sophisticated and determined that our book club should be a gay salon overstuffed like his throw pillows with important ideas. Which it was, sometimes, when it wasn’t just a good excuse to socialize and compare tales of Manhattan in the 1990s.

The tome? *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* by Bruce Bawer. And read it we did, all seven of us, my core Manhattan gay book clubbers who’d focused on gay fiction like *The Frontrunner* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, twenty-five years before gay became the new civil rights lightning rod and our fights led us to a mountaintop of once-unthinkable marriage equality.

Bawer offered insights on how homosexuality was perceived, and how gays contributed to our own negative image challenges, which was a brave thing to do at the time, especially in front of an understandably defensive gay community.

In one passage, he wrote, “There is a broad cultural divide and often considerable hostility, between gays who tend toward the two extremes of the spectrum. We might call them, at the risk of drastic oversimplification, “subculture-oriented gays” and “mainstream gays.”

In addition to encouraging gay people to step up and claim their place at the equality table by acting “mainstream,” he also challenged gay subculture at a time when, in retrospect, there was a movement afoot to dismiss the “nonmainstream” people who’d protected every gay person’s right to congregate. Lest anyone forget, it was those who Bawer called “subculture-oriented” who fought back when the police raided their Stonewall bar in Greenwich Village on that hot, fateful night – June 28, 1969, the actions that kicked off the Stonewall Riots.

Bawer’s words changed my way of thinking, which may account for my parsing out terms like I still do. *For instance, despite its widespread adoption, I don’t use the term gay marriage because it’s not like you get gay married in*

a gay church and tout your authenticity in fictional Gayland™. Words matter and shape how we view the world. The little things—like one person coming out, and another person seeing no rainbow wall dividing gay and straight—these matter.

By the mid-1990s, gays were more visible, thanks in part to huge strides in the 1970s, such as the *American Psychiatric Association's removal of homosexuality* as a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-II, and the galvanizing momentum of the AIDS fight in the 1980s. We came out publicly in larger numbers, marched for our rights more frequently, and the media humanized our stories more than they ever had before. The chord Bawer's book struck was with those of us who wondered if we were visible in a positive way. What good is being seen *more* if visibility doesn't lead to greater social acceptance?

"I'll walk down Fifth Avenue in the gay pride parade when I can wear my suit and carry my briefcase," my friend Richard the lawyer replied in the early 1990s when I asked him if he wanted to join the throng.

"Then wear your suit and carry your briefcase," I told him.

He didn't. I think his reason was less standing on principle and more fear of being recognized by colleagues at his firm. In any case, no one but the politicians who recognized that our movement was a solid voting block wore suits. Most of us wear shorts and T-shirts since the parade always takes place in warm, gauzy June. Back then, the media led with parade coverage of Dykes on Bikes and nearly naked dancing men, and they still do. But now they quickly follow with the political groups and mainstream culture integration that defines LGBT life today, at least in more progressive places.

Our national gay uprising in 1969 changed the landscape by placing us across it. What was then known as the "gay liberation front," and, eventually the gay rights movement, is now more often thought of as the fight for LGBT equality. With the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots upon us, we're a civil rights movement that's burst its closet doors wide open.



Image By Dave Singleton

I slowly came out of the closet myself in the 1980s, and my coming of age has corresponded with that of our crusade. I didn't have any older, out and empowered gay role models any more than the movement did. Now the movement and I are both too old to be young and too young to be old. Where are we headed?

My progress hasn't been linear. It's not like I came out, and my family, employers, and social network all embraced my orientation right away, and life since then has been *happily ever after*. They didn't and it hasn't. My sexual orientation remained a wedge issue with my dad from 1983 until he died in 2007. I've experienced both overt and covert discrimination at a few jobs from the 1980s to as recently as a few years ago. Nor has the progress of our movement been linear. We're nowhere near the end, despite what my straight allies sometimes think.

"You've done it," one friend cheered after a Supreme Court ruling made marriage equality the law of the land in 2015. "You're there. You all are the success story of the last 50 years."

"Well, we are, but it's not so clear cut everywhere..." I started to respond with the steady resolve of Debbie Downer, quick to point out inequities between states and a rise in anti-LGBT violence [1] that's corresponded with our visibility, but I also felt guilty that I couldn't embrace the victory lap my friend thought she'd handed me.

"Oh come on," she said. "You're the rocket launch."

I get it. There's an often-irresistible urge to adopt a soaring narrative that overlooks and minimizes complications and complexities. When economists on television boast that the economy is "good," which they do with some frequency, I silently ask, *for whom?* Simplistic narratives may be popular, but they aren't true. Still, we adore the idea of them. I'd compare our movement to a basic dance step: less of an elegant waltz and more of a chaotic *cha-cha-chá*. One step forward, one step back, rhythmic sidestep convulsion, repeat.

Bawer's thesis that we'll get that place at the equality table when we act like everyone else wasn't the first time a gay rights leader expressed a pro-assimilation philosophy. Gay rights pioneer and icon Frank Kameny ascribed to this theory, too. He insisted on the dress code at his march on Lyndon B. Johnson's White House in April 1965. Seven men in suits and three women in dresses stood on the sidewalk in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to demand equal rights for the LGBT community. The slogan Kameny coined in 1968 was "*Gay is Good*," which stuck. Since a large part of his focus was on getting gay people hired, his sub-slogan could have been "*Dress for the job you want*."

The Stonewall Riots brought us out of a shadowy past where so many of us felt like social pariahs and outlaws. Twenty-five years after that historic night, *A Place at the Table* was the first book I can recall that focused *entirely* on the subject of gay-assimilation. Its publication followed both the initial flurry of post-Stonewall progress and more than a decade of enduring the painful AIDS crisis.

Gay was good in 1969. Gay is still good today. But that little voice inside my head pecks at me. *Good for whom?*

When the book came out, I was still reeling from losing a boyfriend I'd loved to the disease two years earlier, and, before that, several friends. My contemporaries and I were grieving, and angrier than ever. After years of marching, including the historic 1993 March on Washington, we were ready for the support from allies that finally seemed to be coming our way, bringing LGBT rights more into the mainstream.

Twenty-five years after Stonewall was a time to take stock, which I'd argue is necessary to do periodically with any ongoing and evolving cause. It's also a deeply American thing to do. Our country was founded with a revolution that was imbued with the principles of evolution. Our forefathers knew that they didn't have the tenets of society exactly right yet, so they created room to grow.

Now, at this 50th anniversary milestone, we're in the midst of another growth spurt marked by extremes. Anti-LGBT bias is increasing [2] in some places, despite the strides we're making in others. On one hand, fifty years ago it would have been unthinkable to have smart-as-a-whip, appealing presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg inching his way up in national polls. On the other, LGBT hate crimes have been on the rise since – *surprise, surprise* – the 2016 election. Employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is still legal in 29 states. The transgender community has been hit hard by the military ban [3] and healthcare [4] discrimination this past year.

A Place at the Table was a book of its historical moment. It offered the never-dared hope of a place at a magical *Wizard of Oz*-like table; a place where we'd find respect, dignity, and equality, in addition to the heart, courage, and brains we already had. Now I think the basic precept of Bawer's book asked too little and carried with it too much shame from the pre-Stonewall era. If our greatest aspiration was to be included in mainstream society without a moment of doubt in which anyone questioned our right to be there, to have our voices count as much as anyone else's, what would we define as the end of the line?

By the time we reached the presidential election in 2004, we had our place, but we'd asked for more—for our relationships to be recognized by the federal government. That was too much. The Republicans, who'd made marriage equality a wedge issue in that year's presidential election, banished us again. My favorite line from that presidential campaign was uttered by President George W. Bush, looking confused and wounded, saying it "wasn't personal," as if the fight for equality and for legitimizing your love could be anything else.

We rose up, fought back, and came back even stronger after that. Like most of my LGBT friends and allies, I spoke out, went to marches and fundraisers and contacted elected officials. Between 2004 and 2010, I wrote extensively about LGBT relationships and lives, including a multimedia campaign to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. I was driven in this work in large part by how angered I was by double standards and inequality.

In 2011, we saw the end of "don't ask, don't tell," passage of the New York Marriage Equality Act, and Hillary Clinton's speech to the United Nations on LGBT rights. Four years later, in 2015, almost to the day of the Stonewall Riots 46th anniversary, we gained full marriage equality. I remember walking a mile from my home that night to see the White House flooded in rainbow lights and feeling lighter and more comfortable on the streets than I'd ever felt.

Those who thought that the Supreme Court's marriage equality decision was the end of the road, the ultimate victory, changed their minds on November 9, 2016. The other side erupted with plans to rescind our rights and roll back protections, and they've been at it ever since.

From kicking transgender patriots out of the military to refusing to count us in the upcoming census, to death by a thousand cuts and rollbacks, the attacks *persist*—yes, I'm using that word because people need to follow suit.

Shirley Chisholm once said, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

Another way to look at it? If you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu.

The transformation over the last 50 years moves us forward from asking for that seat, which is the quest for “tolerance,” a term I’ve disliked for most of those 50 years. I don’t want anyone holding their nose while they debate my equality. “Tolerance” is loaded with contempt. I also have zero interest in legislating the opinions of haters and homophobes who aren’t even tolerant; those folks don’t know or care about the various LGBT subgroups. We’re all just deviants to them. When they try to legislate our rights away, our movement has now shown that anti-LGBT bigots will be fighting against a tornado that has the power to rise up and blow them away.

Setting the table is a metaphor both for how we gather together in a moment of time and how we lay the groundwork for what comes next. At our table, we don’t ask for permission. We don’t await marching instructions from any organization or any individual, whether they’re telling us we’re less than equal or the luckiest rocket riders on earth. The movement is too old and has been through too much – and so have we – to do that anymore.

I applauded the widespread, angry reaction to the recent movie *Stonewall*, which told the story of our uprising through a white cis gay male character’s lens, ignoring characters like Sylvia Rivera and Martha P. Johnson, trans women of color, who along with a diverse crowd, stood their ground in the sacred space of that Greenwich Village bar. We choose to embrace our complex history rather than lull ourselves into the complacency of a cozy linear narrative. To understand our history is to understand the need to avoid such complacency, and to avoid the comforting expectation of inevitable triumph over bigotry. We’re not there yet, and we may never be.

This 50-year mark is a time to look forward. It’s healing and heartening to revel in hard-won LGBT successes for some, but we have to keep our focus on equality disparities in our country and around the globe.

Gay was good in 1969. Gay is still good today. But that little voice inside my head pecks at me. *Good for whom?* If you’re prosperous, come from a progressive family who TIVO’d *Will and Grace* in the 90s and 00s and welcomed the 2017 reboot, and you live in an urban American mecca, chances are that gay is good indeed.

If you're like me – born in a closeted, unaccepting era and schooled in a conservative, condemning setting, gay wasn't so great. But, it got better once I was able to transition into a more accepting community.

If you're from *anywhere* in the United States, you feel the strong presence of right wingers with an insatiable itch to turn the clocks back and strip away the equality we've fought hard for, and you have every reason to fear they just might if our resistance isn't strong enough.

If you're from a red state or from a family of modern-day religious zealots who want you to undergo electroshock treatment known by its more placid name of conversion therapy, gay is not only not-good; it's potentially horrific and scarring.

If you're from Chechnya or Iraq, where the ruling patriarchy beats gay men bloody, tosses them in prison cells, and hurls them from buildings, the violence against our community is evil beyond anything most Americans might imagine. I don't see how anyone could be aware of these instances and wonder, as some have done, if we even need a motivated LGBT community anymore?

I think of this anniversary and see a table. But I don't see us asking for a place at it, bringing a folding chair, or being on the menu. As we plan for the next fifty years, I'm hoping we'll be led by two guiding principles. First, we don't wait for instructions or permission. Second, we – the LGBT community and our allies – continue the equality fight for *all*. An assault on the rights of any of us, whether we identify as mainstream or as part of a subculture, whether we live in the American South or in Saudi Arabia, is an assault on all of us. Gay is still good, but good isn't enough if it's only good for some.

[1] See https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/hate-crimes-in-dc-have-nearly-doubled-since-2016-according-to-city-data-and-incidents-based-on-sexual-orientation-top-the-list/2019/02/02/967aa46a-2651-11e9-90cd-dedb0c92dc17_story.html

[2] See https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/lgbt-legislation/?utm_term=.c88683e10710

