



EMBODY

By Sossity Chiricuzio

Perspectives

Embody – It takes a queer village

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I have a confession to make: I am, on occasion, very jealous of Queer/Trans youth these days for the chance to know and declare themselves while still young. For public school coming out stories that end in rainbow banners, and supportive friends, and progressive community programs.

Then I remember just how rare that still is, three decades after my own tortured teenage years, and I weep.

The number of Queer/Trans youth that are disposed of by parents and communities and societies still clinging to a dogma that doesn't align with either science or compassion is heartbreaking. No matter whether you consider sexuality and gender to be determined by nature or nurture, they are truths that don't die out, even when you kill us in the attempt.

Those of us that survive usually do so with fractures, faultlines, and far too much experience with maintaining a facade.

My experience of public school was overwhelmingly unpleasant, but high school was definitely the worst. I was visibly poor, verbally outspoken, and generally weird with my poetry and hippie parents

and general lack of interest in boys. Mind you, I was beyond discreet about my very real feelings for some of the girls I was friends with. I knew, without anyone telling me, that those were dangerous and deviant. Especially in a tiny town in Arizona, snuggled up to a military base. And yet, it took less than three months into my freshman year for people to sling the word 'lesbian' at me to see if it would draw blood.

I had sex with fifty cisgendered men and teenage boys while in high school, all but one of those encounters being disguise or assault or survival.

The exception was my first, my sort of high school sweetheart. We were very good friends, both queer, both hiding—though he had a clearer understanding of himself than I had come to yet—covering for each other without naming it. He'd give me the requisite white and red carnations at Valentines, carried through the school halls like a banner of heterosexuality. We would occasionally roll in an awkward tangle of dry kisses, and give each other strategically visible hickies, and then go back to more interesting things.

We never spoke of the dual nature of our relationship, but it was our shared lifeboat, adrift in a sea of expectations we couldn't fulfill.

Eventually we had sex because it seemed like we should, perhaps both looking for that final test. It was an uncomfortable twenty minutes that ended in a heartfelt agreement to not do that again. He dropped out of high school not long after, left for California, joined the Navy, and then came out. He lost his commission, his family, his friends, and like many of our beautiful young men in the eighties, contracted HIV. I shut down, acted out, endured the invasions of my body, boded my time until college, and then came out as fast and furious as I could.

I have a hard time talking about my teenage years. I was skin around shards of betrayal and rage, and I'm still a bit surprised that I made it out alive.

The truth is that my moments of jealousy come from what I wish I could have had, what we all should have: the opportunity to discover our gender and our sexuality with compassion and informed consent, free of verbal and physical and sexual abuse from peers and adults. I recognize that this is still the exception, even now. That for every Queer/Trans youth that is listened to, respected, and encouraged, hundreds more are discarded or destroyed.

For the simple truth of who they actually are. For being a gift that isn't recognized.

I've seen some significant changes affected since I came out in 1989, both in our community and in the world around us. I also see so much more that needs doing, and it feels harder than ever in the current political climate where even those of us who are adults often feel hopeless and afraid. We need to work together, and our youth need us. Mentorship, sponsorship, fostering, community groups, suicide hotlines, skill sharing, staffing shelters, making donations, showing up.

If you haven't already, now is the time to find a way to respectfully support and encourage and protect Queer/Trans youth in your community and beyond. Do it as thanks for surviving your own youth. Do it with respect for their autonomy. Do it now.

Here are some resources and organizations where you can get involved and/or make donations: smyrc.org, thelivingroomyouth.org, lamberthouse.org, stonewallyouth.org, translifeline.org, glsen.org, thetrevorproject.org, camparanutiq.org, fiercenyc.org, isna.org, jqyouth.org, truecolorsfund.org, nyacyouth.org, liveoutloud.info, advocatesforyouth.org.

Don't limit yourself to this list or conventional donations; examine your resources and skills for a way to make a difference, create access, and help them survive and thrive.

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