



Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.

Breaking the Silence

I was asked to speak at a Breaking the Silence event – a culmination of Syracuse University and surrounding middle and high schools' Day of Silence activities. Day of Silence is a national student-led action intended to create safer schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Participants are silent for one day to honor those who are always silent and invisible, due to fear of discrimination and harassment.

What profound wisdom do I have to share? I spend my time driving my daughter to school or dance or piano or baseball, helping her with her homework or listening to her growing pains or balancing the accounting books for her elementary school or chaperoning her class field trips or attending PTO meetings or Parent's Promoting Dance Meetings or Save Onondaga Dance Institute meetings, calling in prescription refills for my ninety-five-year old mother's Metoprolol and Diltiazem and Alprazolam (the generic for Xanax) or purchasing the pounds of chocolate that sustain her between her medications or writing checks to Saint Jude or Saint Anthony or Saint Theresa or the Sacred Heart or Padre Pio and a glut of other organizations named for the graven images that clutter my mother's bedroom (once my dining room), changing the guinea pig's cage or mixing canned pumpkin in the dogs' food so they're not constipated, making dinner for my family - including my partner who except for meals and occasional carnal expectations is mostly self-sufficient. What do I have to say to young, idealistic and passionate LGBTQ kids and their allies? Do they really want me to be the window into their future? Do I tell them that their thick manes will eventually reside on their pillowcases and that, when all else fails, gravity intensifies?

Or do I tell them about the struggle - how us older queers have cleared the way and that they are enjoying the openness and freedom my generation dreamed? And then do I ignore their quizzical expressions while they wonder why the hell they're taunted and pummeled – some, thrown out of their own homes - under such openness and freedom. I had a lot of questions and a bad case of writer's block.

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I did what I often do when I can't think of what to write. I overate and stewed and thought of myself as an incompetent fraud who really has nothing to say. Then Mona came home with a problem from school, and I got angry. I find anger to be a very productive emotion, much more energizing than despair. Nothing beats being pissed off to get my linguistic juices flowing.

A resident poet was working with Mona's class. For one exercise, he'd read a student's poem, then asked which one of their classmates had written it. One poem that he read was filled with images of mother: my mother does this and that, etc. A few students looked at Mona and guessed that she wrote it. Mona felt that they did this to taunt her. They were kids who knew Mona for years and were aware of her family makeup. Mona and I have had numerous conversations about how to respond to other people's hang-ups. Three years ago, upon Mona's request and with her teacher's permission, I even spoke to her class about all kinds of families, including ours. This time I took a less ambitious approach. I told Mona that she should have given them the finger. Let me justify my remarks with an admittedly flimsy defense. Mona and I had recently returned from a lovely stay in Williamsburg, Virginia, where we vacationed with friends: a two-mom family and their daughter, Elizabeth, adopted from China. Mona and Elizabeth got along splendidly. The only snag occurred when they were swimming in an indoor pool and graciously included another little girl in their games. She asked Mona if I was her dad – I was watching the girls while Elizabeth's moms were exercising. She then asked Mona if she was adopted, and told Mona that she felt sorry for her, to which Mona replied that there's nothing to feel sorry about. Next, the little girl asked Mona if Elizabeth was her brother. Elizabeth is not into fem. She was wearing a T-shirt and longer swim trunks. Despite Elizabeth's swimwear, she clearly looked female. Both girls felt that the other little girl's comments were meant as taunts, rather than her honestly thinking that Elizabeth was a boy or caring that Mona was adopted. One of Elizabeth's moms mentioned that, if she had overheard this, she might have ripped the little girl's cheeks out, a frank albeit gruesome response. Of course both girls loved the possibility, though they acknowledged it was a bit extreme. Elizabeth's other mom took a more staid position, attributing the little girl's rudeness to a poor upbringing. My response fell somewhere between my two friends'. However, I wasn't averse to twisting the little girl's cheeks – just a bit. Mona presented another perspective, “I feel sorry that she feels sorry for us.”

So hearing that some of Mona's classmates were using a perfectly innocent poetry exercise to taunt her may have been too soon after the despot in the pool incident. I'm not advocating ripping little children's cheeks out or flipping them the bird. I mean, I hardly think either recommendation should be included in Family Pride's 52 ways to be OUTspoken, but let's be honest. There are moments...

I'm reminded of years ago – another life – when I worked in an institution. A man with Down Syndrome, who lived there, would routinely give staff and residents the finger when he'd get angry – which was quite often. He'd use his pinky instead of his middle finger, but he'd project it with a fierce determination, and afterward he'd appear almost euphoric. Sometimes you just have to flip folks the pinky or whatever finger works for you, if not literally, then at least fantasize.

Mona's response to my suggestion was that she'd get suspended. I told her that I'd be fine if she did. Poor Jack sat there looking at me like I had finally lost my mind, but, if asked, he'd admit that I've done surprisingly well at censoring my language and actions for the first few years of Mona's life – at least the first two, maybe three.

I sent e-mails to Mona's teacher and principal. Just letting you know that I gave Mona my permission to give kids the finger when they're being obnoxious about our family . I proceeded to explain why, then closed with Mona has experienced a steady trickle of abuse from certain kids. I need to give her permission to blow off steam . Again, just as I don't recommend cheek ripping or bird flipping to be added to Family Pride's 52 ways of being OUTspoken, neither am I recommending this letter as a prototype for queer parent/school communications. I already have a long established friendship with Mona's teacher and principal. In other words, nothing I say surprises them. After Mona read my e-mail, she laughed, hugged me and said, "You're crazy Poppy. I love you." That in itself was worth all my angst over obnoxious people, regardless of their ages, who just can't keep their remarks to themselves. Which leads me to how all this inspired the speech I eventually gave to the students at the Syracuse University 's Breaking the Silence event.

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The sentence in my e-mails to Mona's teacher and principal about a steady trickle of abuse reminded me of something I had read about all adult queers being the survivors of childhood emotional abuse. Not the stereotypic notion that we were all preyed upon by pedophiles and that our "life style" is the result of this trauma, but, that as children who either displayed or just knew that we could not fit into heterosexist constraints, we were subjected to emotional abuse. This idea became the premise of my speech, citing the emotional abuse I had endured, or witnessed other children endure in my early teaching career, or know that, despite our so called advances, too many queer youth still endure today. I discussed how we're all survivors, including the children of LGBT folks, and how a paramount step for a survivor is to acknowledge the silence, then break it.

The Breaking the Silence event was deeply moving and left me feeling hopeful. This feeling was affirmed the following evening when I attended a poetry sharing at Mona's school. Mona read some of her poems and received warm accolades from her classmates, many of them caring loyal friends. Mona also read a touching poem about racism, written by a classmate who was too uncomfortable to read aloud – one of the kids who, over the years, has taunted Mona about our family. A critical step - after acknowledging the silence, breaking it and sometimes giving the oppressor the finger - is to forgive.