

Massive hate crime against US LGBT nightclub : Let's not give in to fear after the Orlando shooting

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LGBT Americans have been subjected to many forms of terror. We have responded with love, and grown stronger as a result. Let's do the same this time.

For generations, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans have turned to night clubs and bars like Orlando's Pulse - the scene today of the deadliest shooting in American history [1] - as places of refuge. They have been our sanctuaries.

When our homes would kick us out for being queer, there was the bar. When we were at risk of getting beaten up, as men, for wearing drag on the street, there was the club. When our places of employment might fire us for being queer (as they legally still can in most states), there were leathers bars and glam dance clubs where we could shake our moneymakers.

Bars offered us the illusion of a freedom from terror as queer people, the illusion that there was a place where our sexual desires and our communal need to gather with fellow queers would not be under attack.

This illusion was a lie, of course. Bars were not, and never have been, safe places. This should especially obvious every June when we celebrate Pride month. It's when we remember the Stonewall riots, when all kinds of queers from all kinds of backgrounds were attacked by police inside a New York City dive bar 47 years ago, in June of 1969.

The police were violent to the queer people there. They thought they could do anything they wanted to them, because they knew queer people lived in fear. The police didn't see the Stonewall as a sanctuary, but as a disgusting cage. They thought the patrons were sick and would be too ashamed of who they were to make a fuss.

But the brave queers at the Stonewall fought back against that. In finding the best spirit of themselves, they started what would become a worldwide movement - a movement that would evolve to fight legal oppression, challenge homophobia, organize around the holocaust of HIV/Aids, and lead to marriage equality many decades later.

But gay bars continued to be places of refuge for many - perhaps the only places a gay guy felt OK taking off his shirt, or a lesbian felt OK making out with her girlfriend, or a trans person felt OK expressing their gender identity. For many, no hookup app or amount of tolerance by straight people in straight places could provide this.

Before I went to bed this morning (I'd been up late following the horrible events as they unfolded), I noticed a video. A guy was limping out of the Pulse club. He was covered in blood and being assisted by paramedics. He was shirtless, which made his blood-covered body look even more vulnerable.

I thought about how vulnerable my gay kin are going to feel in clubs, and in Pride marches, for some time. And I thought about how vulnerable all those queer bodies - dancing and sweating and being carefree in a world that largely scorns them - must have felt as they tried to comprehend what was happening around them at the Pulse.

Terrorism works because it makes people afraid of our fellow human beings. Let us not let terrorism work this time. As our ancestors did not at Stonewall, let us not fall to fear.

Let us remember those mourning black families in Charleston - attacked in their sanctuary this very week last year - who looked at Dylann Roof within hours of taking their kin and said "I forgive you" with no malice in their hearts. Let us remember the lack of vengeance they displayed, and how they immediately pivoted from a place of intense grief towards action for building a better world.

Let us remember that individuals who commit horrendous crimes in this country with absurd regularity have one thing in common : they have easy access to weapons of mass killing.

Let us remember that singer Christina Grimmie was also shot to death, also in Orlando, within a day of the tragedy of the Pulse nightclub - seemingly by a man whose race and religion will not be used to smear other members of his same race and religion.

Let us remember what transgender Americans have been subjected to over something as basic as bathroom use (which may have led to a bomb being set in a Target last week) and say we must stop the violence.

Let us remember that we have never really blamed all Christians, Republicans or Democrats (many who have organized en masse to subject queer people to systematic violence and destruction at different points in American history) for the violence waged against us. We should remember that again today. We should remember not to blame all members of any other religion or political ideology for what one person does.

Gay Americans are so creative. Our ancestors managed to turn a riot into a movement of love. They managed to turn the epidemic of Aids into one of the most powerful political forces the United States has ever produced. In this moment, let us not become nationalistic, or prejudiced, or vengeful. Let us not perpetuate the American cycle of violence. Let us interrupt this nightmare as the creative, loving, justice-seeking American queers that we are, who know well how to look death in the eye and still imagine a new, better living world.

Let us remember, in the spirit of Stonewall, and of the pride celebrations every June since, that this tragedy, devastating and heartbreaking and frightening as it is, could also be gay Americans' moment to find the best in ourselves.

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P.-S.

* The Guardian. Sunday 12 June 2016 17.03 BST Last modified on Sunday 12 June 2016 18.59 BST : <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/12/lets-not-give-in-to-fear-after-the-orlando-shooting-florida>

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Notes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2016/jun/12/florida-nightclub-shooting-terrorism-suspect-updates>