

Identity is a powerful concept. All too often identity is forced upon human beings, as external pressures churn to crush a person into societal norms stemming from fear and ignorance. Conversely, when identity comes from within, and is genuinely engaged and shared with the world, it can be the root of the most wonderful expression possible.

Taking a snapshot of any given point in time will reveal change. Today we are on the brink of accepting a huge part of our great human family into a society that has excluded them for far too long. When I was a teenager in the late 1980s, I couldn't have imagined any of my peers being openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. But that doesn't mean they didn't exist. What it does mean is that people of my generation who were naturally attracted to their own sex had an unnatural identity imposed upon them by a society that refused to acknowledge who they were.

I am a straight man who is deeply concerned with LGBT inclusion in society. In large part as a personal penance for a past where I was a very violent and hateful person who attacked and grievously injured a gay man. The harm that I caused can't be taken back. It can't be undone. But I have stopped practicing the hate and violence that founded such harm two decades ago, and today I do my best to convey the honor of peace and compassion to as many people as I can. Beyond my guilt, my family was devastated by intolerance of homosexuality long before I was born. In the late 1960s, my grandmother had my uncle Bob committed at the age of 17 after he revealed his sexuality. He was drugged, raped, and beaten while locked away in an institution that was supposed to "cure" him of being attracted to other boys. Bob died a few years ago, alone and still institutionalized after a lifetime of trauma and misery. Wrought with guilt over his mistreatment, my aunt took her own life soon after.

In May of 2011 Callen Harty invited to me see Proud Theater's production of *Rockin' the Rotunda*. A few months earlier Callen had submitted a wonderful article for *Life After Hate*, an online magazine dedicated to basic human goodness—the innate human need for compassion and the ability to give it. I co-founded *Life After Hate* in January of 2010 along with Christian Picciolini, another former white power skinhead, and Angie Aker, a woman who was a survivor of domestic violence. Knowing the gist of our organization, Callen knew that I would appreciate Proud Theater. He was so right.

The performance I witnessed embodied courage and compassion, coursing with a deep wisdom that only authentic presence can reveal. Here were teenagers—each in complete engagement with their genuine selves, and each other, and the audience—beaming with fearless creative expression as they shared their darkest fears and their greatest hopes. The caliber of talent and artistic energy would have been amazing in any circumstance, but considering that many of the performers were literally at the end of their ropes when they found Proud Theater mere months earlier, the word miraculous would be perfectly suitable to describe what was happening.

My uncle was a brilliant artist. His ability shined forth to the world despite the weight of it repeatedly coming down on him. On the Broom Street Theater stage, young people were prevailing at the same point in life where my uncle was destroyed. In Proud Theater audiences of each performance, other young people are enjoying learning empathy and compassion at the same point in their lives where I wrought atrocious violence.

Proud Theater is a gift to the Earth, sowing seeds of empathy, compassion, and the downright fun and beauty of connecting with the common humanity we all share. I look forward to seeing this practice of peace and love revealed and encouraged in identities across the country and beyond.