

## STONEWALL BABY

# Queer citizenship

*Being part of the world's biggest fondue pot doesn't have to mean blending in—our difference adds flavor*

by Will O'Bryan

**M**uch earlier in the century, this country threw open the gates for millions of immigrants from foreign shores. In an effort to please their new neighbors, many of the immigrants "Americanized" themselves. Some changed their exotic-sounding names to something a little more Main Street. Some threw off their native costume in exchange for denim.

It's as though they felt the Great American Melting Pot could absorb them if they were a little less spicy, which is unfortunate. So many great cultures that could've been incorporated into our society were watered down for the sake of homogeneity. Perhaps there's a lesson for us queer immigrants to heed.

Our journey to America's Heartland didn't require us to cross oceans, just closets—but closets can be as treacherous as the deepest oceans. The immigrants had family recipes from the Old World and accents they tried to hide; we've brought some flair and some good music. But have we "Americanized" ourselves as well?

We're starting to venture out of our gay ghettos into the suburbs, with our Subarus and rainbow flags. Our neighbors look at us and see nothing out of the ordinary. We don't feel threatened and neither do they. But at what cost?

Americans of yesterday could've learned much more from the cultural influx than they did. Some cultures could've taught the individualistic American psyche that a strong sense of community obligation isn't necessarily bad. Some cultures could've taught their stiff-collared compatriots to let their hair down a bit. The religious influx could've added more to our national spirituality than it did.

And what can we queers bring to the table before we get sucked into the pot?

Throughout most of our history, we've been deviants. Sexual deviants. Granted, we weren't deviant by nature, only by law. But in this great, God-fearing land of ours, maybe there's something of our sexual insight that would help add some spice to this very vanilla, oh-so-very sexually repressed culture of ours.

Heterosexuals themselves are having a seemingly difficult time of it. They apparently enjoy sex as much as we do, but they don't like to talk about it. Sometimes they divorce. Sometimes they cheat. And it all looks very messy and mean-spirited. If we can add some insight, help them in some way, shouldn't we? As queers—lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgenders—we're certainly not perfect or omniscient where sex is concerned, but our wealth of knowledge on the topic is fantastically rich nonetheless. And we're probably advanced to the point where I can talk to a straight peer candidly about sex without getting my ass kicked.

As we take our first steps in their mainstream world, maybe we're becoming good citizens who, following the mainstream lead, don't like to talk about sex either. But we shouldn't turn our backs on our roots. And if we are still talking about sex, we don't seem to want to dish the dirt with our straight neighbors.

Jesse Helms sees a photo of a man with a bull whip up his keister, and he goes ballistic. A lot of

straight people probably resent that overreaction. They may not understand the photo, but they might be willing to talk about it. And if they can't talk about it with us, who can they talk about it with?

We've had to think about sex all our lives. We know it pretty well. We can explain things that Heteromericans won't ever understand if we won't talk about them. "Cock rings? What on earth for? Dental dams? What are you talking about? Top? Bottom? You're confusing me!" If the leaders don't lead...

Our Pride festivals have been pretty insular events, growing out of what probably looked like freak shows to breeding folks (artificially inseminated lesbians aside). U.S. Cinco de Mayo festivals aren't reserved for Latino/a Americans, though. And how many of us look upon St. Patrick's Day as the one day of the year when everybody gets to be Irish (and puke green beer)? It certainly would do our fellow citizens well to try to be gay for a day.

I'm not suggesting there's any hope that my mother will show up for a potluck lesbian dungeon party, but we don't have to go to extremes. This country is developed enough that it should be throwing off its sexually repressed shackles—and we're just the Americans to lead the way. But this leadership role is one we are uncomfortable with, to say the least.

Presently, in our discourse with straight people we talk about our sexuality as though it were the least defining aspect of our culture instead of what it is: the foremost. We learned throughout our lives how to blend in, how to allay suspicions, how to move quietly. But at this point there's no turning back. We're here, we're queer, we're moving in next door, and everybody knows it.

We've always wanted to be treated equally. It's what we've been fighting for all along. But we don't have to sanitize ourselves. The melting pot will taste better if all the fruits and vegetables aren't first dipped in bleach.

Our sexual sensibilities are provocative by national standards. It's been so long since this country saw a sexual revolution, and we have the resources to ignite one the likes of which they've never seen. Multiple partners. Multiple partners at once. Remaining on wonderful terms with past lovers. Frank talk about sex. Collectively, we've seen and done it all, though we're remarkably quiet about it in mixed company. As we become increasingly mainstream, we're beginning to act hush hush even among ourselves.

It's hard for us to remember that we've done nothing wrong, that our national values regarding sex were handed down from the Puritans. Of course, there's plenty of sex in America, but how much of it is healthy? Not to say that we're all qualified to be therapists, but we can talk from experience.

Maybe my mother won't end up in the dungeon. In her retirement community in Florida, nobody has a basement anyway. But if some retired lesbian moves in next door to her, I hope she'll speak frankly with Mom about sex. If not, I can always take my mother to It's My Pleasure the next time she's in town. As a good queer citizen, I think I'm duty bound, actually.



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