

Like Bambi in the headlights, I'm caught. Stranded in a moment, I can't decide in which direction to go. Minutes earlier I was testing first-graders on their ability to tell even numbers from odd. But now, due to school picture taking, I am left first-graderless, alone in an elementary school hallway. I am torn between the obligation to finish my allotted hour of parent volunteering and the need to be at home, hammering away on an article that's soon due. This is a day in the life.

I KID YOU NOT
BY
BEREN
DEMOTIER

As I ponder the weight of both responsibilities, parenting and publishing, I am wearing two badges. One is made of paper, sticky-backed with a dull green border. It indicates that I belong in the school and am not some monster mother stalking her noncustodial child. The other badge, the one telling me what I have to write about, is actually a ribbon. It honors a child who died yesterday.

Of course, he wasn't a child when he died. At 21, Matthew Shepard was on the cusp of manhood, no longer a college boy, but a college man. Nonetheless, he is someone's child. A child whose parents, because of someone's hate, won't get to see him graduate or fall in love or, perhaps, become a parent himself.

So I sit in the hallway of the school with a black ribbon pinned to my chest. Two friends, so moved and disturbed by the murder, stopped by last night to bring it to me. As I wave at all the

Black badge of courage

Can one lesbian mom plant the seeds of acceptance in impressionable kids?



students I recognize marching by on their way to appointments with photographic immortality, I wait for the inevitable question: Why are you wearing that ribbon? While they, these fresh-faced friends of my kids, might wonder about my ribbon, I wonder about them.

I wonder about when they will be 21-year-old college kids. Will they be the boys with a twisted idea of a good time or the man tied to a fence by hate? My being here today is certainly part of the big picture. Will the time donated by one lesbian mom who receives spontaneous

hugs from the first-grade boys make a difference? Will they remember and let it bring them back from the brink of disaster—their own and someone else's? I hope so.

I have written before that we are all one outing away from mortality. How true those words ring today. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time is the luck of the draw, and nothing in crime prevention journals prepares us for the hazards of living our own lives.

We are supposed to be safe in our schools, yet teachers and children are killed in alarming

numbers. We, as gay men and lesbians, are supposed to be safe in our bars or otherwise wrapped in our protective subculture. Yet anyone can attempt to pass, in order to lure someone with an open heart and unsuspecting mind to his death. When are we ever really safe, and how desperately do we need the illusion of safety?

I recently read a parenting book (and I read quite a few, when I'm not too busy actually parenting) that dedicated an entire chapter to worry and fear. This was good for me because I worry a lot. The gist of the chapter was that worry and fear can ruin your life. And, if you're a parent, it can ruin your children's lives as well. That chapter made me think about fear as an incredible weapon of destruction.

If we're living in fear all the time, it's hard to be organized or strong, and easy to be less than whole people. Yet despite the efforts of the men accused of killing Matthew Shepard, and those like them, we usually manage against the odds to live happy lives, which is perhaps the greatest slap in the face to those who would have us fade away and return to the closet. Or oblivion.

In my justifying-my-housewife-existence way, I reason that I can be part of that great big slap in the face by being at school today. Our presence in the schools, our uncloseted presence, shows the children who will be our future that we are not someone "other." We are not predators, perverts or pornography hounds. (At least, most of us aren't.) We are people. We are parents. We are pioneers in honesty with our children and in risking it all—jobs, homes, custody, lives—for what we believe in.

And that's a fine lesson to teach alongside mathematics any day.

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HAPPINESS

a film by Todd Solondz



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