

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

That's So Pretty, It Could Be Plastic

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In the classic holiday film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George and Mary walk home from the school dance in borrowed football attire and bathrobe. When George accidentally disrobes Mary by stepping on her garment, she hides in one of the two large, fully-flowered, hydrangea bushes that border a pathway. As an avid gardener, I assure you that the bushes were plastic, as are the flowering plants in most idyllic films. If everything is in bloom at the same time, and there are no yellowing leaves, or browning blossoms, you know for certain that nothing there is real. It's all plastic make-believe.

Because plastic flowers, or those made of silk, are so perfect, people sometimes see real flowers and comment, "That's so pretty, it could be plastic." If someone is always smiling the same way, regardless of the situation, they are said to have a "plastic smile."

This raises questions. Are our lives, our homes, our religion, our jobs, and our friends real, or are they so perfect that they're plastic? When we step back and honestly assess ourselves, can we say with integrity, "It's a wonderful life"?

In response to something I wrote recently about gender expression and our fear of stepping over the lines of what is considered acceptable behavior, a friend working in Tokyo responded:

"I find that lack of comfort or acceptance...is not limited to those who are gender queer. In Japan, the man who wears a suit in any color but black is viewed as non-conforming, and if done in an interview, questions would be raised on whether he was the right person for the job. The person who went to a university other than one of our target schools, the accountant who now wants to work in trading, the banker who took three years off to do something philanthropic - perhaps they are all 'queer' in that they don't conform to our normal expectations of who we think can do a particular job. And yet as a diversity manager, I can see that the research, and even our own experiences, shows us that it's because people don't conform to our normal expectations that they can contribute something different, essential to giving us an edge over our competition. Instinct and logic collide."

One of the reasons that Ray and I love watching historically accurate and realistic portrayals in films is that they give us a sense of what hardships were faced in lives far distant from our own. When there is deep, wet mud in the streets of the western town, and people get their shoes covered in muck as they navigate the planks of wood, we appreciate our sidewalks, even those that have cracks. We think creatively about how we would cope with these and other challenges. But when we see idyllic representations of other people's lives, we sometimes initially feel inadequate. "My garden has never looked like that." And then we remind ourselves that it's just plastic. The flowers are make-believe, as are their lives.

There was a recent piece in *The New York Times* about the challenges being faced by the curators of the African-American museum being planned for the Mall in Washington, D.C. The task at hand is

to capture reality, and not, as the article suggested, an unrealistic portrayal of black life such as is thought to be found about Native American life in that community's national museum. It apparently has a reputation for presenting a romanticized picture.

We gay and transgender people often romanticize our history, our culture, and our lives. We tend to make Harvey Milk into a plastic figure that had no faults or gay enemies. We shudder with frustration and embarrassment when there are news reports of famous married gay couples getting divorced. We feel additional pressure to have our yards win the blue ribbon from the Garden Club, particularly when we're the only gay people on the block.

Corporations feel the pressure to be perfect too. They want to get a 100% rating from the Human Rights Campaign on the Corporate Equality Index because they want to attract and retain talented gay and transgender people, and they want to get their share of the gay community's expendable income. Sometimes that means putting plastic hydrangea plants on the front walk. When companies incorporate into their policies everything that is asked of them by the gay and transgender community, the policies are so pretty that they can be plastic.

The man who directed the film "It's a Wonderful Life" was Frank Capra, and the reviews of the movie called it "Capra corn." The plastic flowers and the romanticism of the motion picture haven't deterred fans though.. We all love beautiful gardens and happy endings. But our gardens and our lives don't look like those presented by Capra, and that sets us up for feeling as if we're failures because we couldn't live up to the unrealistic standards set in plastic.

I understand the need to be perfect like plastic. As a public speaker on gay issues for thirty seven years, I spent most of my life worrying about what I wore, how I spoke, how happy I appeared, how I crossed my legs, how I reacted to hostility, how I spoke about my spirituality, how I described my family, how I managed my drinking and smoking, how I refrained from doing anything afterhours that would be considered "inappropriate by my hosts, how I responded to the needs of straight and gay audience members alike, etc. It exhausted me to be the perfect plastic gay person. It has only been through age, experience, and proper spiritual direction that I have been enabled to be honest, flawed, and real.

I like people who acknowledge their flaws, companies that say, "We need help," couples that don't hide their problems, flowers that have a scent, Japanese men who wear suits that aren't black, movies that capture the way things really were and are, and museums that are honest.

Life is wonderful when it's real, when time and energy are put into personal honesty, and when relationships with others are free of make-believe, no matter how pretty and perfect things seemed.