

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Ghosts in Smiles and Tears at the Wedding

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There were ghosts at the wedding on the beach in Fire Island, hovering above and around us, all smiling, many crying, reflecting the faces of the living souls who had assembled in the sand. Chris Garvin and Todd Sears, the young, gay grooms, in new suits for the occasion, were flanked by their small army of well-dressed, handsome, young, gay, and straight groomsmen, whose orientation you wouldn't know without asking. The gay ghosts were undoubtedly elbowing each other with approval. My parents' ghosts probably couldn't take their eyes away from the grooms' mothers and fathers.

History was being made in that moment as we created a cultural milestone together. This is the beach that at one time was restricted to straight people, because the early settlers of the island wanted it to be just for wholesome families. In the 1980s and 90s, the beach and nearby woods were the domain of young gay men who played sexually, finding family in quick, intimate encounters, never imagining anyone would ever think of them as wholesome or as a legitimate family. Most of that Fire Island generation is now ghosts, their lives cut short by a sexually transmitted virus that has had no cure. And here we were, enough years later that the young grooms could have been the sons or nephews of the deceased, celebrating as a wholesome family with the approving nod of the State of New York. The New York Times would no longer refer to them as "longtime companions".

Some of the living survivors of the AIDS pandemic stood in the group of 100 people who gathered at 5 p.m. on Saturday to witness their young friends solemnizing their marriage. So too were Chris and Todd's parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, fraternity brothers, college dorm mates, scuba diving friends, co-workers, neighbors, and their Fire Island housemates. Katie Couric was with us too, attending her first marriage of gay men. She told me that she thought I did a great job of performing the marriage in the name of love, just before the judge wedded them in the name of the state. It was Federal Judge Harold Baer's words, "By the authority vested in me by the State of New York..." that had all of the living and dead in tears.

As I pulled the wedding guests into a tight circle for the selected readings on love from *The Prophet* and *The Velveteen Rabbit*, I encouraged them to invite into our company whatever "Higher Power" that guided their lives, and all of the people that they wanted to be present. This could include relatives who refused to attend because of their religious beliefs and perhaps gay teens on the street who couldn't imagine a family that embraced their gay children.

The gay ghosts would probably have come on their own, but I invited them and Ray and my parents. In all of the time we have been married, unofficially and officially, our parents never met. I wanted them to sit on the benches with Chris and Todd's parents. I wanted them to see each other, and smile and cry, as we clapped and clapped for the kissing grooms.

There was a day when gay men described their love relationships with the song from South Pacific, "We Kiss in the Shadows". Though that is still true in Iran, where they recently hanged four gay men, and in many other parts of the world, it's no longer necessary in the United States, most especially on the beaches of Fire Island, or of Provincetown, where Ray and I live seasonally. Though the sky threatened to rain, there were no shadows hiding Chris and Todd's kiss from their parents or straight fraternity brothers.

Sometimes we take things in our lives for granted, such as the freedoms we enjoy. Especially the young often assume that life has always been like this for gay people. The bright, beautiful, young men who stood on the beach with us loved the ceremony but needed to be reminded that history was being made. The older, gay men in the group didn't need such reminding. They cried the hardest, and talked the most with me about how powerful the experience had been for them.

As we, the living, dispersed to attend the wedding celebration of great food, drink, toasts from parents and friends, and dance, the ghosts dispersed too, returning to wherever it is they live. All of them left satisfied and glad that they had made the effort to respond to our invitation. The gay male of the Pines talked about attending the next gay wedding on the beach. My folks and Ray's folks hugged before parting ways to keep their eyes on their respective families. All of the ghosts knew that one day each of the wedding guests would be joining them. And then we all would be hovering over future weddings in the sand, knowing that the footprints we left when we were alive had made it easier for these wholesome families to assemble with complete joy and full U.S. Government recognition.