

**EIP**

# Preachin' Pride Blues

Those of you who have read my work before, who know me, or who know of me, might reasonably expect this piece to be...vitriolic, shall we say? You may be bracing yourself for a story that starts with the sound of breaking glass and ends with "anyway, that's why there's a hellhound on my trail and I can't go back to Michigan." Well, unfortunately for what I'm sure are my legions of devoted fans, that's not going to be what this is about.

This article trades in the usual ranting about the stones in my passway for a discussion about the nature of Pride itself, about what it means. There's a reason this article is coming out now, and it's because Pride stretches far beyond the month of June. You may have seen, in a previous article I talked about the need for consistent discussion and representation outwith the "designated LGBT+ times" – this is a part of that.

Pride Month, Pride Parades, Pride Flags – they're the first things the world at large tends to think of when Pride starts being discussed. People recognise the existence of Pride as a concept, but all too often treat it as an entity that exists independently; a deity or demon, depending on their perspective, that can be appeased or celebrated through ritual or ceremony.

Pride doesn't exist on its own. Pride is stories. Pride is people. Pride is us.

Pride, this overarching concept, is composed of a thousand thousand stories, a tapestry of interwoven threads and experiences that combine to make everything that is this concept we venerate. These stories are as many and varied as the people who tell them – stories of laughter, music, tears of joy and sadness both. They are the stories of rocks thrown on the streets of New York, of kisses on Castro, of fists raised in defiance and arms lifted to the sky in celebration. They are beautiful, painful, stirring, heartbreaking, joyful, colourful. Hell, they're red hot. Most of all, **they are ours.**

The rainbow flag has flown high this past month. It's a beautiful symbol, that flag – like

that of any nation, it means a different thing to almost everyone who waves it, and it is vitally important that we, collectively, remember that the flag alone is nothing. That flag is more than bars of colour – it flies over the heads of a whole community, each with their own story and their own life. The flag is just the representation of all those stories, and if you'll forgive a little rambling on my mind, I'll share just one of them.

In San Francisco a few years back, I took a friend of mine to his first Pride event, purely because he'd never been and thought it sounded cool. He'd never been before, not because he'd ever harboured homophobic viewpoints or because he'd grown up in a little town out in the country and never been exposed to LGBT+ content, situations or concepts – so readers hoping for a dramatic and compelling reason will doubtless be disappointed. No, Dale had never been to Pride because, like the vast majority of people who haven't been to Pride "dunno, just never thought about it." This year, however, I'd mentioned I was going, so he asked if he could tag along. Of course he could. When you got a good friend, new experiences are part of the package.

We arrived, we mingled, we had a good time. Drinks were drunk, flags were waved, paint was applied, and generally a fun time was had. Pride events, for all else they may or may not be, are rarely less than a riotously good time. For the sake of length, however, the various exploits of the day are omitted from this retelling, though I'm sure I can recall them if you buy me a drink.

A few hours into the experience, we happened to run across a gentleman wearing a shirt with a simple slogan on it – Free Dad Hugs. Many of you may have seen this particular custom on the internet, and will not need it explained, but for those of you who are unfamiliar with the concept, the idea is that anyone wearing that shirt (typically an older, paternal gentleman) will be happy to hug you. It's a sad truth that even in our relatively more enlightened times, there are still far too many people who find themselves unable to coexist with LGBT+ individuals, and will go to lengths including evicting them from their childhood homes, disowning them, rejecting them entirely and cutting them off from their families – there are still far too many young people who desperately need a Dad Hug, and can't get one from their own dad. That's what this scheme is for – it can't properly replace family, but it can help.

We saw one man wearing this shirt and hugging people, and Dale asked what the story was – I provided the explanation above, albeit with slightly more detail. He, with a little laugh, suggested that it was more of a meme at this point than anything serious, right? People are more accepting now.

At that point in time, a young man who I would have placed at about 17, maybe 18 years old, caught sight of the man wearing the shirt, and collapsed into his arms crying.

Dale was slightly shocked.

The sudden awareness of just how many people still had to face these challenges that he, on some level, had thought of as a thing of the past, hit him so hard that we had to go and sit on a kerb for a little bit while he processed not only the sense of isolation and loss he'd just received a glimpse of, but the number of people feeling it. We talked, and I told him some other stories of my own – the kind of stories I alluded to back at the start of this piece. It was, I think, a lot for him to take in.

While we sat there, a little bit outside the main celebration, we got talking to others – people who felt overwhelmed, people on their own who didn't know anyone and felt lonely, those who didn't know what they were "meant to do." One girl wanted so badly, she said, to feel like she belonged, but she'd never been here before and now she felt like she was an outsider. Everyone else had flags and face paint and some had amazing costumes – she didn't. One guy was in his 50s and felt like he'd missed the chance to celebrate properly. Almost everyone else was younger than him, he explained – he felt like he was too old, too settled, to embrace the celebrations properly.

We sat. We talked, we listened. Those who needed reassurance were reassured, those who wanted encouragement received it. Writing everything that was said out in full would be exhausting, so I won't – suffice it to say that by the time we headed back, we had amassed a whole group of people finding a little extra camaraderie, company and safety. We celebrated, together – we danced, sang, shouted and waved, partied from four til late – all of us somehow, intangibly, more a part of Pride than we had been before.

That story, in itself, encapsulates something that I feel is fundamental to Pride – people coming together. We gather, we laugh, we cry, and we weave our stories together until they become a vital part of something much larger than any of us. We come together, we build this thing that is Pride, and then we all engage in it together. It's a challenge and a celebration rolled together and doused in rainbows, but it is, fundamentally, something that is of us. It doesn't exist without us, without our stories. All of us, sitting at that crossroads in San Francisco, needed our stories to come together to knit us into the rest of the event. Pride happened for other people, but until we did our part – poured our own need and longing and love and, well, pride, into that great mix – Pride didn't touch us. It doesn't exist on its own – it exists because of who we are, who we choose to be, and what we choose to do. Pride is us.

The month, the parade, the flag. They're all wonderful, and the increased visibility and respect they are accorded is a fantastic sign of progress towards true equality, have no doubt – but they aren't Pride, they aren't the thing itself. They're symbols, sigils, representations of this massive gestalt expression of every single person who stands under and with that LGBT+ banner. Celebrating them is fine, but we cannot ever – ever – lose sight of what Pride is, and what it is supposed to be about. Pride is not about caring about a flag, it's about caring about those the flag stands for. It's never about the spectacle of the parade, it's about the people in it, it's about why that parade is there. The month is about Pride, but Pride is not that month.

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