

What is the Meaning of a Flag?

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If I were to extend this question to the general public, I would expect answers involving one's country of origin or residence, collective identity, a sense of communal belonging, and even the spirit of resistance. And these would all be veracious and valid responses, parallel to the ones that I too would conjure up in my mind.

It is to say "this is who we are".

It is to say "you are welcome here".

Aside from the passive connections I felt to the flags of my country and my state, I had never deeply considered or appreciated the meaning of a flag until several years ago.

Not until an arbitrary balmy Tuesday in the middle of June did a flag ever hold intense significance to me. Not until I saw a flash of rainbow fabric nestled in the foliage outside of my aunt and uncle's home did the presence of a simple flag strike such a chord in my chest.

I'd seen pride flags before, hung from porches and waving in the wind at parades, but never had one affected me quite like this. To encounter one in a place that I did not expect, wordlessly declaring the support of those who raised me disarmed me in ways I could hardly verbalize. Suddenly a flag meant something new entirely.

It is to say "we love you and all that you are".

It is to say "you need not fear judgement within these walls".

Seeing that tiny, inconspicuous splash of color breaking through the sea of green gave birth to possibilities that I had hardly dared to entertain. It spoke of a life unfettered by secrets and uncertainty, unclouded by the belief that my family must remain ignorant of such an innate element of my being.

Could it really be that easy?

Could acceptance come so effortlessly?

It winded me like a punch to the sternum; their clear, painless liberality. Their willingness to openly display allyship for a community to which they did not even belong, their public assertion of approval. For everyone else in the cul-de-sac under the blanket of the summer

sun it was a mundane weekday, no more notable than the others that dragged on before it. For me, it was the tentative prospect of everything I had never gambled to hope for.

In the naïve folly of my youth I implied “it” to my mother once, the fragile outlines of the words, dancing around the subject without daring to touch. *Sin! Oh, most grievous sin!* She wept, of course, torn and conflicted and insisted that I never divulge my nature in the presence of her family -hadn’t I thought of what this would make her look like, as a mother and a Catholic? *Sin!*- and we never spoke of it again. It was with this tight-lipped silence that I resigned myself to carrying the weight of my secret, never once thinking that those of my mother’s own blood would grant me the space to unshoulder this burden. Her revulsion set the precedent for how I expected those around me, who had held me to their breasts as a babe as if I were their own, to react to the fact of who I was, who I loved.

It had never occurred to me that members of my family would look past that ancient line in the Bible and wholeheartedly embrace me without a grimace haunting their faces; it had never occurred to me that there could be anything other than a life of shameful secrecy, granted truth only after time had buried those who could not accept what I could not change.

I yearned -and still do- for the approval, the respect of those who brought me up in this world. To know that there were two less people of the generations before me to which I would have to justify my being, to whom I would have to attempt to win over, to remind that I am still their daughter, their niece, their granddaughter was a relief so great that the sheer force of it nearly caved my chest in.

They were braver than I, my aunt and uncle, raised in a time where homosexuality carried more taboo than it does today, and yet they displayed their approval, they flew that flag, despite the uncertainty of reception from their family, their siblings, their parents. They were braver than I, but perhaps their courage could feed my own. Perhaps it is time to stop hiding.

“What does it matter? It’s just a flag.”

Just a piece of colorful fabric stapled to a wooden stick, sitting innocuously amongst the flowers, its rainbow hues echoing their own. But for the first time, careful furtiveness was not the only option; from one simple swatch of vibrant cloth bloomed the prospect of an existence I had only ever prayed for in the dead of night under the cover of my duvet, lest the world hear me hoping. It meant freedom, authenticity, the ability to stand in the light of

day and be seen, genuinely, fully, and loved just the same by people who were integral parts of my life.

For many years I had ignored the reality of who I was, kept it under lock and key with no intention of ever airing the truth, and I had thought that I was content to have parts of me remain secret, known only to me and the partner whose name I never disclosed, safe behind closed doors.

I told myself that I was an inherently discreet person, that I had no desire to introduce the one I loved to the ones who made me who I am.

I told myself that I preferred to live and love in private, that I never wanted a wedding or an engagement or a life where my girlfriend became my wife and swapped stories over the dinner table with my family, where all those that I hold dear could exist in the same room.

I told myself that I wouldn't mind when my brother eventually brought home a girl and my parents welcomed her with open arms, without a second thought.

I told myself that it wouldn't sting to watch them get married, all of our relatives gathered in a reception hall with unstrained smiles, no underlying tension about the morality of their nature clogging the air.

I told myself that it was easier this way.

I told myself these lies with the desperate hope that I would one day believe them, that I could exist without the weight of this secret rotting beneath my ribs.

A tongue bitten a hundred times over, a truth swallowed down even though its bitterness still lingers.

And then one summer afternoon in the face of a rainbow flag, I could lie to myself no longer. The words that had been festering behind my teeth for so long finally sought the open air, and yet, the world did not end. The truth clawed its way out of me to lay raw and vulnerable at my feet, and two pairs of loving hands were there swaddle it close and hold us both in this terrifying newness. The world did not end.

Perhaps it really is no more than a flag to others, barely an afterthought worth acknowledging, but to me and others like me it represents much more; it is to say that you are loved, accepted, not in spite of who you are or with begrudging concession, but unconditionally, without question.

To those of us, the silent ones, the ones who have not yet found the courage to publicly declare who we are, those of us that must still live our truths in secret, the quiet existence of these flags speaks volumes. To you it may just be twelve cents worth of fabric curled around a flimsy wooden rod, stuck into the earth with little significance, but to us it is a wordless beacon of hope, a sign that our most clandestine parts may find acceptance.

It is to say “you are welcome here”.