

"Standing Together"

By Steve Brown

"Will you raise your glasses, please, for my beautiful daughter and her fabulous wife?"

Our daughter's initial coming-out-as-gay moment arrived during a surprise visit one day. She had found love with another woman and the time had arrived to share the good news with family.. We loved her girlfriend easily with her ballcap, bangs, glasses, sparse conversation, and most of all, the happiness she brought to our daughter and to our family with her gentle presence.

The wedding was planned well in advance and all the choices and preparations became a favorite activity for the two of them.

At last I was excited to be onstage after the wedding ceremony, with 200 guests ready to celebrate at the reception. It was my turn to speak, as the other dad completed his toast to our newlyweds and cheerfully handed me the mic.

My float story was going to be the hook in my brief speech. First, though, I declared my love for my new daughter-in-law whom I tend to talk to for hours, bless her heart. Next, I expressed my delight about their marriage, and then told the story.

"When our daughter came out to her mom and me as gay," I began, "my heart was full of joy because she had found love. In that moment I was confident that she had the courage to live the life of an LGBTQIA person without reservation.

"One thing I appreciate about my daughter is her activism. She discovers and supports causes. So, weeks later, to demonstrate support and relate to her activism, I bragged to her that I had watched the Atlanta Pride Parade from our home church on Peachtree Street. I handed out water to the parade marchers like we always do. I had watched a colorful float go by from the company where I work, with people I know onboard, waving ...

"She had an impassive look on her face and didn't take a full beat before challenging me, 'Why weren't you ON the float?'"

The crowd roared with laughter and although I, too, awkwardly smiled before continuing, I knew the rhetorical question was profound.

My daughter-in-law's dad and I had had a great conversation at the rehearsal dinner in our back yard last night and he talked about how much harder life would be for our girls had they fallen in love 20 years ago. I had agreed that it was wonderful for them to be able to simply marry.

Reflecting more overnight, I realized how much courage and support our children would need in an .American culture still polarized in so many ways.

And so, as I stood to salute the bride and bride, surrounded by beautiful gardens and the lake, I raised my glass both to acknowledge their love and the wonder of their beautiful union both, as well as to condemn the ugly and vile pockets of discrimination and hate that still exist against LGBT folk in the world.

"Here, here!" I raised my glass higher, "...and we must ALL help make this society a safer and more welcoming place for ALL our children."

"So, I want to ask YOU to commit to joining me in finding ways WE can support not only *these* lovely brides, but *all* LGBT people in the world. If you agree to help in this worthy cause, when I say 'we are all in this together,' I'd like you to join in by saying the word 'together' in unison."

"So please raise your glasses, to the bride and bride! We are all in this 'TOGETHER!!!'" The crowd erupted and glasses clinked all over the venue.

After speaking, I left the stage and, noticing my bourbon was gone, headed quietly back to the bar for a refill before rejoining my wife.

The bartender filled my glass and as he handed it to me, hesitated very slightly to make eye contact and say, "I want to thank you for what you said out there. It really meant a lot to me."

Surprised and moved by his expression of gratitude, I found the words, "I'm so glad. Thank you for saying that."

There were many warm handshakes and greetings as I headed back to the party floor. A server, and another stopped me to thank me for my words and call to action. While 'I' had been primarily focused - in my moment of toasting - on our children, so many "others" among the wedding guests and catering staff really *heard* what I said and *felt* my words.

One close friend of my daughter, a young woman in a black tuxedo, sporting a striking buzz-cut hair style and a roguish swagger, engaged me. She held my right hand and looked me in the eye saying, "thank you for what you said. I am so surprised because I would never expect to hear that from someone from your... demographic."

And then, one-by-one, others reached out to earnestly thank me, each seeming to linger with an almost desperate hunger for a cultural ally. I was humbled and honored by each small encounter, and keenly present to how genuine it felt to empathize with this Beloved community,

and how noble it felt to serve as an ally if only in these brief moments.

Later on, my two youngest girls came up to me on the dance floor and hugged me with abandon at the same time, smiling and happy. They were pulling me over in two different directions, enthusiastic still about my comments hours earlier, and I was aware of being extraordinarily happy and filled with love.

Emotions typically come in sequence, and my delight was soon followed by slight regret as I recognized that I was still not regularly "on the float" as my daughter had put it.

While my life has been graced by wonderful gay friends and colleagues over the years, I had not been doing enough to support the LGBT community. I had an epiphany in that moment that I no longer want to be invisible or to be perceived as "that demographic." I want to be a better friend, ally, stepdad and father-in-law. I want to identify clearly as an authentic ally, prepared to bravely show up, fiercely speak up, and get on that float for all my LGBT family, friends and community members.

<end>