



STONEWALL STRONG

GAY MEN'S HEROIC FIGHT
FOR RESILIENCE, GOOD HEALTH, AND
A STRONG COMMUNITY

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CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE



God Loves Us, Too

The Inside Truth About Religion and Homosexuality

The young black and Latino guys at the Magic Johnson Clinic at Carl Bean House in Los Angeles aren't likely to be thinking about the *name* of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation clinic. Sure, everyone knows Magic Johnson's story about coming out as HIV-positive in 1991 and leaving his brilliant basketball career. But a black preacher-slash-gospel-slash-disco-singer taking buses and subways around Los Angeles in the 1980s, ministering to black gay men dying from AIDS, won't likely come to mind as they await their STD testing or results. The story of Carl Bean House is lived every day. So is the story of Carl Bean himself, and it's a story of profound faith.

"I really believe resilience for me, faith for me, has far more to do with practical experience," said Reverend Bean in our interview for this book. "Seeing the practical experience of the faith idiom lived out. That is what makes me resilient. I don't think you just get that from hearing Bible verses. We had to see people *live* their faith experiences."

Bean lived *his* faith by forming the Unity Fellowship in South Central LA, the first Christian denomination for LGBT people of color, and its Minority AIDS Project, the nation's first HIV-AIDS service organization run by and for people of color. "Unfortunately the institution became more important than the practicality of living [faith] day-to-day," said Bean. "When they say 'the church' today, they aren't talking about people who ascribe to living a certain way in the world, they're talking about the institution. So we see protecting the institution while children are being molested—rather than challenging people according to what they *do*."¹

Bean is one among the multitudes of gay men and other sexual minority people of faith whose religious beliefs and spiritual values shape and drive their lives. Their lived faith challenges the erroneous view that “all” LGBT people are antireligion, or that all religion is antigay.

The false dichotomy between “religion” and “gay” owes significantly to the news media’s overreliance on conservative evangelical antigay commentators, as a 2012 GLAAD report on religious voices in mainstream media stories about LGBT equality makes clear. Antigay religious conservatives have shaped a public perception of “all” of us as unanimously antireligion—and all religion as unanimously antigay. It’s simply not the case, even within the LGBT community. There is a widespread perception that where it comes to religion and homosexuality, they are best left separate. But that is not the reality for a substantial number of us.

GLAAD’s three-year study of mainstream news coverage about the intersection of religion and LGBT-related issues showed the media overwhelmingly quoted or interviewed sources from evangelical Christian and Roman Catholic organizations to speak about LGBT people’s lives. Although evangelicals account for 26 percent of the U.S. population, evangelical organizations comprised 50 percent of all religious organizations cited by the media. Not only that, but evangelicals accounted for almost 40 percent of all the negative comments about LGBT issues made by religiously identified spokespeople. Those speaking on behalf of the Roman Catholic hierarchy contributed another 12 percent. Most pro-LGBT sources were presented without any religious affiliation—reinforcing the erroneous impression of a fierce wall of fire between “religion” and “gay.”²

That wall is far less fierce than many in the LGBT community itself might suspect. In fact, a 2015 Pew Research Center report, called *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, found that an impressive 59 percent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Americans (the study didn’t assess transgendered individuals) consider themselves “people of faith”—the largest percentage (48 percent) of whom are Christian. Another 11 percent identify with faiths other than Christianity, particularly Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism.

It’s especially interesting to note that Pew’s survey of more than thirty-five thousand Americans found that the percentage of adults over age eighteen who describe themselves as Christians dropped nearly eight percentage points in the seven years since its previous survey, from 78.4 percent in 2007, to 70.6 percent in 2014. Over that time, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated Americans—describing themselves as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”—jumped more than six points, from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent.³

So what's going on? When Americans are moving away from religion, how is it so many LGBT people consider themselves people of faith, or at least affiliated with a faith community? The numbers make clear the inaccuracy of claiming that "all" gay people reject religious faith—or that "all" religious faiths reject gay people.

Fortunately for those gay men inclined toward one of the "organized" religions, or simply a spiritual approach to life, change is as visible as the rainbow flag outside a local "welcoming" congregation. "The change may be due to the fact that the rising tide of LGBT acceptance is allowing more people in conservative communities to come out who wouldn't have a generation ago," said Matthew Vines, author of *God and the Gay Christian*, in an interview with the *Advocate* about the Pew study. "Especially for LGBT people who greatly value marriage, family, and community, the legalization of marriage equality makes a major difference in their ability to be able to envision a future for themselves that makes coming out worth the cost. As they continue to come out in higher numbers in the years to come, they will likely cause the number of religiously affiliated LGBT Americans to rise, and they will also help to build a bridge for other LGBT people to re-engage with faith if they wish to do so."⁴

Of course *many* wish to do so, as the Pew study suggests. Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), for decades has ministered to the spiritual wounds of LGBT people and their oppressors. He has seen, and helped exorcise, a lot of religious pain. He doesn't make light of the pain, nor does he recommend throwing away your own spirituality because a particular denomination disapproves of your sexuality—even if that denomination is the one you grew up in. "Being a spiritual person doesn't mean you have to join a church," he said in our interview for this book. For Perry it all comes down to three things: hope, healing, and heaven. "I always want to give people hope, not throw the baby out with the bathwater," he said. "No matter what you've been taught you can still be spiritual. You can still find your spirituality. Work it out for yourself. You don't have to listen to anybody else."

We all need healing, said Perry, "because there's still oppression sickness in our community." He explained, "We're not like other minority groups. An African American family has other African Americans. Other families are taught their stories; our kids have to be taught and re-taught over and over again, because they never hear the story, that we have a history, that we have made a difference."

Which brings us to heaven. "You can have heaven right here, right now," said Perry. "We don't have to wait till we die. I believe in the hereafter, but I believe we can have some of it here, now."⁵

James Melville (“Mel”) White flashed into public awareness like a bolt from the heavens in 1994, when the former ghostwriter for the Revs. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Billy Graham came out as a gay man. He had already been installed on Pride Sunday, June 27, 1993, as Dean of the Cathedral of Hope Metropolitan Community Church in Dallas—the largest LGBT-oriented congregation anywhere, serving approximately ten thousand congregants in the Dallas area. At his installation, Reverend White proclaimed, “I am gay. I am proud. And God loves me without reservation.”

White’s bestselling 1994 book *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America* was a revelation for many Americans, including many gay Americans. It exposed the fact that we truly *are* everywhere—even, in Mel White’s case, in the good graces of America’s best-known evangelicals and outspoken homophobes. Until he chose honesty, that is.

Publication of his memoir inspired public soul-searching on both sides of the alleged gay-religion wall. It also launched the next phase of White’s diverse career. After three decades that had included teaching communication and preaching at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in California, and producing dozens of documentaries and other media projects, White and his partner, now husband, Gary Nixon, formed Soul Force, Inc. The group is dedicated to teaching Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.’s principles of nonviolence and organizing people of faith to do justice and confront religious leaders whose antigay rhetoric White believes “leads to the suffering and death of God’s lesbian and gay children.”

Little more than a month after he was appointed national “minister of justice,” an unsalaried position for the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, White was arrested February 15, 1995, for “trespassing” at Pat Robertson’s CBN Broadcast Center. National news media followed the story of his arrest, twenty-two-day prison fast, and what White called the “little victory” that followed. After his fast, Robertson visited White in jail and then went on the air to say clearly that he “abhorred the growing violence against gay and lesbian people.” White later said, “Pat Robertson is not our enemy. He is a victim of misinformation, like we all have been. In the spirit of Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., we must go on believing that Pat and the others can change.”⁶

I asked Mel White in an interview for this book how he survived the slander and attempted character assassination that followed his coming out—coming as it was from the evangelical world, the right wing, that had been his world all his life. First of all, he said the term *evangelical* itself is problematic because of its close associations with homophobia. Even the word *Christian* is suspect. “Basically the term *Christian* is no longer germane,

helpful, or even safe to use,” said White. “We can use it in closed circles, behind closed doors. But we don’t want to admit it in public because the definition has gone terribly awry.”

That doesn’t mean White has rejected his Christian faith. When he and his son Mike White appeared in two episodes of CBS’s show *The Amazing Race*, White answered the question about whether he is a Christian, saying, “No I am not a Christian as it is popularly defined. I am a mediocre follower of a first-century Jewish carpenter.” In fact, he attributes his own resilience to a “very personal relationship with Jesus.” He explains that his understanding of Jesus was formed when he was just a boy. “Jesus was always nonjudgmental, a friend, a mentor, a buddy,” he said. “My relationship with Jesus was not about sin. That was at ten or eleven years old at the altar, but after that it was Jesus and me all the way.”

That relationship has drawn richly from White’s imagination, and he’s the first to say so. When he was at the Cathedral of Hope, living in an area outside Dallas the locals avoided because of its KKK history, White said, “The long country roads gave me a chance to take long walks. I always pictured Jesus walking with me, talking with me. No matter how sophisticated we may be, it comes back to that. I’m a little embarrassed to say this, but I talk to Jesus every day.” For good measure, he said he also sometimes would walk with Gandhi, too. “When reading deeply in Gandhi, I would talk with the guy. I would say the same thing of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi, they walk with me.”

One time imagination became real, when White was in jail for his trespassing violation at Pat Robertson’s studios. “I was fasting twenty-one days,” White told me, “and I was a basket case. I would just pray and cry. I was in solitary confinement and for a white boy with privilege and entitlements, well, I would just cry. My cell would fill up with all these people. In that room were all the people I admire and they were all looking at me, quizzically, like, ‘What is wrong with you?’ It was as if they were saying, ‘Are you kidding? This is what you wanted—the chance to make your point in a dramatic way.’”

As real as the figures seemed, White said he is “okay thinking it was just my imagination” because in fact his imagination “did wonderful things for me.” At that point in our conversation, White choked up a bit talking about how his vision had given him strength to carry on in the face of near-constant public condemnation from the evangelical community he had been such a deep part of. “Jesus is the one person I know about who is absolutely accepting, especially of the outcasts,” he said. “Jesus was an outcast. God came to earth as an outcast, and could have come as a king. That story has

always held me close. I feel like a leper some time. Well, Jesus met with a lot of lepers.” Somehow, added White, “with all my right-wing propensities, the church’s craziness, they gave me that Jesus. That was the church’s gift to me with all their sickness. If you want to talk about resilience, that’s all I’ve got for you, that Jesus pulled me through—and it was my imagination, my understanding, my vision, of Jesus that did it.”⁷

Anyone who thinks Mel White’s faith is only in his head is advised to visit his website (melwhite.org), where the notion of anything otherworldly is dispelled at once. You learn quickly the reverend’s faith is deeply rooted in an understanding of social justice that goes back to, well, Jesus. He can’t abide injustice, precisely like the first-century Jewish carpenter himself. White’s book *Holy Terror: Lies the Christian Right Tells to Deny Gay Equality* (originally published in hardcover as *Religion Gone Bad*) goes inside the fundamentalist leaders’ “holy war” against sexual minorities. In an email message White said, “The book clearly illustrates from an LGBTQ perspective a twenty-five-year history of the religious right in their rush to control the U.S. government that ultimately succeeded with the election of Donald Trump.”⁸

Prominently featured on the website at the time of this writing in early 2017 is a link to *How to Resist Extremism!: A Pocket Guide to the Practice of Relentless Nonviolent Resistance*. The image on the cover is titled, “Learning how to protest is learning how to live.” The guide is a bible of how-to information for Americans committed to fighting injustice in all its manifestations in our country, including LGBTQ rights—but also in such other areas as women’s rights, immigration, voting rights, the environment, prison reform, seniors, gun reform, and health care reform.⁹

This list of progressive priorities pulls together the political vision of equality and social justice long championed by the LGBT movement, the moral tenets of White’s and millions of others’ personal understanding of faith, a vision of a society that embraces its diversity, and a further fulfillment of the American founders’ own vision of a “more perfect union.” You might say it’s the real “homosexual agenda”—the moral force behind the political movement, the power behind many of the community’s leading figures, and the source of tremendous comfort and inspiration during the darkest of times.

When Sharon Kleinbaum in 1992 became the first rabbi for Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in Manhattan, the nation’s largest LGBT-focused Jewish congregation was staggering under the impact of AIDS on its gay male members. “I was thirty-three years old and I was burying my age cohort,” Kleinbaum told me in a May 2016 interview at the CBST’s impressive new sanctuary and office space on Thirtieth Street, dedicated only weeks earlier. “We lost at least forty percent of the male members of CBST,” she said.

Kleinbaum recalled ministering to a Jewish man who was closeted, married to a woman, and developed AIDS. He was convinced God was punishing him as he was dying. “I spent a lot of time with people from that kind of background, trying to convince them to believe in a different kind of God,” said Kleinbaum. She believes that CBST, and progressive faith communities like it, play an important role in helping people “not give up on religion but to transform it, to become a different kind of religion.”

The religion she practices takes doing justice seriously, as another of Kleinbaum’s early recollections with CBST shows. “When I came here, I had to fight with Jewish funeral homes to bury anyone [who died from AIDS] with dignity,” she said. “They were burying them in plastic body bags, which is against Jewish law and custom.” Another AIDS memory: “We would sometimes do separate funerals where the community that actually knew the person could speak about them in the fullness of their lives, and not pretend it was cancer.”

Still another remembered experience that brought the light of faith into a very dark place: “I did a wedding, before it was legal, for a congregant who was dying from AIDS,” said Kleinbaum. “He couldn’t get out of bed and his partner sat next to him on his hospital bed. A deli platter was brought into the hospital room. He died a few days later. The dignity and love and sense of humanity in that hospital room was spectacular. It was so inspiring, such a hopeful feeling of being powerful, not victims.”¹⁰

When CBST dedicated its new home on April 3, 2016, now–Senior Rabbi Kleinbaum wrote in the official dedication program, “Our commitment to spiritual seeking is matched by our commitment to social justice, and we act on our commitments. The world needs spiritual renewal and it cries out for racial and economic justice. At CBST, we take both prayer and activism seriously. Our home is expansive, inclusive, and notable.”¹¹

That is precisely the argument Imam Daayiee Abdullah makes about Islam. Believed to be the only openly gay imam in the Americas, the Georgetown law degree–holding, Detroit-born, and Southern Baptist–bred son of a postman and a school teacher came out at age fifteen and discovered Islam at age thirty-three, while he was studying in China. His first Quran was in Mandarin. He converted, and went on to study the religion in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.

“Islam adapts to culture,” Abdullah said in an interview over coffee in Washington, D.C., where he lives and serves as the spiritual leader of the Light of Reform Mosque, a congregation of mostly LGBT Muslims. Abdullah’s experience of coming to Islam by way of China was fortuitous because China already had a long history of gay emperors and military leaders.

“When Islam came in, it didn’t affect their Muslimhood,” said Abdullah, unlike the harsh fundamentalist Saudi Arabia-style Wahabi (think Sharia law). Abdullah said the fundamentalists “get mad because they know I know that translations are slanted” to support their antigay prejudice.

I knew Abdullah would be busy the week of our interview in light of the Orlando shooting the previous weekend. In fact his phone buzzed with calls from people wanting his time. He said the shooter Omar Mateen’s goal was to turn groups against one another. He wanted to divide the community by its differences. Instead his heinous act had the opposite effect. Said Abdullah, “Queer, Moslem, black, Asian, Disney—all communities—are working together in coalition. This is why the response was so quick.”

A 2013 Aljazeera America profile of Abdullah focused mainly on the positive aspects of his faith and work. But it still included the kind of obligatory antigay comments so many in the media feel obliged to include, as the GLAAD study showed, in this case from conservative Muslims rather than fundamentalist Christians. Some local imams have refused to greet him, and others across the country have complained his work performing same-sex marriages—fifty as of the article’s publication—is not “legitimate” and he should “control his urges.”¹²

LGBT people of faith, regardless of their particular affiliation or religious labels, consistently affirm pluralism, community, and a shared commitment to doing justice and showing mercy—precisely the values organized religions espouse even if they are not always practiced. They largely ascribe to the rituals and traditions of their faith, including the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups seen here. But unlike more traditional approaches to religious faith, there is genuine room for the singular experience of the individual believer. Each person truly is regarded as a unique and welcomed expression of God and the “human rainbow.” As Imam Abdullah puts it, “There is room for dialogue and discussion, but too often religious organizations take the position of *authority*. Well, the authority is the *text* and then you read it through *your* experience.”¹³

This open-hearted view of faith, and the essential role of personal experience in shaping it, clashed head on with the traditional top-down approach when V. Gene Robinson on November 2, 2003, was consecrated as the Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire. The first openly gay bishop in any major Christian denomination that claims its bishops descend from Jesus’s apostles became a lightning rod for every homophobic attack imaginable.

The Episcopal Church, the U.S. portion of the global Anglican Communion, has only 1.8 million members in the United States. But it has had an outsized role in American public life since it was the leading denomina-

tion in the thirteen original colonies. It has been the denomination of more American presidents than any other. Likewise Robinson's consecration in New Hampshire has had an outsized role in forcing the Episcopal Church, and the global Anglican Communion, to choose sides. Either it had to stand fast for its understanding of Christian faith and justice by supporting LGBT people or bend to the condemnations from conservative bishops in the United States and the developing world. The church made its choice: in January 2016, the Anglican Communion voted to suspend the Episcopal Church from voting and decision making for three years because of the American church's support for same-sex marriage.¹⁴

Even before the Episcopal bishops could consider Robinson after his election in New Hampshire back in 2003, charges of sexual misconduct were filed against him, one for harassment and another for allegedly being linked to a porn website. "I was locked away in my hotel room while this was being investigated," Robinson told me in an interview for this book. "A priest from my diocese brought me a small calligraphed framed piece. 'Sometimes God calms the storm, but sometimes God lets the storm rage and calms his child,' it said."

Unbeknownst to the priest, another priest had already sent Robinson an aerial photo of a hurricane in the Atlantic. Among the swirling clouds, and right in the center, was a clear blue sky. "Being at the center of the storm while the storm raged around me became the mantra by which I survived," said Robinson. He later persuaded his editor to title his 2007 memoir *Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God* because, said Robinson, "I wanted to indicate that I didn't believe I brought myself to that calm eye of the storm, but only God could do that."

Robinson told me he didn't see himself as courageous in leading the way or abiding the bullying he endured—the death threats, twenty-four-hour bodyguards, "all that stuff," as he put it. "I just thought of it as doing the next right thing, putting one foot in front of the other and knowing I could always change course." In fact, he said, he was so calm that he took an hour's nap before the consecration. "That is how palpably close God felt and how calm I felt despite the storm raging around me. That is what sustained me during that time." What a time it was, with news headlines across the world about the controversy over a gay man who claimed the equal right to God's love. One "Christian" newspaper called Robinson's consecration "A Day of Infamy." There was much worse, too.

But the highly public character crucifixion of the most divisive figure in Anglican church history since Jesus wasn't Vicky Gene Robinson's first experience of suffering—or profound resilience.

Born to poor sharecropping tobacco farmers in Kentucky, he began life on earth with a massive birth injury. The pediatrician told him when he was about thirteen that he'd had to "mash" the newborn's misshapen head back into a roundish shape so his twenty-year-old mother wouldn't be terrified looking in his coffin. He wasn't expected to live, so his parents combined the girl's name they had picked, after his paternal grandfather Victor, and Gene from his mother's name Imogene. "There was a time I was quite bent on changing it," said Robinson of his name. "I hated it." But like growing into one's features with age and development, he said, "I never quite got all the paperwork to change my name. Every time I sign my name 'V. Gene' I remember my history." So did his mom. "Mother had always said she thought God had saved me for something," said Robinson. "She gave me a card on the night of the consecration that says, 'Now I guess we know what it was.'"

Nineteen bishops, led by Robert Duncan, the Episcopal bishop of Pittsburgh, warned in a statement of a possible schism between the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion over Robinson's consecration. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said he expected it "will inevitably have a significant impact on the Anglican Communion throughout the world and it is too early to say what the result of that will be." While Peter Akinola, archbishop of Nigeria, led the anti-Robinson bishops in Africa, Desmond Tutu, the archbishop *emeritus* of Cape Town known for his generous, embracing understanding of God's love, stated that he did not see what "all the fuss" was about, saying the election would not roil the Church of the Province of Southern Africa.¹⁵

"If you are absolutely certain of God's love, then everything else turns out to be very small potatoes," said Robinson, looking back from retirement. "Keeping that in mind, everything got put into perspective for me. So it didn't matter that the archbishop of Kenya said that I was unconsecrated, or that Satan entered the church, or that the archbishop of Nigeria said gay people are lower than dogs. I'm a child of God and nothing can take that away." If you believe that, he added, "It will all roll off you like water off a duck's back."

I wondered how Robinson would convey this kind of faith and resilience to younger gay men. "Obviously I come at this from the world of institutional religion," he said. "Everybody comes to church looking for God, and what we give them is 'church.' I tell LGBT audiences all the time: Don't ever confuse the church and God. The church often gets it wrong and God never does. If you tell people to believe in the church, you spend most of your time talking about religion when in fact the thing that will stand people in good stead is a relationship with God. If you're talking about candles, liturgy, architecture,

politics, you're not equipping people either for a satisfying life or accomplishing anything good."

Robinson said he'd recently been thinking about the religious hymns he grew up with, like "Blessed Assurance." He didn't care for them back then. "I used to run screaming away from them," he said. "They represented everything I hated: old-time religion, where people didn't have a brain." He has reconsidered. "I think those hymns got it right," he explained. "So the effect of blessed assurance is the ability to withstand almost anything because if you are certain of God's love for you, there is almost nothing you can't do."¹⁶

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