Meet Pioneer of Gay Rights, Harry Hay

His should be a household name.

by Anne-Marie Cusac

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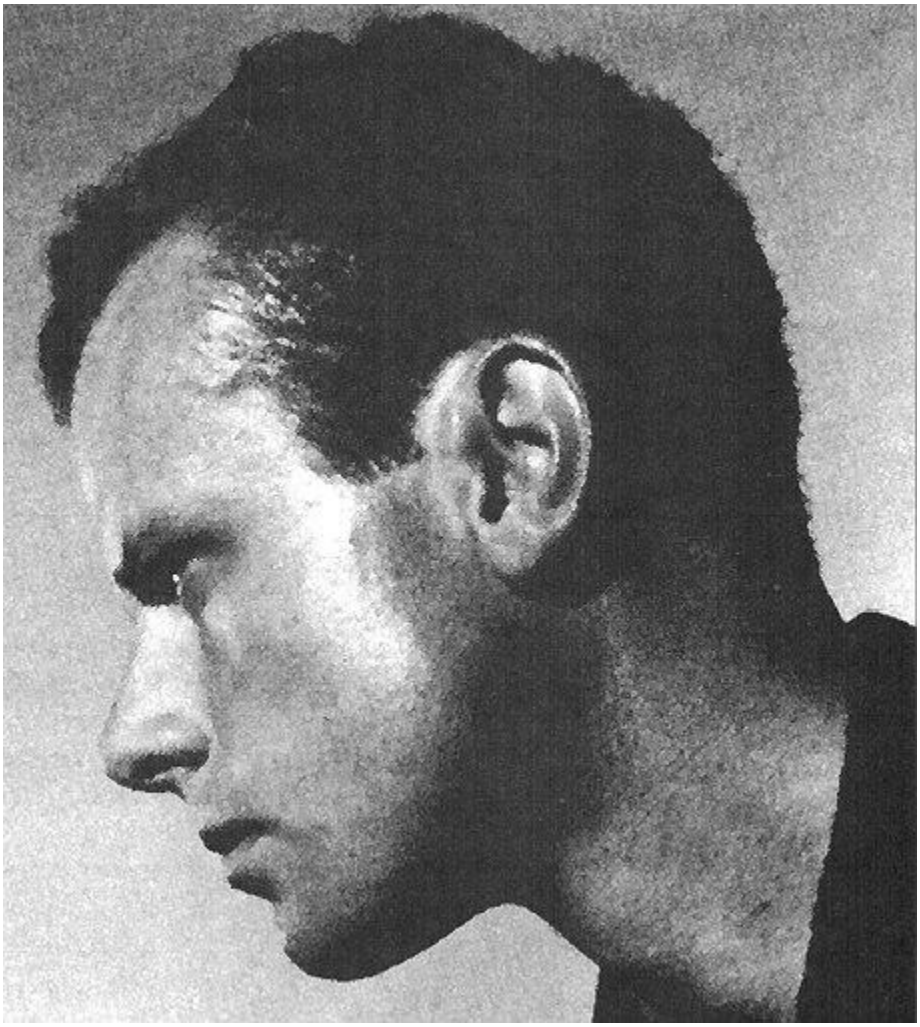

H*arry Hay is the founder of gay liberation. This lovely interview with Hay by Anne-Marie Cusac was published in the September 1998 issue of* The Progressive *magazine. Then-editor Matt Rothschild called Hay "a hero of ours," writing that he should be a household name. He wrote: "This courageous and visionary man launched the modern gay-rights movement even in the teeth of McCarthyism." In 1950 Hay started the first modern gay-rights organization, the underground Mattachine Society, which took its name from a dance performed by masked, unmarried peasant men in Renaissance France, often to protest oppressive landlords. According to Hay's 1996 book,* Radically Gay*, the performances of these fraternities satirized religious and political power.*

Harry Hay was one of the first to insist that lesbians and gay men deserve equality. And he placed their fight in the context of a wider political movement. "In order to earn for ourselves any place in the sun, we must with perseverance and self-discipline work collectively . . . for the first-class citizenship of Minorities everywhere, including ourselves," he wrote in 1950.

At first, Hay could not find anyone who would join him in forming a political organization for homosexuals. He spent two years searching among the gay men he knew in Los Angeles. Although some expressed interest in a group, all were too fearful to join a gay organization that had only one member. But drawing on his years as a labor organizer, Hay persisted.

Then he met Rudi Gernreich, later famous as the inventor of unisex fashion and the topless swimsuit. Gernreich became Hay's lover and eagerly joined his quest for a gay political movement.

About a month after they met, Hay and Gernreich combed the gay beaches of Malibu and the Pacific Palisades looking for new Mattachine members. They brought along copies of the Stockholm Peace Petition, which called for a withdrawal of troops from Korea. They mistakenly believed that the peace petition was so radical it would make the new gay organization seem mild by comparison. Nearly 500 people signed the petition. No one signed up for Mattachine.

Eventually, however, the effort took hold. At its largest, the Mattachine society had 5,000 members.

But the membership of the Mattachine Society grew too conservative for its founders. In 1953, the group's new leaders attacked Hay and the other founders of Mattachine, all of whom had ties to the Communist Party. The founders all resigned, Mattachines' grassroots base declined, and Hay retreated from most gay activism until the rise of a more radical lesbian and gay movement in the early 1970s.

When this interview took place, Hay was eighty-six, and feared the radical right had such a hold on the United States that it could soon overturn gay-rights protections in the few states that had them. His experience as a Communist Party member in the United States during the 1950s gives him reason to worry, he says. He worried, he said, about the speed at which tolerance can shift into persecution.

Cusac spoke with Hay in a small stucco house in West Hollywood. John Burnside, his lover of thirty-five years, was busy repairing Hay's glasses. Burnside is best known as the inventor of the teleidoscope, which creates kaleidoscope-like patterns out of mirrored reflections of the world. He also founded, with Hay, a group called the Radical Fairies during the 1970s when the two of them decided the gay movement was once again growing too conservative.

Hay, who was nicknamed The Duchess, held forth for several hours, occasionally tilting back in his chair with a long creak, and whispering for emphasis.

Question: What was it like coming out in the twenties and thirties?

Harry Hay: You're talking about coming out to yourself and coming out to one or two other people. But it's not coming out to the people on the street you live on. It's simply coming into consciousness. Which is the same thing you did as a Red.

Because you could be recruited, for example, into the autoworkers' union. And the union is underground. And it's illegal. If your supervisor or even your foreman found out that you were now a member of the union, you could be fired. And you knew it. Once you were fired, you wouldn't be able to get a job in the industry again. They'd get all that information--your name, your address, your phone number--and you'd be fingered. Everybody would know.

That was also going on if you were homosexual. You were threatened in the same way: with the loss of your livelihood. So you were wiped out either way. The only difference was that probably all your comrades in the auto factory also would cut you dead because you're one of those perverts.

In that time, you aren't a gay person, you aren't a homosexual person, you're a degenerate. And what you were suffering from was what was known as ostracism. Ostracism means you don't exist at all. And that's a very difficult situation to live with. As gay people, we had been chasing ostracism by that point for probably 300 years. You just knew that you should have dropped into your black hole.

"In that time, you aren't a gay person, you aren't a homosexual person, you're a degenerate."

Q: Did you feel those things?

Hay: I knew I was there, but I didn't believe what they said. I never believed what they said. I've always felt I carried a golden secret, a wonderful secret. Every time I thought about it, it made me feel warm inside and good.

One of the big problems you run into--and you in your generation are involved with that--is you are very much concerned about what your neighbors think, and you are very much concerned about what your buddies think at work. And that's really ostracism you've come to. Because if they think of you as a dirty pervert, and you hear that day in and day out, and that's your only feeling about yourself--which is what happens to very many people--then you carry that stuff around, and you think of yourself as a dirty person. That's all you know. I never believed it.

Q: How did you think of yourself?

Hay: Up until I was eleven years old, I thought I was the only one of my kind in the world. I couldn't find anybody else who felt as I did.

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There was a book by somebody called Edward Carpenter, *Intermediate Sex*. I'm reading about Michelangelo and Alexander the Great, who were "homosexual"—a very long word. I don't know what that word means. So I go to look it up in the dictionary, and it isn't there.

Q: "Homosexual" was not in the dictionary?

Hay: No, it was not in the dictionary. I've always said, "If I had the sense I was born with and looked it up in the legal code, I would have found it." And it was in the penal code, of course. It wouldn't be in any American dictionary until 1938. And in most American dictionaries not until the Second World War. We had no words for ourselves. That's the important point--we didn't have words.

I read about this thing, and I know that word is me. It's about these people, and I and they have the same feelings. I know there are others. From there on out, my dream has him in it--whoever him is going to be--but there is another him somewhere.

I thought of him as another me: subject-subject, not subject-object. "There's not going to be an object of my affection. He'll be just like me, and we'll share." That's when I started my dream. I would look for my brothers, with whom I would share. I never deviated from that one instant.

At one point, I'm talking to Will Geer, the guy who was The Waltons' grandpa. He was also my lover, and he introduced me to the Communist Party. And I say, "All of us guys"--we didn't call ourselves "gay" yet, we didn't call ourselves "homosexual" yet, we called ourselves "temperamental"-- "all of us temperamental guys, we should organize."

Will said, "For Christ's sake, you're out of your mind! What would we talk about? We're cocksuckers or nothing. What else?"

Maude Allen, a character actress from New York who was part of our company, was everybody's mother. And one day Maude says, "It would be a good idea if you underground guys got together." But she said, "You know what I think, if you're going to do it, you're going to have to do it." I said, "Me?" She said, "Who else?"

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I was accustomed to walking alone. I'd find other people who agreed with me, but they also said, "I wouldn't dare mention it." I was the only one who would say, "We've got to stand." And they said, "Well, yes. And after you make it safe, then I'll stand, too. But you have to make it safe."

OK, so if I have to make it safe, I have to make it safe.

Q: So you went and made it safe?

Hay: Well, I was an older brother. So I had to do a lot of things first. My father was a self-made man, and he would beat me senseless. But he was a Scotsman, and stubborn. I'm his son, and I'm stubborn, too. I go on being stubborn.

If you have to wait until I can make it safe, OK, I'll make it safe. And if I have to use myself as the battering ram, I'll do that too, the best I can. (I'll tell you a deep, dark secret: Underneath that facade, I'm a terrified little sissy, just like everybody else. But I never let it show.)

I always say to people, "If you share my dream, why don't we walk together?" And that's my only organizing tool.

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Q: What was your experience as a communist, and how did McCarthyism affect you?

Hay: In 1934, when I first joined the party, I registered underground. Then, during the war years, we were able to come out because we had put the more difficult things for people to swallow temporarily on shelves. And we were all part of the war effort. So we had open Communist Party meetings all during the war.

I always thought to myself, "I love these people. And if I help them to build the pressure now, when I find the words to tell them what my vision is, they'll stop and they'll listen." This carried me through when I was organizing underground for the CIO in the early thirties. And it was quite a long time before I discovered that it wasn't going to work that way. It was a blow when I found out.

After the war, it all clamped down again. During the Korean War, here on the West Coast, we had police inspectors on every block. Any house that had more than three cars in front was suspect. All the license plates were taken. They had discovered what house they were meeting in. They discovered who the people were. And then all you had to do was prove that you weren't what you weren't. You can't do that, as you know. It's the double negative thing.

In the Mattachine Society, underground as we were, we were infiltrated within six months. I have an FBI record. You'd be surprised. Every single member, every single Mattachine chapter--and there were chapters all over the country--were all infiltrated. We never knew who the mole was.

So you had a whole sense of terror. People were very, very careful in this period--1948, '49, '50. The McCarthy witch hunts, the loyalty oaths of people who had to be involved in the school systems, the Hollywood Ten, and then under the Taft-Hartley law the CIO is cut back and the unions are run from the top, not from the bottom--all of this is happening at the same time.

We knew enough about how the Nazis had come into power to recognize that what they needed was a scapegoat. You make the scapegoat something beyond the pale, something beyond the law. Then the police move in and say, "Unless you move in this direction, unless you do as we tell you, we'll brand you as this. Then you will be ostracized." And we recognized that the scapegoat at this point was not going to be the Jews because the Holocaust was much too close to us. And it wouldn't be the blacks because the blacks had already begun to be organized into the

trade unions. It would be us. The scapegoat would be a queer. "Pinko-commie-queer"—that was the thing you heard all over the place. Saw it in the movies.

Q: How did those two things--communist and queer--get combined?

Hay: There were those who hated communists, and there were those who hated queers. If you were both a communist and a queer, then you were beyond the pale, by all means. That cut you off from everything. It broke people's spirit, and once your spirit breaks and you crawl, they keep pushing you and pushing you and pushing you and pushing you and pushing you.

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Q: When you organized the Mattachine Society, you were married, weren't you?

Hay: That's because I was misled, shall we say, by a psychiatrist in 1937. I went to him and I found him a very charming person. He said to me, "Well, maybe you're not looking for a girlish boy. Maybe you're looking for a boyish girl. Did you ever think of that? Do you know any?"

I should have stopped him right there and said, "That's not the issue. I'm not looking for a boyish girl. I'm looking for a boy. And I'm not looking for a girlish boy either." But I didn't.

Do I know a boyish girl? "Yes, I guess I do. She and I work. We're both theater people."The doctor said, "Why don't you get acquainted with her?"

Up until this time, I had been looking for another guy who would share my political feelings and my passion to organize--who would share my own proclivities. I had looked for six years, and I hadn't been able to find anybody who had the same feelings about the struggle against anti-Semitism, about the struggle against Jim Crow.

I thought, "Maybe he's right. Maybe I've got something mistaken in my head." So I got acquainted with Anita, and eight months later we were married. We were married for thirteen and a half years.

The doctor said, "The practice at first will be difficult. But you can become delighted with heterosexual sex. It may take a couple of years to break your habits, but it's going to wear off. By about the third year, you'll be perfectly happy with heterosexual sexuality." So by the fourth year, I knew he was wrong. But by the fourth year, my wife wanted a baby. We had tried awfully hard, and it turned out I was sterile. We were already committed to an adoption. [The Hays adopted two daughters, Katie and Hannah.]

I thought, "Well, maybe in my case it takes longer." But by the end of the fifth year, I knew it was wrong. Dead wrong.

"The doctor said, 'The practice at first will be difficult. But you can become delighted with heterosexual sex.'"

Q: Did you have gay lovers during this time?

Hay: Of course. It never lessened. It got worse. I knew that I was gay in every bone of my body. So I did the only thing I could do. I started the movement.

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Q: I'd like to know how that happened.

Hay: I'm still married in this period. I'm not divorced until '51. I started the movement in 1950. In the spring of 1948, a man named Alfred Kinsey brought out a book about the sexuality of the American male. It becomes an overnight absolute bestseller throughout the community. Chapter 5 had to do with gays and lesbians. It was a shocker for us because we had assumed that we were a few hundred in every city. Turned out, we were thousands in every city that even he knew about.

So, with my copy of Sexual Behavior in the Human Male under one arm, a sheaf of papers under the other, I go through the entire gay community as I know it at that time--which isn't much. Absolutely nobody will touch it. Terrified. And I walk back and forth for two years.

On July 6, 1950, I took my daughter to her dance class. And I watched a little while. All of a sudden, I was aware that on the left there was something radiant. I was just dancing in my veins. I didn't dare look over. But I knew that there was a person there I needed to meet. I looked over and his face told me he needed to meet me. We moved next to each other, and the first thing you know we had made a date to have dinner with each other the following Monday.

Q: This is Rudi Gernreich?

Hay: Right. And we fell madly in love, of course. We were in love with each other's ideas and in love with each other's minds. If you look into the history of fashion, you'll discover that Gernreich was the leading name for years and the leading fashion designer both here in the United States and internationally.

So I brought my plan, and he looked it over and he said, "You know that I'm an Austrian refugee. This is the most dangerous thing I have ever read. And, yes, I'm with you 100 percent."

We set up these discussion groups. And we got the gay guys to come. They would all bring a girlfriend—a mother-in-law or an aunt, a cousin—but they would always bring a cover girl. We would salt ourselves in and around the group that was there. If a guy's eyes would shine a little bit more than usual, we would ask him to have coffee with us. Then we would show him a call to an underground society.

It worked. And the discussion groups were very cute. We might have a group of fifty people, and we would always talk about an issue out of chapter 5 of the Kinsey report. Somebody would raise his hand and say, "You know, I've got a cousin in Duluth." It was always a cousin in Duluth

or Horners Corners. It wasn't L.A. And once in a while, he would slip and say, "I, I mean, my cousin." So we would hear about these various horrendous things that would happen to the cousin in Horners Corners. Then we would take this particular person and talk to him. And we began to get members for the Mattachine Society. We would then come out to each other. It was wonderful.

I remember hardened old queens who would show up, and they would be cynical, and they would be disparaging, and all of a sudden, this one particular hardened old guy, he started to cry. He said, "Look what I've had to put up with all my life, and nobody ever asked about these things before." And when he started to cry, he just broke open. Because all the things he'd been suffering were things that all the rest were suffering, too.

It caught on. We had a sphere of influence of about 5,000 people in the state of California under McCarthy, under the loyalty oath.

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Q: And members of Mattachine won an important legal victory, didn't they?

Hay: The police had a practice of entrapping people. This was done all over the country, but we had a particularly vicious group here in Southern California because of the Hollywood situation. They knew they could get a lot of them. They were shaking down people for thousands in blackmail. This would all be handled hush-a-hush, but thousands and thousands of dollars had to change hands anyway.

This was when we were all illegal. The guys would get some cute little number. And he would entice people to do things they probably would never ordinarily do. The moment that you'd make a pass, a couple of witnesses would just appear out of the bushes and arrest you. So, one particular boy—one of our members, Dale Jennings—was entrapped one night.

The man who I got to act as his lawyer was one of the tough lawyers for the waterfront, who had come to my Marxist classes at the Southern California Labor School. And he said, "I don't know a thing about homosexuality, but I owe you one because you're one of the best Marxist teachers I ever had. So, yes, Hay, I'll handle the case."

For three months, we went down after work to his labor-front office, which was forty miles away from here. We came out to him—what it was like growing up as underground gay guys. He managed to catch the arresting cop in a lie on the stand. He also discovered that the jury was being tampered with.

This kind of a case had never been tried. It had always been taken care of by payoff. We fought it out. We let every newspaper in the country know about that trial three months in advance. Not a single word was ever printed about it one way or the other by anybody. And certainly not by the progressive press, honey.

Q: How did you get the word out?

Hay: In the only way we knew how—,which was to go to the johns and paper the floor with leaflets, or even to go to the bushes and leave things around in the bushes. All the public johns, all the libraries. That's the only way you could do it. It was totally illegal.

In those years, we still had street cars as well as buses. And in each of the public transportations, there would be on a post a little tin can which said Take One, and there would be some information about the time schedule. So we would stuff ours in the can and paper literally all up and down the aisles and stick it in corners. An awful lot of people learned how to find stuff like that.

Q: So there was enough of a culture that people knew how to get by?

Hay: Well, don't forget, the Red underground knew about these practices, too. And I'd been in the Red underground.

After the Dale Jennings trial, we were inundated with people. What we didn't notice was that they were all right of center. Up until that time, the ones with money wouldn't be caught dead with us.

Q: Why did they kick you out of the Mattachine Society?

Hay: They threw me out because I stood for us being a national minority. They didn't want that. All they wanted was to march up to Sacramento and change the law just a tiny bit. They would say, "It's ridiculous to think of a homosexual brotherhood. We don't have anything in common except what we do in bed together. If you can change the law, we can all be normal."

Q: People say that nowadays.

Hay: I know. The assimilationist group you have now is exactly the same crowd that threw me out, only forty years later. Assimilation is the way you excuse yourself. It absolutely never worked at all. You may not think you are noticeable. But they know who you are. They know you're a degenerate, and they've never forgotten that. You won't find that out until the push comes to shove. And then you'll find it out fast. Because they're respectable in the eyes of God, and you aren't.

Q: What is the danger of the radical right?

Hay: If you're very visible, the Christian fundamentalists find you full of sin, don't they? And they will brand you full of sin. If anything goes wrong in the country, it's your fault. It's God's will. And don't forget that God is tremendously important in this picture. It's been used before against . . . well, it was used in Germany, dear. It's what the Nazis did: "You're a goddamn Jew. And you can't prove you aren't. We know what the Jews have done. We know that they have been a scourge and a curse on the nation." And all the people would be anything but a Jew. Eventually, they will be anything but a queer. It's the same thing.

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Q: And you think this is going to happen now?

Hay: It's already happening.

Q: What about gay-rights laws?

Hay: A law is a law. It can be voted in. It can be voted out. It can be voted in and stay in as long as you have the majority. And where do you have the majority? You kid yourself.

If people become frightened, if something all of a sudden goes wrong in our economy (and it can), and the preachers start blaming the sin around them on you, saying that God's judgment is on you, little by little they haven't anything to hang onto except that, and they'll listen--just as they did in Germany. It may take four or five years, but it'll work. It troubles me deeply that all I have worked for may be gone by the time I die.

Q: But the world has changed, thanks to you.

Hay: Has it? What I have done, I have reached my people. And I have given my people a sense of respect. You can't have an ounce of that respect if the entire neighborhood is against you. Try it. We did once.

People who have grown up since the sixties are not prepared for that, never even knew it happened here before. They will find themselves wiped out. You should have seen what happened in Colorado when Amendment Two came down. [Amendment Two, a Colorado law, canceled civil-rights protections for gays and lesbians. The Supreme Court overturned the amendment in May 1996.]

There had been gay groups in every city in the state. And within a year, there wasn't a paper, there wasn't anybody who would mention the fact that they even knew anybody who was gay. They would lose their job, they would lose their house, they would lose their car. And I was shocked.

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Q: What can lesbians and gays do?

Hay: The thing I've been saying to my people all along is, "You know, one of the things you haven't done is you haven't learned your civics very well." In the nineteenth century, a great many immigrants came to our shores. And they got in at Ellis Island for one reason: They brought something the United States desperately wanted. In exchange for that labor power, the United States granted them first-class citizenship. Now you gays and lesbians, what have you brought to share?

Well, as a matter of fact, we've brought all kinds of gifts to share. We just haven't bothered to talk about it. We haven't even told each other what we have to share, let alone the country at large.

I used to talk with the Queer Nation guys when they were first beginning their help with the abortion clinics. In Ithaca one time, we knew that the Operation Rescue crowd was going to make an attack on the clinic. These two guys showed up. They didn't know about the action that day. They went around the corner to see the women at the clinic whom they knew. They saw this huge picket line. Men—not so many men—and women and kids in prams and little kids. There was a big line of people. And there were a few women who would have liked to have crossed that line, but who didn't dare.

So, this is going on over there. Mickey and his friend are over here, under a tree. There was only one thing they could do. They started kissing each other. Within ten minutes, there wasn't a child or a pram or a mama anywhere on that street.

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This is what is known as being a thwart. They didn't say a word. You see what I mean? We know how to do this. We do it at a drop of a hat. And it's very effective.

Because we're mediators, we can make ourselves the butt of the joke. And we oftentimes do. We have been the fool. We make other people laugh. Remember that. This is what the fool always does. He has nothing to lose. Because when they laugh, they begin to recognize themselves.

Q: When did you start wearing your earring?

Hay: In San Francisco when they started what they call "gender fuck," which would be about 1970, about the time of Stonewall. This was the time of Ballets Trockadero, where all the men had beards. I started wearing one earring. Not two, just one. And a necklace.

Now, this necklace that I'm wearing I always refer to as my sport pearls. This is the one I wear for the trade unions. I wear it to speak, to be in actions, to be on the picket line—always my sport pearls.

Every once in a while, I'd have to rush over to do something with the guys after work. I wouldn't have time to go home. So I wouldn't have this on. And these guys came up to me and they said, "What happened? Did it break? Can we buy you a new one?"

They're concerned. That's friendly. That's loving. They wouldn't wear it come hell or high water. But they don't mind buying it for you.

You give them the opportunity to do that. You almost invite it. And you're absolutely delighted with them when they do it, and they feel very good about themselves because they've done it. And you accept it with all the love they can give.

It makes a difference. It changes something.

Any time along the line where we can find a way so that we change something, that guy whom you have changed and the other people around him whom you have changed are going to, in turn, change others.

But that's being a thwart. That's not being confrontational. It's kissing them with a butterfly kiss as you go by. We have to be people who set each other free.

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One of the ways by which we set each other free is to get rid of that silly idea of pride.

Q: Of gay pride?

Hay: Yes. Because the moment you say, "We are proud. I'm proud to be this, and I'm proud to be that," what you're saying is we're almost as good as the others. "Almost" always means not quite.

We're not almost as good. We're neither better nor worse. We are other than they.

Give yourself permission to enjoy being gay. You do have to give yourself permission. You have been told you may not. Give yourself permission to be free.

Originally published in the September 1998 issue of The Progressive magazine. *Anne Marie Cusac is an Associate Professor of Journalism at Roosevelt University in Chicago. For ten years, she was an editor and investigative reporter for The Progressive magazine*.

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by Anne-Marie Cusac

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