

# Fifty Years Since Stonewall: Reflections on Half a Century of Human Rights Activism

by Luz Guerra

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following is an edited version of a talk delivered by Luz Guerra on June 23, 2019 to the congregation at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio, TX in observance of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stonewall.*

I want to pause a moment to honor the native peoples whose land San Antonio was built on—the Coahuiltecos and other native peoples for whom the great tourist attraction of the missions was not a joyful thing. It represented a removal from their homes and from a way of life. I want to thank those ancestors for the lives that they lived and upon whose shoulders we stand.

Stonewall was an important event in my life and not only because I'm a lesbian. Every point over the past 50 years that someone stood up for justice is a bright light in my life and an important occasion to reflect on. 50 years ago, there would not have been a day for women and gender, non-conforming people. 50 years ago, the story wisdom would not have considered the life of a man like Harvey Milk. 50 years ago, when I looked for employment in the newspaper, I had to go the section that said, "Jobs Women", because listings in New York City were divided by gender. 50 years ago, it would have only been a few years since it was illegal for my parents to marry in the South. 50 years ago, we were still riding the crest of the Civil Rights Movement and were seeing many amazing things come to fruition because of the struggles and stands that many people were taking on our behalf. But in many other ways, it's not very different at all and it's important for me to reflect on the ways that this country has not changed and that this world has not progressed.

50 years ago, I was just beginning to find my vocation as an activist. I didn't know that I would spend 50 years fighting for Human Rights; but, you know, kids are very justice oriented; very concerned with what's fair and not fair. I'm sure, like other children I would say to my parents, "Well that's not fair!" My mom would respond with: "Well life's not fair, kid" and my father would tell me a story about racial segregation and why we lived where we lived and why we couldn't live where we wanted to live.

My parents took me on my first marches for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam and against the nuclear war that we all felt was impending at the time. As a child of these two parents—racially white and black—ethnically Dominican, Puerto Rican, Scotch Irish—it might make sense that I would also be justice-minded. When I was 10 years old, I remember clearly thinking that I was a freak and blaming my parents for it. I remember the moment: I was sitting in this kind of air shaft between the lobby and the gymnasium of the community center where I grew up in New York City. It was a sunny day and I remember a beam of light coming down and all the little dust particles flying around in the light. I thought I was a

freak because I thought about things like Justice and the Civil Rights Movement and wanted to talk about these things. My friends thought that I was a weirdo so I wished, in that moment, that I could be like other kids playing and listening to the songs that they were singing. Then I had this flash that it wouldn't be right if I were like the other kids. I guess that some ancestor was talking to me with compassion and said that then I wouldn't be who I am—and that seemed like such an unfair thing—to want to be a child and to feel like if I were to be like the other children I wouldn't be me. Little did I know that that would be a spark that kept me going in life.

So, I became an activist in that community center that was attached to the Methodist Church—the Church of All Nations, it was called. It was in an immigrant community. The minister of the Spanish speaking congregation asked me to come with him to talk to congregants. He didn't speak English very well and I was called on to be a translator and take notes. We went into homes in our neighborhood and interviewed people about their housing situation. I remember going into apartments that had holes in the ceiling, that had sinks

and tubs that weren't working, where windows were cracked and where there were cockroaches and evidence of rats. These were the conditions I lived in, too. That was the first time it occurred to me that people could talk to each other about what was happening in their lives and actually do something about it.

So, I have to give a shout out to the Reverend Baez who gave me that opportunity to see that there was something that I could do. I could ask people questions and take notes and I could talk with someone like the reverend about "then, what are we going to do about it?"

The past week I watched some films [a movie and a series]. How many people here have been aware of the "Central Park Five"? So, a lot of people. Perhaps you've also seen the miniseries called, "When They See Us". How many of you have seen the documentary, "Southwest of Salem"—the story of the San Antonio Four? Fewer people. These two events were very close to my life and heart. In 1989, a 28-year-old woman, Trisha Melli, was brutally attacked and raped in Central Park while out jogging. Her attacker left her for dead. The police were very anxious to do something. They had a very aggressive DA and

a prosecutor who was fed up with the sexual crimes and wanted to do something big. That same night a lot of young people were out in Central Park, as well. Some of them were getting into mischief, pushing people off their bikes and challenging their right to be on the bike path when the kids wanted to be there. It was definitely very charged, racially and ethnically. I lived downtown, 50 blocks away from Central Park. We (the people who I hung out with) would often walk up to Central Park and join other young people who were there getting a piece of nature, listening to music and enjoying ourselves.



Luz Guerra delivers the keynote speech at the 13th annual Take Back the Night event at UT Austin in 2014. Photo: Andrea Kurth | Daily Texan Staff

At any rate, five children—five young men—(between 14 and 16 years old) were in Central Park that night and were taken into custody by the police. Over the next 24 to 36 hours they were kept away from their families, they were not given food, they were not allowed to sleep and they were forced into making confessions of a crime they did not commit.

President Trump was, at that time, a real estate developer in New York City. He took out a full page ad saying he wanted the death penalty to come back and that these animals should pay for what they did to this woman. I will never forget that ad nor how I felt—those young men could have been my guys—as I would have called them. That that could have been us. As a woman I was also very conscious that the person who had been raped could have been me. But it would not have been me because Puerto Rican women and Black women were killed and assaulted all the time in my neighborhood and it never made the front page of the newspaper.

In 1997, four young women—brown women, lesbians—were accused of a crime that they didn't commit. They were accused of sexually abusing two children. Much in the same way that the courts and the media in New York City called these five young men “animals” and dehumanized them, so the media of San Antonio dehumanized these four women because they loved other women and called them “witches”—determined that they would pay. These women served time—up to 12 years—for a crime they did not commit. The young men also served between 5 and 12 years for a crime they did not commit. In many ways we could say that these movies have happy endings because justice won in the end, because the system was forced to acknowledge that it had been wrong. But no one could give those 12 years back to those boys and to the young women who weren't much more than children themselves at that time. We live in a country where these things still happen.

I'm glad that we remember Stonewall and I'm glad that young children are learning the history of who Harvey Milk was and Mayor Moscone [of San Francisco], who hired a gay man and worked with a diverse community of people and why these people were killed. I'm still a girl who is concerned about things that are not fair. I thought a lot about watching “When They See Us” as a mother, now. I thought about how those boys could have easily been my son. I thought about how those young woman could easily have been my daughters and if my children—if our children—are not safe to love who they love; if they are not safe because of the color of their skin; if they are not safe because of the huge divide of wealth in this country, then there is no justice and there is no peace. Because everyone must be able to walk and live free. It's so wonderful that so

many of us can today—and, there are people who think that we have “arrived”, right?

I was reading this week a series of interviews with LGBT elders in the New York Times and was very excited to read that the majority of these LGBT elders said, that yes, LGBT is a mainstream term and that there are lesbian and gay and transgender people on television that are allowed to have stories that actually have happy endings. But, every single one of these LGBT elders said that marriage equality does nothing for LGBT youth who are homeless. It does nothing to address the racism that still exists, and it has a heavier impact

on Trans youth and lesbian and gay youth and bi- youth. The New York Times ... a sort of “centrist” newspaper (laughter) that reflected such a diversity of people and voices who all came to the same conclusion that I would come to—that, made me feel good.

We live in a society that is full of fear—where we are told to be afraid of those who are other and those who are different. Fear is at the root of hate. We live in a society whose history—if we look beyond the myths and stereotypes—is one of injustice after injustice. We live in a society whose leaders spin narratives about the threat of the other to our most vulnerable, to children, in the case of the San Antonio Four and to the lone, white woman, in the case of the Central Park Five. So, our most vulnerable are used as images for why we should hate—today, in 2019.

Where do we start to change the world? I think at the beginning of any story, we want to look for the truth and when we

tell the truth about homophobia, about transphobia, about racism, about sexism, about anti-Semitism, about ableism, about misogyny—it hurts. Whether you have personally been targeted by that specific oppression, by that misinformation [or not], you are still hurt by its existence. You may be a cis gender straight, heterosexual white man, but you have been harmed by homophobia, you have been harmed by transphobia, you have been harmed by heterosexism; because it is all based on hatred. Where hatred reigns, our human souls are lacerated and imprisoned. Where hatred reigns not one person is actually free. Now, you may be someone who has never felt the sting of racism in your own life, who doesn't have to worry about being stopped by traffic cops, who doesn't have to be concerned what neighborhood you are walking in... But your privilege comes from your status in a system that dehumanizes people of color, dehumanizes women, dehumanizes same gender loving people, dehumanizes gender non-conforming people and the truth of a system that is built on the dehumanization of some, is that—ultimately, it dehumanizes everyone. A society that is built on a foundation of genocide, of slavery and dehumanization of an unequal distribution of the wealth



Anna Vásquez, Elizabeth Ramírez, Cassandra Rivera and Kristie Mayhugh, the SA Four, accepted a major award at the 28th Annual GLAAD Media Awards at The Hilton Midtown in New York City in 2017. Photo: Bryan Bedder/Getty Images/GLAAD



Poster for *Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four* film.



of the earth is a society that will not stand. It is a society that is crumbling from the inside and will continue to crumble—unless, we reveal and acknowledge and speak to the truth.

I think about those four young women who were hard-working, caring, generous and responsible—if you see the documentary you get an idea of who they were at the time and who they are now. These were young women who loved other women. And love—we are told in every church, every temple or synagogue, every holy scripture—love is what we’re called to do. To love our neighbors, to love our enemies, to love our families, to love our creator; but, in a sexist, heterosexist, homophobic and racist society and legal system and media, any truth can be twisted into a nightmare; any truth can be covered under a series of lies, any truth can NOT appear in the textbooks of Texas middle school and high school students.

I don’t know if you’ve picked up a Texas social studies textbook recently; but I believe there is one that talks about the thousands of Africans who were brought here as “workers”. Now, I mean this is 2019. This a social studies text in which there is a two-page spread on the buffalo and one paragraph about the native peoples of this country. Textbooks like that harm our children and they harm who we are; they harm all of us and divide us from each other, and they keep us from the love that is our right that is our inheritance that is at the core of us.

I want to tell you about 1992 when this country celebrated 500 years since Columbus. The mythology of this country is “1492 Columbus sailed the sea of blue”—and then there were the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. You know that’s like over 200 years; but that’s what we learned. What was happening during that time Here in Texas? It so important for us to change the mythologies that are dominant right now.

When I was that little nerdy kid and concerned about big issues that haven’t changed in my lifetime, I was often told, “don’t be such

a downer”. When I was a human rights advocate, working for Central Americans who were fleeing wars—my son’s father, I remember him telling me when we were going out to dinner—“please don’t talk about your work; people don’t want to be brought down, people don’t want to know about these human rights violations”. The thing is everything that makes us want to squeam away and say, “oh no, I don’t want to [hear] about that” will only keep us that much longer away from the truth that we should all be seeking.

When I was being teased about being a downer and told “why do you want to focus on these negative things” and my brother was telling me “you’re still writing about sexual assault? Come on, get off of it, write about something else.”

I don’t think that we have a choice, if we want to give our children a future that is worth living. I think that the truth is—we’ve screwed up the earth, we’ve poisoned our rivers and oceans. We have hurt people around the world and that needn’t be our focus. Our focus can be about working to be sure that there’s clean drinking water for everyone, and about making sure that children are safe everywhere. Our focus can be that there needn’t be hate. I think that holding onto that contradiction of here are these terrible truths and we want to walk about with our hearts filled with love for all of our fellow people and creatures, that these two things are NOT incompatible.

I ask you, in the same way that you’ve asked me to join your congregation this morn-

ing, I ask you to join me in holding the two uncomfortable truths in our hearts at the same time. I think it is the only way for us to move forward.

*BIO:* Luz Guerra, researcher, writer, editor and consultant, has worked for over 30 years with communities of color, LGBTQ and indigenous peoples, and others, advancing social justice and human rights in the U.S. and the Americas.



Poster for *When They See Us*, series by Netflix.



The Central Park Five with the writer/director, Ava DuVernay, attend the World Premiere of Netflix’s “When They See Us” at the Apollo Theater on May 20, 2019 in New York City. (L to R): Raymond Santana Jr., Kevin Richardson, Corey Wise, Ava DuVernay, Antron McCray, and Yusef Salaam. Photo: Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images



2019 stands as a historic year for the LGBTQ community whose fight for liberation is traced back to riots at the iconic Stonewall Inn in New York City where police battled with lesbians and gay men led by drag queens most notably Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Ray Rivera among others. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 are widely considered to be the beginning of the modern LGBTQ movement. The first Pride Parade took place the following year in 1970 in New York City.