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Speech delivered at Tupelo Pride 2018

J. M. Benson Hill

University of Mississippi

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JACOB	יעקוב
MORDECAI	מרדכי
BENSON	בן ציון
HILL	הילל

October 8, 2018

Re: Speech at Tupelo Pride 2018

This is the speech I delivered at Tupelo's first LGBTQ Pride Festival on Saturday, October 6, 2018 at Fairpark.

I would like you to consider something for me. What does it mean to you, as a gay person, to be proud? Does it mean that you have to be out of the closet? Put a rainbow bumper sticker on your car? Does it mean that you have to volunteer with LGBT causes? Support LGBT political candidates? There is no doubt that being proud can include those things, but at the most fundamental level, gay pride means accepting yourself. More than that, it means truly loving yourself. Loving yourself as you are, at a deep level.

I came out just over ten years ago. Since that time, I have lived as an out gay man. Like many of you here, I have been a vocal advocate for gay rights. Anyone would consider me an "out and proud" gay man. A local hate group even classified me as a "radical homosexual activist." I make it no secret about being gay. But does that mean that I'm proud? That is the question I was faced with recently.

Not long ago, a group of colleagues and I were in the hallway at work after a meeting. One of the women complimented my shirt and joked that if she learned more about men's fashion, it might help her find a boyfriend. I laughed and noted that it hadn't helped me find one, but maybe it would help her. She was slightly stunned and said "Oh I didn't know. You don't seem gay." Now, for those of you that know me and are laughing internally, remember that this woman has only known me for a short time, and in a limited, professional setting. And let me assure you that this woman was not in any way trying to be rude. I knew from some of her past work that she is very supportive and an advocate for equality. She is an ally. The topic had just never come up between us. I chuckled and assured her that yes, I'm as gay as it gets.

Later, when I was thinking about the encounter, I realized that some part of me was pleased. I was actually proud that someone thought I acted straight. It felt like a compliment. This realization floored me. Why would I feel proud of being mistaken for straight? The thought that I, even momentarily, was somehow flattered by her mistake upset me. I was angry. Angry at myself, and angry at society for still making me feel like I have to conform to a particular mold to be considered a "real man." Why do I still need validation from someone I barely even know?

This attitude is reflected often within the gay community. How many times have you heard friends describe a gay guy as being too "femme," or too "camp" and not acting masculine enough? How often has someone described a lesbian as being too "butch," or too much of a "dike"? How many times have you not wanted to hang out with someone because they were too obviously gay? How many times have you tried to tone down your own gayness? I don't mean for fear of violence around homophobes, that is just personal preservation. I am talking about the times we try to hide our true selves from the members of our community, or from those people we encounter on a daily basis. Why do we feel the need to do that still?

So even though being told that I didn't seem gay was not meant to be an insult, it still caused me pain. It was a reminder that society still sees us as outsiders. Our fight for equality has come so far! We experience a level of acceptance today that we could only dream about 20 years ago. But our fight is far from over. Today, more of society is perfectly willing to accept us and let us join their club – as long as we follow the dress code. As long as the men are strong and masculine enough, and the women are demure and feminine enough, they are willing to accept that we love someone of the same gender. So, we try to fit in. After all, we have been fighting for acceptance for so long, now that we have achieved so much, maybe we should “tone it down” a little so that we don't risk losing what we have.

Friends, this is not pride. This is the opposite of pride. Sure, more of us are living openly than ever before. We are coming out of the closet at an earlier age than ever before. And those are both wonderful things! But many times, we still are not comfortable living authentically, even within our own community.

So for all of us struggling with this internal fight for acceptance, let me tell you today: you are perfect. Not just part of you. Not some mask that you use to fit in. Are you a gay man with a soft voice and a flamboyant personality? You are perfect! Are you a lesbian who prefers wearing boots to high heels and working on the truck rather than decorating? You are perfect! And if you are none of those things, you are also perfect! Whatever you are, do not be afraid to be your authentic self, because it is perfect. There is no blueprint on how to be gay; there is no right way. There is only you. You are what a gay person looks like because you are one.

Remember, being proud is not just about being bold. It is much more than being unapologetic. Being proud means loving who you truly are. Being proud means being grateful, not just refusing to compromise. So be bold. Refuse to apologize for being yourself. But don't forget to be thankful for what you are. Love your gayness. Be Proud!

In Pride,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.M. Benson Hill". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and "H".

J.M. Benson Hill