

MARDI GRAS PARADE – STILL RELEVANT

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Okay. Okay. I know that there are performers in the Sydney G & L Mardi Gras parade that we would just as happily miss. The excess, the bare bottoms, the vulgarity, the tired old humour. Too many party frocks, sequins and feathers.

Most gays, after all, are as boring as the rest of us. Supermarket trolleys, mortgages, pets, not enough exercise.

The Sydney parade is in your face. But most gays just want to be treated equally and to get on with their lives. So the Mardi Gras is not an entirely accurate cross-section of the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and trans-gender community of Australia. It never was.

Just the same, my partner Johan and I always turn out to cheer the parade on. So why do we do it? The answer is pretty simple.

This is one day in the year when members of the gay community can temporarily take over the streets, join family and friends in celebration and not feel second class. If you have spent much of your life being told that you are sick, or worse still, evil, it does feel good to have this public affirmation of diversity. At other times in Australia, we celebrate racial, gender and religious diversity and tolerance. Well, this is a day when we can celebrate diversity in sexual orientation. That diversity is no big deal. We all have to just get used to it. And the aim of Mardi Gras is to promote acceptance of diversity as a strength of Australian society.

Our country is potentially a foremost example for the rest of the world. We have more people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds than any other society on earth. We have made giant leaps since the Australia I grew up in in the 1950s: where Aborigines were treated with contempt and taken from their families because they were light-skinned. Where neighbours were shunned because they were

Catholic or Protestant. Where the White Australia Policy excluded migrants from neighbouring lands and made Asian visitors feel unwelcome. Where women were second-class citizens. And where gays were criminals – throw away the key.

We can be proud of building a new society that accepts and celebrates difference. We can do this because we feel confident that our underlying unity in Australia will shine through. I am not referring to tolerance, which is a very condescending emotion. But to acceptance, which is a recognition that nature and experience rejoice in differences. In Australia, we no longer demand that everyone must fit into the same narrow little mould. Creative societies protect and respect diversity. The Mardi Gras parade is an over-the-top occasion, on a few kilometres of central Sydney, when all of us, straight and gay, can reflect on how far Australia has come in the past fifty years.

No longer do we think that gays are all sissy or pretty. We now know that they sit in our parliaments, the highest courts, in top business positions, on the sporting field – everywhere.

I have never walked in the parade. Being pretty ancient, I watch it from a comfortable vantage point. But my partner, Johan, who was an Ankali, walked with other volunteers, straight and gay, from this group who act as supporters for people living with HIV and AIDS. The AIDS epidemic is not over. It still hits the gay community hard. The parade helps to reinforce safer-sex messages.

The parade also continues to catch media attention. Just to talk about its ongoing relevance is part of the struggle for minds and hearts. When Johan and I first met, 40 years ago, it was the soap opera *Number 96* on commercial television that brought home the ordinariness of gay lives and interpreted them to fellow citizens.

Yet there is nothing ordinary about the hero of this year's parade. Australians of every background will be cheering Matthew Mitcham, our Olympic gold medallist, with the highest score ever in Olympic history for diving. Last week I saw the Governor-General induct Matthew as a youth ambassador to countries in the Pacific to strengthen their struggle against HIV. That is why it is important to see Matthew and other young gay and lesbian marchers and revellers and to realise that they are part of us – part of the great Australian family.

A family of diversity on a day when, momentarily, respectability and denial are dropped. Vulgarity and celebration reign supreme. And all of us are asked to think for a few minutes about the past oppression and how that still prevails in most of the world.

But is it all over? Have all the battles been won for equality for gays? Certainly a lot of progress has been made in the past year, thanks to federal legislation. But much remains to be done – anti-discrimination laws, civil partnership recognition and, in the view of many, marriage for those who feel it is their right as a citizen. If you think it's all over go and see the Oscar-winning movie *Milk* and think about its basic message. It shows not polite people begging for tolerance but angry fellow citizens demanding why, in this day and age, they cannot have full equality with their straight brothers and sisters.

This is the way minds and hearts are changed. By arresting attention and not arresting people for being themselves.

So that it why we still turn out for this parade that began as a protest against police oppression in 1978. Now the police and the Australian Defence Force marchers always get the biggest cheer. Well done, Australia. We can right wrongs. We can make our country a just, diverse society where everyone has a place and no-one, repeat no-one, is treated as second-class.