

# THE PERFORMANCE



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# OF PINK

**SOME REFLECTIONS ON PINK T-SHIRT DAY**

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I always find it difficult to articulate my feelings around Pink T-Shirt Day, but this year I thought it was worth the effort. Recently, I was involved in a seminar for Simon Fraser University Student Teachers in the Faculty of Education, and someone posed the question: “How do you feel about days of recognition like Pink T-Shirt Day?”

If I’m being honest, I simultaneously hate them, AND recognize the need for them. I’m networked to other LGBTQ+ advocates and activists who find the day cringe-worthy and, for many of us, there is frustration and trepidation as the day approaches. Though well-intentioned, I struggle with the way that the day is often handled in schools. Lately, I have Lin-Manuel Miranda’s song from “Encanto” in my head, but I’ve replaced the lyrics, “We Don’t Talk About Bruno-no-no” with “We Don’t Talk About Homo-pho-bia.”

My frustration from days like Pink T-Shirt Day comes from the potentially performative aspect involved. I worked at a school that participated in a Pink T-Shirt Day flash mob event. We rehearsed choreography to perform in the stands at a Vancouver Giants game (back when they hosted their games at The Coliseum). The opportunity to be part of a flash mob is a powerful thing. There is merit in the sense of community experienced as being part of a collective energy that is hard to capture in other contexts.

What I struggled with was the discrepancy between the number of hours invested in learning and practicing the dance in comparison to the amount of time spent developing understandings about the origins of the day, or what we were attempting to communicate by participating. Even the song selection became quite sanitized, focusing on the inspirational, but somewhat superficial, and failing to centre the music of queer artists who might have commentary on the kind of bullying the day is supposed to address.

I was a student in the elementary schools that I now work in. I experienced the kind of bullying and harassment that Pink T-Shirt Day is a response to. While we have taken strides to make progress, I’m consistently reminded of how misconceptions about gender expression and sexual orientation are still

as pervasive as they were when I was a student. I experienced homophobic harassment long before I understood or could articulate my own sexuality. So, it wasn’t even necessarily about being gay. It was about being *perceived* as being gay. A lot of boys who demonstrate stereotypically feminine traits or feminine preferences often have their masculinity and their sexuality questioned. These perceptions about their sexuality are often weaponized against them. Decades later, I still have very vivid memories of some of those exchanges, and the feelings associated with them. The incident in Nova Scotia in 2007, where a boy was subjected to homophobic taunts for wearing a pink shirt to school, prompting Travis Price and David Shepherd to take action, is a fairly routine example of this.

We’ve all probably had those moments where we’ve felt guilt about interactions we’ve witnessed, and lacked the courage to intervene. Those teens took action and should be applauded, but I struggle with the Random Acts of Kindness narrative attached to Pink T-Shirt Day. It wasn’t a random act. It was a targeted and purposeful response with an objective. It was a product of observing hurt and isolation that conflicted with their values and that they wanted to do something about. It was a response to witnessing homophobic taunts, and engaging in a peaceful and productive demonstration to combat that specific behaviour and to communicate a sense of “you are not alone” to the young boy who was targeted. When we don’t include that part of the narrative, and we separate the victim from the event, we potentially end up with just another ‘saviour’ narrative.

There are many ways in which we continue to perpetuate the idea that it’s okay to hurt queer people. You don’t have to look too far to find examples that include politicians and parents objecting to the presence of LGBTQ+ identities in books, faith-based opposition to banning conversion therapy, and the inordinate number of anti-trans bills being proposed or enacted south of our border.

In the last few years, I’ve noticed a shift in the conversation to celebrations of kindness. I want to be clear that I’m NOT saying that conversations

about kindness aren't important. I acknowledge that they are. But celebrating a day which was inspired by a response to hurtful and homophobic behaviour without mentioning or exploring homophobia feels somewhat disingenuous; it does feel like the day has been appropriated. It's a little like talking about finances without ever mentioning money.

We use words like 'diversity' that dilute the conversation, so it becomes a 'sanitized' version of only the differences that don't challenge or offend us. I don't mean to say we shouldn't talk about diversity, but I am saying that there are occasions where we need to name and specify the diversities of which we speak. What we choose not to name or speak about is as significant a part of curriculum as what we promote and celebrate. Part of what we communicate when we choose not to address the homophobic origins of the day, has the potential (even if unintended) of saying that we don't talk about the experiences of queer people, and we don't promote their protection.

It's not that we shouldn't talk about, or put an emphasis on, kindness. My concern is that when we limit the conversation to kindness, we leave a lot unresolved and unmentioned. We've witnessed a number of celebrities and public figures being held accountable for their words or actions, whether accused of being homophobic, transphobic, racist, sexist, misogynistic, or otherwise. We've also observed other celebrities and public figures coming forward to defend them, dismissing the accusations because said celebrity has always been kind to them, negating the victims' stories because it wasn't their experience and, consequently, resulting in some pretty glaring examples of gaslighting. It becomes a little problematic if we're not having a more nuanced conversation about kindness, and the recognition that some people who are perceived to be kind are quite selective about who they are kind to.

I'm happy to encourage students to wear pink, but I struggle with pressuring them to do so, particularly without a deep and purposeful understanding of why they're being asked. I get frustrated by schools that offer prizes for the class with the most pink t-shirts, because one demonstration of genuine support

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can be more meaningful than twenty four that lack understanding or conviction. Heck, my niece would gladly wear a pink t-shirt every day. I'd just appreciate that when she wore pink on this day, that she understood that it meant something more. My hope is that she'll understand that it is a way of saying, "Hey: I recognize some of the pain people experience, and I'm going to stand up for them so they don't have to feel alone," or "I want people to know that I love my uncle, and it's not okay to say hurtful things to him or to people like him." That's a message that many LGBTQ+ students and their families would love to hear that is not quite covered by 'kindness' or by generic conversations about bullying.

It's not my intention to suggest that we shouldn't be combatting all forms of bullying. We absolutely should, but I feel like the piece of the conversation that is often missing is how specific people are targeted and harassed for things that are aspects or perceived aspects of their identity. When we acknowledge that by targeting people by their sexual orientation (or perceived sexual orientation), by their disability, by their gender, by their race, by their socio-economic status, or any other aspect of their identity, we are dealing in the realm of values and that's much more complicated to navigate than when we make our

conversations generic. Generalizing the origins of the day offers permission for many to avoid uncomfortable topics, while ignoring how uncomfortable it is for those who are subjected to chronic, targeted harassment. And, while I understand that it is important to show compassion to the bullies and to address whatever is going on for them, it's difficult to watch concerns about the well-being and outcomes for the bully prioritized over victims they targeted.

In the context of conversations about kindness, I've heard extensions about healing and uplifting others. Ambitious and well-intentioned objectives, but it's tough to heal from something when that trauma continues to be surfaced and we collectively decline to acknowledge or specify the things that cause the trauma (in this case, overt homophobic behaviour). It's like attempting to do Truth & Reconciliation, without addressing the Truth.

It's not my intention to derail conversations and learning opportunities about kindness, but rather an attempt to encourage others to consider how they recognize this day, and invite them to complement those conversations with extensions that deal with deeper understandings about how people who are targeted feel – particularly because they are often

targeted for things they cannot control. I encourage people to consider how they engage with this day to avoid powerful opportunities for advocacy, and opportunities to engage in genuine allyship, and, inadvertently, killing them with 'kindness'.

This lesson at this link [bit.ly/JeromeParCoeur](https://bit.ly/JeromeParCoeur) is helpful for young students to better appreciate the origins of the day and the role that homophobia might play in how we perceive, react to, and treat others.

My hope in you having taken the time to read this, is that you extend the learning beyond Pink T-Shirt Day and beyond conversations about kindness. One of the most powerful engagements about the origins of Pink T-Shirt Day that we had in a school I taught at was that we used the February date as a catalyst, and The International Day of Pink (celebrated in the second week of April) to frame our explorations. It allowed educators to make plans for developing understandings intermittently and over a number of weeks. We recognized the learning with regard to homophobia, empathy, and understandings in an assembly in April to honour the International Day of Pink – a similarly themed day, but initiated by gay student, Jeremy Dias:

*"After coming out in high school, Jeremy faced extreme cases of discrimination by students & school officials. At 17, he began a legal case against his school and school board, and at 21 won Canada's second-largest human rights settlement. Jeremy used the money to found the Canadian Centre for Gender & Sexual Diversity, the International Day of Pink and the Jeremy Dias Scholarship." [ccgsd-ccdgs.org](https://ccgsd-ccdgs.org)*

My hope is that we recognize that kindness and action do come from places of purpose, and that recognizing harm and responding with empathy is important. My hope is that we strive for allyship and advocacy that is genuine and respectful of the LGBTQ+ experiences and voices that endure the emotional labour that days like this attempt to acknowledge. My hope is that we engage in meaningful exchanges that centre progress over performance and that, ultimately, we avoid the performance of pink.

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