

## Troubled Water

I watch from the audience as four teens shuffle out onto the brightly lit stage, the platform suddenly seeming fifty feet longer with only a few people on it. I had been in Denver for a few days already, having come with other Lick students to participate in a four day international festival of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) choruses. We Lick kids were the single non-LGBT-identified group present; I had heard we were even the first in the history of the festival to be allowed to perform. Just yesterday we had sung onstage alongside the Lesbian Gay Chorus of San Francisco in the premier of “Harvey Milk: A Cantata.” And now, Ana and I were finally relaxing into a couple seats of the packed Ellie Caulkins Opera House to watch a youth choral group from the United States sing.

As the four youth walk onstage, the audience quiets down. The tallest choral member, a girl with chopped blond hair, peers out nervously into the crowd, gingerly takes the microphone out of the stand and opens her mouth.

*“When you’re weary, feeling small...”*

The amplified notes bounce off the towering walls, the balcony, the seats, echoes jarring in the otherwise silent space. The baby-blue shirts of the singers stand out sharply against the darkness of the audience.

*“When tears are in your eyes,”*

Uneasy in the spotlight, the kids trip over the words like rocks in a river. I can’t help wondering if they generally try to avoid this much attention.

*“I will dry them all...”*

I shift in my seat, attempting to get more comfortable. From somewhere below, I hear a muffled cough.

*“I’m on your side when times get rough”*

A movement in the audience catches my attention. I turn my head slightly and find that two men near the front have stood up and are clapping along.

*“And friends just can’t be found”*

Without warning their whole row is suddenly up and clapping with them, the row behind following, now the row behind that just beginning to rise as well. A steadily growing clamor arises as seat upon seat flip-flops vertical and dozens of feet drop to the floor like rain. The stage is suddenly out of sight as a wall of bodies erupts in front of me.

*“Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down”*

And before I know it the surge has hit, my chair is flippity flopping, and the stage has come suddenly into view again below, hundreds of silhouettes facing the bright lights and swaying to the beat. Our arms surround each other as we move back and forth, back and forth, the steady pulse of ocean tides. And the four teens are no longer whispering in trepidation but shouting into the mikes, mouths widening into grins that take up the stage. The roaring wave catches up to us and we are singing in one voice that connects the pain and struggle and liberation and fulfillment.

*“Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.”*

But we are not a bridge; rather we are the rush of a tsunami; first cracking the sides of the concert hall, then erupting through the concrete walls and tearing through the streets of Denver. The wide boulevard filled with people cheering, waving, the path of the young singers a rippling corridor of hands reaching out for prized high-fives.

Even now, Denver brings up such mixed emotions for me. On one hand, I am proud to live in a nation that would allow such an event to take place. However, after talking to the

festival participants and watching the youth perform, I can't begin to imagine what some of them must have gone home to, the kind of bullying and hatred some endure daily. Despite countless reminders of how liberal the Bay Area is compared to other parts of the U.S., I had always believed that in one way or another, our country practiced the tenets of equality and justice, and that Americans were overall striving to be a fair-minded people. It's clear to me now, after watching the discomfort of the youth onstage, that there is still much work to be done to ensure the rights and well-being of the LGBT, even in such a liberal city as San Francisco.

Within the LGBT community, there seems to be an overflowing amount of support for the others, to the point at which I'm almost dismayed that I can't belong to it. Instead of categorizing this vibrant group of people as an oddity and treating them as such, we need to follow their example; create a place where all people are safe and everyone is encouraged to shine. And in order to do so, we *must* accept the fact that we are not always the symbol of fairness and equality we pretend to be.

If there's a singular most important thing I learned from Denver, it's that just believing in liberty and justice won't make them reality for the LGBT community, or for any other minority group. It's not enough to accept, smile and walk away. I am reminded of the words of the cantata we sang onstage in Denver, words taken from the speeches of Harvey Milk:

*"You must make a commitment. Without it, you are just occupying space."*