

Epilogue: Hope

Being queer is the greatest joy of my life. A decade ago, those were words I never expected to write. Hell, in this current world, it still feels like a bold statement because of the political, media and social landscapes that make it feel damn near impossible, at times.

It is a privilege to be a part of a community which embraces difference, loves fiercely and continually challenges the status quo. That doesn't mean it is easy to exist outside of what society has determined to be 'normal' or 'acceptable', and this book has been my attempt at illustrating just some of the difficulties we continue to face as LGBTQ+ people, not because of our identities but because of other people's intolerance, ignorance and outright hatred.

There are still those who think that members of our community are bad, sinful, broken, a threat, something that needs to be eradicated or kept away from other people. As though we might be contagious. These people, sadly, are everywhere: from the person standing on a street corner to the leaders of whole nations.

I was angry for so long at those who made it their mission in life to destroy the hard-won rights of LGBTQ+ people, who were so often fuelled by their own hatred and limited views of the world that they insisted on imposing them on others. These days, I tend to pity them instead.

Whilst some of the most threatening, pernicious voices have

power, influence, money and the apparatus of the state – they still haven't eradicated us. Their efforts have been fruitless. I've written throughout this book about history repeating itself and the risks of assuming that social progress is linear, something that feels ever more prescient as we witness a global rise in fascism once more. But there is also the much-underlooked fact that the continued fight against us reminds us we have always been here, disrupting systems just with our presence. We are everywhere and always have been.

What scares so many people who despise us, who would rather we shrank into the background – even those who don't mind us but would prefer if we were less loud, less blatant – is that there is no world that is divorced from the influence, power and strength of LGBTQ+ people. And if there were? I wouldn't want to live in that place – devoid of our impact on art, music, fashion, technology, science, medicine, literature and so much more.

Whether you make us illegal, remove our access to support, debate our existences, threaten our lives or indeed kill us – we prevail. Always. We're stubborn like that. A dandelion that sprouts between the narrow confines of concrete paving slabs is still a flower in bloom, just one someone has decided is doing it incorrectly, so we call it a weed and try to get rid of it. I take great comfort in this fact, especially on the hard days.

Growing up queer, there were a lot of hard days. I was lucky. I eventually found people who cherish me, who hold me and see me for who I am and who love me. I am acutely aware there are so many people who will never be able to be recognized as LGBTQ+ because of the danger that would place them in. I am a loud, proud person but I know that is not possible for everyone. Whoever you are, wherever you are, I see you. And we've got you. Progress is much more of a relay race than people imagine, and we are always passing the baton to those who are able to do the most in that moment.

I am shocked when people say they don't know anyone who is LGBTQ+. Of course they do.

Even if you are straight and cisgender and think you have nothing to do with us, I promise you have friends, family or acquaintances who are part of the community. But they won't tell if you if they don't feel safe.

LGBTQ+ people are not 'other'. We're the people who teach your children to do times tables, who clean your streets, who offer you a seat on the bus. We're the people who scan your shopping or make your favourite TV show or take your blood pressure. I'm fond of saying, 'LGBTQ+ people – almost the same thing as people'.

We are messy and complicated and brilliant because that is what it means to be a person. We are people and we are not demanding too much by expecting to be treated as such. We do not have to be perfect or conformist to be worthy.

I wrote this book with the aim of engaging what I called the 'compassionate middle'. I could see a growing divide between the depictions of LGBTQ+ people in the press and by politicians, and the people I encountered on the ground, most of whom were at least partly supportive. They might have had uncertainties, questions and/or concerns, but they were not vehemently against the rights of LGBTQ+ people, on the whole. Sometimes they had just never had the opportunity to have a conversation where they got things wrong and were able to be a bit rude and use the wrong language and say the wrong thing, not because they were scared we would come down on them but because they didn't want to be rude or hurtful.

I realized that was a good place to start – because it showed that somewhere, they cared enough to recognize the person in front of them had feelings. Seeing us as people was a start.

Even though there are more out LGBTQ+ people than ever before, we are still a minority. It is still profoundly unsafe to be LGBTQ+ in parts of the world, and, as this book has demonstrated, the UK has become increasingly hostile in recent years, in part because of the complacency that set in after same sex marriage equality came to pass.

Within the community, there is still a hell of a lot to do. As queer people, we've got to tackle the rampant transphobia that's inveigled its way into our media, politics, laws and attitudes with alarming rapidity, if not for our trans siblings then because it will be our heads on the chopping block next. We've got to realize we can commit to both learning and unlearning whilst also holding grace for those who know less, who might be newer to the community, might not have had access to knowledge. We've got to continue to build solidarity with other movements and communities because, as should be apparent by now, nothing affects just LGBTQ+ people. We must fight, but we don't have to fight alone. We need those outside of the community to publicly and loudly ally themselves with us. It is not enough to say you support us if you don't match those words with actions when those who strive to remove our rights are raucous, organized and well-resourced.

Quiet, interpersonal acts of support are important and life-saving but they are insufficient. We need the people who turn up to our bars or our Pride marches, who value diversity, who like what we make – frankly, people who value human rights – to start proving it. You've made it to the end of this book, which is a good start, but getting started or increasing your efforts to support LGBTQ+ people in tangible ways is important, too.

The persecution of LGBTQ+ people is aligned with racism, ableism, misogyny and other structural violence. We have repeatedly seen how the pursuit of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and practices serves as a diversionary tactic, drawing people into debates rather than tackling important matters like poverty, underfunded education and paltry access to healthcare.

A world that supports LGBTQ+ people and values our existence is a world that fundamentally cares about people. It shouldn't be idealistic nor should it be radical to be compassionate, to value difference, to have empathy. It should be an alarming indictment of any society that there is anyone, let alone children, who thinks it is better to be dead than to have to live as an LGBTQ+ person. And

who is to say it couldn't be you next? After all, the world always needs scapegoats.

I find it difficult to balance the exquisite magic of being queer with the darkness of the challenges we face. I am still angry a lot of the time – in fact, I'm still regularly outraged. It hurts to see people in my community in pain, to see them needlessly suffer because of other people's ignorance or cruelty or both. It is indescribably awful going to lay flowers at the graves of friends younger than you when their deaths were preventable, in a country that claims to be world-class in supporting LGBTQ+ rights. Especially when what they needed was not asking the earth: less cruelty, less ignorance, more care.

I originally worried that writing this book might scare LGBTQ+ people who were less confident in themselves but I came to realize that nothing I write can be as scary as the reality. But I wanted to end this book with this: to be part of the LGBTQ+ community is a privilege, one that has afforded me love, solidarity and care. To be queer is to be held and supported and nourished by other wonderful people from every walk of life. It has given me a unique vantage point through which to see the world and a ready desire to shrug off any societal expectations placed upon me. It is freedom, it is joy and it is hope.

Some say rage and anger corrode, but they just seemed to galvanize me, to make me love harder, to want to learn more. It's something no one can ever take from me. It's how I'm not numb to all of this.

My inner cynic tells me things can get worse, but they can get better, too. I have to have that hope.

We've got work to do.