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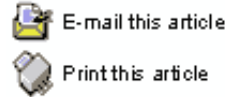
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### Victory dance

By MARGARET WENTE
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So Marc Hall and his prince were allowed to go to the ball to dance.

The judge's ruling that granted Marc his night at the prom will change the landscape for Catholic institutions, especially ones that get public money. But that is not the heart of this decision. The heart of it is that Marc has the right to be himself.

If you're gay, it's a long hard road to be allowed to be yourself. Not long ago you were a criminal. Then you were shunned, then tolerated, then included (maybe, sometimes, in certain circles). What a luxury to be yourself -- something the rest of us can take for granted.

When I was Marc's age, no gay kid would have dared to be himself. The world was such a homophobic place that you spent years wondering what was wrong with you, and desperately trying to change it.

Even in the enlightened '60s, it was absolutely not okay to be gay. The first man who ever told me he was gay burst into tears, and confessed that he hated who he was. He was desperate to go straight. That was only 30 years ago.

"You looked in a mirror," a friend once told me of those times, "and you were a stranger to yourself."

"All I ever wanted to do was cut hair," says another friend, who grew up in a small B.C. town where the other boys played hockey. He got beat up regularly.

Things are better now. But tens of thousands of gay people still feel they can't go public with their private lives, especially at work. They think their private lives will be an issue, and they're right. It's still rough to be gay in high school, where kids are practising their sexual identities, and acting homophobic is one way to declare you're not a fag. If you're a gay kid in a small town, multiply this misery several times over.

Marc's courage to simply be himself has made him a hero to other young gay men. "In high school, I was so closeted and afraid, I would never have been

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able to do it," one 19-year-old college student told a Toronto Star reporter. "Something is wrong if you have to be a hero to be out in high school," said another.

At his school, Marc is not universally adored. Some kids say he's wrecked their prom. Some think he's just a showboat. "He shouldn't make it public that he's gay like he does," one boy told the CBC. No surprise in that sentiment; the Catholic Church shares it.

According to the church, homosexuals are "disordered." They can be good Catholics -- but only if they don't engage in homosexual acts. Those are sins.

In the courtroom this week, this tortured logic resulted in several hilarious efforts to draw the line between "being" gay (allegedly okay, even on school property) and "acting" gay (not). "Acting" gay is narrowly defined by the school board as "romantic activity" toward a member of the same sex. For example, the school board would allow Marc to take his boyfriend to basketball games but not the prom.

The board's lawyer also carefully explained to the court that two gay students could attend the prom together -- providing they lied. The school would not object if they pretended to go alone, and then didn't dance with each other.

"They could go to the dance but couldn't dance," the judge paraphrased helpfully. The judge learned that even dancing can be divided into romantic and non-romantic. For example, a priest explained to him that the tango is romantic (so homosexuals aren't allowed to do it, I guess), but square dancing isn't, so they are.

No wonder the judge called this case the most difficult he's faced in nine years on the bench. All in all, it was a lousy week for the church to be defending its role as a pillar of morality. Just when you thought the sex-abuse scandals can't possibly get worse, they do. On Tuesday, the notorious ex-priest Paul Shanley entered a plea of not guilty to several counts of child rape. He has publicly rhapsodized about the joys of seducing boys, and his resumé includes a leave of absence running a flamboyant gay motel -- with the help of church money.


This also was the week that Cardinal Bernard Law took another step toward oblivion, by testifying that he couldn't remember very much at all about now-defrocked John Geoghan, a serial pedophile whose problems had been repeatedly brought to his attention. In Canada, priests are in the dock too, for sex abuses directed at both genders.


So I don't suppose that many Catholics will be scandalized by Marc Hall's prom date. They're much more scandalized by the scandals in their own church. Most of them believe that if anyone's disordered, it's a church hierarchy that's even more incapable of dealing with criminal sex acts than it is with legal ones. Top church officials have zero tolerance for homosexuals with a romantic life, for priestly marriage, or for ordaining women, but they're not so sure about zero tolerance for their own sex offenders.

Will Marc and his prince charming live happily ever after? I sure hope so. But we all have to travel a way yet, to get to a place where prom dates don't matter any more. I guess we'll know we've arrived when you don't have to be a hero to be yourself.

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