



Homophobia is Immoral. Where are the “good” people?

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Since elections in November, I’ve been doing a lot of soul searching. With 11 states adopting anti-gay state constitutional amendments; with foes, friends and pundits blaming “gay marriage” for Kerry’s loss; with another 12 to 14 state marriage amendments on the horizon over the next two years, including one threatened here in Virginia; with anti-gay rhetoric at an all-time high and absurd anti-gay attacks on even SpongeBob, it is clearly a time to take a step back, reflect, and process where we should go from here and how we are going to get there.

Some of our colleague organizations in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement are saying the results of November 2 showed that we have failed to educate the public about who we really are and get beyond the stereotypes of circuit boys, leather people, butch dykes, and drag queens — that it is now our obligation to “reintroduce ourselves to the American people.”

Others both inside and outside of our community are saying, in effect, that it’s all our fault — we pushed too hard and too fast and it’s now time for us quiet down, shut up about marriage, and set our sights lower. And almost everyone saying that we lost control of the terms of the debate and that it’s up to *us* to reframe the terms of the debate — that we must shift the focus from “moral values” to simpler concepts — like fairness — that polls and focus groups show have the most resonance with the American public.

With all due respect to my learned friends and colleagues, I think these approaches are dead wrong. They are nothing more than the “blame the victim” mentality that has afflicted our nation generally and our movement specifically for way too long.

Something bad happens, it’s *our* fault. *We* have to work harder to make it better.

Rather than reframing the debate away from moral values, I believe we must embrace them. Or more precisely, the utter and appalling *immorality* of the ongoing and escalating attacks against gay peoples, our families, and our very beings. And, equally, the utter and appalling *immorality* in the failure of so many people of good will to come to our aid. It is time for us not to abandon, but to seize the moral high ground and simply say that anti-gay discrimination is *immoral*.

We need to raise our voices and state clearly and unambiguously that we are now witnessing and living through another ugly chapter in our nation's long romance — or struggle — with the forces of intolerance and bigotry. People of good will can either rise up to now speak for gay Americans, or they will look back 20 or 30 years from now with shame that they did not act.

Let me start with some of the ugly facts about discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Young LGBT people are still at least three times more likely to attempt and commit suicide. Yet, in recent weeks, a federal agency insisted that the words “gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender” be removed from the title of a workshop on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender suicide.

At least 40 percent of homeless youth in this country are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender thrown out of their homes simply because of who they are. Yet, there is not a single federal funding stream to address this problem.

Survey after survey shows widespread anti-gay discrimination in employment, with between two-thirds and three-quarters of us hiding our sexual orientation on the job or on the street for fear of discrimination or violence. Similarly, nearly half of gay people in the supposedly liberal state of New York report experiencing public accommodation discrimination in the last five years. Yet, discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations and credit is perfectly legal in 35 states, including Virginia.

According to the FBI — whose own statistics notoriously undercount anti-gay hate crimes — in 2003, anti-LGB crime (they don't track anti-transgender violence) is now the second highest category of hate crime, and more people were murdered because of their sexual orientation than for any other reason. That means that in proportion to the U.S. population, anti-gay hate crimes are 28 times more prevalent than hate crimes motivated by hatred of white people, and nearly two times more likely than crimes motivated by hatred of African Americans. Yet state and federal legislators refuse to add sexual orientation to existing hate crimes laws and the anti-gay industry says these things don't even happen.

And, of course, the examples of injustices in the area of partner and family recognition are too many to list — from grossly disparate taxation, to partners of 20 or 30 years being denied pension or line of duty death benefits, to the unending stories of someone not being able to say goodbye to his or her partner of 40 or 50 years in a hospital Intensive Care Unit because they're not "family."

Webster's defines discrimination as "unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice." Clearly, gay people are targets, victims (or whatever word you choose) of discrimination.

Our movement has often shied away from talking directly and forcefully about all of these problems. Instead, we have consistently talked up, and frequently hyped, the good things, such as significant and positive changes in public support for our basic rights, the growing number of positive portrayals of our lives in the mainstream media, and our winning incremental protections at the state and local level in some parts of the country.

We have talked much less about the ugly side of homophobic discrimination because we have not wanted to sound like whiny victims, or appear as though we are trying to compare and rank our problems over those other minorities. We have been afraid that the facts — for example, data that show high rates of substance abuse in our community — will be used by others to argue that we are, in the words of the Vatican, intrinsically disordered.

These have all been legitimate concerns because, in fact, our opponents skillfully attack us using these points, most principally that we are seek to expropriate — indeed equate — our own struggles with the long, brutal and still unfolding civil rights movement to end racism and the still much-alive legacy of slavery in this country.

This ugly canard has been a deliberate and focused strategy of the anti-gay industry in America for more than 25 years. If any of you have not seen the 1993 *Gay Rights/Civil Rights* video, millions of which have been distributed and viewed in churches, I urge you to do so; this is one of its basic tenets. And, over the last election cycle, we saw this same attack rise to new levels as part and parcel of the calculated campaign from the president on down to try to wedge off African American support for Democratic candidates.

I am sad to say that some in our own community, in addition to well-intentioned straight allies, have played right into their hands by equating gay rights — particularly marriage equality — to the civil rights movement. Such comparisons are not only factually wrong, but understandably insulting to many of our staunchest allies.

So before I go any further, let me be clear: I am in no way equating our struggle with the civil rights movement or attempting to rank oppressions with other minorities. As Suzanne Pharr, an activist in the south for 30 years and author of *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* has said, homophobia, racism, sexism and all the other “isms” are not identical; indeed, she notes, “there are very real differences between the various forms of oppression. In various contexts and historical periods, one form of oppression may be much more salient and destructive than another.”

But, that does not and should not mean that we cannot speak the truth about pernicious discrimination against gay people. That does not mean we cannot speak the truth that anti-gay discrimination shares a common source and a common language with racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of religious and ethnic bigotry our nation knows all too well.

As my hero Keith Boykin, author of the recent book *Beyond the Down Low* has said, “Some say you can’t compare (the gay rights movement) to the civil rights (movement). Yes, you can compare the two movements. You can compare apples and oranges. What people really mean is that you cannot equate civil rights with gay rights.”

And, I agree with Warren Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, authors of *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, who say that while “... the experiences of victims of racism, for example, are not identical to those who suffer the effects of homophobia ... the many strands of discrimination, however, run parallel and at points intersect. All involve negative prejudgments whose purpose is to maintain control or power over others.”

Let’s look at some parallels in the rhetoric behind the current attack on gay Americans and past attacks on others.

In 1871, Pope Pius IX said that Jews, “owing to their obstinacy and their failure to believe, they have become dogs.” He added, “We have today in Rome unfortunately too many of these dogs, and we hear them barking in all the streets, and going around molesting people everywhere.” This is the pope beatified by John Paul II in 2000.

Today, a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Antonin Scalia, says that ending the criminalization of gay adults having private, consensual sex calls into question laws banning bestiality.

In the 1880s and beyond, interracial marriage was “an effort to destroy the (white) race by a mixture of black blood is an effort to destroy western civilization itself.

Today, James Dobson says that “barring a miracle the family as it has been known for five millennia will crumble, presaging the fall of western civilization itself.”

In the 1880s, history tells us that most non-Catholic Americans “believed that Irish poverty was a sign of laziness and immorality, of ignorance and superstition — traits they considered inseparable from Irishness and Catholicism. Newspapers in New York, Boston and elsewhere

often depicted the Irish as violent and drunken, even as subhuman, more akin to apes than native-born Americans.”

Today, a presidential candidate calls us “selfish hedonists,” and a college course materials calls “Gay sexual behavior ... fundamentally pagan — it lacks spiritual, as well as physical, discipline. Ultimately, gay sexuality is satanic in origin.”

One hundred fifty years ago, the Bible was used to justify slavery and white moral superiority. Just 45 years ago, 41 states had anti-miscegenation laws on the book and their rationale was simple and absolute and the state Supreme Court of Virginia held, “Almighty God created the races, white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.”

Today, seven of more than 1 million verses in the Bible are used to justify anti-gay animus, and the airwaves are full of preachers quoting Leviticus to say that gay people are “an abomination” while wearing polyester clothing and having a lobster dinner following their sermons — equal abominations in the Old Testament.

In the past, whenever there have been reforms to the institution of marriage, such as ending the notion of women as chattel or giving women the right to divorce, opponents have claimed that marriage has been an unchanging human institution.

Today, our opponents, in the words of President Bush, claim “marriage as we know it today is not only sacred but an enduring human institution for over 5,000 years.” Good lord, what history books are they reading? More to the point, what Bible are they reading? Just how many wives did the prophets have? I can only imagine what King Solomon would think of the “one man one woman” marriage argument.

Many of our opponents say, and I think a majority of Americans believe, that prejudice and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is profoundly different than that based on race or religion. One reason offered is that gay people can “pass” for straight, while racial minorities

cannot pass. Therefore, the argument goes, it's only gay people who "flaunt it" that face discrimination. Yes, many gay people can and do "pass," but many others cannot and choose not to. And, even the most straight acting, straight-laced couples — not matter how hard they try — cannot escape the statutory discrimination which refuses to acknowledge their relationships.

The larger argument offered is that that anti-gay discrimination is based on disapproval of our behavior, not on some "immutable characteristics" and that homosexual behavior is simply "unnatural" and the Bible tells us so. Pundits say there is an "ick" factor — that the thought of gay sex revolts non gay people, as if it were a innate, visceral reaction — and that reaction is proof positive that there is something wrong with homosexuality.

I actually sort of get this argument because ever since I can remember and to this very day, the thought of heterosexual sex makes me queasy. But I've actually never thought that would justify discrimination against straight people.

Here again, this "ick" rationale — prejudice based on another community's behaviors — is not unique to gay people, but has past parallels.

As John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman write in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, "Ever since the seventeenth century, European migrants to America had merged racial and sexual ideology in order to differentiate themselves from Indians and blacks, to strengthen the mechanisms of social control over slaves, and to justify the appropriation of Indian and Mexican lands through the destruction of native peoples and their cultures. ... In the nineteenth century, (they write) sexuality continued to serve as a powerful means by which white Americans maintained dominance over people of other races. Both scientific and popular thought supported the view that whites were civilized and rational, while members of other races were savage, irrational, and sensual. These animalistic elements posed a particular threat to middle-class Americans."

The point I am trying to make is that there is no justification whatsoever for anti-gay discrimination. The arguments for it are just as hollow, and just as immoral, as unjust, as

unfounded, as ridiculous as all those offered in the past to support the second class treatment and vilification of other minorities.

I know where it comes from — from the ism of heterosexism — viewing the world through a heterosexual prism, with the implicit understanding that heterosexuality is fundamentally superior to homosexuality and that gay people are fundamentally inferior to straight people. This notion that another group of people is less-than, inferior to, is the source from which all isms spring, and heterosexism is no less objectionable.

Given this, what I find so depressing, profound, and shocking is the widespread societal tolerance, acceptance, and indeed support for not only the construct of heterosexism but for so many of the appalling harms it inflicts on our people. I talked earlier about some of the uncontroverted products of anti-gay prejudice. I'd like to focus now on the extraordinary, political campaign now being waged against us.

For example, from 1993 to 2000, the legislatures in 37 states passed laws to prohibit two people of the same gender from getting married. These were laws to take away rights from a minority — rights I should note we didn't even have. Nothing on this scale has occurred so quickly in our nation's history, unless you consider prohibition taking away one's right to drink. Throughout that onslaught, there was barely a whimper of protest from the public, let alone much of our own community.

Last year, anti-marriage state constitutional amendments were put on the ballot in 13 states, nine of which also prohibit the recognition of any form of relationship between persons of the same gender, including domestic partnerships and civil unions.

These amendments invited the public to vote to deprive a tiny minority of a fundamental right the majority takes for granted and would never allow to be challenged.

And who was it left up to fight these amendments? The minority. It became *our* obligation to “educate” voters about our lives. In all of these states, our opponents spread outright lies and

outrageous myths about our lives and our relationships. For the most part, the mainstream media and churches were silent, and most progressive organizations and political campaigns steered as far away as they could. There were sterling exceptions, but they were few and far between.

And, when we lost these fights, it was *our* fault — we didn't do enough or fight hard enough or — almost pervasively — we deserved it for bringing up marriage at the wrong time and the wrong place. And, we're not done. There will be another 12 to 14 amendments on the ballot in 2005 and 2006 — and an unprecedented wave of mean spirited legislation is being introduced in statehouses across the country — led, sadly, by Richmond, where legislators are falling over themselves to be the most anti-gay.

I ask those of you here tonight who are not lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender to imagine what it would be like for your rights to be put up to a popular vote. What it would be like to wake up on November 3 and realize that 7 out of 10 of your neighbors do not believe you have a real place in their society.

Then again, why I am so shocked by resounding silence that comes from “good people” in all of this. In more horrific ways, in instances small and large, this has happened so many times before in our nation's history. The irony today, however, is that so many Americans see themselves as enlightened, unprejudiced, fair, and believers in equal rights for all. But of course, that is the same thing people have strongly believed while denying rights to or terrorizing other minorities.

Twenty years from now, I believe people will look back and say, “How is it possible that people of good will could have stood by? Where were the busloads of activists and clergy? How could the media have repeated, unchallenged, hate-filled misinformation?”

But, for the here and now, I have five suggestions.

The first is that we must make the political attacks on gay people a moral issue, not a political one. This is not about some mythical gay political agenda that should be debated like revisions to the tax code. This is about individual people and their families and their basic rights.

This need to be put on the moral line of what's right and wrong. When others say they cannot be "with us" on issues ranging from basic nondiscrimination protections all the way to marriage, what they are saying is that they do not consider gay people — our, lives, our love, anything — equal to them. They are saying — many without even knowing it — that we are lesser human beings. That simply is not right or true, and we have got to stop making excuses for it.

In this vein, we must categorically reject the notion that it is acceptable for our basic rights to be put to a popular vote, and that there is something sacred in the "will of the people," one of the new tag lines of the anti-gay industry. Let's face it, so many of the rights we take for granted — from freedom of the press to freedom of religion to things like desegregated schools to interracial marriage, or even access to contraception — would be lost if put to a popular vote in many states. Our Founders knew that fundamental rights should never be put to a popular vote because the rights of a minority will always suffer. That's why we have the Bill of Rights.

Second, while yes, gay people should all be happy to talk to others openly and honestly about our lives and the inequities we face, it is not our job or burden to show straight people that we can be good neighbors, good parents, that gee whiz, we're people too, so we can get equal rights. No one any longer insists that Jewish people or Latino people or Catholic people or black people do this to get equal rights, but somehow we should. No.

Discrimination against LGBT people is wrong. Period. End of story. We don't have to "educate" another single person

Third, and related, and I'm saying this to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, we have got to put others on the spot to support us, to stand up for us, and to fight for us. As the cascade of lies pours forth from the Anti-Gay Industry, we need, we expect, and morality demands that people of god speak out, in the same way and with the same vehemence as they would if it was another minority under attack. We need to go to our ministers and rabbis and say "where is your voice?" We need to say to elected officials who meet with and attend events of those in Anti-Gay Inc.: "How can you do that?"

Fourth, to organizations and leaders who share progressive values, and who oppose the reactionary and frightening direction this nation is going in, we must say you can no longer look the other way as we are attacked — slightly embarrassed. Because whether they like gay people or not, or believe in our fundamental humanity or not, the simple political reality is that the forces of darkness in this country are using gay people, our issues, and marriage in particular as sharp point of a wedge, behind which is all the rest of their scary agenda — everything to overturning *Roe v. Wade*, to breaking down the separation of church and state, to ending social service programs for the poor, to establishing a judiciary that is driven not by law but ideology, to limiting grounds for divorce.

And finally, our opponents, some allies, and even some in my own community, are saying we need to keep quiet, get in line, and straighten up or it will be even worse. Instead, I believe just the opposite, and ask each of you to raise your voice in this moral quest.

Thank you.