

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force



CREATING CHANGE

Matt Foreman speech at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center of Utah WinterFest closing plenary — February 11, 2006 Salt Lake City, Utah

Pride, Anger, Righteousness

It's a real honor and privilege to be here today, and whenever I'm in Salt Lake, it really does feel like coming home. I lived here for five years when I was growing up — in grade school in Magna and then in junior high here in the city. I was all set to go to Judge High School when we moved to Canada.

We came here from Palo Alto, California, after my father finished his MBA and an advanced degree in metallurgical engineering at Stanford. I quickly learned that I was different — I was the only white gentile in my 3rd grade class, and the only one in our neighborhood. People did reach out to us though, and said repeatedly we simply had to come to the stakehouse on a Friday night. Well, we were lonely, and coming from ranching people we were definitely up for good beef. We got all dressed up — and, you know the punch line here — were stunned and embarrassed when we pulled up and found out it was a church, not a place to eat.

I don't know if growing up here as an outsider, a looked-down-upon minority, not part of the chosen, even our address — 8457 West-3450 South — reminding us everyday of the dominion of a largely alien dominant culture made it easier for me accept and frankly be grateful to god every day for being gay. But I do know — and I know many of you feel the same way — Utah is part of me and every decision I make.

I've been asked today to talk about a way to frame and understand our movement's struggle for equality and how we can survive and thrive in the face of incredible challenges and attacks here in Utah and across the country.

I can sum this up with three words: pride, anger and righteousness.



I'm starting with pride because once we start talking about the challenges we face, our internal weaknesses, and the might and ugly tactics of our opponents, it's easy to lose sight of what an amazing people we are. Let me put it simply: No other social justice movement in the history of the world has made as much progress as we have in the 37 years since Stonewall. Let me say it again: No other social justice movement in the history of the world has made as much progress as we have.

Forty years ago, the term "sexual orientation" was unknown and there were no laws protecting gay people from discrimination. Today, 48 percent of the nation's population lives in a jurisdiction that protects people from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Forty years ago, no one had ever heard of the term "domestic partnership" and today more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies offer DP benefits. It was inconceivable 40 years ago that the city of Salt Lake would have a pro-gay mayor, would have a vibrant and effective statewide LGBT rights organization like Equality Utah, or a stellar institution like the LGBT Community Center of Utah, a huge gay pride celebration, or even today's gathering. Who could have dreamed even 10 years ago that every household in Utah would have seen television commercials talking about gay and lesbian families or that 34 percent of voters here would support marriage equality?

Against hundreds of years of prejudice injected into every fiber of society's DNA, against huge odds and mighty opponents, with meager resources, with a plague that killed a generation of our men, we — *you* — have accomplished all of this in less than 40 years — a mere blip in history.

All of this was brought home to my heart and mind on Tuesday when I had the honor to attend the funeral of the best ally our community ever had, Coretta Scott King. We were reminded that it took more than 200 years to end legal slavery in this country, another century to guarantee African-Americans the right to vote, and that, if anything, the aftermath of Katrina showed how far we still have to go to end racism and poverty in this nation.

So, whenever you're tempted to think that we're all screwed up, our organizations aren't effective, that we're not accomplishing anything, or that things are hopeless — think about how far we've come and be proud of yourself and all those who have come before you.

Next, I'd like to suggest that what our movement desperately needs is anger. It seems to have been accepted wisdom that we're supposed to ignore the lies of our opponents, their distortions, their disgusting tactics, and the vile things they say about us. We're supposed to respond to their attacks to the gut with rationality and reasonableness. Even in our own internal discussions, we tend to make light of them, to smirk or roll our eyes.

In our hearts and our voices, that has to end.

You hear them, you see them, you feel their poison seeping into the public discourse and into young and old minds alike.

We see the hierarchy of the Catholic Church continuing to scapegoat gay people for the decades of appalling sex abuse of children and young people that it alone created, nurtured and covered up.

There's Lou Sheldon, James Dobson, Donald Wildmon and their ilk making their livings spreading outright falsehoods about us and our so-called agenda.

There are hundreds more of these extremist “leaders” railing against us day in and day out on radio and television and from pulpits.

It would, in fact, make sense to ignore them if they were confined to extremist fringe where they belong. But the sad and appalling reality is that the mainstream media largely gives them a free ride and legitimacy.

The sad and appalling reality is that they wield enormous influence over public policy, with Karl Rove in the White House vetting through them everything from HIV prevention policies to the nomination of supreme court justices.

The sad and appalling reality is that president goes to their conferences, caters to them, prays with them, gives them our tax dollars, and consistently throws them rhetorical red meat, as in his recent State of the Union address, when he linked American’s concerns “about unethical conduct by public officials” to “activist courts that try to redefine marriage.” Lets’ see here — criminal behavior here and marriage equality here — any kind of connection — other than patently insulting — of course not.

The sad and appalling but not surprising reality to you is that the often hidden hand of the LDS church is pushing anti-gay legislation and certainly never lifting its voice for us.

And we can’t pretend as though their tactics and this unholy alliance aren’t working. Let’s look at what’s happened in just the last 7 years around marriage equality. In 1998, no state constitution specifically prohibited same-sex marriage. But today, there are 19 states that have acted to do just that — including, of course — Utah, and there’s another six to seven states facing the same thing this November, and more in 2008.

They are relentless in their persecution. Just look at what’s going on in your own state legislature — Rep. LaVar Christensen — who, as you know, was a driving force behind the constitutional amendment — is sponsoring bills that would enable a biological parent to cut a non-biological parent out at any time and prohibit any court from recognizing the relationship of the non-biological parent. Another one of his bills would prohibit counties — like Salt Lake County — from offering domestic partner benefits or benefits to non-biological children.

Then there’s his HB 304 bill, which seeks to void legal agreements between us — about our relationships, our property, our children — the very thing he said during the Amendment 3 debate that he did not want to do. Damn hypocrite.

But this is about much more than passing discriminatory laws — it is about hurting people — our people — in real ways. I don’t want to bring us down, but we need to face the realities of the products of America’s Anti-Gay Industry:

Young LGBT people are still at least three times more likely to attempt and commit suicide, and there is anecdotal evidence that the rate is even higher here in Utah.

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.

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. Yet, discrimination in employment, housing, public

accommodations and credit is perfectly legal in 31 states including, of course, Utah.

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 Utah legislators refuse to consider a bill that would specifically include hate crimes against gay people 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 from 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."

I don't know about you, but all of this makes me sick, and it makes angry, very angry.

But what to do with this anger? Obviously, we can never use anger to fuel, foster or even consider violence. We can never allow anger to lead us to irrational behavior.

But, we must hold this anger in our hearts to spur us on because, as Coretta Scott King — the most nonviolent person on earth said — you cannot fight for justice unless you are angry about injustice.

But what can we do? What should we do?

We need to take our pride and anger and move forward with righteousness. I know some may be reluctant to use this word because it is what our opponents wrap themselves up in. So, when I say righteousness, I don't mean moral superiority, or some God-given dominion. Rather, I mean that we must embrace and espouse our fundamental humanity with the same fervor, the same sense of right and right and wrong that our opponents use to deny us our humanity.

This means changing the frame from which we've been operating since Stonewall. Our vision, our goal is not equal *rights* — as if what we are seeking is a better dental plan — but to be accepted for what we are — and that is fully human. Everything — including all the rights and responsibilities we are now denied — will flow from that.

We are — like everyone else — created in God's own image and likeness. We are, like everyone else — as our founders said — endowed by our creator with the same inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We are — like everyone else — entitled to dignity, respect, and access to the same protections, institutions, rights and responsibilities as all others.

This means stopping running away from the morality and moral values issue, and instead seize them and go on the offensive. More specifically, we must never shy away from calling out and speaking the truth about the utter and appalling and disgusting *immorality* of the ongoing and escalating attacks against us, our families, and our very beings.

We must say over and over and over again, simply, directly, and unambiguously that there is no rational basis for anti-gay, anti-lesbian, anti-bisexual and anti-transgender discrimination.

We must say over and over and over again, simply, directly, and unambiguously that anti-gay, anti-lesbian, anti-bisexual and anti-transgender discrimination in all its forms is *immoral*.

On this score, there are no ifs, buts, or howevers. We are fully and completely human, period. When they say, "God made Adam and Eve," we need to say — and I'm borrowing from Bishop Yvette Flunder in Oakland, "Well, *who* in the hell do you think made Steve?"

What this really means is us — both internally and externally — rejecting and doing everything we can to end the "gay exception." The gay exception is that it is OK to say things about LGBT people in legislatures, in newspapers, on TV that no one, no one could get away with saying about another minority.

You know what Sen. Chris Buttars and Eagle Forum president Gayle Ruzicka say about us. If they were to say the same things about any other minority, they would be shunned, denounced and — if ever quoted in the media — identified as extremist. But that doesn't happen — in fact, Gayle has a reserved seat in the gallery of the state capitol here. I say, where's the seat for the Aryan Nation?

I also saw that Sen. Buttars has said that one of the tactics of the so-called gay agenda is to brand our opponents as bigots and intolerant. Well, frankly, I don't think we do that nearly enough and, Sen. Buttars, to quote a great gay icon, Bette Davis, "But ya ahr, Blanche, ya ahr..."

And, of course, it's not just in the legislative arena — look at the myriad jokes that have come out of *Brokeback Mountain*. There's nothing remotely funny about that movie. Imagine if this had been a movie about another minority couple that had been denied their love because of society's prejudices — jokes about it? Never. But we're all supposed to just go hee-hee and accept this as part of straight America's sick fascination with gay sex? No. Enough.

As the cascade of lies pours forth from the Anti-Gay Industry over the coming year, morality demands that we *and* non-gay people speak out with the same vehemence as they would if it was another minority under attack. We must be direct: Silently bearing witness to this discrimination is as wrong as discrimination itself.

Within this context, we need to stop seeing and talking and thinking about this wave of anti-marriage, anti-any-form-of-relationship-whatsoever constitutional amendments, these hideous anti-gay bills in the Utah Legislature as political contests that we ought to be winning if only we did something better. As I said before, the fact that more than one-third of voters in Utah rejected the Amendment 3 in 2004 is nothing short of miraculous, but it is an outrage that something like this was even on the ballot. It is an outrage and another sterling example of the gay exception that these bills have even been drafted, let alone introduced, let alone moved through committee.

Because, when you boil it all down, these amendments, these bills are about inviting the public to vote on whether they deem us as good as they are, whether our love and our families are worthy of respect — put simply — whether or not we are not fully human. This — putting the rights of a minority up for a vote — is always wrong. This is not democracy. This is the tyranny of the majority and it's immoral.

So, let me close with three things I'd like you keep in mind here in our Beehive State.

First, and I know I'm preaching to the converted here, we have to be a daily mission to speak the truth about our lives to our family, our friends, our neighbors and our co-workers because we know that someone actually knowing a LGBT person is hugely important in determining attitudes about us. But we cannot assume that because people know we are gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, or that we have dinner together or whatever that they actually know anything about the injustices we face. In fact, the opposite is very often true. We have to speak from the heart and ask for support. And, this is about the hardest thing in the world for many of us.

Second, in our movement and in our community, we need to accept that there are many roles to play and they are all welcome. The African-American civil rights struggle advanced more quickly than it would have otherwise because it had Martin Luther King, Jr. *and* Malcolm X. They knew each other, they respected each other, and they worked together behind the scenes. Mike Thompson can't be throwing around incendiary rhetoric in Capitol or chaining himself to legislators' desks — believe me, I had his job in New York and you do that and doors are closed to you forever. But, that doesn't mean that others shouldn't. What I'm saying is there is no one message, no one tactic and we are best served when we have Log Cabin Republicans over here and a resurgent Queer Nation over here.

The corollary to this is that, as we move forward, and press for equality, there is going to continue to be enormous pressure to cut corners, to not be honest about our lives, to leave parts of our community behind. Let's always remember that building our community over the long term is far more important than any quick wins. Let's remember that our moral values — unlike those of our opponents — demand that we always speak honestly about our lives, without disingenuous whitewashing and sanitizing to make us more acceptable to the "mainstream." Let's remember that our moral values demand that everyone is included and no one no one gets left behind — not people of color, not trans people, not bi people, not Native people, not leather people — not anyone.

And finally, as anti-gay rhetoric and legislative attacks continue right here and around the country, we cannot allow ourselves to be discouraged, or to pin any responsibility on our heroes like Mike or Valerie Larabee for not doing X or Y or not — for God's sake — working hard enough. We are not the first — these things have happened to others in our nation's long-romance with intolerance — to African-Americans, to Native peoples, to Chinese immigrants, to Irish and Catholics, and yes, Mormons, before us — but hopefully, we will be the last. This is where our inherent righteousness must kick in. We will fight, we will make our case, we will not surrender — but when we lose today, tomorrow or next month or next year, let's remember that it is not our fault and that in the not to distant future, the people who are doing this do us now and their descendants will look in shame and regret.

I am confident that because of people like you, we will win a federal law protecting *all* of us from discrimination in the next seven years. I am confident that because of people like you, we will have the freedom to marry coast to coast within 25 years.

So, together folks, let's go forth with pride, with anger, and righteousness and we will prevail.

Thank you.