

We're Here to Recruit You

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Rob Eller-Isaacs

San Francisco County Supervisor, known to those who loved and followed him as the “Mayor of Castro Street,” martyr to the cause of human liberation, began his stump speech with the words, “my name is Harvey Milk and I want to recruit you.”

Well, my name is Rob Eller-Isaacs. I’m one of the ministers of Unity Church. I’m a Unitarian Universalist. I am a religious liberal. And I, and we, are here to recruit you. We’re here to recruit you to openness and authenticity. We’re here to lend what courage we can to each and everyone who longs to step

out of the closet and into love's embrace. And we're here to enlist you in the struggle to bring in the reign of mutual respect.

The great abolitionist Unitarian preacher, Theodore Parker, wrote that "the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice." I think he must have had in mind not only the martyrs, not only those who fought and died for freedom but also the unsung others who somehow found the courage to step beyond their fear; those of whom the English poet Stephen Spender wrote, that "in their lives (they) fought for life, (those)who wore at their hearts the fire's center. Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun and left the vivid air signed with their honor."

Today we join progressive congregations and communities all across the land in observing National Coming-Out Day.

There is reason to rejoice. Just this past Thursday by a vote of 249-175, the House passed and sent to the Senate a bill to broaden legal sanctions against violent prejudice by classifying as "hate crimes" those attacks based on a victim's sexual orientation, gender identity or mental or physical disability. Passage in the Senate seems assured. I'm sure you join me in expressing our gratitude to those who finally found a way to extend federal law to help to protect our neighbors and ourselves against violent crime enflamed and magnified by prejudice. It's been a long time coming.

But in the midst of our rejoicing we still have to confess how far we have to go. Social progress comes in fits and starts. The key, it seems to me, is solidarity. Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen uses the term “friendly fire” to describe the tendency of marginalized groups to imagine they can consolidate their progress by severing their ties with those less fortunate. Though early feminists were powerful allies in the effort to abolish slavery, the fourteenth amendment did not extend the right to vote to women. And so began a jockeying for power among activists who should have stood in solidarity. We need to understand the reality of linked oppressions. As we celebrate National Coming-Out Day and

reaffirm our commitment gay liberation we would do well to remember the racism and homophobia are inseparable expressions of the self-same fear which affects and undermines us all.

One of the many reason that I love the church is it the one place in society where one doesn't have to choose one from a list of narrow causes. Our cause is the cause of human liberation. We do our best to find creative and effective ways love our neighbors as ourselves. It's as simple as that and as demanding. What does it take to come out? What does it take to walk that "old revolutionary road" as it "breaks off into" the "shadows?" What does it take to come out when "our country

moves closer to its own truth and dread, its own way of making people disappear.”

In the late 1970's Anita Bryant, John Briggs and a band of right wing ideologs, callings themselves good Christians went on the attack. Twisting scripture to their own ends they attempted to incite America against what they saw as a tidal wave of immorality. Thank God many of us saw things differently. Thank God for the gay liberation pioneers who risked it all, not only their privacy but sometimes their very lives by speaking out and coming out and stepping out into the streets. In 1978 the statewide ballot in California included a proposed constitutional amendment to ban homosexuals from

teaching in the public schools. Proposition 6, known as the Briggs Amendment after its primary sponsor, John Briggs had widespread support that spring. Three of the four major contenders for the Republican nomination for president, Bob Dole, George H.W. Bush and John Connally declared their support.

The newly organized San Francisco gay community was enraged. Their leader, Harvey Milk, began to organize to fight the Briggs Amendment. At first it didn't go well. In the recent academy award winning film called "Milk" Sean Penn in a stunning embodied performance says

If we're gonna convince the 90% to give a damn about us 10%...

We have to let 'em know who we are. Everybody's coming out.

The entire state. No matter where they live. **We're** going to tell

everyone in the state to come out. Every gay doctor, lawyer,

teacher, dog catcher... We have to leave the ghetto, let all

those people out there know that they do know one of us. And

if people won't step out of the closet, we open the door for

them.

ANNE KRONENBERG

Jesus.

SCOTT SMITH

The whole state is not San Francisco.

HARVEY MILK

Clearly, Scott.

JIM RIVALDO

It could be dangerous. There is such a thing as a right to privacy.

HARVEY MILK

Privacy's our enemy. You want real political power? Let's tell the truth for a change. Starting here. If there's anybody in this room, right now, who hasn't told their families, their friends, their employers... Do it. Now.

Do you understand my friends? Milk is saying that the real enemy is our isolation. He's saying there are times we

have to sacrifice our privacy, to step outside our walled communities, to overcome our fear in the interest of a larger love. Milk hit the road. His stump speech went like this:

Hello. My name is Harvey Milk, and I want to recruit you.

I want to recruit you for the fight to preserve our democracy against the Anita Bryants and John Briggs who are trying to legalize bigotry! We have a choice to make. The fight is at our doors. We must either go back in the closet and shut it tight, or fight... History shows that if we continue to fight, we...will... win.

And win they did, win we did. Briggs, who had hoped to become California Governor on the strength of the victory of

Proposition 6 woke up on the morning following the election to find the proposed amendment had lost by a significant margin. Though the efforts of Milk and many others had played a role in it's defeat, Briggs was sure the tide had been turned by the fourth contender for the Republican nomination. His name was Ronald Reagan. He had the courage to say no to the hate mongers. I disagree with much of what he stood for but we should all be grateful that that time, when it really mattered, when lives were on the line he stood on the side of human liberation.

This past November we saw another attempt by the so-called Christian right to legislate their prejudice. It was called

Proposition 8 and sought to limit the protections of marriage to heterosexuals. With massive funding from the Mormon Church and concerted support from the Roman Catholics this time it passed.

Soon the issue will be put before the voters of California once again. If we had the money I would put up billboards on every major highway all across that Golden State. Those billboards would have a portrait of their Lord and Savior right up there bigger than life and he would smile down and say “Hello. My name is Jesus Christ and I’m here to recruit you.” How dare they use the gospel of the Prince of Peace to reinforce their prejudice!

I'm sorry. I know we always try to see through other's eyes. I know we try to welcome differences of opinion. But you and cannot allow the forces of ignorance and oppression take control even if they claim to serve a loving God. You and I cannot condone it. There is no turning back. Take courage friends. History shows that if we continue this fight, we, will , win.

So be it and Amen.

