

Our Community, At A Glance

By Brad Vanderbilt

There's nothing sexier than a man who knows his own sexual power. If you've ever been to the Eagle Beer Bust you may know what I mean. I love that weekly event because it is so often filled with men who know their sexual power. As you squeeze through the testosterone-filled crowd, you see every size, shape and shade of sexy San Franciscan.

Barrel-chested Papa Bears. Lean, lanky swimmers. Bulging body builders. Silver-haired Leather Daddies. Porn stars, tax attorneys, frat boys, biker dudes and an infinite assortment of "regular guys." Amid that amazing diversity, you have a sense that there is a place of pride for each of us. A sense that "in this space, I can be my sexy self."

I have often felt that we've lost that sense in the Castro. I'm told that the Castro used to be a friendlier place. I've lived here ten years now, and I'm not sure I've seen it get worse, but I have come to the conclusion it could be better.

So how do we help create a friendlier Castro? How do we start to foster the kind of community where we really are welcomed and welcoming, regardless of the ravages of time and gravity?

It starts with learning to love our bodies, something perhaps easier said than done.

What holds us back often has as much to do with our own fears and inhibitions as the facts and figures of our various measurements. Certainly we live in youth-obsessed culture that venerates inhuman ideals of zero body fat and sculpted muscles, all the while telling us to Super-Size our consumption from our first mocha-chocolate to the final hurrah of all-you-can-eat pizza.

So naturally, most of us have a lot of baggage to unpack. We grow up in a culture deeply ambivalent about sexuality. Obsessing over it, glamorizing it, exalting it. But also demonizing it and harshly castigating anyone who transgresses in the slightest way the ever changing boundaries of "appropriate sexual expression" as subjectively defined by the dominant culture.

Being queer, we are usually on the losing end of those judgments about appropriate sexual expression. So we are told our sexuality is wrong, sick and sinful. Add to that an equally damaging fear in our society of our bodies themselves. In this context of body phobia, sex phobia and homophobia, it can be a long and arduous journey to arrive at a place of acceptance of our bodies and our sexual selves. Only when we get there can we begin to share that acceptance, that generosity of spirit with our queer brothers.

But let us try nonetheless. Try being more gentle with ourselves. More forgiving of our flaws. More aware of our fabulous uniqueness. Then try to pass the love along, because we can all use more gentleness, more forgiveness and more love.

The next time you are in the Castro and you catch some guy checking you out, who is perhaps "not your cup of tea" – instead of a "you wish" sneer, how about giving that guy a nod of acknowledgment. Not a "come hither" stare, but a small, brief nod that says, "I saw you watching, and thanks for the attention."

I think we need to re-learn that whole gay "look-look" thing. When I first came out in Dallas, one of the coolest things about being gay was the way you would be walking down the street, or paying for your groceries, or in line at the DMV when you would suddenly catch sight of another guy, and in a split second of eye contact you knew he was gay, and he knew you were, and it was this perfect tiny moment of communion.

Those glances, those brief, little moments, communicated so much. And something so profound. In those looks we told each other, "I know who you are, and it's okay. I am too." And even in Oaklawn, Dallas' gay district, where you didn't

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need eye contact to discern a guy's sexual orientation, those "checking you out" glances were often a small, beautiful affirmation.

I wish we could re-learn some of the great non-verbal skills we had before the age of Skype-ing out our orgasms in real time to the grainy image of some naked, heavily pierced dude in Berlin waxing his schlong with a massive black dildo hanging out his ass. Not that that can't be fun too.

But couldn't we try to bring the sexy back to those real-life look-look moments? To instill once again some sense of connection and compassion in the casual glances we exchange when walking through our neighborhood?

When I'm in the Castro and I get a lusty look from passer-by, I get a little ego boost from the experience, and I'm happy to return the look with a smile and a nod. Not a nod that says "Yeah, baby,

bring it on." Well, at least, not usually. But a look that says "Thank you, I appreciate that you have noticed me." It's a small thing, but so important.

These brief exchanges say without any words that we both have a place of belonging in this community. It says not just that I'm glad that I've been noticed, which is usually nice in and of itself but it also says, "I'm glad that you are here to notice me, and that you are part of this community."

Maybe it's not that big a deal. It's not the magic bullet to cure all our wretched -isms. It won't end world hunger, increase T-cells, or even restore a receding hairline. But if a friendly nod helps another queer brother feel a bit more connected to a sense of community, isn't it worth it? Doesn't it make it in some way a better place for all of us?

Very few of us were born and raised here. We came, often times, because we were looking

for a place we would finally really belong. We found a city of breathtaking beauty, where being gay is unremarkable and the potential for crazy sexual adventure is virtually limitless. But often we also found ourselves struggling to keep our heads above water in a very expensive city, feeling disconnected and alone in a community where sex is plentiful but authentic connection can seem rare.

The gay "look-look" thing may not be the key to our communal salvation, but along with taking a more compassionate look at ourselves, and truly loving our beautiful, perfectly imperfect bodies, it may help us be more compassionate with each other, and move us toward a more loving and connected community. Why not give it a try?

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