

# Do We Still Need a Gay Community?

By Tim Vollmer

Frank, a friend of mine from Berlin, has been visiting me in San Francisco nearly every year since the early 1990s. Last year he surprised me by declaring, "I'm sorry, but gay San Francisco is boring." When I pressed him further for details, this is what he said: "There is nothing to do. Where is everyone? All you see nowadays are gay couples walking around the Castro holding hands or walking their dogs. There is no nightlife, no energy. I used to feel like I was coming to a great gay center, but now I don't."

When my friend came this year (yes, he still came) I noticed he did very little that could be described as "gay." He shopped a lot, did some day trips and spent a fair amount of time on his laptop. He had a good time visiting his friends and enjoying the area, but in a way he could have been visiting any attractive big city.

While this is just one tourist and thousands of gays still eagerly come to San Francisco, especially for the big summer and fall gay events, my friend's comments still struck an alarming chord with me. They echoed what I've been reading and hearing elsewhere, that it's not just San Francisco's gay community that seems to be in the doldrums, but also gay communities around the globe, from New York to Amsterdam to Sydney (Berlin, which has been busily rebuilding its role as the bohemian capital of Central Europe, seems to be one of the few places bucking the trend).

Multiple reasons have been floating around as to the cause of this development, if it is indeed happening. The first, and perhaps most optimistic view, is that this isn't a bad thing at all, but rather the opposite, a sign of progress. Conditions for gays have gotten so good—think domestic partnership rights, successful gay

sitcoms, and the outcry over the recent use of "faggot" by celebrities—that gays no longer have to live apart and huddle for protection.

A variant of this view focuses on the gay marriage phenomenon: gays are now pairing up, having children, moving to the suburbs and no longer need—or have time—for active participation in the community, or at least the "traditional" gay community. In this view, the PTA has replaced the LGBT community as the focus of life. Being gay is still important, but the context has changed with the locus being the home rather than the bar or gay volleyball.

Of course, everybody talks about technology. The Internet, it is said, has killed the gay bar as community has gone virtual. Nowadays instead of hanging out at the local tavern or all-night dance club, gays, especially younger ones, are said to be hooking-up or checking out profiles online via "Manhunt" or "craigslist" and other social networking sites.

One of the big pink elephants in any discussion of the state of the gay community is the AIDS epidemic. The decline in community participation, it is argued, is due to the loss of a generation of gay men who would have been taking up leadership and community-building posts. Or it is argued that the need to go into AIDS activism and public health professions created a sort of long-lasting "brain drain" diverting activities away from the type of community work seen in the 70s.

Lastly it has also been said, usually not loudly, that the perilous state of community is due both to long-standing problems that have never been adequately addressed and to recent TV-friendly stereotyping that has gone

largely unanswered. The gay zeitgeist has been moving toward "marriage," toward the mainstream or just hunkering down behind the computer monitor because the "gay lifestyle" is seen, again among younger individuals especially, as both unhealthy and, increasingly, as superficial.

What is one to make of all these views and theories? Is the gay community in San Francisco or elsewhere suffering from a sort of malaise even as the gay movement's goals seem to be going successfully mainstream? Is the gay community distasteful and outmoded to the young, irrelevant to the partnered and just plain problematic for the rest?

Perhaps the best way to answer questions like these is to reflect on one's past experiences with the gay community however one defines it and ask yourself, how has it been? How has it changed in my life? Do I still need it? Is the gay community still necessary?

As for myself, having grown up in the Bay Area, I've been involved with San Francisco's gay scene since I was in my teens in the late 70s. I've seen the gay community here go through many phases, so my first take on these questions is an acknowledgment that the community has never static—it has always been in a constant state of flux. For example, I've watched as the Castro has gone back and forth from crowded and bustling to nearly empty and sad, with many stops in between.

And my friend Frank from Berlin is right; strolling couples seemed to have replaced cruising singles, but this is not the first time the neighborhood or the wider gay community has changed "styles." The morphing of the macho Castro Clone into the more punky and grungy ACT-UP and Queer Nation style in the mid to late 80s

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was a memorable example.

Even more significantly, I remember the looks I got when I first started showing up in the late 70s, especially from the older gays who, in their 30s and 40s, were at that moment building the Castro as a gay neighborhood and a much more organized gay community in general in San Francisco. Perhaps because of growing up in the City's shadow after the advent of gay liberation, I was naturally, even easily, openly gay—much more so than these older, largely transplanted, gay pioneers. So much so, in fact, that the older gay folks would once in a while stare in astonishment, as if they were realizing the future gay “type” would be a fundamentally different creature from themselves, a new type of gay who would belong to a new gay world. As I often had to remind them—they grew up in the closet but I didn't—and it made a big difference in how we saw the world and ourselves.

While the community—and the people who inhabit it—have always been changing, so has my relationship to it. When I made my first forays into the City and saw the men lining the streets in the Castro and in front of the bars and clubs, I couldn't get enough of it. Although I might not have grown up in the closet confused or conflicted about my sexuality, I was still surrounded by heterosexuals and it was stifling. Coming into the City and being surrounded by other gay people was like breathing fully and freely for the first time.

Unfortunately, my relationship with the gay community didn't stay so idyllic. Fairly soon I realized that the gay community had confining elements of its own (as suggested in the term “Castro Clone”). As a child of divorced parents, I was also keen on establishing relationships that lasted. What I found however was a sexual culture that seemed mostly impersonal and fragmented, whether underground, as it was during the more repressed 80s,

or more public, as in the more free-wheeling 90s and beyond.

Perhaps most disappointingly, I found that despite the HIV epidemic and its obvious connections to drug use and unsafe sexual practices, these problems persisted and seemed even to intensify rather than abate over the years. When it came to my sexual and romantic future, I began to wonder in my early 30s if I needed to look beyond the urban gay community.

Sure enough, around that time, I met a person who preferred to live in the very suburbs that I once found so confining, a man who was also more involved in the family and community he grew up in than he was in the world famous gay community down the freeway. When we decided to create a life together we also decided that his world would provide a more favorable environment than the urban gay one, and so it has for the last 16 years.

So does this story—this brief recap of my last 25 years—mirror the story of the shift of community to marriage in the gay culture? Hardly. Something happened nearly exactly the same time as my relationship was forming that prevented me from deciding between marriage and community. In the early 90s my entire social circle, save one or two “friends of friends,” died on me. In the span of a year, my own personal gay community disappeared. Suddenly, the gay community that once seemed as crucial as oxygen was gone. It left me rather than my leaving it.

The emotional toll of those times is of course well known. Less discussed is the loss of community that occurred simultaneously when our network of friends and loved ones died out. For many of us, the idea of the gay community as dispensable, for whatever reason good or bad, is not entirely a theoretical discussion. Some of us have seen life without a gay community, or at least our little section of it, and, speaking for myself, it was

devastating. Just about everything in my life suffered as a result of the lack of it, my health, my career, even my relationship. As the song goes, “you don't know what you've got till it's gone” and losing my gay community during that time period highlighted how important—even essential—it was to my well-being.

The upshot of this story is that nowadays, whenever I hear that San Francisco's community (or the gay community in general) is “boring,” or that married or younger or “post-gays” don't need it, I sort of smile. I also nod when I hear about all its faults and imperfections and the reasons not to be a part of it. I smile and nod because I think, yes, I once thought these things too. But then I got a good taste of life without a gay community—by leaving for married life in the suburbs right about the time when all of my friends in the City died—and I definitely did not like it.

The styles might change, as well as the struggles, even the sort of people who comprise it, but the gay community is still necessary for me, and, for a good chunk of time to come I suspect, for nearly every other gay person too.

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