

Where Have All the Angry Gay Activists Gone?

By Tim Vollmer

Something strange happened in May. I began to see happy gay men and lesbians nearly every morning. The pace picked up in June, with more and more smiling gays everywhere. The reason of course was the historic California Supreme Court decision allowing same-sex marriage--and the flurry of news reports that followed. Every morning the papers had front page stories and photos of beaming gay couples, and all day long television news shows were full of gay men and lesbians holding hands, hugging, and heading down the aisle with unrestrained glee.

Naturally I'm happy at the positive turn of events--but also a bit caught off guard. Though I came of age in a time of great gay optimism--the late 70s in San Francisco when everything seemed possible--my experience as a gay person has been much more decisively shaped by the dire times that followed, when the gay community seemed at times to be fighting for its very existence. So the sight of so many delighted gay people enjoying the embrace of mainstream society and its traditions has been as jarring as it has been uplifting. I find myself wondering, where are all the angry activists blowing whistles and demanding their rights or protesting some wrong? Are they gone for good, replaced by an army of bubbly gay couples storming City Hall for marriage licenses? If the era of angry gay activism is really over, does it matter?

It would be hard to overemphasize the role of angry gay activists in paving the way for a world which seems to be on the brink of treating gays equally in marriage, and by extension, in nearly every other way as well. Since World War II, each generation has come up with groundbreaking forms of gay activism that both

sought to build on the previous generation's strengths and rectify what the newer group saw as the older one's weaknesses. From buttoned-down homophile groups to rampaging gay liberationists to Doc-Martin-stomping Queer Nation, each generation has produced an angry and defiant up-swelling that has improved gay lives.

At least, each phase of gay activism has had a beneficial impact on my life. I was born in the middle of the homophile movement, which sought to bring respectability to the notion of gay rights in the late 50s and early 60s. My earliest attitudes toward being gay were shaped by their efforts, albeit very indirectly. I remember my mother explaining to me when I was quite young that "homosexuals" were "sick" but not "sinful"--a very important distinction to a woman educated by nuns, especially since it was her opinion that homosexuals couldn't change. Such an attitude seems reactionary today, but back then it was considered liberal when compared to the dark sinister stereotype it was replacing. The positive message I absorbed when I was young was that being gay was involuntary and permanent and ultimately no one's fault.

Growing up in a suburb near San Francisco, I was lucky to get the full impact of the waves set into motion by the Stonewall riots and the subsequent gay liberationist era. I was just entering high school when I read an article containing the slogan "gay is good" which changed the ground I walked on. Suddenly I knew there were people out there with an attitude toward gays 180 degrees opposite from the one I was hearing from mainstream society (and from my mother). By the end of

high school I was going to gay student unions at local colleges and learning about the politics of "homophobia" and "sexual oppression" which boldly declared society was sick, not gay people. From the beginning of my adult gay life, I didn't feel like a sexual outsider--I felt I was part of a political movement.

Early on, I could tell that I had less baggage as a gay man than those older than me or those from more conservative areas--and they could tell too. Gays who came from a background in which same-sex feelings were seen as a sinful choice--or who did not feel a part of a political or social movement--had a whole layer of guilt and conflict I didn't have. I remember older gays staring at me when I began to take part in the emerging Castro scene as a teenager. I was clearly more at ease with being gay out in the open, on the streets, and later even in my professional life. Although I have often taken it for granted, I've also been very grateful for the struggles of gay activists who came before me in helping give me a more relaxed basis to my sexual identity.

Of course, by this time the gay community was about to have a whole new set of challenges, and again the example of angry gay activists played a pivotal role in helping me deal with them. Building on earlier successes in turning contentious issues around, groups like ACT-UP said the core problem of the new AIDS epidemic was society's inaction to deal with it, not the orientation of the people affected by it or how the virus was spread. Queer Nation soon followed at a time when the community's spirits were at their lowest, injecting a sense of pride and sexiness that all the attention on disease and suffering had drained away.

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It may be that the ACT-UP/Queer Nation era was the high point of the angry gay activist, so much so that whistle-blowing gay caricatures became staples on comedy shows such as MADtv. Given the life-or-death context prevailing during those years, it isn't surprising that peaking passions led to the closing of streets and bridges and even the opera. By the late 90s, expanding treatments and better outcomes were making such extremes seem outdated and unnecessary.

Gay marriage as an issue and strategy seems to typify the dramatic change away from the in-your-face gay activism of earlier eras. Yet even this new decidedly non-angry and assimilationist form of activism has had a huge positive impact on me as a gay man. Having moved back to suburbia more than decade ago with my long-term partner, this new emphasis on relationships has made me feel an important part of a gay world that all too often seems to stress only the meat market values of the bars and clubs. It has also been extremely validating to see mostly middle-aged gay couples in both the straight and gay media, and to see that gay culture now embraces the entire cycle of life, rather than just the splashy and glamorous first half.

Does this mean that we've reached the end of our struggle for acceptance and equality, as the recent headlines declaring "Finally!" seem to suggest? Indeed, the present era reminds me very much of the period in San Francisco I first came to know—right after Harvey Milk was elected and a state proposition banning gay teachers was defeated—when a bright new world for gays did seem so possible.

My guess is that the angry whistle blowers will return sooner than we expect. The zeitgeist pendulum is bound to swing away from the happy couples and back to younger restless types protesting against new problems (and shaking their heads at the obsolete mindset of their gay elders). I fear also that the present euphoria will unfortunately be followed by a new round of troubles and challenges, some similar to those of the past and some entirely unexpected.

Already dark clouds are forming on the horizon, casting shadows over all the wedding celebrations. More anti-gay propositions loom, and a crumbling health care system threatens everyone but especially those hit hardest by HIV. Plus, particularly vicious anti-gay backlashes are emerging in the Middle East and Eastern Europe that are now beginning to impact the lives of Western European gays. It may be only a matter of time before those currents hit here too in ways that are hard for us to foresee.

So, despite the unprecedented good news of the present moment, I'm keeping my old pair of Doc Martin boots and my collection of whistles. I want to be ready just in case the new breed of activists need some support in making gay life even better.

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