

The View from the Lectern Reflections of a Gay Professor

Occasionally it happens. In fact, there are quite a few of us, though the environment in which we work is rarely tolerant and often blatantly hostile. So we have to be very careful, and trust you understand our discretion. I was a teacher for several years at a Catholic university in a major metropolitan center, an institution notorious for its homophobia. In my department of about two dozen professors, there were two other gay males. The three of us were kindly referred to by the astute departmental secretary as "our bachelor professors." None of us could be said to be "out" at work; that would have been professional suicide. Though we were pleased that "our crowd" had its representation even in this hostile environment, each of us made the prudent choice to develop our circles of friends outside the university.

I was just starting to come to terms with my sexuality when I was an undergraduate. Though I was fortunate to have several teachers whom I admired, I never (to my knowledge) had a gay teacher. The only time the "subject" came up was in a Classics class, when the fundamentalist professor was asked to explain the Theban sacred band of Ancient Greece. The sacred band was a military organization based on the bonds of devotion between pairs of lover-warriors. For several decades in the middle fourth century, B.C. Thebes overpowered most of Greece on the strength of the sacred bank until that great father/son team of homosexual warriors Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great annihilated them in a fierce battle, gaining mastery of the peninsula. My teacher showed his evident disgust with the whole business, apologizing for having to speak about it in class. That was all I ever heard, though anyone who has ever studied the past and read between the lines could learn much more.

By the time I finished graduate school, I had reconciled myself to my sexuality, and looked forward to teaching my own classes. Every teacher, of course, was once a student. Some of us forget too quickly what it was like to be a student, but we all, at least at the beginning of our careers, have a mental list of what we would like to do differently--and better--than our predecessors. Among other things, I wondered how I would conduct myself differently from my fundamentalist teacher should a similar question arise in one of my classes. By now I had learned that the "subject" was so important to ancient history that it was historically irresponsible not to mention it. I would never allow myself to exploit a teaching position to propangandize for any personal views, but I did want to avoid hypocrisy at a minimum, and if possible, provide an example of tolerance for straight students and support for gays.

This proved more difficult than I thought. On the many occasions on which it seemed to me critical on professional grounds alone to mention homosexuality, such as the involvement of the Greek lovers Harmodius and Aristogeiton in the overthrow of the Athenian tyranny or the mostly homosexual Antonine dynasty of ancient Rome, I found myself worrying about seeming too interested for my straight students or alternatively too ambivalent for gays. Where appropriate, I mentioned other traditionally taboo subjects in lectures like prostitution, infanticide, abortion and especially misogyny, that ugly but fashionable literary convention of the ancient world which lead to vicious stereotyping of women as stupid, shrewish, spend-thrift, and slutty. I found that my willingness to talk about these things served as a signal to my students that the usual constraints did not apply and that any relevant question could be entertained in class.

Perhaps the most difficult question ever posed came from a female student who asked me what role I thought the practice of male homosexuality played in the oppression of Greek women. In an instant I was called upon to give a thought reply that

- would not be seen as knee-jerk defense of homosexuality
- would not be interpreted, on the other hand, as homophobic
- would be sensitive to the feminist perspective on history
- would not get me fired, and most important of all,
- would be as historically sound as my experience and judgment allowed.

I always tried to be sensitive to the possibility that my sexuality might subliminally be influencing my perception of my students' performances. The fact that I learned my male students names more quickly led more than once to an embarrassing routine of calling on students like so: "Yes, Tom... You have a question, Steve? ...Ah, yes ma'am..." My "fans" were the great exception to this rule. A teacher's "fans" (in some cases you might think other names more appropriate, but I for one won't agree) are an indispensable element of any class. They sit up front, rarely miss a class, are amused by the teacher's jokes, nod when he looks at them for encouragement, hiss when their classmates ask stupid questions. They come in both sexes and all sexualities. Their names are never forgotten. But for the benefit of everyone else, and as a check on myself, I made it a practice always to compare the median grades for my male and female students after grading exams. I was relieved to find they were never out of line with each other.

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