

Their Crime, Our Punishment

A Personal Account of Anti-gay Violence

Surely one of the most tragic consequences of social homophobia is the violence against gays known as "fag bashing." As a gay man who has had the misfortune to be bashed twice by homophobic thugs (sorry, I can't bring myself to use a nicer phrase), I'd like to share my personal perspective on this troubling problem of our times.

First, the nasty details. Four years ago, I left a gay bar late at night and hopped on my bicycle for the ride home. I never made it. A carload of thugs trapped my bike against the curb at a red light, and before I could escape, one of the car's occupants shot me with a tear gas gun. Utterly disabused of the quaint notion that these fellows might hold any pacific intentions towards me, I struggled to get away. It wasn't easy. My glasses fell off, I was blinded in one eye, and could barely see with the other.

Of course a half-blind fairy on a bicycle was no match for four thugs in a V-8 1970 Chevy, and in seconds they had cut me off again and piled out of the car for a one-sided rumble. I experienced a moment of pure terror as a fist came my way, the sort of terror I learned possesses a victim when he realizes that something terrible is about to happen and he can do nothing to stop it. My last sensation in a blind abyss of pain was of a crash landing on my chin on the cold February pavement.

When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a wheelchair in a hospital ward, one eye all sealed up and for all appearances gone for good, the other still stinging with the tear gas. From what I could see, my clothes were drenched in blood. "Do you know who you are?" "Where are you?" "Do you have Blue Cross?" "What's your policy number?" So came the questions, relevant and absurd.

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I was thrown up against an x-ray machine, then wheeled frantically down the hallway to an ophthalmology clinic. I thought to myself, at least I was lucky enough to be bashed practically on the doorstep of the world-famous Massachusetts Ear and Eye Infirmary. But I reproached myself bitterly, thinking, "I lost an eye for a chance to get laid."

At the clinic they pried my sealed eye open (you can imagine the pain), found it was still there, but that it had broken through the socket floor (a "blowout fracture"). Over the next few weeks I had cause to wonder at both the fragileness of

the human body and its remarkable ability to recover from severe trauma. Slowly that eye opened up, giving me double vision at first, then months later--miraculously it seemed--restored sight.

The stupidity of the criminals in using some credit cards they had stolen from me to buy gas for their cars enabled me to track them down through the auto registry. To this day I know the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of my assailants. Yet even more shattering than the actual assault was the refusal of the city police department to make a serious investigation of the case, much less any arrests. After having practically solved the crime myself, I simply proved an embarrassment to police detectives who evidently felt that I had gotten what I deserved at the hands of the "enforcers of the contemporary morality."

I went on with life, enormously sobered about "crime and punishment" as it applied to gay people. My story might have ended here, had not a much less serious assault this past summer served to provide a puzzling postscript.

This time I was traveling in a car, riding down the main street in Provincetown, a well-known gay resort. While I dozed off, the driver and another friend in the back seat chit-chatted about the young men on the street. "Did you see that blond, Charley?" "Yeah, but he's got to be straight."

A moment later, said blond youth was at the window of my car seat and battering me around. "You were looking at me," he said, educating me about a "crime" I didn't know existed and which I didn't "commit" anyway.

The irony of the comparison to the earlier assault struck me keenly. Now I was sitting inside a car, trapped by a seat belt and unable to crank up the window, being bashed by a pedestrian! After promising to "knock" my "head off next time," the assailant stopped his attack.

Other than being convinced of the utility of buying power windows for my next car, I found myself at a loss over this incident. I no longer had any illusions that police were willing to extend a protective or retributive arm to a gay, so a complaint seemed utterly futile.

On the other hand, I still search for the "politically correct" response I feel I failed to make. Surely gays have not been put on earth to serve as convenient punching bags either for crazed thugs or uptight youths, least of all in a gay resort, where the simple instinct for self-respect seems to demand a stand for our "turf." So I still wonder, what are we to do? What worse things are in store when it becomes clear that we can be beaten up with impunity?

- T.R.