

The Tyranny of Small Minds

By Katherine Gray

Who doesn't remember a childhood incident when a grownup took a heavy hit on a kid? It usually went something like this: "God doesn't love a liar" or "Nobody can stand a cheat" or "Nice girls don't do it." But in those days no one, NO ONE, ever even talked about being gay, or being pregnant, or having the crabs.

Well, times change.

I was reminded of how easy it is to lay a guilt trip on the defenseless when I read this week about "Bob," who died of AIDS. At the funeral, the minister said, "I'm not sure where Bob is now."

It's so damned easy to be judgmental. But somehow, this so-called man of God, like so many judgmental mortals, picked the fight that suited him.

I wonder: How has he handled other funerals? Did he ever take a hit on a deceased woman who had an abortion, or a husband who fooled around, or a father who refused to support his children? Has he ever said, at any other funeral, "We don't know where Bob is because he beat his wife" or "played the horses" or "was killed while driving drunk" or "stole money from a client"?

I doubt it. Somehow, this minister decided to single out Bob's homosexuality for censure — at his funeral, yet. And this particular lack of

tolerance, of charity, of love, is especially offensive to those of us who believe, absolutely, that Bob's sexual preference did not condemn him to a life in the netherworld.

As we approach the beginning of a new year, I hope everyone will think about the larger message of Bob's life and death and how our city reacted to it. His illness, his dying, are part of our greater community.

Let's hope there's a sea change, for the better, taking place right now — in our hearts just as in our politics. Columbians, South Carolinians, Americans — all want less government, lower taxes, less intrusion in our everyday lives. Don't we also want more tolerance of others' views?

Can't we accept that a neighbor is a Muslim or a Jew rather than a Christian? Can't we accept folks who are different — whether because of race or sexual orientation or religion? Isn't there room to rejoice in our differences as well as our similarities?

We must not ignore the small hurts, the mean slices, the unkind attitudes. When the voters spoke on Nov. 8, they said they wanted changes. But I don't think they said they wanted more intolerance. I think they wanted less.

I think Americans want big government out of their faces. They want a happy, contented life for Bob and his friends just as much as they wanted a happy, contented life for the Father-Knows-Best

family they saw on TV in the '50s.

The word communitarianism has been used and abused in the '80s and '90s. Shouldn't it involve wrapping our arms around those who live next door, down the street, across town? Shouldn't it mean extending a helping hand, even to those who are "different?" Shouldn't it mean being less than judgmental of our fellows when their views aren't the same as ours?

I feel sad for anyone who can only condemn. Bob's lifestyle did not kill him. Indeed, his lifestyle did not harm the community where he lived and worked and made friends. He died of a disease that strikes males and females, blacks and whites, gays and straights.

If God is indeed in his heaven, I am convinced he did not desert Bob. Neither did the friends and family who went to his funeral service to celebrate his life. They were shocked by the eulogy. But they spoke with their feet. In droves, they walked out on the minister who chose the occasion of Bob's death to raise a question about whom God might favor. They sent a stronger signal about the strength of our community than any small-minded homily ever could.

Katherine Gray is an Associate Editor of The State newspaper in Columbia, SC. This commentary was originally published in the Dec. 29 edition of The State and is reprinted with permission.



"There is not one member of the gay community who hasn't benefited positively from the changes over the last thirty years. Yet we still hear, 'I don't like the gay community here very much.' To which we must respond, 'But my dear you are the gay community!'"

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Mailing Address P.O. Box 27928
 Raleigh, NC 27611
E-Mail FRNTPAGE@AOL.COM
Phone (919) 829-0181
Fax (919) 829-0830
National Sales:
 Rivendell Marketing (212) 242-6863
 (908) 754-4348

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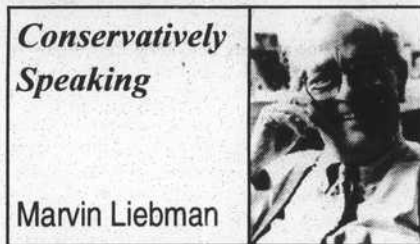
The Coming of Gay Marriage

During the last year, when asked where I believed the primary emphasis of the gay movement should be, I have been unequivocal in stressing a single priority — the need to organize locally, in our neighborhoods, cities, and states.

We are now at the beginning of an historic battle that has started in Hawaii and promises to progress throughout the country, state by state. This may give our movement just the impetus it needs. At stake is a crucial legal right, central to our struggle for dignity and acceptance. The issue is gay marriage.

For the past year and a half, I've followed the Hawaii gay marriage case with fascination. It has sparked national attention. After brushing aside less than compelling arguments by the state's adversarial lawyers, and tossing off a hostile resolution approved last session by a hastily convened state legislature, Hawaii's Supreme Court is set to strike down discrimination against same-sex couples in the granting of marriage licenses. The state's new Democratic governor publicly supports the court's expected decision. Against the conservative tide of the mid-term elections in most other states, Ben Cayetano parlayed explicit pledges of support for gay marriage to victory last month. The big issue on the Court's ruling is not if, but when.

The Hawaii victory, when it does come, should not be looked at as any final answer. It is simply



the beginning of a long struggle which can be of equal importance to our community as was the stand at Stonewall some twenty-five years ago. If this beginning in Hawaii is to endure and spread, we have our work cut out for us, and we will have to endure the inevitable heat which will come from all sides.

The concept of gay marriage is highly energizing and, perhaps, the issue which will finally turn American lesbians and gay men into a cohesive force and movement. The major opposition, of course, will come from the religious right. I have no doubt that right-wing politicians will introduce bills in state legislatures seeking to restrict the right of gays to marry. Without an educated, mobilized activist countervoice, such bills may very well be adopted. Similar efforts may also erupt in Capitol Hill, taking shape either as a free-standing bill or, more insidiously, as an amendment to any other bill before the Congress.

Our primary requirement from Congress, therefore, is for inaction. Given popular anxieties about gay issues, the inclination to make the issue "just go away" may actually work in our favor on Capitol Hill.

Against these efforts, the basic message is as simple as it is persuasive. Discrimination. For nearly two decades, gay men and lesbians across the country have been trying to have the announcements of their commitment ceremonies printed in local newspapers, meeting mixed responses. And, as far back as 1970, gays have sought redress from the courts following their attempts to do what straight Americans take for granted — to enter into a legal union.

As is illustrated by the Hawaii plaintiffs widely divergent backgrounds, the fight over gay marriage both showcases and taps the diversity of the gay community. The issue promises to energize us across the lines of race, class, education, and age. As a *Newsweek* poll conducted last summer indicates, the equal right to marry is of particular importance to lesbians.

For men and women alike, though, the issue has a greater poignancy than the quest for more common legal protection from discrimination. The issue also promises to mobilize members of the community who have not been previously tapped or politicized in other battles. While the pivotal

continued on next page

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