

Gay Liberation— From Self Acceptance To Social Acceptance

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, June 11, 2006
by **Tom Ferrick**, Leader

I will tell you a story from my time and interpret memories in my way, always remaining intent on approaching universal truth. My hope is to bolster the image gay people have of themselves as they embrace the joy and naturalness of gay sexuality. In a postscript at the end, I will speak again to this vision.

Let me begin with 1969 (which, of course, was the summer of Stonewall), I resigned from the Catholic priesthood and embraced Humanism – the defining act of my life. I have had a moderately successful career. All that time I have been and forever will be gay. I let those I worked with know that I was gay, wrote some letters to the editor and occasionally spoke on radio and TV about my orientation. I was publicly active in a gay men’s response to AIDS, called Men of All Colors Together. But these activities paled in force and number to the time and effort I gave to the Humanist cause.

Now, in my later years, I want to pay homage to every gay person who has outwardly fostered the movement over previous decades and to personally pledge a greater effort for the cause. So that homage begins today.

This resurgence of mine, a reawakening, began with, of all things, a movie! Some here, I’m sure, have seen *Brokeback Mountain*, the so-called gay cowboy love story. Its tragic message and universal appeal moved me so deeply that I praised it on the Internet. Tony Hileman happened to catch it and asked me to speak here this morning – (parenthetically, I spoke here 35 years ago and these two platform addresses act as bookends to my humanist journey). He believed, I think, that Humanism had something to say to the Gay Community and America, and vice-versa. Here in a few words is the story line of this powerful work of art.

Two young cowhands find themselves together but isolated, herding sheep on a mountain side. One night a freezing storm and some whiskey fate them to sleep together huddled in a pup tent. Long repressed homoerotic feelings bring on a furious act of intercourse. In the days immediately following, they deny being queer but give way again to the power of their urges and within days have come to fully accept the pleasure and joy of their uninhibited embrace. After that summer, each gets married but can’t throw off the memories of that encounter on *Brokeback Mountain*. Over the years they have a succession of “fishing trips” when they recapture the ecstasy and quiet pleasure of being together. These moments contrast with their unfulfilling home life and both men feel the frustration and emptiness of their lives. In time the marriages break down and with estrangement, all including the children, suffer. When Ennis learns of Jack’s death, (almost certainly a violent hate crime) he brings the ashes to Jack’s parents in rural Texas and finds there, in Jack’s closet, his own long lost shirt, encased by Jack’s – these are very same shirts they wore on that first idyllic encounter. The sense of loss, the awareness of defeat, lingers in the remaining minutes of the film ; only a kindness felt for his daughter gives him the courage to go.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

The events of Brokeback Mountain cover the period of the sixties to the eighties. Much has changed since then, much has not. A bit of History is in order. The last decades of the 19th century have been called “the gay nineties.” Americans in general were upbeat about their world but gay men were living the sad stories we have heard about, such as those of Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, and others. Sometimes so appalled by their condition, extreme measures were sought. It was not unheard of then for a man to opt for suicide, other chose castration, as did Guy Olmstead, in 18944, horrified by his love for William Clifford. Every day thereafter, he experienced bodily discomfort but was able to say: “I have absolutely no passion for other men, and have begun to hope now that I can outlive my desire for Clifford.” Sigmund Freud was issuing some consolation – the homosexual was not sick, he declared, simply undeveloped. But few listened to him.

Everywhere sodomy was punished severely. In the first half of the 20th century, there was only the rarest mentioning of homosexuality; it just wasn’t talked about. So there was no surprise in 1952 when the American Psychiatric Association officially declared homosexuality to be pathological.

In the 1960’s, America experienced a cultural revolution, and one little noticed event here in NYC ignited a movement. Yes, at the Stonewall bar, in the summer of ’69. People weren’t paying attention – a human being for the first time was walking on the Moon, and as for me personally, I was writing to my cardinal archbishop, Richard Cushing, telling him I was resigning from the priesthood and leaving the Catholic faith. Most people were unaware that the patrons of a gay bar in Greenwich Village boldly resisted the intrusions of the police, barring them from the door, so tired were they of the constant questioning and harassing searches. For three day they stood their ground until city officials arbitrated the matter. But in the fledgling gay community, organized only in a handful of cities at that time, the news was electrifying.

In the months and year following, gays began to let people know they were around, gay newspapers and magazines sprouted up, and the gay bars multiplied. It was sometime in this period that I wandered into such a place and to my astonishment, learned that gay men were numerous, happy with one another, and unafraid there in such strange sanctuaries. I remember feeling somewhat euphoric, forever knowing I had a refuge. The seventies gave this underground movement a sense of great hope and some of us dared to actually live with a partner. Sex in dark places mushroomed. A false optimism took over; they were heady days ... and short-lived.

Early in the eighties came the scourge of AIDS. The Reagan Administration largely ignored the crisis, and the gay community was slow in mustering its forces against the disease. Many gays were in self denial, others defensive, antagonistic, with health authorities. Their leaders made them grasp the reality of the threat. (I refer you the book, “And the Band Played On.,” (Randy Shilts). AIDS is a disease that is caused by a totally opportunistic virus that had, we think, breached the human-chimpanzee barrier, probably in Cameroon, sometime in the 1960’s. Given access to a person’s blood, it destroys the immune system, ravaging the entire body with such horrors as Kaposi’s sarcoma and pneumosistis pneumonia. I witnessed the painful absence of the stricken when my small group of white and black men met at Harvard’s Phillips Brooks House and no cure was in sight. Protease inhibitors and magic cocktails were years away. The new symbol was the quilt project, which in myriad variations, gave a strange consolation to the bereaved community.

And then. as if things could not grow worse for American homosexuals, we suffered another setback. In 1984, the Supreme Court upheld the criminalization of sodomy in the

case of *Bowers vs. Hargrove*. This was a wrenching defeat. Hargrove and his friend were arrested in the privacy of their bedroom while making love to one another. They had appealed the case through the courts and now came the final decree. Justice Powell had been somewhat ambivalent. He admitted to his liberal law clerk, Cabell Chinnis, that he didn't think he had ever met a gay person. Chinnis was a closeted gay man, but failed at this crucial moment to make his orientation known. He did argue with Powell that everyone should have the right to love whomever they chose but the Justice rejoined that he couldn't find that right in the Constitution. Some years later Powell admitted that he was wrong in the way he had voted. The gay community, as you might imagine, was unforgiving toward the law clerk. Posters declaring "silence = death" have been showing up from time to time ever since. By a vote of five to four, gay Americans had been denied a basic right to privacy and so the law remained for nearly another two decades. Chinnis was reviled by some gays, but by choosing to pass as straight he did what thousands have done before and continue to do today. A Yale law professor, Kenji Yoshino, and gay author of "Covering," believes these angry gays were responding to their own internal homophobia because they knew that in similar circumstances they very well might have done what Chinnis did.

Throughout history, humans aroused by sensual passion for their own sex have chosen assimilation and lived careful lives, but lives psychologically marred by repression and deceit. They learned to fake an asexual or heterosexual orientation. They could laugh as loud as others at jokes derisive of gays. Perhaps tell a better one. It's only been in our time there have been thousands of middle aged persons who, even though they happened to be married, and had children, summoned the courage to follow the honest path, often for their own sanity. It was a road strewn with unfairness and hurt, leaving families wrenched apart. Transitions full of heartache.

But I have digressed from our lessons in history. After the *Bowers* ruling, law had again legalized shame. Despite his good intentions, there was no way President Clinton felt he could keep his campaign promise to allow gays to openly join the armed forces. No Harry Truman, he. His compromise, the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, was a pragmatic deception officially tolerated and, I think, an embarrassment to honorable people. The 2000 election, with the resurgence of the religious right, brimmed with premonitions of threat. Never in modern times have we had an Administration so theocratic in tone and so infused with biblical certainty.

Now, early in the 21st century, change is in the wind. On one hand, consider President Bush's attempt to ignite the Republican base by proposing a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. Consider, on the other hand, the Supreme Court Ruling in the 2003 decision, *Lawrence v Texas*. Each ratchets up the national debate.

Again, as in *Bowers*, two men are arrested in their home as the result of a tip. Eventually the case reaches the highest court and *Bowers* is declared null and void. The Court ruled that "the liberty protected by the Constitution (mainly the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment) allows homosexual persons the right to choose to enter upon relationships in the confines of their homes and their own private lives and still retain their dignity as free persons." As for religious tradition in this matter, the Court declared that its "obligation is to define the liberty of all, not to mandate a moral code." In other words, it does not speak at the behest of any religious doctrine. In decriminalizing sodomy the vote was decisive, 6 to 3, with Anthony Kennedy speaking for the majority. He's well known for saying that our foremost freedom bestowed on us by the Founders is the right to decide the meaning of our lives, to enunciate freely the values to which we choose to adhere, and so it follows, to determine whom we love and

the way we love. We are talking here about core freedoms based on personal dignity, that cherished Humanist value.

James Essecks, who is Litigation Director of the ACLU's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project writes: "For years, whenever we have sought equality, we have been answered in courts of law and in the court of public opinion with the claim that we are not entitled to equality because our love makes us criminal. That argument is now a dead letter. Every gay person, the court said has the same right to "define one's concept of existence, of meaning, or of the universe and of the mystery of human life as every American." "Since 1986, said the ACLU, lower courts have relied on *Bowers v Hardwick* to take away or limit custody to gay parents and to uphold firing or refusing to hire gay people." The Court has said we are a part of the American family. Now it's time for the rest of society to do the same. The far-reaching decision means that similar laws in 12 other states are also invalid. "This decision, said Anthony Romera, ACLU's Executive Director, is all the more important because it comes at a time when the right to privacy is under one of the greatest assaults it has ever faced."

Something important was happening there in the Supreme Court in the spring of 2003. Dean Yoshino remembers it this way, "Deep into the argument, Chief Justice Rehnquist asked Paul Smith, the counsel for the gay appellant, (*Lawrence*), whether ruling in his favor would permit gays to be kindergarten teachers. Smith said he would need to know why the state would object to gay kindergarten teachers. Justice Antonin Scalia clarified that the state would have an interest in preventing children from being steered into homosexuality. As he made that no-promo-homo argument, a ripple of disbelieving mirth swept over the courtroom. That was the moment I was convinced we would win." And indeed we all did.

About a week from now. New York will be celebrating Gay Pride again—truly celebrating because of this ruling.

It was no longer a given that you could easily train a child to become gay. Modern medical science does not know how homosexuality comes about but there is no evidence that it can be imposed and absolutely no evidence that a child chooses it.

My memory holds very early stirring in a sexual direction, at five or six years of age, (when I thought Flash Gordon was neat) followed a few years later by an adolescence often alive with homoerotic imaginings. But I was carried along by the certainty of a vocation to the priesthood, and so celibacy would not be an unendurable burden. The famous Bishop John Shelby Spong has a derisive paragraph on all this: "Can you imagine an adolescent choosing to be homosexual? What would be the intellectual decision-making process? "Ah" I can hear him or her saying, "I will decide to be a homosexual. I like being disowned by my family, beaten up by my friends, fired from my job, run out of town, condemned by my church, shunned by my neighbors' and all the other things that we have done as a society to gay and lesbian people. What would motivate choosing a life of persecution? The irrationality of homophobia simply amazes me." He moves on to an allied subject, the prejudice preached by many religions. "Statements from the conservative Pope Benedict XVI and right-wing evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are so hostile, so filled with fear and venom and profoundly ignorant, first of Sacred Scripture's real meaning, (some biblical scholars make a genuine case for understanding the condemnations of homosexuality in Scripture, Leviticus and St. Paul, as aimed at non-procreative sex), and second, of the modern scientific and medical understanding of homosexuality as to be breathtaking. There have been some weird claims of success in "curing" gays by certain right wing groups. They have no credibility

in scientific circles and if fraudulent they do great damage to young minds. Spong is an optimist: "Prejudice, while still virulent, is in fact dying". Gay people that I know, some staying in their faith, find a way to harmonize religious doctrine with a homosexual life. In the past few years, the uncountable number of clergy who have supported gay rights, especially of all those who have supported gay marriage has just amazed me.

And that reminds me of the prospects for the passage of an Amendment to the Constitution banning Gay marriage, briefly prominent in recent news, It is limping at the starting gate but the ban is popular in most of the states. As one who has performed a variety of different marriages, I can state categorically that the "feel" of a homosexual wedding is precisely the same as a heterosexual one. And never have I witnessed any hint of a threat to conventional marriage; where, we keep asking, is the harm? Talk about fear mongering. Massachusetts should have nothing but pride in creating and defending this opportunity for legal bliss.

Let's return to the beginning, to the movie, Brokeback Mountain.

The best review, I think, appeared in the New York Review of Books last February, written by Daniel Mendelsohn. He writes, "The real achievement of Brokeback Mountain is not that it tells a universal love story that happens to have gay characters in it, but that it tells a distinctively gay story that happens to be so well told that any feeling person can be moved by it."

The reviewer goes on, "Their final vacation together (before Jack is beaten to death in what is clearly a flashback, as a road-side gay-bashing incident) is poisoned by mutual recriminations. "I wish I knew how to quit you" the now nearly middle-aged Jack tearfully cries out, humiliated by years of having to seek sexual solace in the arms of Mexican hustlers. "It's because of you that I'm like this – nothing, nobody," the dirt poor Ennis sobs as he collapses in the dust. What Ennis means, of course, is that he's nothing because loving Jack has forced him to be aware of real passion that has no outlet, aware of a sexual nature that he cannot ignore but which neither his background nor his circumstances have equipped him to make part of his life. Again and again over the years, he rebuffs Jack's offers to try living together and running "a little cow and calf operation" somewhere, hobbled by his inability even to imagine what a life of happiness might look like.

The country's reaction to the movie was phenomenal, winning three Oscars, reaping huge profits, and touching the hearts of millions. I believe it provides the gay community with an opening to change attitudes. A chance to open a national conversation about homosexuality, to learn, to empathize, to organize and, at least in part, to sweep away the scourge of homophobia.

This is a powerful tragedy mirrored in a thousand neighborhoods across the country day in and day out. It is the tragedy of the Closet. The heterosexual world is largely unaware of the sadness so well masked. That world takes for granted that the yearnings it experiences are universal, assumes its feeling have the same direction as all others, and that all leaps of the heart are indistinguishable. The hetero-world's whole array of entertainment flows from this presumption. How remarkable it is that over eons of time, over all the centuries, millions of homosexual persons have suppressed their most basic desires, hidden their identities, smothered their pain, and smiled to the world around them.

It's uncontested that when straight people learn that someone in their crowd is gay, their negative attitudes diminish. Clearly if the untold number of closeted gays were to

“come out” to family, fellow workers, friends and neighbors, they would change the world. Because it must be done on an individual and voluntary basis, all we can do is encourage, reassure, and stand by them.

The tragedy of *The Closet* is a kind of subtitle for *Brokeback Mountain*. These two young men, in a different and better world, could have known a lasting happiness, attained quite regularly by the majority of lovers everywhere. They had no chance in the America of the past; maybe, just maybe, it would have been different in the America of the future.

I close with this from Mendelsohn’s review: “A grief stricken Ennis, now in his late thirties, visits Jack’s childhood home, where in the tiny closet of Jack’s almost bare room he discovers two shirts, his and Jack’s, the clothes they’d worn during the summer on *Brokeback Mountain* – one of which Jack has sentimentally encased in the other. (At the end of that summer, Ennis had thought he had lost the shirt; only now to realize that Jack had stolen it for this purpose.) The image—the two shirts hidden in the closet -- preserved in an embrace which the men who wore them could never fully enjoy, stands as the poignant visual symbol of the story’s tragedy. Made aware too late of how greatly he was loved, of the extent of his loss, Ennis stands in the tiny windowless space, caressing the shirts and weeping wordlessly.”

Postscript

You have heard a subjective albeit thoughtful view of gay history. It’s one man’s story and cannot speak for a myriad of experiences and conditions that are part of an infinitely greater story. Life was very different forty years ago, before the revolution. Today, the gay community is multi-ethnic, more inclusive, broader in its interests, (composed of lesbian, bisexual, and trans gender people as well as gay white males.) and far better organized than in earlier days. It struggles on a larger plain than civil rights and on more battlefields than the courts. Very true. My closing point is that, given the inspiration of its early pain and glory, it still must seek justice—generously and unceasingly ... and in the open, before the world.



A member of the American Ethical Union
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2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org