

EULOGY TO HARVEY MILK

Gerald Gerash,
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Service for Harvey Milk and George Moscone

I cannot tell you a great deal about Harvey Milk. I have read about him for several years in our Gay newspapers, and have come to know him--as we all know other Gays, we who are Gay; and as we all know all other Jews, we who are Jews. He ran as an openly Gay candidate for several offices, never winning, never expecting to win, but wanting to use the opportunity to educate. Thus, in losing, he won--we won (that was the best we could do back then). As I read about him in these earlier days, I don't remember consciously noting that he gave me courage, but looking back now, I realize he did. We who are activists fortify each other and every effort in dealing with the closet helps us to continue our work.

Last year he finally won. He was elected to the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco which is like our City Council. His victory was a victory for the Gay people of San Francisco. It was a victory for us too, for as a largely closeted or underground people, it encouraged us to confront the imprisonment of our closets. Yes, a prison, this closet. Not a prison understood by others, but one which we too well know; one which we have done battle with from the first day of the discovery of our "difference" and will continue to battle with for the rest of our lives. The battle against the closet is the battle for our freedom, not merely for the usual freedoms assumed by heterosexual Americans, such as the freedom to speak our thoughts and opinions, advocate our rights, associate with our own whenever and wherever we choose, but all those rights so basic and assumed that they were not even necessary to enumerate in the Bill of Rights. Those rights reserved in the people--the right to love and to live with that person of one's choosing.

On November 17, 1977, shortly after Harvey was elected, a friend recorded a conversation with him. Harvey said: (the reference to the phone call from Altuna, Pennsylvania, was from a Gay teenager)

"I know that when a person is assassinated after they have achieved victory, there are several tendencies. One is to have people go crazy in the streets, angry and frustrated and the other is to have a big show or splash, a great service. Naturally, I want neither. I cannot prevent anyone from getting mad or angry or frustrated. I can only hope that they will turn that anger, frustration and madness into something positive so that 2, 3, 4, 5, hundreds will step forward--so the Gay doctors come out, the Gay lawyers, the Gay judges, Gay bankers, Gay architects. I hope every gay professional will just say "Enough!", come forward, tell everybody, wear a sign, let the world know. Maybe that will help. These are my requests. These are my strong requests, knowing that it could happen, hoping it doesn't. And if it does, I think I've already achieved something. I think that it has been worth it. I got that phone call from Altuna, Pennsylvania and there is at least one person out there who at least has hope, and after all, that is what it's all about."

In talking to my San Francisco friends, I was told 40,000 and 50,000 people gathered for his memorial services and for the candlelight march. His statement in anticipation of assassination was read along with some of Harvey's speeches. I was told that the mood was one of anger, frustration, grief and that it is dangerous to be Gay, but that it is indeed worth it. The mood is one of increased resolve and involvement in the struggle. Harvey wanted us to learn from every development in the history of Gay people so we can learn, progress, go forward - including learning from his death.

Through Harvey's efforts, a strong Gay Civil Rights law was passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. However, he knew that laws and rights intended to protect and free us, in fact do not-protect and free us so long as the myths, fears, and hatreds continue. Homophobia. That is the weapon of fear and hatred used to deny our freedom--through assaults, beatings, insults, taunts, jokes, the law, shock therapy, therapy, threats on the job, family ostracism--in short, homophobia is the weapon that imposes upon us our status as "the less than human."

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Harvey fought homophobia with every word he spoke for each word of every open Gay destroys those cherished notions of what a queer is. Harvey went beyond dispelling notions of queerness. He and the Gays who put him in office showed that we have the potential to attain power--power to survive the institutions that bear down upon us and to organize to turn those institutions around for our own use and advantages; the power to control our lives, our communities. Only when we attain and exercise this power will we be free, have self-respect. And when we have self-respect that is when our community will be respected.

Harvey understood that to achieve freedom, we must understand the rule of divide and conquer. As a Jew, he knew how anti-semitism (the view of the Jew as a "the less than human") prevented Jew and non-Jew from achieving solutions of common suffering and oppression. Thus, he was quick to see that the Gay people which includes women, Third World and Jews is especially subject to divide and conquer. He saw that the tools historically used to prevent people from working together and blaming one group's woes on the next, were an extremely divisive force among Gays. He was co-founder of "The United Fund", an organization to collect money to defeat the Briggs Initiative and to distribute it among the various groups working against the Briggs Initiative. It was $\frac{1}{2}$ women and $\frac{1}{2}$ men and of the total, $\frac{1}{3}$ were Third World. He knew that an effective movement can only be achieved by dispelling the myths we were taught about women, Blacks, Chicanos, Asians, Jews, Latinos, and other minorities. And to go beyond the dispelling of myths by detoxifying ourselves from the poisons of sexism and racism and supporting the liberation of women and minorities. If only for our own self-interest, this is a political necessity for the simple reason that women and minorities will not continue with us to achieve Gay civil rights seeing that they will remain oppressed as women, Chicanos, and Blacks after Gay rights have been won. And we cannot win without them! Harvey Milk did not work to achieve Gay freedom with the expectation that upon that achievement his status as Jew would remain unchanged.

Only by working on our own phobias that we have about women, Blacks, Chicanos, and Jews, can we build a powerful and effective united front against Homophobia. We, in the process, will become fuller human beings because we liberate ourselves from sexism and racism. In struggling for the freedom of Lesbians as women and for the freedom of the minorities of our Gay community, ~~we are~~ Gay brothers and sisters.

We Gays and Lesbians are in a unique historical position. Out of our necessity to survive, we have the potential to lead all Americans to a unity always asked for and heretofore never foreseeable. We are the cutting edge of personal and sexual liberation and we are in the front lines for the possibility of a newly **liberated** human being.

Others, before Harvey Milk, have fallen as victims of homophobia--early deaths from alcoholism and suicide; beatings, stabbings, and shootings by heterosexual men, the victims of a frolic called "Queer Bashing." However, harvey was not a fallen victim, he was a soldier felled in the line of battle. In running for office, he had made the conscious decision to risk a shorter life, but a life out of the closet, and, as an elected official, one that would increase the probability of freedom from the closet for others, for us.

He died at age 47. In one of his desk drawers at his office a poem was found:

"I can be killed with ease.
I can be struck down,
But I can never fall back into my closet.
I have grown.
I am not by myself.
I am too many.
I am all of us."