

Re-thinking Gay Image

By Marti Abernathey

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Abstract

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I'm old enough to remember.

It does not seem that very long ago that Russian Orthodox leaders commanded the sympathy of the world as they attempted to keep their faith and practices alive in the face of the Soviet Government's "scientific atheism." It was only yesterday that Russian Jews were desperately trying to emigrate to the US, to Canada or to Israel because of persecution. We applauded we empathized with their desire for freedom and equality.

Alas, their desire for equality was limited to being able to practice their beliefs publicly and impose them upon their nation. Those who disagree are not to be heard from and are not to be recognized as a part of the people

The Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic leaderships of Moscow are united, perhaps for the first time since the days when they opposed communist oppression. They are united in their oppression of others.

They called for opposition to gays and Lesbians. Some even called for violence to be used against the gays and Lesbians...

That stunned me...

It would be like any number of events in Moscow over the years, but this time it would not be the religious organizations being tear gassed or clubbed by the Soviet Army; it would be the religious organizations doing the violent beating of gays. A German gay political figure was beaten on camera while giving an interview as police looked on..

The permit for gays to gather had been denied, but they marched anyways. The police arrested close to 200 people, 120 of whom are gay, to break up the event. For the time that it lasted, the gathering and protests were an unadulterated and ungilded example of the religious right's feelings about us, what they are willing to do to us...

Yesterday, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the same fine people who make the New York St Pat's parade such a newsworthy controversy every year, threw cups of water and copies of the Irish Constitution at Justice Minister McDowell, who was about to speak at a conference on rights for same sex couples. They accused Minister McDowell of trying to "pervert Irish children." The Ancient Order identifies as strongly Catholic. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that "This organization grew up gradually among the Catholics of Ireland owing to the dreadful hardships and persecutions to which they were subjected."

All of these organizations that are now targeting gays and lesbians, were themselves once the victims of oppression. They tried to gain respect, they demanded the right to be heard, the right to equality and justice. Now they demand the right to silence, to oppress, to demean, to slander us. The once dispossessed have become the oppressors

Throughout history, gays and lesbians took part in campaigns for civil rights against totalitarian or oppressive forces. A gay man was one of Dr Martin Luther King's lieutenants. Gays and Lesbians figured prominently in the Easter Rising, the true beginning of Irish Independence and were integral parts of groups that the Ancient Order opposed. Lesbians have been part of the women's rights and women's suffrage movements in many countries..

Pride Parades will not gain us public sympathy, at least not if they continue to be a showcase for various fetishes rather than being a vehicle to engage the public at large in a dialogue over gay rights issues. As many of these events exist now, they hand our enemies a weapon to be used against us, in terms of behaviours and sights that they feel and sometimes are unsuitable for children to see and clearly offend many people's sensibilities.

We need to carefully re-think our public image. We have to look at how it is that we wish to be perceived by straights, what mental picture we want people to see when the words gay or Lesbian are mentioned. We must find a way to craft an accurate and positive image that conveys our kinship to other citizens, that seizes upon and builds upon our similarities rather than revelling in and highlighting our differences. Having considered the image that we wish to convey, what actions will impart and strengthen this mental pictogram?

The time has come for a constant and positive gay presence in the public mind. The time has come for the gay and Lesbian community to decide how to make this possible and how to sustain it. Who will be brave enough to take up this challenge, to be iconoclastic enough to re-make LGBT activism and to perhaps smash or strike at a few of the sacred cows of Queer public image and behaviour?

It is time for these future leaders to come forth, for if they do not, we face a long dark time brought about partly by our inaction and partly by our actions.

History awaits those who seize this opportunity.

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