

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Yard Sale of Our History

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Throughout time, the artifacts of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender history have been burned in shame by shocked family members, or tossed away without knowledge of their significance. Our courageous accounts of our first awareness of our sexual and romantic feelings, our love letters and poems to the intimate occupants of our hearts, and the personal objects we used or collected, have been thrown into the trash or buried in the dumps. This cultural cleansing of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of our ancestors is a tragedy. Only a small handful of the stories of our family's lives have survived, and they must be treasured and guarded vigilantly.

For many years, I lived in fear that if Ray and I died unexpectedly together, well-meaning family members would have a yard sale and put our personally-edited book of Walt Whitman's work, and Susan B. Anthony's handwritten letter, in a box of other gay and feminist treasures and be glad to get \$20 for them. These pieces of our history might then be stuck by an unknowing straight person, either on a bookshelf because the binding was pretty, or on a wall because it created a good look. Our love letters would be dumped into black plastic bags, and put street-side for garbage pick-up.

Last night, the start of that dispossessing almost happened. Ray and I looked in horror at one another as we sat in our stationary car, waiting to turn left onto our street, when we saw a car headed straight at us at 60 miles an hour. We braced ourselves just as it swerved seconds before crashing into us. It was the closest either of us can remember feeling that we were at the end of our lives. Had we died as expected there would have been an initial period of shock and sorrow by survivors, and then the process would have begun to get rid of all that we owned.

Coincidentally, we had arranged to sign papers today that ensured that all of our possessions would go to a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community fund, called appropriately, "Our Fund." The fund will distribute the assets of our estate to the group of our designation. At this time, it's the Stonewall National Museum & Archives. We've instructed our attorney that our money and historic memorabilia go to our family of choice, which is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth of today, tomorrow, and the day after. They need to see, and to be able to appreciate, the pieces of our history that have been found and preserved by us and others.

Some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people may think, "That's nice, but it doesn't relate to me because I don't own a rare book." But every Valentine from their beloved that they've tucked away in a desk drawer is as valuable to today's youth as an artifact from the 1860s. The well-chosen words in a card from one woman to another on their anniversary are an invaluable piece of our history. Every ticket stub from a gay play or film, every flyer from a Pride March, every photo from a vacation, are pieces of our history that need to be preserved and presented to others. Throw nothing away, and be sure that your intentions are clear that the mementos of your life be donated to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender archive and museum.

A few nights ago, I welcomed a group of people who had assembled in Stonewall's facility for the first reading of a new play by my friend, Tony Adams. *A Letter from the Bishop* deals with the struggle of gay priests to obey their bishop's order to read a letter against marriage equality at Mass. My opening remarks, as a representative of the board, said how appropriate it was that this play was being heard "in this sacred space." From the quizzical looks I received from some people, I knew I needed to explain.

"You're sitting just inches away from a case containing the gavel, donated by Congressman Barney Frank, that signaled the repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'," I told a man at the end of the first row of chairs. "And you're sitting next to Martina Navratilova's signed tennis racket," I explained to the woman behind him. "It's my hope that Tony will sign his play and leave it for good care here at the museum. This is its home. Here it will be honored."

When you go into a church, the windows of colored glass depict scenes from the lives of the religion's heroes. Statues, similar to those of the Roman gods, line side altars to remind the congregants of the lives of their holy ancestors. Such spaces, filled with flickering candles and incense, are referred to as sacred.

For me, a statue of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas holding hands would create a much greater feeling of reverence than one of St. Christopher. For me, the bullhorn used by Harvey Milk to rally the troops in San Francisco would be much more a relic than a chip of bone from the body of St. Theresa. For me, a photo of the Rev. Troy Perry would inspire more awe than one of Pope Benedict XVI.

When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi gave the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" gavel to Barney Frank, she may have had some sense of its historic significance, but she didn't likely understand its sacred nature. When coupled with the other artifacts that represent our history and culture, it helps make our home feel safe, and us feel valued. I get tingles down my spine in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender museum as I once did so regularly and easily in a church.

Don't let our stories and our histories end up in a yard sale.