

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

“Get Back Aboard! Damn It!”

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Everything was going great until I flipped the bird.

It felt like a joyful morning. I had hugged Fannie, the woman who manages the flowers in the grocery store, and I had led the produce personnel in a round of "Happy Birthday" for Emmanuel, their manager. When I wished him "Happy Martin Luther King Day," he responded, "And it's my birthday." How could I let that pass?

Then, as I pulled out of the parking lot, a guy on the sidewalk was yelling at the top of his lungs to someone I couldn't see, "You faggot!"

"Hey," I yelled in a disapproving voice from the car.

"Mind your own business," he angrily yelled back. "I'm not talking to you."

"I don't like that word," I replied in an attempt to have him understand.

"I'm a Vietnam vet and I can say anything I want," he screamed. "Why don't you come out here and try to make me shut up, faggot."

The light changed. It was time to move on, and I chose not to let it pass. I flipped him the bird.

That's not how I normally end conversations or confrontations, and it bothered me much of the day. Instead of impressing the man on the street that the word "faggot" is unacceptable and hurtful, I made him angrier than I found him. It felt good speaking up to him. It would have eaten at me not to have told him that I hated the word he was yelling in the street. But I felt bad that I hadn't figured out a less hostile way to end the dispute.

Speaking up is really important. We need to do it for ourselves and for everyone else who needs an ally. Letting people know that their words or their behaviors are unacceptable is not just a good thing to do for the health of humankind, but also what we ought to be doing.

In Italy today, the populace is celebrating the behavior of the coast guard officer, Captain Gregorio Maria De Falco, who yelled at the cruise ship captain who abandoned his passengers, "Get back aboard! Damn it!" There are even T-shirts being worn now with those words emblazoned. Captain Francesco Schettino is being lambasted by the media for what are considered his inappropriate, unprofessional behaviors. Captain De Falco is being praised as a hero for speaking up.

"I am not a hero," the coast guard captain replied. "My team and I just did our duty."

I felt I was also doing my duty in confronting the man on the street with his inappropriate behavior. It would have been easier to ignore him as the other drivers did. It would have spared me the anxiety that results from conflict had I convinced myself it was none of my business. It would have been less stressful just to shake my head disapprovingly in disgust. I might have asked myself, "Why make it worse?" But I couldn't let it pass. I just couldn't.

It hurts my feelings when people don't speak up for me. I feel enormous disappointment in friends who let things pass because they don't want to get involved, or feel that it's none of their business. Fear of conflict is innate. I don't know anyone who loves to fight, or if I do, I avoid them. But, I'm attracted to people who don't let abusive behavior pass. They're my heroes, even though I feel it's their duty.

Had the man on the street yelled the word "nigger" instead of "faggot," I would have yelled out "Hey" just as strongly. He would have told me that it was none of my business. I would have told him that it was the word he used that I didn't like. He would have told me that he had the right to say anything he wanted because he was a Vietnam vet, and he would have called me a "faggot." Then, my inclination would have been to flip the bird as I drove off, but if it happens again, I think I'll just wave. Sometimes, after you've done your best, you have to let go and hope that your show of kindness will do more good than trying to get in the last word... or finger.