

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Vanity or Freedom

Posted: 15 March 2012, 12:49PM

Yesterday, I met a gay superstar. He's a young, very handsome, muscled, stage and cable television entertainer and educator on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. He stopped by the Stonewall Museum booth at Pride Fest, and gave me his card. He had no awareness of my work, nor that that I was just like him 37 years ago, although much-less muscled. When I told him, it didn't seem to register.

"The messenger is the message," I said quickly, as he eyed other people he felt drawn to see. "Take good care of yourself, and don't feel you always have to be 'on.' Tell your story. And be ready to let go." And then he was gone.

A few days before, a former television star/pop singer from France was sitting in my living room bemoaning his minor weight gain. The photo of him on the cover of his first CD was adorable. As I looked at the photos on the covers of the later CDs, it was clear he was aging. He was still handsome, but not in the same youthful way. Today, he is a popular cabaret performer for middle-aged straight people, many of whom have fond memories of his presence on a popular television program.

"You look terrific," I assured him. "You're just aging like the rest of us. It's the way of life. Embrace it. If you fight it, you'll make yourself miserable."

Many gay men deeply mourn the loss of their youthful good looks. We keep old pictures of ourselves as young men out in the open so that others can say, "My, you were handsome." But, we translate that also to be saying, "What happened? You're not as appealing anymore. Your hair is gray or gone. You've gained weight and lost muscle." We feel a moment of pride to be told we were good looking in our youth, and then we experience the cold splash of reality that we're not as worthy of admiration and envy.

When Ray and I were in Austria for Christmas, we visited the castle of Empress Elisabeth, a woman who married the Emperor at a very young age, and who spent the rest of her life regretting it. She wrote:

"O, had I but never left the path that would have led me to freedom; O that on the broad avenues of vanity I had never strayed."

We are constantly reminded of the perils of aging in this culture. Today's movie stars are tomorrow's small-stage actors, if they're lucky. The young, beautiful models on the runways know that their careers will be short lived, and they hope to become spokespersons for a cosmetics company. The Oscar winning film, *The Artist*, focused on the vanity of a silent screen film star whose fading fame created a nightmare for him.

Most young, gay men don't read gay newspapers, and when they see a crowd of gray-haired, gay men, they flee. There seems to be no effective means of telling them how to avoid the painful experience caused by clinging to their youth. And even when they stop and listen, such as the gay superstar whom I met at Stonewall's booth at Pride Fest, there is little chance that they will really understand and incorporate our mentoring.

That's why it's essential that we older, gay men and lesbians model for them the joys of aging. As hard as it is to say, and to believe, the next time a friend is touring our home and spots a picture of us from the past, when they say, "Boy, you were good looking," we need to respond, "And still am."

That's not vanity. It's the wisdom of acceptance, and of living in the moment. When Dan Savage proclaims, "It gets better," he's right on the money. But it doesn't stop getting better when you turn 40, 60, or 90.