

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Flabby Muscles & Fleeting Fame

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I protested as I used a squeegee to scrape the water from the shower door. "I didn't have to do this in Dallas," I said to Ray in mock disbelief. "You perhaps have forgotten that I just received the Selisse Berry Leadership/Lifetime Achievement Award."

"No, honey," he replied, as he continued doing whatever it was that distracted his attention from me. "I'm very proud of you."

"Yes, but in the hotel room, there were flowers from friends and a big bowl of snacks," I said. "I was special."

"Have an M&M," he replied. We both laughed.

I walked on air last week at the Out and Equal Workplace conference in Dallas. Besides getting a much-appreciated standing ovation from 2,600 people in response to my acceptance speech, my new video (<http://ally-video.com/brian>) was shown. I was also on four well-received panels, had successful private meals with corporate executives, and received many compliments for the exhibition on transgender issues that I did for the [Stonewall National Museum](#). Now I'm walking in deep puddles, as southeast Florida is getting torrential rain. I'm repeatedly cleaning out drains. My hands are dirty.

Fame is fleeting. I have known this since I led the first-grade orchestra at St. Matthew's School in Flint, Michigan. Life keeps telling us the same thing. If we listen, we spare ourselves from suffering. Don't dwell on the past. Don't try to control the future. Be in the moment. Enjoy it, but trust that it will pass. If we cling to past glories or past failures, we set ourselves up for unhappiness.

On Tuesday night of the Out and Equal conference, a group of us went out to dinner to laugh as good friends about what was happening in our lives. At the table was Bob Witeck and Wes Combs, the founders of the nation's most influential gay public relations firm, Vic Basile, the first executive director of the Human Rights Campaign and one of the founders of the Victory Fund, Todd Sears, the corporate whiz kid of diversity and inclusion work, and Joel Burns, the Fort Worth, Texas, city councilor who created an international sensation with his speech on bullying. We were joined by two strangers to me, one of whom was the very muscled and masculine poster boy for a recent gay civil rights battle. The other young man sat next to me quietly, but he immediately stole my heart with his gracious nature, and killer smile.

At the beginning of the meal, I tried to make conversation with the muscled man across the table. Without knowing of him, I nevertheless thanked him for his sacrifices and contributions, and asked him where he might want to go from here as a person. "Fame is fleeting," I cautioned him. "Three years from now, people may not remember your name. You may not care about that, which is good."

But, how can I help you move forward?" Regrettably, he didn't seem very interested in what I had to say, who I was, or who anyone else around the table was. He spent most of the meal downloading pictures of buffed gay male bodies on his phone, from a sex service he was enrolled in. None of the pictures showed heads, just muscled bodies.

I eventually gave up trying to engage the man with the muscles, and turned my attention to Anthony Cotton, the young man sitting next to me. After learning about him, his work, and his aspirations, I came to believe he will be one of the bright, smiling faces of our future. He now works as an investment officer for USAID, a federal organization that creates economic opportunities for poor people in other countries. He also works tirelessly to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues are addressed in the federal government and among economically disadvantaged people outside the United States. I also told him that I wanted to support him, and he was most grateful for the attention. Mentoring is something that experienced gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, and our treasured allies need to do for our youth. It is how we will ensure the success of our civil rights movement.

Bob, Wes, Vic, and Todd were sitting at the dinner table the night I received my most-welcomed award from Out and Equal. We talked about our meal earlier in the week, and we all came to the same conclusion about the two new people who had joined us. Muscles grow flabby and fame is fleeting. The person we all admired most was young Anthony.

It might well have been shyness that prevented the buff poster boy from engaging with the rest of us at our earlier outing. I assume that it was insecurity rather than arrogance that created his demeanor. But the life lesson he must learn, as we all need to do, is not to take yourself or public acclimation too seriously. Fame can be fun but it doesn't represent who you are. Fame and fortune may spare you from daily using the squeegee to wipe down the shower door, but they don't prevent other people from forgetting who or what you once were. Nor will they give your life true meaning.

Hopefully, all of us who risk getting heady with positive public attention will have a Ray in our lives who say, "I'm proud of you honey. Now, have an M&M."