



Suzanne Pharr: Connecting the Dots of Oppression

"We are reluctant to oppose things we need to oppose ..."

BY PEGGY LUHRS

Shortly after 9/11 I joined the peace vigil at the top of Church Street. My sign read, "The antidote to terror is increased human rights for all." So I was certainly ready to hear Suzanne Pharr's message at the University of Vermont that human rights must be the standard for all progressive movements. Pharr sees the LGBT community as vital to that forward motion.

Pharr is the author of *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* and *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation* and a former director of the Highlander Research and Education Center. Her talk was on April 11 at the Billings Theater. I'm only sorry the theater wasn't full because Pharr gave us a road map of our likely future under the neocons and some inklings of how we might forge a new path.

Pharr noted that at least since the abolitionists, there have been two divergent streams in American thought. One constricted human rights – indeed it supported slavery – and the other advocating expanding human rights – the abolitionists and women's suffragists.

One stream expands democracy and the other contracts it and people's participation in it. One strand represents slavery, the Jim Crow laws, the Ku Klux Klan, McCarthyism and Cointelpro. Cointelpro was the FBI operation that spied on US citizens who were exercising their constitutional rights to oppose the Vietnam War.

The human rights stream includes the Labor movement, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement and the gay rights movement. Pharr told the audience, "We in this room stand in that stream of struggle."

She went on to give a brief history of the rise of the Right since the Sixties, beginning with the candidacy of Barry Goldwater. She noted that Richard Vigery began to work to

increase conservative voter numbers by using fear-based direct mail, a tradition continued in the last election using the LGBT community and the "threat" of gay marriage to mobilize right wing voters and to solicit their money.

This "politics of resentment" began with the Black civil rights movement and a sometimes overt and sometimes barely concealed racism. Pharr outlined how the right has mobilized resentment by funneling corporate money into think tanks that define the conservative agenda. Many of these think tanks currently are referenced by news media as if they were objective sources. The Republican Party has built an alliance with the religious right. The Moral Majority of the Reagan era was one of the first of these organizations.

She said the Right discovered the best way to defeat women was to organize women against women. I've had plenty of experience with that tactic. Phyllis Schlafly was paid to travel the country opposing the ERA, and she did that successfully in Vermont. We now have Concerned Women for America and the repulsive Ann Coulter to replace her.

By the same token (pun intended), they use African Americans to defeat African Americans. Alan Keyes is a good example. This is one tactic of the new "soft" racism that also claims white people are victims and that uses conservative Christianity to unite black churches with the Right's agenda.

The election of Reagan consolidated gains for the Right and started the horrendous practice of putting the fox in charge of the henhouse. Business was deregulated and industry skills took over government regulatory agencies. An anti-tax strategy became primary. Reagan gave us the image of the Welfare Queen, another racialized slur.

Of course, during all this maneuvering, there was resistance and progression in some parts of society. But the 2000 election really

solidified power for the right. Those of us who are paying attention notice that daily we are losing government protection and constitutional rights while a creeping theocracy is supported by government money handed out to "faith-based organizations," all of which have been Christian.

Pharr noted that queer folks are used as a direct target to instill fear, and that Vigery has told his readers that LGBT people "have a veneer of goodness but underneath are trying to destroy our churches." She sees the LGBT community as one of three canaries in the struggle for a climate that supports human rights. The other two canary groups are immigrants and prisoners.

But, she said, as LGBT people, we "call the question of what it means to be human. We hold the possibility of integrating identities. The Right would constrict the definition of family while we expand it."

Pharr said our work is to expand possibilities, expand the definition of family and create hope. We, the LGBT community, are vital to progressive vision as people who incorporate multiple identities and ethnicities. She sees us as people of hope who are at our best creating space for the humanity of everyone. We need to counter the constrictive vision that the Right promotes.

In the question period I noted one of the things Pharr had not mentioned was increased militarization. She agreed that was another part of the plan. I also asked her why she thought it was so difficult to get out the incredible contradictions of the religious Right. For example, they talk about family but their capitalist values support no actual families, they talk about Jesus but practice a politics of exclusion.

She said the short answer was "We are reluctant to oppose ... capitalism, we are reluctant to give up that material benefit." She looked for leadership from the young and said it was coming mostly these days from universities and that we need to support those places where liberation is nourished. She suggested the important thing was to have our vision, and that we how we make it happen might best be described by a book title from the Highlander Center called *We Make a Road by Walking*. This is a path we better get onto before we are absolutely bulldozed from the landscape by the resentment politics of the Rapture Right. ▼

Peggy Luhrs is a longtime peace, feminist, and lesbian activist in Burlington.

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