

Out in the Mountains

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To Submit Articles and Letters

We encourage and implore our readers to do what they can to make *OITM* a paper both for and by gay, lesbian, and bisexual Vermonters. Please assist us by typing your articles and letters double-spaced and including your name and phone number in case we have any questions. Your submission should be received by *OITM* no later than the 10th of the previous month. **Thank you** for helping out!

Editorial

"Gay" Versus "Queer"

by Hugh Coyle

There's been a lot of discussion lately concerning the use of the word "queer" to stand for gay men and lesbians. Those in favor of a "queer community" point to the need for a more unifying term to bring together gay men and lesbians under one definition. Others see it as an attempt to turn around what has been considered a derogatory term and claim it as our own. From the start we ask the term to do two very different things at once, so dissenting opinions are bound to arise.

By definition, the word "queer" means deviant, strange, odd, unconventional, or eccentric. There is no positive denotation of the word in the dictionary. Likewise, when used to describe homosexuals, the connotations of the word remain negative, referring back to the original meaning.

In adopting the term to stand for the gay and lesbian communities, we would be in essence asking two things: first, that American society as a whole somehow modify its interpretation of the word to allow for a new meaning; and second, that homosexuals cease to view the word as a depreciating slur.

There are many Americans who would see nothing wrong with homosexuals calling themselves "queer," since it would confirm what they've believed all along - that we are deviants. Trying to argue otherwise would be futile; the authority of definition is on their side. After all, the gay and lesbian communities don't write the dictionary, and what the dictionary says under "queer" is "deviant." Even if the word were to be accepted into standard usage to refer to homosexuals, the original meanings of the word would remain there prior to the new meaning.

Some argue that the use of the word "queer" is akin to the wearing of the pink triangle, the symbol used in Nazi Germany to label homosexuals who were killed by the thousands in concentration camps. The pink triangle was an emblem, however, not a word. Its use was determined by a political force no longer in power, and its original meaning, despite the attendant connotations, was "homosexual." In adopting the pink triangle as representative of the gay community, we weren't redefining that meaning; we were stripping it of its negative social and political connotations and appropriating it for our own use - as an emblem of homosexual perseverance and pride in the face of oppression.

Others claim that use of the word "queer" has intrinsic shock value, yet who are we trying to shock? Those who already use the term against us? One might argue that our acceptance of the term robs it of its power in the hands (or mouths) of our oppressors, but by that argument, we might just as well try calling ourselves "deviants" or "perverts."

If we need a term to unify the men's and women's communities, why not try changing the established meaning of "gay" to be more inclusive (which, some people argue, it already is). Why complicate matters by trying to redefine a negative word at the same time? Such a tactic threatens further divisiveness, as current debate over the two terms has shown.

Our adoption of the word "queer" won't magically remove it from its history of derogatory use, nor will it somehow enhance the original meanings of the term. Likewise, it won't instantly desensitize those of us who see the word as insulting in its use, no matter what the context.

If we feel we need a new term to stand for all our communities, why don't we make use of the creativity that has been a hallmark of gay and lesbian people throughout time and invent a word that is truly *ours*? When it comes to matters of identity, we should define who we are in our own voices, using *our own* words and not the words of our oppressors.

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