

Reflections on a Campaign

Howard Russell

In 1990 I made a decision to run for the Vermont State Senate. I ran and I lost. As you can well imagine, it was not an easy loss to accept. I had insisted throughout the campaign that nothing less than winning was sufficient and I maintain that today. I don't say that in an attempt to put myself or anyone else down. The effort that was put out by one and all was amazing. I say it because I believe that it is vital, as members of an oppressed group, that we settle for nothing less than everything. "Almost" is not good enough. We deserve much, much more.

I have been wanting to write about my experience of this campaign for some time but have found it very difficult to do so. I have been amazed at how low my batteries were after the election and how long it is taking them to recharge. It has been very difficult for me to even talk about what it is I learned through this effort. But now is the time to do some of that in order to glean the lessons for me and perhaps some of the lessons for us as a community.

The following is a list of some of the lessons I have been able to identify for myself. It continues to grow the more I reflect back on the last year.

1. Dare to take yourself seriously. What you have to say is vital. Believe in it.
2. You don't have to have all the answers to raise important questions.

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3. Our perspective and our voices as gay, lesbian and bisexual people are absolutely necessary in making this a better state and a better world.

4. If you speak from your heart, from what you truly believe, the integrity of what you have to say will carry the message.

5. It's better to be rejected as who you are than to be accepted as someone you are not. It is not only important what you say but that you use your own true voice in saying it.

6. Don't wait for the fear to go away. It's probably with you for the long haul.

All of these have been important lessons for me to learn, however, I think the final one has been the most important. I think this is a lesson that we have to learn over and over again as gay people. In this culture we are constantly being challenged to make the commitment anew not to be controlled by our own fear.

This campaign was both terrifying for me and exhilarating. The most terrifying moment for me personally was marching in the 4th of July parade in my home town. Was Hinesburg, Vermont ready for a native son to be marching down the street as an openly gay candidate for public office? I had been open about being gay for years, but I had always been cautious in my home town. How hard would they let me push before they shoved back? I was terrified, but it was something that I knew I had to do. I did it and I survived.

I was also terrified at the prospect of going door-to-door. You can't imagine how many times I parked on a street and tried to coax myself to go and knock on that first door. What would people do? Would they recognize me? Would they attack me? I finally did get myself to knock on that first door, and then a second, and then a third and I was on my way. I knocked on doors. I fought off dogs. I got lectured at. I got hugged. I got in debates. But I got heard.

I was terrified going to my first debate. Would I make a fool of myself? Would I be humiliated? What did I know anyway? Again, the first time was the most terrifying, the second somewhat less so, and so on. It was never completely comfortable. I did learn that when I took the risk of speaking of what I truly believed people would listen. They didn't always agree with me but they rarely attacked me.

I find myself feeling vulnerable sharing as much as I have so far in this article. I wonder if in reading this, you all will simply see me as "tooting my own horn." That is not my intention. As gay people, we are constantly being challenged to move forward in spite of our fear. If we wait for the fear to go away, we remain stuck where we are. I suspect that I, like most gay people, will always carry significant amounts of this fear with me throughout my life. The fear deserves to be noticed. After all, we do live in an unsafe society for gay people as well as other minorities. However, the fear does not deserve to be given control of our lives.

There also were exhilarating parts of the campaign. By far the most wonderful part of the campaign was standing at the polls in my home town on election day and being overwhelmed by the statements of support from so many in my "community of origin." It really felt like a part of me coming home for the first time in my life.

So I came out of this campaign somewhat battered, extremely exhausted, definitely wiser and most definitely prouder. Not just proud of myself for pushing through my own fear, but proud of the communities that I am a part of. There were so many individual acts of courage that I had the privilege of witnessing throughout the campaign: people volunteering to go door-to-door all over the county; people standing on well-traveled streets with signs saying "Howard Russell for Vermont State Senate"; people putting bumper stickers on their cars despite the assumptions that this would probably invite.

This was not only an effort by gay, lesbian and bisexual people, but this group in coalition with many straight allies. The power of this coalition clearly took mainstream politics by surprise.

So now the question that many are beginning to ask me: will I run again in '92? The truth is that I still don't know. I came out of this campaign not only with an awareness of what is possible politically, but also with a commitment to do what is right for me. As of yet, I don't know what that is. If running in '92 is the next step that is right for me, then that's the next step that I'll take. If it's not, then I'll be moving on in another direction.

The more important question for each one of you is "what is your next step in finding your voice and moving forward?" I look forward with delight to hearing all about it. ▼