

Writer Stephen McCauley on the Shepard Murder

[Ed. note: Stephen McCauley, UVM graduate and author of *The Man of the House*, *The Easy Way Out*, and *The Object of My Affection*, was in Burlington for the university's celebration of National Coming Out Week. He has graciously provided OITM with the text of his speech for reprinting here.]

I suspect that many of the workshops and lectures you've organized this week have been given over to discussion of the murder of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. Every gathering related to gay awareness here and at colleges and universities

around the country is held this week under the shadow cast by this lynching, an event so appalling that even those news outlets usually reluctant to cover any story with gay content have felt compelled to feature it prominently.

There's no mistaking the fact that this event — the abduction, beating and burning — of an openly gay college student, two days before the start of his school's Gay Awareness Week, is an attack on all such celebrations and educational programs. And it's an attack on all of us — gay people and those who, regardless of sexual orientation, support civil rights and equal protection under the law for gay people. (And I hope you'll bear with me if, for the sake of brevity, I use the "gay" to mean gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and every variation on "queer".)

While there's no way to completely explain such an event, it's in the interest of our enemies (and I use the term advisedly) to have us believe that this is an isolated act of senseless violence and cowardice — or even more absurdly, a robbery gone wrong. It's in the interest of our enemies to portray this as a crime of passion committed by two disturbed, detached, confused individuals, acting in a moral vacuum. In short, it's in the interest of our enemies to take the attack out of the social and political context in which it occurred, thereby absolving all but the murderers themselves of any responsibility for the torture and death of this young man.

While it's true that this murder could have taken place anywhere, at any time, it did take place at a very particular moment, in a very particular political climate. And Matthew Shepard was tortured and murdered for a very particular reason. And I think we're all clear that it had nothing to do with the contents of his wallet.

Accomplices helped dispose of the

murderers' bloody clothes. But Matthew Shepard's blood is not only on the clothing of the two men who pistol-whipped and beat and burned him and then left him tied to a fence, or on the hands of the two young women who provided an alibi for them for 18 hours while Shepard was dying alone in the cold. His blood is also on the hands of all the preachers, and politicians and priests who dehumanize and demonize homosexuals. His blood is on the hands of all the talk show hate-mongers who — for the sake of ratings and publicity — portray our behavior and our lives as morally degraded and demeaning to the family, and the institution of marriage, and the love of God, and the stability of an idealized image of the "American Way of Life." His blood is on the hands of two of the most powerful politicians in Congress, Representative Dick Armey and Senator Trent Lott, one of whom calls a gay colleague a "fag" in open public debate and one who, two months ago, compared a sexual preference with kleptomania and other forms of criminal behavior. His blood is on the hands of a Texas judge who justified giving a light sentence to murderers who stabbed a gay man 37 times by explaining that their actions had been provoked when the victim made a sexual advance. And his blood is on the hands of Wyoming politicians who, less than one year ago, voted down a hate crime law in their state, claiming that no such crimes against gay people exist.

These people share responsibility for Matthew Shepard's death because all have helped create an atmosphere in which lynching a gay man and leaving him to die on a fence, arms outspread as if crucified, can be read not as an act of senseless violence and cowardice, but as a patriotic duty and a moral imperative.

The men who murdered Matthew Shepard, are not isolated individuals operating in a moral vacuum, but foot soldiers in the "holy war" the Religious Right and its allies in the Republican Party declared against us years ago — most publicly, vigorously, unambiguously, and unapologetically — at the Republican National Convention of 1992. This crime could have happened anywhere, at any time, but it did occur in a political climate in which privacy no

longer exists, and in which homosexuals are routinely used as the poster villains for fund-raising and get-out-the-vote efforts. It did occur less than two months after a series of advertisements paid for by right wing religious and political groups described homosexuality as an illness which can and should be "cured" by the physical and psychological violence of out-dated and discredited treatments. Perhaps this attempted cure — of their victim or of themselves — was what the Wyoming attackers were symbolically attempting when they set upon Matthew Shepard.

Homophobia, like racism, is learned behavior. Given the overheated, hate-filled, gay-bashing rhetoric of some of this country's most prominent and powerful politicians and religious leaders, it's hard to view the killers in Wyoming as anything other than especially good students.

When acts of violence of this sort occur, we generally rush to write ourselves out of the scenario, by searching for the detail we can use as an emergency exit from the nightmare. I wouldn't have gone to the bar; I wouldn't have stepped into the truck; I wouldn't have made a pass; and so on. But there are no emergency exits from this story, no lessons to be learned about redemption, only fresh examples of how predictably hostile the world is, despite some striking, hard-earned and very significant gains. We might be lulled into a false sense of security by a new openness in the media and a greater degree of political clout for gay people, and therefore shocked by the horror of this particular crime. But I suspect even the most optimistic of us find it anything but unbelievable.

And yet, we can't be defeated by this kind of tragedy, but must, in the aftermath, try to find new courage and determination — to demand our rights, to assert our identities, to assign responsibility to the guilty parties — those who committed the atrocity and those who created the political climate in which it occurred — and to demand apology for every act of homophobia, no matter how subtle or subconscious. And we must vote. Even if it means voting for the less unacceptable choice. Our dignity, our freedom, and our lives depend upon it. ▼

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