

health & wellbeing

TWENTY



SOMETHING

BY THOMAS HENNING

“**B**eaten, burned and tied to a wooden ranch fence like a scarecrow until a passer-by found him a half-day later, near death.”

When I first read that the immediate questions that came to my head were “Who is responsible for this heinous and sickening crime? What monsters would allow that to happen to another living being? Where are the assailants lurking?” I read this on Saturday October 10th at Our Town Meeting and the answer became nauseatingly clear. Many people are responsible for this inhumane crime, a crime that is replicated in varying degrees, on a daily basis, across the country.

The monsters that allowed this to happen are the apolitical, apathetic, and selfish individuals who allow their own complacency, as well as that of the community at large, to encourage people to ignore, hate, and fear. The assailants are lurking everywhere and most alarmingly in us. What I realized standing there at Our Town Meeting was that we did not actually pistol whip Matthew Shepard but we did not take the pistol away from his assailants either.

This may sound reactionary but I would ask how involved you are in your community. Do you know the issues, the candidates, are you registered to vote, will you vote, do you serve on a board or volunteer resources to agencies that work towards improving the overall health of our community? If you are involved, how involved are your circle of friends and do you hold them accountable if they are not involved?

Far too often we talk about the price we pay for being gay. But what about the responsibility we have? It concerns me to see the mindset that says I find it easy to live as an open gay person so homophobia doesn't exist to me. It concerns me that we can be so dismissive of how fragile our rights are at this moment. But it concerns me most that we can close our eyes to our own internalized homophobia to the extent that unless the blood is spilled on our shoes we will keep on walking with our eyes closed and conscience shielded.

I have engaged in many discussions around the Post-Gay movement. The argument, at least in my mind, whitewashes the LGBT movement. It falsely lulls us into believing that if we assimilate we will be saved all the while overlooking the fact

Do Something — Anything

that in assimilating we put our open homosexuality on the shelf and do not ask the same of our heterosexual counterparts. I understand that many are tired of having to face, educate and defend against homophobia. But, pumpkins, just because we are tired does not mean it will go away.

Do we ask the battered wife to try to be a better wife to her husband or say to the AIDS advocates that we know your tired, stop and AIDS will go away? Well, maybe we do. Maybe we are so self-centered that we refuse to see beyond us. Maybe we are so selfish that we will back any theory that allows us to ignore that we engage in our own oppression and in fact harness our own self-hatred to encourage us to oppress ourselves and others.

As a twenty-something I understand that I have never had to fight for my civil rights. I understand that I have grown up in an era where those civil rights pre-existed. Do I have the same civil rights as my younger straight brother? No. Do I enjoy the same liberties that my straight brothers do? No. Do I have the option to live the same life that my straight peers do? No.

So, even while I understand that I have the previous generation to thank for the limited rights I have, I have the responsibility to ensure that the generation that follows has truly equal rights. That is not a choice I should have but a responsibility that I should live up to. I can not sit back in silence anymore. I can not take the indulgent stance that I am tired or that I have to devote my energies into taking care of myself because that option does not exist. It doesn't exist for Matthew Shepard or countless others who have been victims of gay bashing.

Try this at home, take an article of what happened to Matthew Shepard and replace his picture with yours, his name in the article with yours, and allow yourself to react. Better yet, replace it with the name of a friend or loved one and allow yourself to react and ask yourself what would change in your life if that article were real. What would you do differently to have changed that outcome?

When you find that answer, do it. Be proactive and not reactive and take with you the sobering fact that your very existence is political — whether you want it to be or not. Do not sit by, take the pistol from their hands and destroy it. It is only then that we can begin to even seriously have the discussion around moving

away from LGBT movement into living securely in a heterosexually controlled world.

We have a responsibility to go to debates and ask the candidates those questions that address our needs as individuals, we need to encourage organizations where we are consumers to host forums with political candidates. We can be proactive by writing letters to the editors of our local newspapers, writing our elected officials telling them what is important, informing ourselves and then informing our neighbors.

We can also be proactive by serving on committees, school boards, volunteering at agencies such as Outright VT, Vermont CARES, the Coalition, Out In The Mountains, or countless other agencies that serve our communities. We have a personal power that we more often than not don't use. Use it.

The Religious Right, the Republicans, and many other groups have come together despite their many difference to squelch our communities and ensure that we are not granted equal rights. They are organized, motivated and ready for a fight.

I believe that it is imperative that we are as well. It is crucial to our physical and mental health that we find a way to come together, despite our many differences, to ensure our protection and future. Many of us were told by our parents to ignore those people that made fun or did not understand us. In my mind it is one of the most harmful lessons we can be taught as children.

Ignoring the problem doesn't make it go away, it only allows that problem to grow and strengthen. Matthew Shepard could not ignore the fact that he was being beaten and burned. Those who loved Matthew Shepard can not ignore that they will never hear him laugh or see him love again. We would be as inhumane as the actual assailants are if we now chose to ignore just how vulnerable and threatened we really are and view what happen to Matthew Shepard as unique or unimportant enough to make a difference in our lives.

I would encourage everyone to get out, get active, and make our communities a better place not just for us but for everyone. It is paramount that we no longer ignore, turn away, and glaze over that which could quite easily swallow us up and destroy not only the quality of our lives but our lives as well. ▼

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