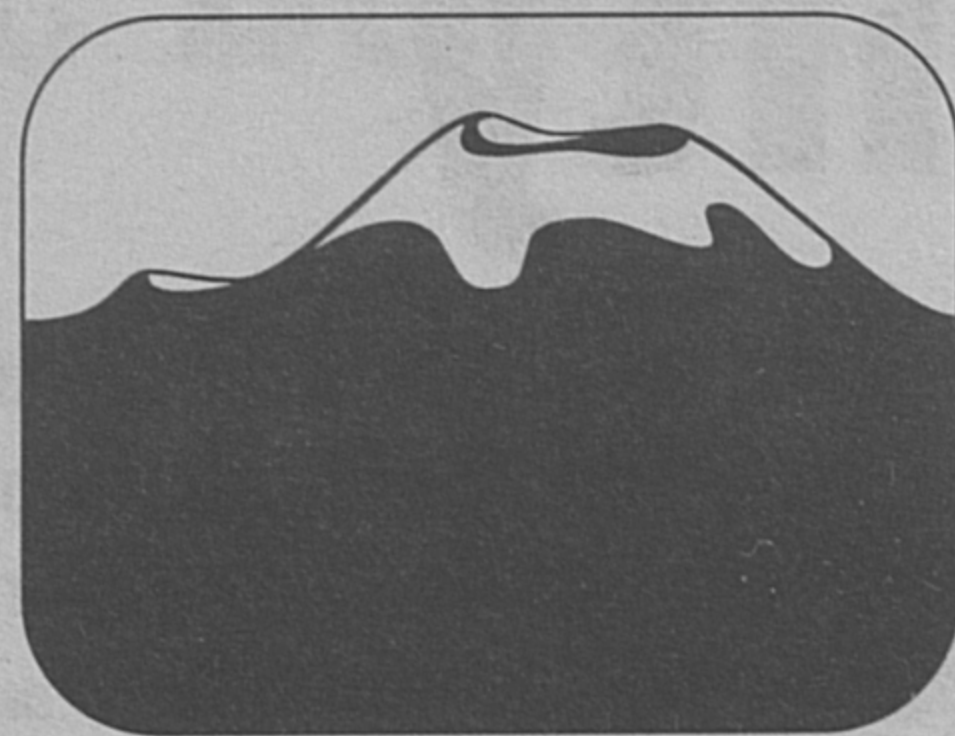


VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS

by **andrew j. campbell**

United Support in Middlebury

Triangle Park in Middlebury is overlooked and seems dismal in the dead of winter. The fountain is dry, save heaps of snow, and is covered with ugly plastic. The trees are bare and several feet of snow conceal the evergreen border.

However, on Saturday, February 12, this pocket park on the corner of Main Street and Merchants Row was alive with the sound of justice and the spirit of freedom.

We gathered there at around 3:30 to prepare for this inter-faith demonstration. We made an enormous banner to sum up our basic message: "People of faith SUPPORT same-sex marriage." Our main purpose was to counteract recent religious opposition. Such reasoning was apparent in the sign I carried with a radically worded message: "God LOVES fags!"

Other signs gave a less religious and more practical or legal aspect to our cause. One quoted this country's founding principles of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." "Why limit the right to marry?" asked one sign. A heterosexual participant used the common phrase "I am straight but not narrow." One teenager's sign proclaimed a simple message: "love is good."

"Honk if you support same-

sex marriages," was probably one of the best signs. A surprisingly large number of drivers sounded their horns and gave us thumbs-up. Only a few passers-by made contrary gestures. Overall, our message was well received by the community.

While the event was indeed a success, the planning was hurried and intense. About a month ago, I embarked on a mission to counteract the opposition coming from the Catholic Bishop and other people of faith. As the co-chair of Vermont Open Circle Awareness League, a politically active Pagan organization, I engaged support for an inter-faith demonstration. It would be an exciting effort — Christians and Pagans uniting to declare support for same-sex marriage. These two faith groups have been religious enemies throughout history, and innumerable people have been caught in the crossfire. Such a joint effort was undoubtedly in the spirit of Unitarian Universalism. Therefore, we appealed to the Champlain Valley Unitarian Universalist Society to co-sponsor the event.

I quickly finalized the plans, and the rally was scheduled to coincide with National

Freedom to Marry Day. Ironically, and in all likelihood, purposefully, Freedom to Marry Day fell on the same date as Traditional Marriage Day. While the bishop was celebrating "one-man, one-woman" marriages in Burlington, we would be rallying for same-sex marriage in Middlebury.

Channel 3 covered both events in a non-biased manner. The *Rutland Herald* and the *Valley Voice* also covered the story with the superb reporting of Ed Barna, a freelance writer.

While the community's reaction to the event was valuable, even more so were the experiences of the participants. Such activism was motivating for many people.

"That was so much fun!" expressed Bianca Stone, a teenager for whom this was a new experience. She exclaimed that this event was very moving, and encouraged her to become more involved in political activism. For myself, the demonstration was also motivating and encouraging. It was a way that I could finally stand up for myself in a loud, direct manner.

To others, it was more of an illustration of anger. This anger clearly resonates across the fair-minded community. We

are fed up with the gross opposition clearly rooted in fear. Meredyth Dunsmore, a high-school student, expressed her offense to reporter Ed Barna. "It just hurts me," she said, "that people are so unwilling to support people who are different and so unwilling to allow people to be happy." One married woman commented, "if anyone's crazy enough to marry, then by all means, LET THEM!"

When I later asked a friend about the issue, she refused to talk about it. She explained that the opposition infuriated her to a point where she gets apprehensive in any discussion of same-sex marriage. Personally, I often rudely denote the opposition as "the stupid people."

During this demonstration we used the power of our anger and turned it into powerful, peaceful activism. Together we sang the popular civil rights song from the UU hymnal "We Are A Gentle, Angry People."

This was not the first expression of religious support for same-sex marriage. More than 100 religious leaders in Vermont have signed the "Marriage Resolution," and more than 80 clergy members have gone even further with their support. In a public statement, they proclaimed that inclusion of gay and lesbian couples in the marriage statutes could only strengthen this institution. They stated that when two men or two women form a committed, loving relationship, they exemplify a "moral good" that cannot be represented by domestic partnership legislation.

This brave proclamation by many of Vermont's religious leaders is to be commended. However, in my discussions with local residents, most were

completely unaware of this support — and this unawareness was a large reason behind the organization of our demonstration.

Same-sex marriage is important to many people, declared Rev. Johanna Nichols of the UU church. She explained to reporter Ed Barna, "I know a lot of people who have suffered, and are still." Rev. Nichols has been active in the struggle for some time. She recently spoke to the legislature and offered her support for same-sex marriage. Along with other clergy, she vowed to stand behind the legislature if they choose to include gay and lesbian couples in the marriage statutes.

This religious support expressed to our government was exactly what the demonstration asserted to our local community. But while we have indeed covered both audiences, there remains much more to be done.

In the days ahead, I will be writing many letters to the editor and to my local representatives. I will be active in gaining support from both the community and the legislature. I trust that you will do the same. As Margaret Mead professed, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." ▼

Andrew J. Campbell is founder and director of Vermont Open Circle of Wicca & Wicce, a multi-tradition Pagan church in Addison County. He is also founder and co-chair of Vermont Open Circle Awareness League, a politically active subgroup speaking out against ignorance and hatred in all forms.

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feeling so empowered. They realized they could sit down with a key policy maker and actually teach him something. Somehow, we have to get more people to do that kind of thing."

Pollina called empowerment a long-term process with leadership as the key. "Having the right kind of governor can make a real difference in how people feel about their ability to be active in decision making," he said.

A New Jersey native, Pollina has lived in Vermont since 1972, graduating from Johnson State College with a degree in Political Science and Environmental Studies in 1977. After graduation, he moved to Montpelier and started a non-profit network of radio stations.

Since then, Pollina has been involved in work on such issues as the impact of the development of shopping malls, Bovine Growth Hormone, genetically engineered foods and NAFTA. He worked for US Representative Bernie Sanders for five years as a policy advisor on a range of issues.

"I guess I'm a non-profit kinda guy," said Pollina, "which doesn't mean that I don't know how to run a business or balance a budget. Non-profit work takes a lot of creativity and persistence."

Pollina said he has asked friends to tell him if he starts to "act like a professional politician or get too or get too distracted to hear what people have to say and deal with that."

"I'm going to run this race to win," he said. "But I'm going to run the race in a way that allows me to maintain who I am."

"Vermont needs a governor who will fight for the issues working Vermonters care about: universal health care, living wages and an economy that works for all," said party chair Heather Reimer during the nomination.

The Progressive Party, the result of the Progressive Coalition born when Bernie Sanders became mayor of Burlington in 1981, will not officially vote on its platform for this campaign until its convention this summer. The pre-platform includes support for a single-payer health care system, livable wage legislation, progressive tax reform, reproductive choice, and full inclusion of gays and lesbians in marriage. ▼

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