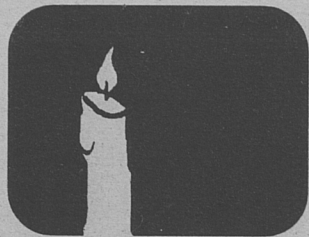


health & wellbeing

FAITH MATTERS

by the reverend christine leslie



Faith Matters and Iconic Matters

One of my favorite places to shop is in the office and warehouse for a company based in Burlington called Bridge Building Images. This family-owned company specializes in production and sale of modern-day icons. (The

Seeing these images also gives me courage and strength to persevere in the fact of bigotry, hatred, and self-doubt. I would even say seeing these images is inspirational.

When I look at them, I can breathe in the Holy Spirit

tently for the rights of all those without a voice. These people included blue-collar workers, the elderly, racial minorities, and GLBT men and women.

On November 28, 1978, he was shot five times at close range by another politician, Dan White, who was infuriated by Harvey's defense of GLBT people. White also murdered the Mayor of San Francisco that same day. That night 40,000 people, men and women, old and young, straight and GLBT alike held a candlelight vigil outside City Hall. In this icon, Harvey Milk holds a candle, keeping vigil himself for the oppressed of the world. He wears a black armband with a pink triangle. This was a Nazi symbol for homosexuals and represents all those who have been tortured or killed because of cultural fears regarding human sexuality.

I was stunned and shocked that November morning in 1978 when a classmate called to tell me Harvey had been shot and killed. I can still feel the curve of the phone in my hand and the cool plastic against my face. I can see the pattern of the flooring in my kitchen where I stood. I was in seminary at the time, just across the bay in Berkeley, CA. I had made the decision to go through the ordination process openly and honestly, in part because of the courage with which Harvey was living his life.

The fiery flash of pain and anger that seared my soul during that phone call left an

imprint in me that has never left me. I vowed then and there I would let nothing keep me from seeking ordination on an open basis. My vow paid off. People all over the Bay area were shocked and stunned by this vicious hate crime against an openly gay man. Many people of faith were shaken into a new consciousness I believe helped to make possible my ordination in May, 1981, the first one of an out lesbian in my Protestant denomination.

The explanation card for the Harvey Milk icon goes on to say that the day of his election, Harvey tape-recorded his last testament in which he acknowledged that he would most probably die violently. The last words of that message were "You gotta give them hope."

That Harvey gave me hope is an understatement. The least any of us can do to thank Harvey is to live out of that hope and do what we can to bring an end to the phobic fears that fueled his death and so many since his. This means being open and honest about who we are whenever we can be. It means joining in our annual VT GLBT Pride celebrations, especially if you have never done so. It means working tirelessly to support candidates in this fall's election who support the civil rights of GLBT people. If we

live our lives this way, then we become iconic for those who still live in the shadows of fear, shame, and guilt.

Where would be today if Harvey Milk and Martin Luther King, Jr., had not lived their lives the way they did? Where would we be today if Stan Baker, Peter Harrigan, Holly Puterbaugh, Lois Farnham, Stacy Jolles, and Nina Beck had not sued the state of Vermont for the right to marry? Where would we be today if Beth Robinson and Susan Murray had not represented them? Where would be today if our allies, Episcopal Bishop Mary Adelia McLeod, Rabbi Joshua Chasan, and the United Church of Christ's VT Conference Minister, the Rev. Dr. Arnold Thomas, had not testified in favor of same-gender marriage in February?

All I can say is never, ever underestimate the iconic impact of even the smallest effort we take to be open and honest about our lives. We just never know whose life, including our own, might begin to matter again when we do this.

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"You gotta give them hope." final words of Harvey Milk's tape-recorded last testament

word "icon" comes from the Greek word "eikon" and means "an image, figure, representation, or picture.")

It's a real treat to get their catalogue in the mail or browse their Web site and pore over the icons I have come to love as well as look for new ones they have crafted.

The Kelleys use posters, large and small, of the artwork of a variety of artists and mount them on a plaque to create the icons. The icons of Martin Luther King, Jr., Harvey Milk, Mahandas Gandhi, Sergius and Bacchus, Joan of Arc, We-Wha of Zuni (a 19th-century "berdache" and Zuni holy man), Stephen Biko, Perpetua and Felicitas, and Archbishop Oscar Romero are just some of my favorites, as is one of their newest offerings, "Jesus of the People" by a Vermont artist, Janet McKenzie.

The name of this company makes sense when looking at the icons they offer. The ones named above and many others bridge a gap in my soul every time I look at them, which, of course, is the point. Seeing images of these people helps me keep my faith in the goodness and reality of the Sacred Source of All Life.

through the spirit of their lives. I am literally inspired to believe I, too, am called to make a difference in the lives of others for the better.

It is especially healing and holy for me to gaze at the picture of Harvey Milk created by artist Robert Lentz. The explanation card that comes with the icon tells us Harvey Milk was the first openly gay person elected to high public office in the US. He was not a professional politician, but ran for City Supervisor in San Francisco because he felt ordinary people were pushed aside there by moneyed interests.

"It takes no money to respect the individual," he said. "The people are more important than roads." As Supervisor, he fought consis-

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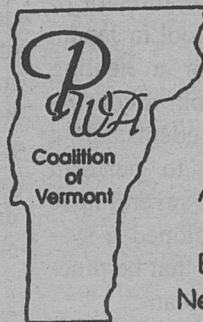
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