

Chapter 26. Learning from the gay rights movement.

*The Boy Scouts of America maintains that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing an obligation to God. . . . The recognition of God as the ruling and leading power in the universe and the grateful acknowledgment of His favors and blessings are necessary to the best type of citizenship and are wholesome precepts in the education of the growing members. No matter what the religious faith of the members may be, this fundamental need of good citizenship should be kept before them. The Boy Scouts of America . . . is absolutely nonsectarian in its attitude toward that religious training.*¹ Declaration of Religious Principle, Bylaws of Boy Scouts of America

*We believe that homosexual conduct is inconsistent with the requirements in the Scout Oath that a Scout be morally straight and in the Scout Law that a Scout be clean in word and deed, and that homosexuals do not provide a desirable role model for Scouts. Because of these beliefs, the Boy Scouts of America does not accept homosexuals as members or as leaders, whether in volunteer or professional capacities.*² Boy Scouts of America Position Statement: Homosexuality and the BSA.

The parallels between atheists and gays are many. Both atheists and gays can “pass” as heterosexuals or religionists if they do not identify themselves. Absent that self-identification, they will often be assumed to be heterosexual or religious, as the case may be. Further, both gays and atheists are raised in a society where most presume they will grow up to be heterosexual or religious. An atheist child in a religious family may feel a similar sense of isolation and loneliness to that of a gay child. Growing up, the gay or atheist child must often learn to reject the assumptions of the dominant culture and to stand on his own with pride.

Both “gay” and “atheist” are affirmative identities. There are many people who have homosexual relations (Ted Haggard for example, see Chapter 17) who do not assume the identity of being gay. Similarly, there are many more people who do not believe in religion than the few who affirmatively identify themselves as atheists. One of the distinguishing elements of identity is pride. Gays have been building their pride for more than 40 years, atheists have some catching up to do.

Additionally, both gays and atheists suffer from social stigma and discrimination. Five hundred years ago, both atheism and homosexuality were crimes punishable by death. Even in some countries today, both homosexual activity and apostasy (specifically, renouncing the Muslim faith) remain punishable by death. The Boy Scouts of America singles out both gays and atheists as people unfit for membership. The Christian right attacks gays and atheists with equal fervor. The general public views gay and atheist candidates as the least desirable

to serve as president.³ An old proverb counsels, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” There are natural parallels between the gay and atheist movements.

The path of the gay rights movement over the past 50 years has lessons for atheists. Think about it, 50 years ago, gay relations were illegal in all states. However, gays have taken concrete steps to improve their lot. Now a U.S. Supreme Court decision affirms their right to relationships,⁴ 21 states prohibit discrimination against gays,⁵ 8 states have domestic partnership laws⁶ and 5 states plus the District of Columbia recognize gay marriage.⁷ Gays, once a horribly stigmatized minority, are now ranked ahead of atheists in a poll asking who the electorate might choose to be president.⁸

Fighting for gay rights.

The birth of the modern gay rights movement, the Stonewall Rebellion, was marked by three days of riots which started when police tried to harass the patrons of a New York City gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, on June 28, 1969. The patrons and protestors labeled themselves “homosexuals.” But that was about to change.

In the fertile civil rights environment of the era, the Gay Liberation movement began. On the first anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, thousands of New Yorkers marched in a gay pride parade. Parades were also held in Chicago and Los Angeles. Each year the number of cities and countries conducting “pride” parades has grown—all on or around the anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. The world’s largest celebration occurs in Sao Paulo, Brazil, with over 3 million attending,⁹ the largest celebration in the U.S. is in San Francisco, with over a million attending.¹⁰

The people previously known as “homosexuals” adopted a new name, “gay.” Formerly a derisive term, it became both a name and an identity. Slogans like “gay is good” and “gay and proud” were popularized.

Gay Liberation also used symbols. One early symbol was the Greek letter lambda (λ), for liberation. Some gay organizations still have “lambda” in their names. Others used an inverted pink triangle (\blacktriangledown)—the symbol used by Nazis to identify gays in the concentration camps where they were exterminated along with the Jews. But in 1978 a San Francisco artist designed the rainbow flag,¹¹ which has become the most recognized symbol of gay pride. If you live in a larger city, you will likely see rainbow flags, or variations of rainbow flags, on many vehicles and businesses.

The gay rights movement identified itself from its inception as a civil rights movement. As such, it built coalitions with other groups. Women’s liberation was a natural ally, but other coalitions formed as well. For example, in San Francisco, unions wished to boycott Coors beer. Gay politician Harvey Milk worked to get Coors removed from gay bars, thereby

earning him union support in his run for political office.¹²

Gay Liberation worked with the political system to recognize gay rights. From ending police harassment, the movement quickly moved to affirmative rights. Policies and laws against discrimination were promoted in businesses and cities. San Francisco, Ann Arbor and East Lansing first adopted gay rights ordinances in 1972.¹³ In 1974 AT&T became the first major national company to adopt an equal opportunity policy for gays.¹⁴ Such small steps have led to statewide anti-discrimination laws in 21 states,¹⁵ plus anti-discrimination laws and policies in countless cities and companies nationwide.

Gays and their allies have also worked in the fields of art and entertainment to create more positive gay images. One of the first Hollywood movies with central gay characters, 1970's *The Boys in the Band*, opened the floodgates for numerous others that followed. Ellen DeGeneres' disclosure she was a lesbian in 1997, and the incorporation of her character as a lesbian on the *Ellen* show were big news. Gay characters are now so common in television and movies that the review I read before seeing the 2009 movie *Taking Woodstock* did not even mention that the main character was gay. And on TV, talk show host Wanda Sykes speaks of her wife without anyone blinking an eye. Even the all-American comic book, *Archie* has added a gay character.¹⁶ Gays have come a long way and the media has helped.

The gay rights movement has not only worked on the social side of the spectrum, but on the legal side as well. Victories include the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*,¹⁷ overruling the few state laws that still prohibited gay sex, as well as state court decisions in Vermont, Massachusetts, Iowa and California authorizing gay marriage.¹⁸

The gay rights movement has also become an economic force. In the early days, activists marked their bills "gay money" to make the point that gays are a strong economic force. Some advertisers caught on early—Subaru successfully marketed its automobiles to lesbians. The liquor industry was a pioneer in advertising to the gay market. Coors beer, once subject to a boycott by unions and gay rights activists, later began sponsoring gay events and advertising in the gay media. Today, advertising to the gay market is frequent and occurs without much notice or comment. The power of the gay dollar has been recognized.

Many strategies have worked effectively for the gay rights movement, but probably the most effective is "coming out." Within the gay world, not disclosing your status is known as "being in the closet," while becoming open is known as "coming out of the closet," or simply "coming out." Early in the gay rights movement, activists insisted that being "out" was essential to recognition of gay rights. They reasoned that everyone knows someone gay, even if they do not realize it. It would be easy to oppose gay rights if you had never met a gay person, but if you know your favorite elementary school teacher is gay, your grocer is gay, your barber is gay, your neighbor is gay, and each of them is a fine and likeable person, then it is much harder to oppose gay rights. Seventy-seven percent of Americans say they know

a gay person, an increase of 35 percentage points since 1992.¹⁹

The gay rights movement established a “national coming out day,” October 11, to encourage gay people to be more open.²⁰ A coming out brochure reads, “Gay . . . Americans are sons and daughters, doctors and lawyers, teachers and construction workers. We serve in Congress, protect our country on the front lines and contribute to the well-being of the nation at every level. In all that diversity, we have one thing in common: we each make deeply personal decisions to be open about who we are with ourselves and others--even when it isn’t easy. We express that openness by telling our friends, family, co-workers and even strangers that--among all the other things we are--we’re also gay.”²¹

The brochure lists advantages of coming out:

- Living an open and whole life.
- Developing closer, more genuine relationships.
- Building self-esteem from being known and loved for who we really are.
- Reducing the stress of hiding our identity.
- Connecting with others who are GLBT.²²
- Being part of a strong and vibrant community.
- Helping to dispel myths and stereotypes about who GLBT people are and what our lives are like.
- Becoming a role model for others.
- Making it easier for younger GLBT people who will follow in our footsteps.

If you reread the preceding paragraphs about coming out and substitute “atheist” for “gay,” almost every provision applies to atheists as well.

Over the years, you probably have met a gay person who takes the coming out strategy quite seriously. He will have a rainbow flag on his car, a gay button on his jacket, a T-shirt that says “how dare you presume I am straight,” and still he will find a way to speak about being gay in just about every conversation. It can be a bit amusing, but it is a necessary process, and it is a process that atheists should consider. How many times have you heard of a loud, out and proud atheist? We need more of them.

At one point, openly gay celebrities were few and far between. Quentin Crisp’s publication of *The Naked Civil Servant* in 1968 pushed him to the fore, and Elton John’s public declaration he was bisexual in 1988 was big news. Now, entire books and Websites contain seemingly endless lists of gay celebrities. But the impact of role models is important. Celebrities who are open about their status help to reduce discrimination and serve as role models for younger people. Atheist celebrities currently seem more secretive about their lack of religion than they do about their sexuality.

Of course, the analogy between gays and atheists has its limits. To a large degree, gays need each other to find love and support. Gay bars have been a gathering point for centuries. But to be honest, I have never heard of an atheist bar. Also, living honestly with one's sexual orientation may be more key to the happiness of an individual than atheism. At first this seemed obvious to me. But the more I think about it, the more I am unsure. Atheism is a key element of my personality and I could no more comfortably attend church, sing hymns and pray, than a gay person could marry a spouse of the opposite sex. Nonetheless, I do think that sexual orientation is a more core distinguishing factor than the lack of religion.

That said, the number of gay people in the world is relatively fixed. Heterosexuals, despite the claims of the Christian right, do not convert to homosexuals and homosexuals do not convert into heterosexuals. Religion, however, can be changed. A large number of atheists were once religious and each year the number of atheists grows. We are not limited to remaining 1% or 20% of the population. Eventually, we will be the majority.

The correlation between the gay rights movement and the atheist movement is not complete. Nonetheless, the movements are similar. Gays have significantly improved their rights and societal standing in America over the past 40 years, while atheists have not. The gay rights movement has adopted valuable strategies that the atheist movement can use as well; strategies like agreeing on a name, choosing a symbol, developing an identity and most importantly, coming out. The next chapter discusses actions atheists may wish to consider to improve the effectiveness of the atheist movement.

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22. GLBT is an acronym for "gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered."