

Source: Walter L. Williams, "Methods by Which Humanity Can Derive Benefit From Lesbian and Gay Men in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Empathy*, v.3, n.2 (1992), pp. 87-89.

In this time of Cold War thawing, gays and lesbians have an historic opportunity to move toward an influential world role in the 1990s. Not only does the increased attention toward freedom in Eastern Europe bode well for all aspects of human rights, but new worldwide political issues are coming to the forefront. In recent decades, so much of the world's attentions went toward keeping the super-powers from nuclear war that other international problems were never adequately addressed.

Conservatives in the 1980s formulated social dangers in terms of homosexuality, abortion, and "dangers to the family." Foremost on the post-Cold War world's international agenda will be new enemies. This decade's gravest threats are the interrelated problems of over-population, poverty, governments' indebtedness, and environmental pollution. These problems are related, especially in Latin America, Asia and Africa, because of population increases. Overall, the growth of the human species within the last two centuries is truly alarming. It took all of human history for world population to reach one billion by 1830. It took only a century beyond that to double. Even that astounding gain has been dwarfed in recent decades. There are now 5.2 billion people in the world and a projected forecast of over 8 billion by the year 2025.

Third World nations cannot presently feed their populations; increased poverty and further indebtedness are their only prospects, Over-population looms as a worse disaster during the next few decades despite various nations' birth control efforts.

Our focus, however, should not be only on Third World nations. The United States, Europe, and Japan have been the Principal culprits squandering vast resources at the expense of their poorer neighbors. They have also been the principal world pollutants while politely

chiding World nations – with fewer economic alternatives – to reduce deforestations, consumption of fossil fuels, and so forth.

It is in this ecological context that gay People can make a major contribution. Evidence from non-Western cultures clearly offers us possible models in how to construct more socially-useful roles for homosexuals. The American Indian *berdache* role and the Polynesian *mahu* role, for example, offer viable possibilities in terms of care for the aged and for unwanted children (Williams, 1986).

Today, in the United States as well as in many developing countries, homeless children pose a major problem. Not only are they a great expense to society, but by being raised in the streets, or in underfunded and over-crowded juvenile centers (often little more than prisons), they tend to produce future social misfits.

Since most gay men and lesbians do not reproduce, we are a potential source for becoming adoptive parents. Rather than begging for equal rights as adoptive parents, gay and lesbian activists must confront homophobic social service agencies and lawmakers, demanding that they justify the waste of taxpayers' money by not allowing gays and lesbians to provide a home for unwanted children. We should also ask those fundamentalists who attack the "evils" of homosexuality and abortion what they are doing to address the problems of adoption and over-population. Where are all those unaborted, unwanted and impoverished children going to live?

Rather than begging for equal rights to governments that all too often violate such rights, gay men and lesbians would be more effective emphasizing to the world's governments the benefits of *encouraging* some of their people to pair as same-sex couples. We could contact every nation's embassy with a detailed explanation for how they could help to control their populations by legalizing same-sex marriages, encouraging lesbians and gays to adopt

orphaned children, and giving financial incentives to people to adopt older children rather than to reproduce. International adoption agencies must be set up on a much wider scale than currently exists. American gays can be valuable resource people, helping nations set up gay-style social groups, safer-sex education campaigns, rap groups, "coming out day" plans, media campaigns, and other means of encouraging young lesbians and gay men to come out proudly rather than remain in hiding often entering the heterosexual lifestyle as a parent.

As gay lifestyles and adoption become more open in different nations, the pressure on homosexually-inclined individuals to heterosexually marry will decline. By pairing anti-discrimination campaigns with the encouragement for adopting homeless kids, we can persuade political leaders that homosexuality is an asset in their efforts to reduce population and care for the current generation of "throwaway" children.

Generally, the world's leaders recognize the importance of population control. We must convince them that it would be much easier if they abandoned old procreative ideologies. Judeo-Christian attitudes that discourage non-procreative forms of sex originated at a time when human populations were small and subject to high infant mortality rates. That has all changed as massive population explosions threaten not only our own species but many others as well. As we further pollute the earth, drain water supplies, burn forests, and expand deserts, procreative ideologies must accept part of the blame.

When gay people begin to think of ourselves as a *benefit* to the future of the earth, we will make more effective progress in overcoming prejudice and changing our social status. Rather than begging for equal rights by claiming we are "just like everyone else," the American Indian example shows that we should be emphasizing our difference. We have special gifts which can benefit society. Society's strength lies in its diversity and its appreciation for our unique contributions to our families and communities.

We need to point out repeatedly to anti-gay institutions how prejudice hurts them. To give just one example, few can doubt that with such a large proportion of homosexual Catholic priests and nuns, there is a direct relationship between the increasing shortage of new priests and nuns, and the increasingly homophobic stance taken by Church leaders. With so many people in this generation having thrown off their sexual repressions, the Church finds fewer homosexuals willing to enter a life which requires sacrificing basic inclinations. Likewise, it is no accident that homophobic Big Brother/ Big Sister programs are experiencing shortages of volunteers. Eventually they will realize that they will lose if they lack the participation of lesbians and gay men; that homophobia hurts them as much as it does gay people (Blumenfeld, 1992). Rather than begging these institutions for equal rights, we should emphasize the positive contributions lesbians and gay men can make to their benefit.

An example of how gays can dramatically improve their status, by emphasizing positive contributions rather than begging for equal rights, can be seen in the recent history of the city of West Hollywood. The cityhood movement originated when forward-thinking gays grew tired of merely making negative protests against homophobia and police mistreatment. Though part of the Los Angeles urban area, the territory between Hollywood and Beverly Hills had never been incorporated into the city limits of Los Angeles. Gay people had begun settling there in the 1960s to get away from the homophobic Los Angeles Police Department. In the early 1980s, after gay residents played a major part in the revitalization of the West Hollywood area, gay and lesbian activists decided that incorporation would best serve their interests. To accomplish cityhood they built an effective political alliance with senior citizens, the other major demographic group in the unincorporated area.

Gay activists began asking the elderly about their problems, and what the gay community could do to help. With most seniors on fixed incomes, their major concerns were the need for

rent control, better health programs, and protection from violent crime. Gay leaders mounted a campaign to pass such policies by mounting a voter drive to establish the new City of West Hollywood.

Once cityhood was enacted, gay and lesbian candidates ran for city council by appealing to seniors' concerns. Since the majority of gays in the city are renters who are concerned about homophobic violence and about AIDS, they and the seniors became natural allies. Together, they form a political majority. Senior citizens in West Hollywood appreciate their gay neighbors because they feel safe and need not worry about being violently attacked; gays know that they are not likely 'to be physically attacked by a gang of elderly people.

Each group offers major advantages to the other and as a result the alliance between the two groups is strong. Gay activists must learn from this example and from the cross-cultural studies of non-homophobic societies. In the 1970s lesbians and gay men learned to be open about ourselves and proud of who we are. In the 1980s, we learned how to take responsibility for those who are ill and to accept a humanitarian duty to care for them. In the Gay 90s, this community is poised to recognize that the highest good is in helping others. If gays can always emphasize what we as an organized community can do to benefit others, we will gain our rights faster than just by pushing anti-discrimination ordinances. As we have learned repeatedly in recent years, such ordinances often fail. While it is good to repeal antigay laws, we must realize that if the gay and lesbian community does not have public opinion on its side, such "top-down" legislation is doomed to be exploited by bigots.

The major gains made by the lesbian and gay liberation movement in the two decades since Stonewall have been due largely to the massive numbers of lesbians and gay men who have come out proudly to their families and friends. Protests and pride marches can be useful, but they are even more important for providing gay people with a sense of self-worth than

they are as pressure tactics upon government. The coming out process, itself, is what has had the most impact on non-gays' attitudes. We need to encourage more lesbians and gays to come out to their families, co-workers, and friends. Once people come out, they can direct their energies toward making their contributions to society rather than hiding the reality of their personal lives. The gay movement has recognized these as both social and personal benefits. Yet, once people come out, the gay rights movement has provided little direction except to protest against discrimination. More profitable would be a positive offering to the non-gay community.

Non-gays can legitimately ask why they should support lesbian and gay rights from their own self-interested viewpoints. Social change seldom succeeds on altruism alone, and "what's in it for me?" remains a central issue for many. Consequently, the gay movement must continually emphasize how ending prejudice will help to make heterosexuals' lives and communities better. Just as was done with the seniors in West Hollywood, the general heterosexual population needs to be offered positive incentives, advantages to dropping their heterosexist attitudes and accepting lesbians and gay men as equals.

Few people know that homosexuals have made so many contributions to society; to take just one example, homosexuals have written much of the great literature in American history. But we have more recent heroes than Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Today's lesbian activist leaders in the ecology movement and the pro-choice campaign, and gay men's support of the arts have been crucial to the development of modern American culture. If the United States ever adopts a comprehensive national health care system much of the credit should go to lesbians and gay men who have tackled AIDS. To be recognized by society these acts on its behalf must be done as openly gay people and as a *community-wide* effort.

Probably the greatest progress for gay rights occurs when gay men and lesbians are recognized as gay people who are doing good work in areas NOT related to homosexuality. It is more important that students realize their learning is being assisted by lesbian and gay educators, than that they learn gay studies. When an openly gay person helps family, neighbors, or colleagues to accomplish a task, that is a stride toward overcoming homophobia.

I know two openly gay men who led their neighborhood in a tree-planting project. And while the whole neighborhood appreciated their leadership abilities, their efforts also changed others' attitudes because the two men were open about being gay and about their loving relationship. Every homeowner knew that the value of their house had increased due to this gay couple's efforts. Among American Indian tribes, berdaches get their high status in their village NOT because of their homosexual behavior, but because they are seen as being a type of person who – precisely because of their differences – have particular talents and contributions to make that different from the average person. To the extent that all lesbians and gay men can develop their talents AND express them in a non-hiding manner, the 1990s will be a time that progress can be made.

To come back to the first point of this essay, it is with the question of over-population that the gay and lesbian rights movement can potentially make its most important impact on the world in the 21st century. For the first time in our history as a species, humankind must accept that we cannot go on increasing in numbers. We have over-populated to the point of becoming a growing cancer on the earth. In starkest terms, homo sapiens is like an AIDS-like virus that is multiplying rapidly. Christian teachings against birth control, against abortion, and against acceptance of same-sex relationships are more than irresponsible. They are a mortal threat to the future of our earth.

Like parasites, Homo sapiens are in danger of killing our host. But unlike other parasites, we cannot just move to another host when our earth becomes so polluted and over-crowded that we can no longer survive. If we continue to grow at accelerated rates our species may not survive. Eventually the earth will recover, but the human species (and many other with species) will go the way of the dinosaurs unless we start to think in radically different ways about procreative sex.

Gays and lesbians can take the lead in addressing these problems, if only we will think of ourselves as a blessing to society. If we will only ask, "What can I do to change the world, to make it better than before," then we can work toward improving our own situation while helping others. If lesbians and gay men will stop trying to mimic heterosexuals in their irresponsible and selfish desires to bring more babies into the world, and instead emphasize the need to facilitate adoption of the massive numbers of unwanted and abused older and non-white children who languish in alleyways and institutions, then the gay rights movement can link its struggle with at least one major problem facing humanity. If we begin to think in these terms, and to develop other issues where we can make positive contributions, the lesbian and gay community can become an integral factor in human progress in the next century.

## **References**

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