

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING TRANSPHOBIA

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I teach a class at the University of Southern California, called “Overcoming Prejudice.” Out of this class grew a book titled “Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work,” James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams, eds. (Columbia University Press, 1997). To see a review of this book, go to www.gaybookreviews.info and click on “By Title” and scroll down to “O”. In the course of preparing this class and working on this book, I did a lot of research on the most effective ways to persuade people to drop their prejudices and to change peoples’ attitudes. I conclude that the four most effective ways to change social attitudes are by one-to-one dialogue, by organizing religious groups, by involvement in the mass media, and by organizing on university campuses.

NEED TO DO REPEATED ONE-TO-ONE DIALOGUE

What I have found in my research is that the single most effective way to get people to change their mind about an issue is through ongoing, repeated, one-to-one dialogue. One-time conversations do not have as much impact. We must spread anti-prejudiced ideas by repeated, ongoing conversations, especially with people that we have some personal connection to: our relatives, our friends, and our co-workers. If we will give them something to read, anything to follow up on our dialogue, that is even more effective. Readings might be a short pamphlet, or a packet of xeroxed materials, or even a book, if the person is an avid reader. This dialogue and reading followup is the single most effective way to influence social attitudes.

In the years after World War II, gay rights activists in the Netherlands decided on a strategy of using ongoing one-to-one dialogue to try to reduce prejudice against homosexuals in that small country. They gathered together a dedicated group of twenty activists who were committed to trying this policy. Together, they came up with a list of the sixty most influential leaders in the Netherlands. This list included prominent government leaders, religious leaders, newspaper and magazine editors, radio announcers, business leaders, and civic leaders. Then each

one of the twenty activists chose three of the names on the list, and made a determined effort to get in touch with those three leaders for a one-to-one chat. Some were not successful, but with determined effort most were able to gain an audience with their targeted leader sooner or later. After several conversations with these leaders, the activists managed to persuade many of them to drop, or at least reduce, their prejudice against homosexuals. Dr. Rob Tielman, author of an article in the JOURNAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY [v.13 (1987): 9-17] on this topic concluded that this campaign was largely responsible for the Netherlands being on the forefront of gay rights in later years. Because the most crucial opinion-molders in Dutch society had had their consciousness raised in these ongoing dialogues, they were not likely to engage in prejudiced actions. Other people in Dutch society took their cue from the leadership class, and homophobia gradually declined in the Dutch population in general.

While this strategy might not work for a large nation like the United States, it might be adapted for a particular city, or a particular occupation group.

What persuasion theorists emphasize is that people do not generally change their opinions drastically, but only step by step. In other words, if a newspaper demeans transgender people, it is not realistic to expect its editors and reporters to suddenly embrace transgender liberation. However, it might be possible to persuade the editor that his writings are alarmist and are not an accurate reflection of the real lives of most transgender people. He might be persuaded to shift his zeal to the real problems facing transpersons and their families, or he might be persuaded simply to stop publicizing non-existent bogeymen. It needs to be calmly pointed out to him that he is not doing his job as a newspaper editor if he is not accurately reporting the news. By pointing out an inconsistency between his overall value system (in his case, he sees himself as an accurate reporter of the news) and his behavior on this particular issue, a condition that psychologists call cognitive dissonance is created. If you can create cognitive dissonance in a person, they are less likely to be sure of themselves, and will be less likely to write or speak on this subject in the future. Try to create as much questioning in their mind as possible.

To give another example, from the 1950s through the early 1970s gay rights activists targeted psychiatrists. At that time psychiatry considered homosexuality to be a mental illness, and therapists saw themselves as benevolent doctors dealing with sick patients. Their studies were based on their homosexual patients, who indeed showed evidence of mental illness. When gay activists confronted them by saying that they were really only perpetuating prejudice, the psychiatrists' image of themselves as helpful doctors was challenged by questioning whether they were no

different from narrow-minded bigots. The gay activists forced the psychiatrists into questioning their tactics, by bringing in unbiased psychological studies done by Professor Evelyn Hooker of UCLA.

Hooker conducted numerous mental health tests for a group of males who were NOT in psychiatric therapy. Some of the male subjects in this group were homosexual and some were heterosexual. She then asked prominent psychiatrists to rate the mental health of each subject, but she did not tell the psychiatrists which men were homosexual and which were heterosexual. The panel of psychiatrists rated each of the subjects' reports. The mental health of the men who were homosexual, as a group, turned out to be rated slightly higher by the team of psychiatrists than the mental health of the men who were heterosexual. This proved that homosexuality, in and of itself, did not make a person mentally ill. It showed the fallacy of basing all their statements about homosexuality on the basis of studies done with homosexuals who were under the care of a psychiatrist. Of course such studies would show mental illness if the only homosexuals consulted were those who were in therapy. Confronted with this contradictory evidence, many psychiatrists changed their mind, and in 1974 the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from their list of mental disorders. [For more information on these examples, see Walter L. Williams and Yolanda Retter, *GAY AND LESBIAN RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY* (Greenwood Press, 2003)]

What this example proved is that any study based solely on a population that is in therapy is distorted. Likewise, studies based on gender nonconformist children who are in therapy are of course going to tend to show mentally disturbed children. That is why most of them ended up in therapy, because they suffered from a negative reactions to their gender differences. However, it is important to emphasize that no conclusions can be drawn from such studies, because gender nonconformist children who may have adjusted well, or who were not mentally disturbed, would not be likely to be participating in therapy.

Just like the gay activists did, transgender people should challenge therapists who think they are doing benevolent work to try to "help" sissy boys or female tomboys by making them conform to standard gender roles. They should be confronted as prejudiced bigots who are enforcing gender norms, when they should be accepting gender nonconformist children and helping them to improve their coping skills in dealing with prejudice.

The initial goal for the most prejudiced individuals is simply to get them to shut up. An anti-prejudice campaign should first aim to reduce prejudiced public discourse. The second aim is to get such public discourse to be socially unacceptable. This can be accomplished by various means, including embarrassing the prejudiced person, or intimidating them. Prejudice requires continual reinforcement to be continued. If it can be removed from public discourse, it will over time decline. Most prejudices become inflamed when people in the dominant group feel threatened. Remove the topic from public discourse and many people will no longer feel alarmed and threatened.

NEED TO DEVELOP AN ACCEPTING RELIGION

The second most effective way to change prejudices, particularly for questions relating to morality, is the attitude of religion. Cross-culturally, what I have found most dramatically is that the attitude of a society's religion has more to do with that society's acceptance of homosexuality than any other single factor. [See my chapter on Cross Cultural aspects in "Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia."] What this suggests is that it is crucial to build and develop a religion that is positive and accepting of transgender people. There are several possibilities.

SHAMANISM

First, many American Indian religions see feminine males and masculine females as doubly blessed because they have both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman. Such "Two-Spirit People" are often religious leaders, and before European influence such people were highly venerated as spiritually gifted [see Walter L. Williams, "The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture" (Beacon Press, 1992).

BUDDHISM

Second, some sects of Buddhism are trans-positive. For example, a website for the Buddhist Universal Association is currently in development. The BUA has a moral code that celebrates diversity and respects transgender people as well as other stigmatized sexual minorities.

JESUS

Third, another website at www.jesusandmary.info is currently in development, in which a similar trans-positive and sex-positive view of Jesus is emphasized. This

religious group, called The Fellowship of Jesus and Mary, explicitly rejects the anti-crossdressing books of the Bible (both the books of Genesis and Leviticus in the Old Testament, and the writings of Paul in the New Testament), and focuses solely on the Teachings of Jesus. This new religious group is pro-transgender, pro-sex, pro-youth, pro-feminist, pro-Jewish, pro-Buddhist, pro-animal, and pro-environment. They appeal to what they call “the exiles from Christianity,” such as transgender people, sexual minorities, women, Jews, environmentalists, and others. They do not call themselves Christian, but instead go by the name of Jesusism and their members are called Jesusites. They reject the imagery of a suffering Christ on the Cross, and instead use images of Jesus and Mary with arms outstretched in loving embrace. They will soon have a religious text for sale by an online publisher titled “The Teachings of Jesus.” This is required reading for anyone who resonates to the loving message of Jesus but who rejects the transphobic, anti-sex, anti-women, anti-Jewish, anti-environment messages of Christianity.

MASS MEDIA

Besides one-to-one dialogue and religion, the third most effective way to reduce prejudice is through the mass media. Most people are, sad to say, more influenced by the mass media than anything else. Rather than lament that fact, we should utilize it. We should make special efforts to contact movie stars and TV celebrities and persuade them to speak publicly about how they think that discrimination against transgender people is bad. This is how public attitudes are shaped.

Transgender people should be extremely grateful to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) which has worked tirelessly to change mass media representations of transgender people along with lesbians and gay men. GLAAD, and an offshoot organization called Hollywood Supports, have had massive influence on filmmakers, television directors, broadcast journalists, print journalists, and

My research has shown that people are very influenced by what they read in newspapers, magazines, popular novels, and on the internet. Ironically, where people are the most heavily influenced is when they are reading something that does not directly relate to the topic on which they are prejudiced. For example, many men would likely not purchase or even pick up a book titled “Transgender Liberation.” In contrast, a book with a title like “Successful Males: Varied Ways to Create Your Own Life and Get Ahead of the Pack” would likely be very interesting to many men, and to parents of boys. If such a book had each chapter

written by an adult male who told of the important factors in his success, it could become a best seller. If male readers would like to submit their life story to me, focusing on the secrets of their success, I would be open to being the editor of such a volume. There might be a chapter included in such a book that would be written by a man who, as a boy, wanted to become a successful businessman, and he attached himself as an apprentice to an older experienced businessman and thus learned to be a successful marketer. There might be a chapter written by a man who, as a boy, was heavily influenced by a man in his church, or a friend of his mother, etc. And then there might be a chapter written by a successful male who was a crossdresser, and another who was transgender and another who was transsexual. In a book with, say, fifteen chapters, if three chapters had a transgender element that helped to lead to the boy's later success, that would not be overpowering to the general reader. But it would be a powerful statement to the reader that transgender people exist and could be a good thing.

For a model of how to write such a book, see my review at www.gaybookreviews.info and click on By Title then scroll to "Living Happily Ever After: Couples Talk About Lasting Love" by Laurie Wagner et.al. This coffee-table book is marketed as "a perfect gift for weddings and anniversaries" and on the front cover are photos of cuddily man-woman couples. Yet, within this book of thirty chapters on thirty couples who have been together for more than thirty years, there are three chapters scattered throughout the book on same-sex couples. They are presented just like any of the man-woman couples. Because their stories are so positive, they are such sympathetic characters, and their narratives are so like the other couples' loving stories, they make the subtle but dramatic impact that same-sex couples can be just as loving and admirable as any man-woman couple. This book is so effective precisely because it is NOT a book on gay couples. Indeed, most people who purchase "Living Happily Ever After" would be unlikely to read such a book. It is crucially important, then, that the mainstream reader should feel that they are learning something of value from these wise individuals, something that will benefit them in their own life. If they have this feeling, it will be hard for the reader to sustain a prejudice based on faceless stereotypes. We need more books and articles to be published not trying to make such individuals "normal," but for their existence to be "normalized" in the context of the reader's perception. This gradual change in attitudes made by normalizing diversity makes it no longer threatening, but simply a part of life.

My book "The Spirit and the Flesh" is effective precisely because it is NOT a book on transgenderism. Readers pick up this book because they are interested in Native American culture and religion, or because they are interested in Gay

Studies. In this book, as well as in my forthcoming new historical pop novel, “Two Spirits: A Story of Life Among the Navajos” (forthcoming from Lethe Press, fall 2006), because I mention transgender people as a normal part of Native American ways of life, the subject is normalized within that context. I find that people will be more likely to accept something that is written about a different culture, while they might be up in arms about the same topic in their own society. If someone is learning something about a new culture that they are not familiar with, they tend to be more open-minded.

This is why it is so important for transgender persons to take jobs working in the mass media, because they will have countless opportunities to normalize trans issues in articles and stories about many varied topics. And, they can have an additional great impact by influencing their co-workers in the mass media, if they pursue the ongoing one-on-one dialogue approach. If a trans person can rise to a position where they can hire other employees, they can intentionally use interns or temporarily hire other trans persons, with the intent of training them and giving them real world job experience. Then, later, they can encourage that newly trained person to go out and look for another job in another media corporation. By having experience, that person becomes more hireable elsewhere. The employer can then search for another inexperienced trans person to hire and train. The more trans persons who can get jobs working for the major media, the better. Each person can then have a huge impact by radiating influence by the one-to-one dialogue method with their co-workers in the mass media.

Yet there are some opportunities to influence the mass media even without working in that field. One of the most important ways to have an impact is to regularly write letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines. Such letters are amazingly influential, because if published they influence not only the editors of the publication, but also the readers. Letters to the editor are among the most widely read parts of newspapers. You do not have to be a professional journalist to influence the mass media; anybody can write a letter to the editor.

The future is the internet. In 1996, I established the INTERNATIONAL GAY & LESBIAN REVIEW, at www.gaybookreviews.info which is the world's first academic journal to be published entirely online. It includes a number of reviews of books on transgender topics. Of course, there need to be many more reviews of such books, in all fields of book reviewing, and many more websites that deal with transgender issues.

Whenever I talk to young trans people who are searching for a career where they can influence public attitudes, I encourage them to learn how to make their own websites, and to enter careers in journalism, popular fiction writing, screenplay writing, filmmaking, radio and television production. Rather than taking an English class to learn how to write the Great American Novel, it is more valuable for transgender activists to learn how to write interesting pop romances, comic books, and other best-selling genres with sympathetic interesting main characters who are transgender. Rather than learn how to write esoteric poetry, it is more important for aspiring poets to transfer their talents into songwriting, so that they can come up with popular tunes with transgender ideas in the lyrics. The goal is to incorporate non-prejudiced ideas and approaches into every form of mass media imaginable.

ORGANIZE ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

The fourth most effective way to spread an idea is through education. As an educator I wish it was first in importance, but education is still very influential. Universities are where the next generations of leaders are trained. Not only for the United States, but for many countries around the world. If efforts to reduce transphobic prejudices can be focused on college campuses, there can be a great impact. Here are some ideas to have an impact:

1. Organize a local chapter of the Fellowship of Jesus and Mary, or the Buddhist Universal Association, as a campus religious organization. There are usually a minimum number of students required to get such a group officially recognized, but once that is done a religious group has almost unlimited flexibility on campus. Official recognition allows the group to have a free place to meet, a budget, an email address, library privileges, and sometimes an office space with telephone line. Academic freedom, added to ideas of religious freedom, make campus religious groups an ideal place from which to conduct anti-prejudice campaigns.
2. A campus religious organization can more likely sponsor academic symposia, panels and public discussions on controversial topics like “Stop Forcing Transgender Children to Conform to Gender Norms.” Invite professors to be on the panel. Even if they are antagonistic, they will be forced to listen to an opposing viewpoint and might change their mind.
3. Mount exhibitions in the library or student union. If the group can get a budget to construct an exhibition, after it has finished its time of display on that campus,

the group could loan the exhibits to a sister group on another campus. Traveling exhibitions can be very effective ways to reduce prejudices. Hundreds of students, faculty and staff can view the exhibits, and be exposed for the first time to new anti-prejudiced ideas.

For ideas of how to effectively appeal to people to drop their prejudices, see the section “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” that links sexual liberation to the ideals of the Founding Fathers, in Walter L. Williams and Yolanda Retter, “Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History” (Greenwood Press, 2003). Years ago I did work to develop such an exhibition, and if funding can be located I would be interested in reviving this project. We need funders to come forward and support this project. Exhibitions, mounted in public libraries, schools, and museums, can be very effective in spreading messages of liberation and human rights.

4. Seek out and talk with professors, and use the ongoing one-to-one dialogue technique. Focus especially on professors of education and others who teach about youth: developmental psychologists, social workers, sociologists, anthropologists, juvenile law, criminalologists. Even if they are antagonistic, be calm and friendly, and keep going back to talk to them again. Take pamphlets and xerox materials, and maybe even books for them to read. Give these readings as gifts, and the person will more likely feel beholden to read them, or at least will feel more positive toward you.

5. Offer to speak to classes. It is important to be an open role model as a transperson who has actually experienced this positive impact, instead of just someone who studies the subject. Students resonate to personal involvement. Try to be as sympathetic and likable as possible. Antagonistic dogmatists are not as effective in persuading people to change their opinions. Many people change their attitude on the basis that they admire or like the presenter, and they want to be like that person.

6. Offer to speak to student groups. Any kind of student group: a dorm discussion group, a dinner group, a sports team. Doesn't matter; if they have a meeting and offer an invitation to speak, be there. Tell the organizers you cannot cover the whole subject in one meeting, but try to talk to the same group at least three times. Repetition is important.

HUMAN RIGHTS

It is important to put the issue of transgender liberation in terms of rights for all, and opposition to discrimination on the basis of gender. Here are some great human rights quotes from Daisaku Ikeda, president of the Soka Gakkai International Buddhist Association. These quotes are taken from his book “Faith into Action”. Ikeda writes:

“Everyone has a right to flower, to reveal his or her full potential as a human being, to fulfill his or her mission in this world. You have this right, and so does everyone else. To scorn and violate people’s human rights destroys the natural order of things. We must become people who prize human rights and respect others, above all.”

“Human rights are fundamental and must take priority over all else; without human rights, neither peace nor human happiness is possible.... Their violation cannot be permitted, whether by states or by any other force.”

“Buddhism thoroughly protects the sanctity of life and the freedom of the human spirit, and this constitutes our mission.... We must be prepared to protect people whose rights are in danger, or who are threatened by tyranny or oppression.”

“Our schools must TEACH human rights, our religions must PREACH human rights, our governments must RESPECT human rights....

Unless we can build a society that regards human beings NOT as a means to a goal but as THE goal itself, we will remain forever a society of discrimination, unhappiness, and inequality.”

“Youth must have the spirit to attack injustice, the spirit to refute what is wrong.... [To be] afraid of ‘making waves,’ are the actions of self-serving youth who are already spiritually old and decrepit.”

“We must stand up for our beliefs and take action. Human rights will never be won unless we speak out, unless we fight to secure them.... Do not say you will do it ‘someday;’ now is the time. Do not say ‘someone’ will do it; you are the one. Now is the time for youth to take full responsibility and courageously pave the way.”

Wow. What a world we could create if every religious leader thought like this. Imagine these words coming from the lips of a Pope, or an Ayatollah, or a fundamentalist preacher on television. If they did, then maybe we would indeed be

able to create a world in which the most important thing is to bring about peace, and to maximize happiness, and to love one another.

In one of his speeches, Dr. Ikeda counseled youth:

“Rather than a life of blank pages, live a life crammed full of memories—of battles well fought, and wonderfully diverse experiences. Not to leave behind any history, just to grow old and die, is a sad way to live.”

For the sake of human rights, for the sake of the happiness of all humankind, now is the time to spread the message that transgender people have the right to wonderfully diverse experiences, and to experience all the good things that life holds out. Now is the time.