

“Intolerant of intolerance”

Has our language been co-opted?

-- Troy Carlyle

I've been doing some travelling lately, and in general have been quite a troublemaker the past few months. Starting with book signing events at Barnes & Noble and Hastings for my book “The Remainder of My Life,” then it was off to Austin to talk to our state legislators about Tyler and gay rights. And now, I'm just returning to Tyler from a week in Washington, where I had the opportunity to speak with Kay Bailey Hutchison, Louie Gohmert and John Cornyn's staffers about the situation back home and how we can fix it with a little equality and a sense of community.

Now, I've lobbied before—so I wasn't surprised when I was greeted warmly in Tyler bookstores and by our legislators, even though our legislators all have pretty terrible voting records when it comes to gay rights. When you're in politics, you have to learn how to be friendly to people you don't necessarily get along with or like.

I was surprised, though, when I got back home and was asked by a friend why I even bothered. This well-meaning person, after hearing about all my activities, actually said to me, “Intolerance of intolerance is itself a type of intolerance.” She felt that, by lobbying for gay rights, I was just as bad as those people who lobby against gay rights.

Her remark got me thinking, because in Tyler I've discovered that “activist” is often seen as a dirty word. Many people here, gay and straight alike, seem to believe, as my friend believed, that it's better to say nothing than to speak up for equality.

She did have a point, after all. Technically speaking, intolerance of intolerance IS itself a type of intolerance... but I'm not sure that's a very meaningful way to use that word. It could be said, for example, Rosa Parks was prejudiced against those people who asked her to sit at the back of the bus, but I don't think that's a very meaningful way to use the word “prejudice.”

Similarly, the religious Right has hijacked much of the language we use



in our struggle for equality. When they say we're going to burn in hell because we're gay, we may call that language, "spiritual violence." But now, increasingly, when we say this isn't true — that we're not going to burn in hell — they are calling such language, "spiritual violence," too. Once again, it's true that we might construe ANY religious disagreement as a form of spiritual violence, yet to do so is not a very useful way to communicate. The more we equivocate all such disagreements, the less our language means.

Another example is the whole "family" argument. The Right Wing fights for laws that make it illegal for me to marry, which is a type of violence, yet they claim that I have also committed violence against them by wanting to marry in the first place. When we start calling gay marriage an "attack" on conservative Christians, then the word "attack" itself loses all meaning. No one yet has been able to explain why they use such inflammatory language, except that they are simply borrowing the language we use, and trying to turn it back on us. In fact, if I got married, it wouldn't affect them any more than it affects me when they get married. It's none of their business.

I think it's time we understand that "freedom of religion" doesn't include freedom to restrict the freedom of others. It means you are free to love your God, but not free to pick up a stick and make me do what you say.

Is intolerance of intolerance itself a type of intolerance? I don't choose to use our language that way. I'd rather call it "freedom fighting." And to be clear, this is a type of freedom fighting that Martin Luther King and Gandhi talked about, where I can be willing to lay down my life for a cause, but still be unwilling to pick up a stick or a gun.

It's true that activists may be troublemakers, but rest assured the waves we're making are pushing toward *real* liberty — the kind of freedom that doesn't try to step on the freedom of others.

— In peace and with love—Troy