

Who we are

Beginning almost with the first day I appeared in East Texas two short years ago, I've been told time after time after time that gays must remain invisible here. Moving from coastal North Carolina, it was as though I had entered an alternate reality. "Things are just different here," people said. But it wasn't an alternate reality; it was a culture – a Right-Wing religious culture that preached hatred toward gays; and a gay culture that didn't feel much better about itself... "Trust me," one friend once prophetically warned, "don't be 'out' here. The gay community eats its young in East Texas."

Over these past two years here, I've found an odd mixture of some of the warmest and most wonderful people on Earth, and also the injured and apparently mean-spirited types. Like wounded animals, we instinctively lash out at those trying to help us. I've seen people reaching out for help, and being bitten and clawed at for being "needy." I've also seen people reaching out to help, and being bitten and clawed at for threatening the familiar comfort of isolation. And again I hear the warnings: "You can try to help me if you like... but challenge my sacred belief system at your own peril."

But what, I ask, do we do when that "belief system" says we must remain silent and invisible? How can we help ourselves when our "new religion" states that things will never get better... that we will always eat our young here, and we must therefore always be alone?

The child becomes the parent, not so much because it was a good parent, but for the lack of any other example. We cannot help but become the parent, when the parent provides the only illustration of parenting we have available....

The same is true, I believe, of cultures. A culture maintains consistency over a period of time, not because it is true or correct or good or best... but because it lacks other examples. For better or for worse, a "culture" is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A newlywed couple was eating their first holiday ham at their first holiday dinner together, and the new husband asked his young wife why she had cut off and discarded the end of the ham before baking it.

"To tell you the truth," she replied, "I'm not sure. My mother always cut off & discarded the end of our ham while we were growing up. I never thought about cooking a ham any other way."

After the meal, the wife called her mother and asked the question of why their hams had always been so prepared.

"Oh honey," answered her mother," our oven was so tiny.... That's the only way I could fit a ham into it."

In East Texas, our cultural standards are set down in black and white, in Leviticus and in Romans, and interpreted and enforced by the dominant churches – clearly stating that it is unacceptable and damnable to exist as a gay person.

The East Texas gay culture springs from this dysfunctional belief system, which may go a long way toward explaining why so many of us agree that East Texas gays are among the meanest in the country.

We are a fractured group of children who have become our right-wing parents. Some remain closeted, self-loathing and pious, while others have become rebellious, inventing a new (but also flawed) piety to replace the one that condemned them. But the new piety is a religion of one -- it still has room to condemn the rest of the gay population. So we are kept separate and alone in our beliefs. We become bitter and lonely and, yes... mean. We sit alone and lash out at anyone who would challenge our "religion of one."

Arthur Bloch (author of the "Murphy's Law" series of books) said, "A conclusion is the place where you got tired of thinking." I believe we have grown weary and have drawn our conclusions. And to assure these can never be questioned by others, we have decreed that our conclusions are "sacred".....

There's an old Zen parable that goes something like this:

Someone said to Buddha,
"The things you teach, sir,
are not to be found in scripture."

"Then put them in there,"
said Buddha.

After an embarrassed pause
the man went on to say, "May I
be so bold as to suggest, sir,
that some of the things you
teach actually contradict the
scriptures?"

"Then the scriptures need amending,"
said Buddha.

I believe that too many scriptural interpretations have become "self-justifying facts." The Buddha story is wonderful, because it reminds us and empowers us to say, "that is not sacred," from which inevitably follows, "that is not true!"

Sure, God speaks through scripture, but his voice is most clearly heard in the wind, and in the static between radio stations.... I see it through our self-enforced isolation when I ask, "how is this working for us?"

The child becomes the parent, not so much because it was a good parent, but for the lack of any other example. But wait! There are other examples. We live in an age of information. We are beyond stasis. We have the ability to change – to will into being a new culture. And from the raw material of our own lives, we can will ourselves into being better parents -- who are compassionate and understanding.

Chinese writer and inventor Lin Yutang said, "Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence."

If you will walk with me down that road, together we can bring it into existence. We decide who we are.

-- Troy Carlyle