

The Hope Speech by Harvey Milk

My name is Harvey Milk, and I'm here to recruit you. I've been saying this one for years. It's a political joke. I can't help it. I've got to tell it. I've never been able to talk to this many political people before, so if I tell you nothing else, you may be able to go home laughing a bit.

About six months ago, Anita Bryant, in her speaking to God, said that the drought in California was because of the gay people. On November 9, the day after I got elected, it started to rain. On the day I got sworn in, we walked to City Hall. And it was kind of nice. And as soon as I said the word "I do," it started to rain again. It's been raining since then. And the people of San Francisco figure the only way to stop it is to do a recall petition. That's the local joke.

So much for that. Why are we here? Why are gay people here? And what's happening? What's happening to me is the antithesis of what you read about in the papers and what you hear about on the radio. You hear about and read about this movement to the right, that we must band together and fight back this movement to the right. And I'm here to go ahead and say that what you hear and read is what they want you to think.

Unless you have dialogue, unless you open the walls of dialogue, you can never reach to change people's opinion.

I know we are pressed for time, so I'm going to cover just one more little point. That is, to understand why it's important that gay people run for office, and that gay people get elected. I know there are many people in this room who are gay who are running for a central committee. And I encourage you.

You see there is a major difference-- and it remains a vital difference-- between a friend and a gay person, a friend in office and a gay person in office. Gay people have been slandered nationwide. We've been tarred and we've been brushed with the picture of pornography. In Dade County, we were accused of child molestation. It is not enough anymore just to have friends represent us, no matter how good that friend may be.

The time has come when the gay community must not be judged for our criminals and our myths. Like every other group, we must be judged by our leaders and by those who are themselves gay, those who are visible. For invisible, we remain in limbo. A myth. A person with no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no friends who are straight, no important positions in employment.

A gay person in office can set a tone, can command respect, not only from the larger community, but from the young people in our own community who need both examples and hope. The first gay people we elect must be strong. They must not be content to sit in the back of the bus. They must not be content to accept pabulum. They must be above wheeling and dealing. They must be, for the good of all of us, independent, unbought.

The anger and the frustrations that some of us feel is because we are misunderstood. And friends can't feel that anger and frustration. They can sense it in us, but they can't feel it. Because a friend has never gone through what is known as "coming out." I will never forget what it was like coming out and having nobody to look up toward.

I remember the lack of hope, and our friends can't fulfill it. I can't forget the looks on faces of people who have lost hope, be they gay, be they seniors, be they blacks looking for an almost impossible job, be they Latins trying to explain their problems and aspirations in a tongue that's foreign to them. I personally will never forget that people are more important than buildings.

I use the word "I" because I am proud. I stand here tonight in front of my gay sisters, brothers and friends, because I'm proud of you. I think it's time that we have many legislators who are gay and proud of that fact and do not have to remain in the closet. I think a gay person upfront will not walk away a responsibility and be afraid of being tossed out of office.

After Dade County, I walked among the angry and frustrated night after night. And I looked at their faces. And in San Francisco, three days before Gay Pride Day, a person was killed just because he was gay. And that night I walked among the sad and the frustrated at City Hall in San Francisco, and later that night, as they lit candles on Castro Street and stood in silence, reaching out for some symbolic thing that would give them hope. These were strong people whose faces I knew from the shop, the streets, meetings, and people who I never saw before but I knew. They were strong, but even they needed hope.

And the young gay people in Altoona, Pennsylvanias, and the Richmond, Minnesotas, who are coming out and hear Anita Bryant on television and her story. The only thing they have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right. Without hope, not only are the gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the "us-es." The "us-es" will give up.

And if you help elect more gay people-- that gives a green light to all who feel disenfranchised, a green light to move forward. It means hope to a nation that has given up, because if a gay person makes it, the doors are open to everyone. So if there's a message I have to give, it is that I found one overriding thing about my personal election. It's the fact that if a gay person can be elected, it's a green light. And you and you and you-- you have to give people hope. Thank you very much.