

Why I Finally Joined
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
May 23, 2010

For the first time this year, California will celebrate Harvey Milk Day on Saturday, May 22nd. On the weekend of May 22nd, California Faith for Equality is calling on its network of 6,000 faith leaders and communities to read the Harvey Milk "Hope Speech" in its entirety or in excerpts during or following worship services.¹

Who was Harvey Milk? Perhaps more than any other modern figure, Harvey Milk's life and political career embody the rise of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) civil rights movement. Milk was born on May 22, 1930. He was the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in a major city, serving on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors from 1977-1978.

While in office, Milk worked to pass a gay rights ordinance and defeat Proposition 6, commonly known as the Briggs Initiative, which would have banned gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools. Milk encouraged LGBT people to be visible in society and believed coming out was the only way they could achieve true social equality.

Milk was tragically assassinated in 1978 by Dan White, a former colleague on the Board of Supervisors whose politics often clashed with Milk's. After resigning from the Board and being denied reappointment by then Mayor George Moscone, White entered San Francisco City Hall through a window armed with a gun and shot and killed both Moscone and Milk.

During White's criminal trial, the defense argued that White was a victim of pressure and had been depressed, a state exacerbated by his consuming a large quantity of junk food before the murders. This later became known as the "Twinkie Defense." When this tactic proved successful and White was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and a mere seven years and eight months in prison, San Francisco's gay community erupted into protest in what came to be known as the "White Night Riots."

¹ This material was taken from California Faith for Equality's Harvey Milk Day resource kit. See <http://cafaithforequality.org/>.

Harvey Milk's legacy as a civil rights leader is still felt today. He was named one of TIME Magazine's most influential people of the 20th century. Many institutions and organizations are named for Harvey Milk to commemorate his life and social contributions. Most recently, the major motion picture MILK, chronicling the rise and fall of Harvey Milk, has captivated audiences worldwide to much critical acclaim.

A Short History of the Bill, Harvey Milk Day (SB 572)

Introduced in February of 2009, the Harvey Milk Day bill (SB 572) was signed into law by Governor Schwarzenegger on October 11th, 2009. It proclaims May 22nd Harvey Milk Day, and encourages public schools and educational institutions to conduct suitable commemorative exercises on that date.

Now, an excerpt from “The Hope Speech,” delivered by Harvey Milk on March 10, 1978:

“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 . . .

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

If my non-gay friends and supporters in this room understand it, they'll probably understand why I've run so often before I finally made it. Y'see right now, there's a controversy going on in this convention about the gay governor. Is he speaking out enough? Is he strong enough for gay rights? And there is controversy and for us to say it is not would be foolish. Some people are satisfied and some people are not.

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's not enough anymore just to have friends represent us. No matter how good that friend may be. The black community made up its mind to that a long time ago. That the myths against blacks can only be dispelled by electing black leaders, so the black community could be judged by the leaders and not by the myths or black criminals.

The Spanish community must not be judged by Latin criminals or myths. The Asian community must not be judged by Asian criminals or myths. The Italian community must not be judged by the mafia, myths. And the time has come when the gay community must not be judged by our criminals and 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 tenth of the nation supposedly composed of stereotypes and would-be seducers of children--and no offense meant to the stereotypes.

But today, the black community is not judged by its friends, but by its black legislators and leaders. And we must give people the chance to judge us by our leaders and legislators. 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 pablum. 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 the 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've 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'm 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 that a gay person, up-front, will not walk away from a responsibility and be afraid of being tossed out of office.

After Dade County, I walked among the angry and the 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 the 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 gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es, the us'es will give up. And if you help elect to the central committee and other offices, 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 is a message I have to give, it is that I've 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.” [end speech excerpt]

Where is hope to be found today? I find hope in the capacity of humans to grow and to change. Small changes give me hope. Talking with a stranger for two minutes instead of one minute – a change that small gives me hope. In fact, I am leery of dramatic movements, grand gestures. Small changes lighten the load of someone who is burdened, and we are all burdened. Here in the mix of congregational life, we can practice kindness, empathy, and respect. Then we can take kindness, empathy, and respect into the world outside these walls.

Jane Roper recently wrote about how much she values congregational life for its many opportunities to practice kindness, empathy, and respect. You may find her article “Why I Finally Joined a Church” on the Salon.com website. She writes:

“Our family just joined a church.² . . . By being a part of a U.U. church and going to religious education classes, our girls [three-year-old twins] will learn about their Judeo-Christian heritage and any number of other religious traditions. They'll be given a framework for thinking about spiritual matters and be exposed to principles and ideas that we value, in a context other than our own parenting. They will get, we hope, a spiritual grounding that will allow them to choose -- or refuse -- their own paths as they get older.

But there's more to our decision than just this heady spirituality stuff. Because there's more to a church -- this one, anyway -- than just services and Sunday school. There are fundraisers, social events, service projects, study groups, retreats and, of course, committees. Oh, the committees.

² See http://www.salon.com/news/religion/index.html?story=/mwt/feature/2010/04/25/family_joins_church . Jane Roper is the author of [Baby Squared](#), a narrative blog for [Babble.com](#). Her first novel, "Eden Lake," will be published in 2011 by Last Light Studio. She lives and writes in the Boston area. Her website is www.janeroper.com.

It's precisely the sort of join-o-rama I've avoided for most of my adulthood. But although there's a part of me that still resists, quite fiercely, I'm trying to embrace it again.

I want my children to see that a group of people can work together, give of their time and talents, and support each other through life's joys and sorrows not because they're family or even necessarily friends, but because they believe that it's an important part of being human.

I also want to expose them to good, old-fashioned community in a world where, increasingly, community happens only in virtual spaces. I'm a huge fan of blogs, Facebook and Twitter, but I don't think there will ever be a substitute for sharing the same physical space with a group of people -- having conversations, making music together, offering each other a handshake, a smile, or a word of sympathy.

I know how earnest this sounds, and the cynic in me cringes to type the words. But the rest of me believes this is the stuff that matters. My girls will figure out irony and irreverence and how to craft a pithy, 140-character dispatch on their own -- probably sooner than I think. But before that happens, I want to make damned sure they understand kindness, empathy and respect for other people. Of course, joining a religious community isn't the only way to do this. But it's a way to practice and think about these values on a regular basis, with intention. Lord knows I could use the practice, too.”

By developing our capacity for kindness, empathy, and respect, we are developing our capacity to not only be gentle when gentleness is called for, but also to be strong in refusing to cooperate with injustice. Case in point: the state of Arizona, which passed SB 1070, requiring police to determine immigration status if they suspect that someone may not be in the country legally. Unitarian Universalists have a decision to make. Our General Assembly in 2012 is scheduled to be held in Phoenix. Should the Unitarian Universalist Association boycott Arizona and move General Assembly? That is the proposal by the UUA Board of Trustees which delegates will vote upon at the end of June.

The call for a boycott is controversial. Instead, Arizona ministers, religious education directors, music directors, and administrators urge a “no” vote on the UUA board’s motion to move

General Assembly in 2012 in part because our moral and religious presence in Arizona will do more good, and have more of an effect, than our financial boycott will have a negative impact. I encourage this congregation to consider whether General Assembly should be moved out of Arizona and to let know so that I can take your opinions into account as I vote.

I conclude by pulling together diverse strands that reinforce each other. May we honor the memory of Harvey Milk by practicing kindness, empathy, and respect. May joining this congregation strengthen our capacity to resist injustice. May it be so!