

My Friends Could See Me Now”—and a drag queen screamed, “The problem with living in a bubble is that bubbles *burst!*” She was fierce, and I was moved, but I also wondered why she was the one on the news that night, why this movement still doesn’t have a Martin Luther King Jr., a telegenic, brilliant spokesperson to whom all of America can relate. The dedication of movement organizers has brought us a long way, but we are now in desperate need of a willing leader with solid media sense, a palpable inner core, an ability to navigate the game of hardball politics, and the balls to step forward and be our public face.

Whoever you are, it’s time to come out. Because, as I was reminded the morning after the election, it’s faces—not arguments—that will close the deal on marriage equality. I was in a taxi on Market Street, and as we passed City Hall the driver mentioned the protest and asked me what I thought of gay marriage. I flipped the question back to him. “I used to be against it,” he answered, “and then I saw it. When I saw it I understood.”

The driver, whose name was Ali, told me he was from Yemen and he’s straight. When a friend recently came to visit him, the two went sightseeing. “I took him to City Hall and we saw all these people getting married. We saw men marrying men and women marrying women,” Ali said. “I was really surprised. They were so *happy*.”

His voice was low and unsentimental, but the first syllable of “happy” was so full of amazement it shot almost an octave higher than the second. The word seemed to crash

down through a roof. He kept repeating it. “I have seen a lot of things,” he went on. “I have seen bisexuality, gay, lesbian. The sexy parts. I had never seen the love before. But I saw these two guys get married and I realized, *This is their happiness.*” As he turned onto Castro Street, Ali said, “Everybody has a right to their happiness. Nobody should have the power to take your happiness away.”

WE GAVE INTO ANOTHER POST-ELECTION TEMPTATION too. Many drew a simple parallel between our struggle and the black civil rights movement. Signs at protests said, “I have a dream too,” “Welcome to Selma,” and “Gay is the new black.”

There’s something to this, but it’s dangerous territory, and we have to be careful not to lose our bearings here. Gay is the new black in only one meaningful way. At present we are the most socially acceptable targets for the kind of casual hatred that American society once approved for habitual use against black people. *Gay* is the dark pit where our society lets people throw their fears about what’s wrong with the world. (Many people, needless to say, still direct this kind of hatred toward black people too. But it’s more commonly OK to caricature and demean us in politics and the media in ways from which blacks are now largely exempt.) The comparison becomes useful, though, in forcing us to consider the differences between our civil rights struggle and theirs.

Except in a few statistically insignificant cases (the gay kid who happens to be the child of gay parents), being gay begins with recognizing your difference from the people with whom you have your earliest, most intimate relationships. As such, it’s an essentially isolating experience and therefore breeds in many gay people certain qualities—such as independence and perfectionism—that can undermine our ability to cooperate and compromise with others. Though some of us were lucky enough to find role models, mentors, or gay friends early in life, we weren’t born into the kind of beloved community that the African-American church aspires to be. Today, the church is still the strongest black American institution, and though it is far from a perfect place, for its members it’s a cradle of love and shelter from oppression.

Our oppression, by and large, is nowhere near as extreme as blacks’, and we insult them when we make facile comparisons between our plights. Gay people have more resources than blacks had in the 1960s. We are embedded in the power structures of every institution of this society. While it is illegal in this country to fire an African-American without cause and in most places it’s still legal to fire a gay person for being gay, we are more likely to have informal means of recourse than black people have. Almost all gay people have the choice of passing. Very few black people have that option. Of course, we shouldn’t have to make that choice, and our civil rights struggle is about making sure that we don’t have to.

Blackout on Proposition 8

ALTHOUGH MOST OF CALIFORNIA’S BLACK POLITICIANS OPPOSED PROPOSITION 8, MANY AFRICAN-AMERICAN PASTORS VOCIFEROUSLY SUPPORTED IT. WHY DOES BLACK CULTURE DRAW DIFFERENT LINES ON GAY RIGHTS?

BY ROD MCCULLOM

Channeling Leni Riefenstahl and the Nuremberg rallies as inspiration, three dozen antigay black pastors dispatched hundreds of uniformed black Southern California schoolchildren in October to encourage blacks to vote yes on Proposition 8. The smiling children had been dismissed from school for the event. Banners read, “For Children. For Families. For Our Future.”

Apostle Frederick K.C. Price, one of the nation’s more prominent black televangelists and leader of the 22,000-member Crenshaw Christian Center, ordered the children into the streets as the army in his own personal jihad against gay marriage. Marriage was defined by God as a union between a man and a woman, he said, and to change that definition would “jeopardize our children’s future.”

Thinly disguised homophobia has always been the calling card of fundamentalist black churches, and as a result black voters tend to be more conservative on social issues. It came as no surprise when exit polls on Election Day showed that Prop. 8 was rejected by 51% of white voters yet supported by 70% of blacks. Even before a single ballot was cast, the persistent drumbeat by many in the gay e-telligentsia—especially revisionist conservative Andrew Sullivan, who fancies himself an authority on race relations—was that black homophobia would seal the passage of the ballot initiative.

The truth is far more nuanced. Blacks made up no more than 10% of those voting in California this election. Even if a larger proportion supported the measure, the passage was “sealed” by millions of mostly white, conservative, inland voters and the millions

On a deeper level, though, the gay civil rights struggle is about preventing discrimination based on our proclivity to love, as distinct from the messier foundation of racial discrimination, which primarily has to do with protecting white privilege and wealth. No one would deny that fear of mixed marriages significantly inhibited the progress of the black civil rights movement. (Blacks won employment and voting rights a full three years before the Supreme Court finally struck down miscegenation laws in 1967.) But love and sex were not, as is the case with gay civil rights, unambiguously the heart of the matter. This is the reason our progress has been slow: Love cannot be understood in the abstract. You cannot understand it until it touches you or you find your way into its orbit.

We have to stop rage from getting the best of us right now, and keep love at the fore of everything we do and say in this battle. We are close to winning everything we want. We are so close that we do not have time to rehash the Malcolm/Martin struggle between anger and peace, force and non-violence. Let's call the Mormons out on the campaign of lies they funded, but let's find a way of doing it that steers clear of hatred. Enough with the "Fuck Mormons" signs. Some Mormons are gay, not all Mormons voted against us, and a few of them publicly put themselves on the line for us.

We are taking to the streets now—while writing this, I received an e-mail from a friend pointing me to an online organizing of protests on November 15 in all 50

states—and we are angry, probably not least at ourselves for our own complacency and cowardice, for not working as hard as we could, for not giving as much as we could, and for letting so much slip from our grasp. Let's find a way of channeling the passion of this flash point and harnessing this energy for the long haul so we can do the hard work of claiming the full rights and realizing the full lives that we know we can have.

WHEN YOU USE FAGGOTS TO START A FIRE, you don't just dump a bunch of twigs on a few logs and hope something catches. You choose your tinder carefully, you bundle it vigilantly, you place it carefully—then, and only then, you set the fire.

On Election Day the No on 8 campaign prepared statements for its website to post in the event of a victory or of a loss. One of the people in charge of this task left the office that night with her eyes full of tears. "I am so angry," she explained, "that they dragged us into this shit. And they shouldn't have. We already won, and still, they are making us fight for what we already won." She pulled herself together. "But we're going to win. We have to win. I am 23 years old," she said, "and this is my civil rights battle."

For a moment I was overcome with admiration for this woman's passion, and at the same time, with a shiver of thought that, if it were made of words, would consist of something like the phrase *You are going to die*. It was a keen intimation of mortality, of the sense in which our lives, even in the

THE ADVOCATE ONLINE POLL

Is gay the new black?

Sign on to *The Advocate's* website beginning November 19 to cast your vote and leave your comments. Results will appear in the February issue.

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moments of our most focused and profound presence, are merely fragments of the endless story of the human struggle for dignity. A friend in Los Angeles said he saw a sign at one of the protests saying, "Rosa sat so Martin could march so Barack could run." For us, as for the African-Americans who lived through the '60s, many apparent failures will, in retrospect, clearly be progress. We lost a lot on this Election Day, but we gained a lot too. Not least was a president who has shown almost every sign of goodwill we could wish for and a Congress eager to follow his leadership where we are concerned.

A lot of us have been fighting for as long as we can remember, trying to keep the world from seeing us as faggots. Maybe it's time to give up that fight and choose another one instead. Go ahead and be a faggot, in a way that shows the world that a faggot is a person. Start a fire, but let your fire be a beacon. Let your fire burn away your hate, and it will burn away the hate of your enemies. Let your fire be the light that shows your love. If you do that—if we do that—we will win the world, and soon. ❖

of dollars from the almost lily-white Mormon Church. An eleventh-hour television commercial by Samuel L. Jackson and robo-calls by Magic Johnson and Barack Obama apparently fell on deaf ears.

Almost every major black politician and organization in California was on record against Proposition 8: the state chapter of the NAACP, whose friend-of-the-court brief was considered in the state supreme court's landmark marriage ruling last May; assembly speaker Karen Bass; then-assemblyman Mervyn Dymally; Oakland mayor Ron Dellums; U.S. representative Barbara Lee. Even former NBA player and new Sacramento mayor Kevin Johnson, who angered gays by saying marriage should be restricted to a man and woman, opposed Prop. 8 "because it would write discrimination into the state constitution."

"Why wasn't this message coming out?" asks Archbishop Carl Bean, founder and leader of the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, a majority black-LGBT denomination that fuses the charismatic tradition of the black church with a progressive, gay-friendly ministry. Bean said he received "at least two" robo-calls in the 20 minutes prior to our interview that specifically targeted blacks to "support Proposition 8, protect marriage, and protect the family. But why weren't there any phone calls from the other side?"

Bean isn't surprised many black pastors supported the antigay amendment pushed by white social conservatives. "That is the painful history of the black church," he says, adding that many black preachers opposed the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1950s and

'60s. The Reverend Joseph H. Jackson, then-president of the National Baptist Convention, the nation's dominant black Baptist group, "called him 'Martin Luther Coon' and actively fought against him."

Bean calls himself "lucky" to have a pastor who was a classmate of King's to teach him progressive Christianity, and he expected more church leaders steeped in the tradition of civil rights to oppose Prop. 8. The Reverend Eric Lee, president of the California chapters of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a group founded by King and other civil rights and religious leaders in 1957, agrees. Standing outside the gates of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints temple in Los Angeles's Westwood district, he said, "The same people who are driving this fight for Proposition 8 are the same people who considered African-Americans inferior and used the Bible to justify slavery [and] Jim Crow segregation."

What's more, the Mormon Church "did not allow blacks into the priesthood and did not allow them into Mormon heaven [until 1978]," he adds. "It's amazing to me how all of a sudden when there's another scapegoat, African-Americans so quickly join in oppressing another people." Lee notes the same clergymen who are marching to the antigay call today were noticeably absent as HIV/AIDS ravaged the black community. These clergymen are missing "an understanding of what the Scriptures talk about: providing quality to life and dignity to God's people," Lee says. "They are definitely wrong on this issue, and hopefully, God will be the final judge for all of us." ❖