

COMING OUT CONSERVATIVE

An Autobiography

BY

MARVIN LIEBMAN

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accomplishments at home and abroad. Work to make our basic approach to life and politics more meaningful. Hold fast to the basic concept of individual liberty over the state. Accept all the different men and women who live in our unique nation with its precious constitution.

Looking back, I realize that I have achieved important things and helped to influence important events. I take great pride in this. In my failures are my successes, and are the triumphs of all of us who recognized the futility of communism and who contributed in some part to its demise.

If I have learned anything about life, it is to be yourself. Be what you are, no matter who you are or how you were born. Don't try to be what others want you to be. Accept the difference of others. Include them in your lives. By shutting others out merely because they are different, you diminish your own life and that of your children.

In 1963, I wrote a speech for Governor Edison that he gave at a testimonial dinner in his honor. The words I wrote for him at the end of his career hold true for me nearly three decades later:

I have lived a good many years. No one knows all the answers, but I do know this: in the time that is left me, I will continue fighting for America—for what it really is and what it really means. And so must we all—no matter what the obstacles and no matter how discouraged we may become. To give up would indeed be a sin against the memory of all those heroes of the past who have given us a nation.

Fear of difference creates closets that keep us from realizing the dream. We must open the doors of the shadowy closets of bigotry and intolerance and finally come home into the bright light of freedom.

Appendix A

Letter from Marvin Liebman to William F. Buckley, Jr., and response by William F. Buckley, Jr. (Published in National Review, July 9, 1990)

Dear Bill:

I have given long and careful thought to what follows. It is something I feel I have to do. I urge you to give it sympathetic and immediate consideration. I send it to you 1) because you are my best friend; and 2) because *NR* is the logical publication for this statement.

It has been nearly four years since *NR* published "John Woolman's" missive, "A Conservative Speaks Out for Gay Rights." It may not surprise you to know that I have kept a clipping of that article all this time. It sits in a file which although not titled may as well be called my file on Conservatives of Courage on the Issue of Homosexuality. It is a very thin file. You were courageous to run John Woolman's letter as a prominent article, and to allow him, 18 months later, to publish his "AIDS and Right Wing Hysteria." Your doing so brought a feeling of genuine admiration in this old friend.

We've known each other for almost 35 years now, and ten years ago you served as my godfather when I entered the Catholic Church. Though the subject never arose, you and Pat, among my oldest friends, must have known that I'm gay. It never seemed to matter.

But it does matter to many "movement" conservatives—this question of who is, who is not gay; and they wonder whether homosexuals are a menace to society. Just as, too often, there has been an undercurrent of

anti-Semitism among even some mainstream conservatives, there has always been an element of homophobia among us. In many years of service to The Cause, I've sat in rooms where people we both know—brilliant, thoughtful, kind people—have said, without any sense of shame, vulgar and cruel things about people who through no fault of their own happen to be different in their sexuality.

Anti-Semitism is something that, happily for the history of the last three decades, *National Review* helped to banish at least from the public behavior of conservatives. *National Review* lifted conservatism to a more enlightened plane, away from a tendency to engage in the manipulation of base motives, prejudices, and desires: activity which in my view tended to be a major base of conservatism's natural constituency back then. Political gay bashing, racism, and anti-Semitism survive even in this golden period of conservatism's great triumphs: but they are for the most part hidden in the closet. I think they are waiting to be let out once again. I worry that the right wing, having won the cold war and, for all intents and purposes, the battle over economic policy, will return to the fever swamps. I see evidence of this. It disturbs me greatly. It is for this reason that I write.

I am almost 67 years old. For more than half of my lifetime I have been engaged in, and indeed helped to organize and maintain, the conservative and anti-Communist cause. The names of some of the enterprises we helped launch may bring a nostalgic tug. I name some of them to establish my bona fides as someone who has toiled on behalf of the movement.

Among the more obscure committees I was involved with were the American Committee for Aid to the Katanga Freedom-Fighters; the American Emergency Committee for Tibetan Refugees; the Emergency Committee on the Panama Canal; the Aid to Refugee Chinese Intellectuals. Among the better known, of course, are the Committee of One Million, Young Americans for Freedom, the American Conservative Union, the Conservative Party of New York, and the Goldwater and Reagan campaigns. All the time I labored in the conservative vineyard, I was gay.

This was not my choice: the term "sexual preference" is deceptive. It is how I was born; how God decreed that I should be. As with most gay men of my generation, I kept it secret. It was probably not a secret to those who

knew me well—my beloved friends and family—but no one Spoke Its Name. I now regret all those years of compliant silence.

Why have I chosen this moment to go public with that part of my life that had been so private for all these years? Because I feel that our cause might sink back into the ooze in which so much of it rested in pre-*NR* days. In that dark age the American Right was heavily, perhaps dominantly, made up of bigots: anti-Semites, anti-Catholics, the KKK, red-necks, Know Nothings, a sorry lot of public hucksters and religious medicine men. I think there is general agreement that it wasn't until the founding of this publication that the modern American conservative movement was granted light and form.

I was privileged to be a part of the enterprise from its earliest days, together with such great men as Whittaker Chambers, Frank Meyer, James Burnham, Russell Kirk, Brent Bozell—all of them. This effort, combined with the groups we founded, resulted in the eight-year reign of Ronald Reagan.

Now times are changing. There is no longer the anti-Communist cement to hold the edifice together. The great enterprise, in which so much time has been invested, is in danger of sinking back to an aggregation of bigotries.

Too many of our friends have recently used homophobia to sell their newsletter, or to raise money through direct mail for their causes and themselves. This letter isn't designed to settle scores, but rather to give warning to the movement from someone who's been a part of it for three and a half decades.

I've watched as some of our conservative brethren, employing the direct-mail medium I helped pioneer, use Robert Mapplethorpe's bad taste and the NEA's poor judgment to rile small donors, provoking them with a vision of a homosexual vanguard intent on forcing sadomasochistic images into every schoolroom. . . . I have been appalled to read in newsletters by conservative leaders that George Bush, by inviting a gay leader to a White House ceremony, is caving in to "the homosexual lobby." . . . I was outraged to see a spokesman for one of the more prominent conservative foundations quoted as saying that the cost of treating AIDS patients "could be the greatest impetus for euthanasia we've ever seen."

I worry about those allegedly Christian televangelists preaching hatred and fear of gays. These are men who would deny to more than twenty million Americans even the joy of peaceful union with their own families. . . . None of this seems to me to be the purpose of the cause I joined, along with you, 35 years ago.

A personal note is in order. I am both gay and conservative and don't find a contradiction. There shouldn't be any "shame" in being gay. Moreover, the conservative view, based as it is on the inherent rights of the individual over the state, is the logical political home of gay men and women. The conservative movement must reject the bigots and the hypocrites and provide a base for gays as well as others. The politics of inclusion is the model by which what we achieved with Ronald Reagan can continue and flourish without the anti-Communist and the anti-tax movements as sustaining elements. Conservatives need to remind themselves that gay men and women, almost always residing in the closet, were among those who helped in the founding, nurturing, and maintaining of the movement. They should be welcomed based on common beliefs, and without regard to our response to different sexual stimuli. One's sexuality should not be factored into acceptance in a cause that is based on beliefs, no more than color, or ethnic origin: because sexuality isn't a belief, it's a factor of birth.

One day the conservative movement will recognize that there are gays among us who have advanced our cause. They should not be victims of small-mindedness, prejudice, fear, or cynicism. That day may be a long way off, and I sometimes think the trend is in the opposite direction. *National Review* could have an important role here, once again guiding conservatives toward the more enlightened path. I pray that it will.

As ever, your friend,
Marvin Liebman

Dear Marvin: I hope you will believe me when I say that I understand the pain you have felt. Certainly I honor your decision to raise publicly the points you raise. My affection and respect for you are indelibly recorded here and there, in many ways, in many places.

But you too must realize what are the implications of what you ask. Namely, that the Judaco-Christian tradition, which is aligned with, no

less, one way of life, become indifferent to another way of life.

There is of course argument on the question whether homosexuality is in all cases congenital. But let us assume that this is so, and then ask: Is it reasonable to expect the larger community to cease to think of the activity of homosexuals as unnatural, whatever its etiology?

The social question then becomes: How, exercising toleration and charity, ought the traditional community to treat the minority? Ought considerations of charity entirely swamp us, causing us to submerge convictions having to do with that which we deem to be normal, and healthy?

It is a vexed and vexing subject, and your poignant letter serves to remind us of the pain we often inflict, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes sadistically. It is wholesome that we should be reproached for causing that pain, and useful to be reminded that we need to redouble the effort on the one hand to understand, even as we must be true to ourselves in maintaining convictions rooted, in our opinion, in theological and moral truths. You help us to remember that a gay person overhearing relaxed chatter mean-spirited in its references to gays suffers. Suffers just as much as an unidentifiably Jewish or Catholic human being would suffer on hearing invidious locker-room talk about their ethnic or religious affiliations.

I close by saying that *National Review* will not be scarred by thoughtless gay-bashing, let alone be animated by such practices. I qualify this only by acknowledging that humor (if wholesomely motivated) is as irresistible to us, as it is to you. You are absolutely correct in saying that gays should be welcome as partners in efforts to mint sound public policies; not correct, in my judgment, in concluding that such a partnership presupposes the repeal of convictions that are more, much more, than mere accretions of bigotry. You remain, always, my dear friend, and my brother in combat.

—WFB