

just out

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Steppin' Out

Photo by Jay Brown



P A G E T W O

A symbolic pair

It was fitting that the Nobelist and the caring mother should sit together, representatives in turn of the universal human family and the conventional human family

BY ROBERT BERNSTEIN

Inside New York's historic Waldorf-Astoria Hotel one crisp evening last November, a man and a woman sat together at the head table of a black tie event in the hotel's elegant Grand Ballroom. Together — looking out over a pennant-festooned floor where nearly 800 finery-clad men and women were gathered to share food, drink, laughter and tears — they symbolized the vision that had brought the hundreds there.

He was a world-revered Nobel Peace laureate, an author of whom an early critic had written, "Not since Albert Camus has there been such an eloquent spokesman for man." She was a suburban housewife with a grandmotherly air, beaming with pride to be representing an organization that tonight would share the spotlight with a figure of history.

In a sense, it was just another fundraiser, typical of the hundreds of similar affairs that each year help fuel the engines of a democratic system. But it was also an affirmation of a fact that misguided moralists have managed to keep secret from the national mass mind: the movement for gay equality is deeply rooted in the truest and most enduring of traditional values.

The occasion, two days before election day of 1989, was the city's eighth annual fund dinner of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, the principal lobbying arm of the crusade for gay citizens' civil rights.

Banners proclaimed the evening's theme, "All Part of the Family." Its sponsors described the event as a celebration of the role of lesbians and gay men in all their various

families: "the human family, the American family, the families in which we were born, the families we have created, and our community family."

So it was fitting that the Nobelist and the caring mother should sit together, representatives in turn of the universal family and the conventional nuclear family. Their side-by-side presence suggested that this was indeed a movement in the mainstream of the evolution of human enlightenment.

The laureate was Elie Wiesel, generally regarded as the most powerful of Holocaust writers. His table companion was Paulette Goodman, president of P-FLAG, there on behalf of parents who hold equal love for their gay and nongay children.

They were flanked by other guests of honor, including the Democratic candidate for mayor of New York City and a pair of area congressmen. The crowd before them, though composed largely of gay and lesbian celebrants, was liberally sprinkled with the latter's parents, grandparents, brothers, sister and other kin.

Two days later, the glow of pervasive harmony would be shaken by some political and social realities. The head table's pro-gay candidate, David Dinkins, would become New York's mayor-elect — but by an unexpectedly narrow margin that would generally be attributed to closet bigotry. And fundamentalist forces would rejoice the same day in the repeal of pro-gay measures in no fewer than five American cities. There, it would be the oppressors' turn to cheer.

But here, and now, it was a time for the celebration of understanding and compassion, a time for spiritual renewal. For the moment,

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it was almost possible to forget that millions of our fellow citizens still resonate to the Bible-thumping vibrations of the self-proclaimed "religious" right.

Yes, this was a night when we would ignore the setbacks and toast hope — when we would view the glass as at least half full (with champagne, at that) and fete hard-won progress.

Elie Wiesel, after all, is a sort of incarnation of hope for human rights, survivor of a Holocaust that he would describe that night as "the consequences of the opposing views when they dominated the scene." And he would recall movingly that gays were there, too, sharing with his own people what he called "those places of darkness, silence and fire."

His keynote remarks, eloquent in their simplicity, were directed largely to a question on every mind: why, from what must comprise a daily mountain of similar invitations from more fashionable sources, had he chosen to respond to this one?

His answer, in retrospect, is what might have been expected from one of the century's most articulate chroniclers of the human spirit.

"Those who hate you, hate me. Those who hate, hate everybody.... So why should I not be here to speak to you about self-respect and about civil rights.... We are all human beings."

When it was over — capped with a benediction by a Presbyterian minister whose lesbian daughter was a dinner co-chair — there was a lot of teary embracing, especially among parents and their gay children. The overheard words of one pair summed up, at least for me, what the evening was about:

"I love you, Daddy." "I love you, honey." ▼

Robert Bernstein is a vice-president of the Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and editor of the PFLAGpole