

Institutionalized fear

Using distortions and false information...people undereducated in the issues follow like rats

by Lee Lynch

Probably I'm not the only 46-year-old for whom fascism was a word from history. I never needed to know more than that it was evil. Today I'm learning to understand the term from the inside out. Fascism is institutionalized fear. It is the politics of manipulation of human emotions in order to obtain and keep power.

Fascism is at work in our country today, singling out traditionally disenfranchised groups and attempting to legalize discrimination against these groups. I live in one of six of the states to be chosen as test sites

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for attack by the organized Christian Rightwing. Across the country these, often fledgling, organizations have ties to such pillars of the Christian Right as the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, and the Christian Broadcasting Network, the largest broadcasting system in the world. In a move of frightening significance, this network's chief, Pat Robertson, has attempted to purchase United Press International.

In my state, the Right has chosen to attack gay people. Although I am astonished that a group of people whose agenda, composed of hate and motivated by fear, can even make a bid for power in a democracy, I am glad for the chance to prepare.

I was born at the end of World War II, just a month after the atom bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, four months after Germany surrendered. There was no TV and of course I couldn't read. I knew, though, what the Nazis were and who they'd been after. Many of my playmates were Jewish. I spent my dreams fleeing Nazis. At first, they pursued all of us kids. As my understanding grew, I futilely tried night after night to protect my friends. My dreams were a sad training ground; now I am a target of the fascists.

Suzanne Pharr, author of *Homophobia, A Weapon of Sexism* (Chardon, 1988), explains. "In each test site, the Christian Right focuses on one issue as an entry point to develop a constituency base for its broader agenda. They believe that the source of the national economic crisis, the changing structure of the American family, the proliferation of drug trade and abuse, social violence, and AIDS can be traced to people of color, homosexuals, feminists, the poor and communism. In their view, these groups want 'special rights,' and the demands for rights are causing the destruction of society. Hence, their agenda is to eliminate the fundamental rights and protections of those who are not the majority voice by targeting them and by playing on the fears and confusion of the general population."

Is this news? Hardly. What is news is how close they are coming to their obscene goal. An early battle was won in Oregon in 1988 when the protection of state employees from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was successfully blocked. That experience enabled the local Rightwing fringe to gather more followers. Today, outside post offices and malls in Oregon, I see sympathetic supporters literally lining up to sign any petition that advertises itself as opposing "special rights for homosexuals."

The Oregon agenda of the Rightwing Christians is a proposed amendment to the state constitution, by way of a ballot measure, that would legalize discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation by declaring homosexuality to be "abnormal behavior," forbidding the "promotion of homosexuality," and yanking state certification from nurses, hairdressers, counselors, etc. Oregon may feel very distant from other parts of the country, but the insidious web of the Right is well-financed and well-placed. They have the ears of the highest reigning powers in America. Wins for the Right in current battlegrounds—California, Florida, Maine, Colorado, Massachusetts or Oregon—would create a clearer picture than we should need of this major threat.

What exactly is fascism? According to my dictionary it's a system of government characterized by a rigid one-party system, forcible suppression of the opposition (including minority groups, leftist parties and unions), belligerent nationalism and racism, glorification of war and the retention of private ownership of the means of production under centralized governmental control—or a political philosophy based on such doctrines and policies. Is this what the Christian Rightwing wants? Can we afford to wait and see?

When I tell out-of-state (and some Oregonian) friends what's going on in the six targeted states, and what's likely to be hatching in the other 46, I usually get a response like, "Oh, they're a bunch of kooks. No one will take them seriously." If so, these are wily kooks. Using distortion and false information—such as a video that the local fear-mongers are distributing in Christian churches—people uneducated in the issues follow like rats after a piper. I've seen the video. It's made up of clips from San Francisco and Washington marches and features nudity, small children with their gay parents, gay youth, S/M practitioners and N.A.M.B.L.A. members. The message is that gay people are dangerous. The response is signatures, promised votes and increased contribution of funds. A war chest filled through duplicity is none the less a war chest. And gays are forced to defend, defend, defend, when we should be using our energy to help our own people or simply to live our own lives.

We can't afford to underestimate the Christian Right. In the cities it may seem that such groups could not possibly be strong enough to do anything but harass. This simply is not true. Though the Right warns heterosexual Christians of the militant homosexual agenda, it can only conceive of this non-existent agenda because it has one of its own. Month after month our strength is sapped with the overwhelming numbers of volunteers amassed. Nice church ladies sit at petition tables not understanding the depth of the issues, only knowing with the certainty of ignorance that homosexuality is wrong. Old men afraid of their pasts, young people afraid of their own sexualities, parents terrified that their children won't conform, all flock to shove us back into our closets.

I went to town last week wearing a bright orange anti-Right button. A saleswoman at the nursery asked about it.

"They're trying to take away the rights of gay people this time," I explained to her, hoping to appeal to some memory of the great war for democracy. "Who will they go after next?"

"You're right," she replied, bustling off. "What starts out as a good idea can turn out bad."

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