

INTERVIEW

MANIFESTO FOR THE
MILLENNIUM

In her eagerly awaited first book, Urvashi Vaid examines our movement's past, present and future

by Daniel Vaillancourt

Virtual equality is the state in which I think gay people live right now," says attorney, community organizer and former National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director Urvashi Vaid. "It's something like the computer-generated simulations of reality that are found in virtual reality.... On the one hand, we're more visible than ever, but that visibility does not mean we are understood by straight people better than we have been.... At the same moment that we have gay characters on television, gay leaders in Congress, and gay people who are prominent in every field, laws banning discrimination based on sexual orientation have largely yet to be enacted. Only nine states and 150 cities or counties have nondiscrimination laws."

In *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, a controversial and compelling debut that earned its author a six-figure advance from Anchor Books, Vaid chronicles the battles we have won and lost since Stonewall, explains why we must strive for acceptance rather than settle for tolerance, and—in a final chapter titled "There Are Things to Do"—calls to action every queer in the United States.

"Right now too few of us are involved in this movement," says Vaid, who believes every gay, lesbian or bisexual individual has a responsibility to contribute something toward the achievement of genuine equality.

In a recent telephone conversation from the Victorian house she shares with her lover, comedian Kate Clinton, in Provincetown, Mass., Vaid shared her thoughts about *Virtual Equality* and gay liberation at the end of the 20th century.

In *Virtual Equality* you suggest we focus on pop culture and our families of origin, rather than solely on politics and legal reform, to achieve true liberation. Why is this crucial?

This is so hard to talk about because I've written a 400-page book. [Laughs.] I am tempted to say, "Read the book, read the book...."

Coming out in the context of our families and pursuing visibility—communicating who we are in the context of our communities and neighborhoods—is so important because that's what's going to win gay people genuine acceptance. Our visibility has made possible everything that we've gotten so far. But I'm arguing in my book that one of the things that's happened is that we have gotten too focused, as a movement, on legal and political strategy. Again, I don't tend to think in an either/or framework, so I don't say we should reject all those strategies. I think those mainstreaming strategies are very important. But we have to supplement those strategies with more of an emphasis on cultural transformation, and that transformation occurs by our full participation in the lives of our families—our straight families, I mean; our families of origin—and by our full participation in the lives of our communities....

I can only take it back to my own experience. I come from an Indian family, and that family was not very accepting of my homosexuality when I came out to my parents 15 years ago. But you know, over 15 years, they have moved dramatically. These traditional Hindu parents are now today totally excited about my book. They've read it; they've learned from it; they've been challenged by it. They get it more than they ever did. And by them getting it, they are now going to be in a better position to talk to their friends, to my extended family of relatives. I am out to absolutely everybody. [Laughs.] It makes such a difference in how all of those people think about gay people and gay rights. They talk about my work in the gay rights movement with everybody. That is a very specific example of how culture is transformed through the process of engaging [our families of origin] on gay issues.

The message, then, is, "Come out, come out, come out."

Absolutely. That's the single most important action every single person must take. While I don't believe in outing, and I don't believe in forcing

people to come out, I'm arguing that we should make it a moral imperative. I want every gay person to think that the only way they can be whole and moral is to be out. Now, some conservatives disagree with that. They think it's kind of fascistic of us who are out to demand this of everybody. I don't think so. I think unless we expect that of ourselves and of each other, how can we expect anything from this society? I mean, if we're not willing to stand up and say, "I'm proud to be gay, I am who I am, I am perfectly comfortable telling everybody

about it, and I am going to take whatever consequence comes"—until we take that kind of responsibility for our own lives and our own struggle for freedom, I don't think anything's going to change.

On page 33, you write that in creating gay ghettos, we've built communal closets. How so?

To the extent that someone can live in a gay community and still be in the closet to their family, we've just recreated the closet with more space.... So many people still go to San Francisco or New York to come out of the closet.

And that's OK. I mean, I think that's always going to happen. It's going to be very hard for a young gay man in a small town in Iowa, or for a lesbian in Nebraska, to come out—unless they have some support. So maybe they will have to go to San Francisco to define their own identity. But once they've done that, I would urge those people to recognize that going back home and coming out to their high school friends and their family at some point in their life is absolutely essential for us to win genuine equality and cultural integration.... [Liberation will] come by every single gay person being exactly who they are in the context of their lives, and it's still something that 90 percent of our people do not do. I am shocked, constantly, when I learn that people are not out to their family, and yet they live lives within the gay community that are completely out. They go to gay bars, they go to gay businesses, they have an open lover relationship, they have an extended circle of friends. To all appearances, they're very out. But then when they talk to Mom and Dad back in Illinois, they're not telling them the full truth, or they're not inviting Mom and Dad to come into their gay life.

On page 206, you write, "Rather than asking how gay and lesbian people can integrate themselves into the dominant culture, what if, instead, we affirm that our mission is explicitly to assimilate the dominant culture to us?"

What I meant, specifically, by that sentence, is

that I think that we spend so much energy saying, "We're just like you," and I don't think we are just like them.... When we say, "We are just like you," it's not a very persuasive argument to most people who look at us and see us as very different. Nor is it an appealing argument to me. What I would rather say is, "Look. We're different." The heterosexual society ought to look at our difference and ought to change itself. I want to change the dominant culture to make it more comfortable with our difference, rather than changing us to say, "Oh,

we're just like the dominant culture." I think it's more of a contortion to say that gay people are just like straight people than it is to say to straight people, "You have to accept that human difference in sexuality exists." That's not a stretch; that's being honest. Sexual orientation has a spectrum, and we're part of that spectrum.... You know, we're often accused by the right

wing of wanting to normalize homosexuality. Well, it's true. I do want that. I think a lot of the goals of the movement are very much about teaching people the truth about our lives, and assimilating straight culture to who we really are—to get used to us; to deal with the reality of the fact that gay people are just ordinary people.

Provincetown, where you live with Kate, is an excellent example of cultural integration between the gay and straight communities, is it not?

Absolutely. I really appreciate this community. This is a community where people have been out for years—longer than the organized movement.... It's really quite amazing to live in a community where it's not a big deal that somebody is openly gay. [Laughs.] You have openly gay people who are 75 years old, who have lived in this community for 45 years, right next to the Portuguese fishermen who have lived in this community for 50 years.... Over the years, openly gay people have made a home here. I feel you can see what's possible in the rest of the world [here]. There's no reason why it has to be limited to Provincetown. There's nothing magical in the water here. [Laughs.] It's just that what's different is that there's been an established gay community that has not shied away from participating in the life of the full community. We didn't create a gay ghetto in Provincetown, we created an openly gay community that lived as a

part of Provincetown.

What do you hope to achieve with *Virtual Equality*?

Very specifically, I would love to see the book spark a greater interest on the part of people who haven't been previously involved in gay politics. I wrote what I think is a lively history and a lively analysis of the strategies that our movement is using. It's a very hopeful book for all the criticism contained in it. I don't think it's negative. I really have a lot of faith in the movement; I believe in it. I want this book to inspire people to get more involved in their local organizations, to get more personally committed to gay and lesbian freedom. I'm really eager for that to happen.

To many, the publication of the book marks your return....

I never left! [Laughs.]

...What role would you like to have in the movement?

I'm hoping to be organizing in the movement, to build state organizations and to build an electoral presence or power for the gay community. I think, specifically in the gay world, those are the things I want to work on. I think what I'm going to end up doing is working on an organizing project for existing organizations. At this point, I really want to return to doing the work of building the infrastructure of the gay movement. After writing this book, I'm so clear that where we have to be strong is exactly where we're weak—and that is at the state level.

I want to try to focus my own work in meeting that need, and I think a lot of people are thinking along this line. Power and money [are] moving from the federal level to the state level, and all these issues—whether they're referenda or marriage—are going to be decided at the state level. The most important thing we can do as a community is to be registered to vote, and organize state by state. Just imagine how powerful it would be, for example, if we could say, in June of 1996, that the national gay movement registered two million new voters. Can you imagine? That's cool. [Laughs.] And you know what? We could do it. We could absolutely do it.... Quite frankly, I believe the work of movement-building and the work of motivating gay people to become more active in our movement is the most important work that somebody like me can do.

My last question is a little frivolous, but interesting nonetheless.

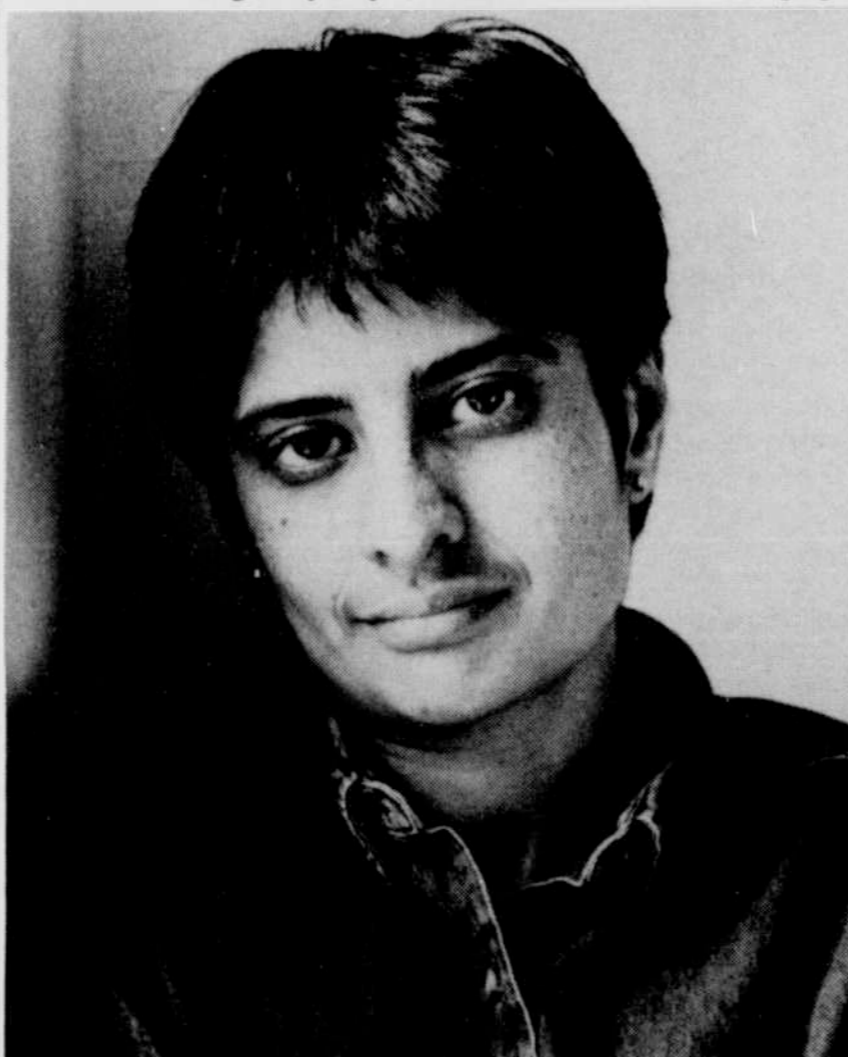
What is it, Daniel?

Many view you and Kate Clinton as an unlikely couple. I want to know what it's like to live with one of the world's funniest lesbians.

You know, she's really funny in daily life. She cracks me up.... But like a lot of funny people, she is also very shy.... What she loves to do is read and really be quiet, have a few friends over, go to a movie. I'm much more raucous and outgoing than she is. We're very compatible around our passion for social change. I often say we're the marriage of comedy and tragedy. It's funny; she really tempers my negativity sometimes. I can get very bleak and cosmic, and then she'll just make me laugh at myself and it just gets me out of it.

I think her work is so political. She's interested in the same things I'm interested in, but she looks at it from a completely different perspective. She reads absolutely everything. I mean, I never had a subscription to *The New Republic*; she did—forever. Her favorite book is *A Brief History of Time*. Stephen Hawking, you know? [Laughs.] I don't know too many comedians who read that. And then she worked it into a joke. [Laughs.] She's a complete character, and I adore her. I am so lucky; I am truly in love.

Urvashi Vaid will be speaking at 7:30 pm Monday, Oct. 30, at The Old Church, 1422 SW 11th Ave., in Portland. Her appearance is sponsored by Powell's City of Books. There is no admission charge, but tickets are required and can be obtained at Powell's.



Urvashi Vaid