

CIVIL RIGHTS/GAY RIGHTS SPEECH for GAYE WITHOUT SHAME CD

I have known oppression all my life: as a black in the segregated south as a poor person, as a woman, as a single parent, as a lesbian. By far, the most severe has been the oppression of color. My ancestors were raped from Africa, families separated and sold, my language and culture stolen. My name stolen. My first identity is shaped by my blackness.

Yet, many of the struggles and indignities I have faced as a lesbian are similar to those I've faced in my struggle for black civil rights. Briefly I will share a few of the similarities. I should note here that I will use the word "queer" to represent the GLBTQ community inclusively.

First, both black oppression and the oppression of queers is justified by the Bible. Yes, it says that slavery is okay and that the master can keep and sell the children. The Bible also says that the homosexual is an abomination and should be put to death. Yes, it's all right there.

Yet, it also says that adulterers shall be put to death, that non-virgins before marriage should be executed, that divorce is not permitted, that married men can have concubines, that if you have riches, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven. You see, this beautiful book can be selectively used to oppress anyone.

Secondly, the struggles are identical in that the oppression is legislated. Think about the many Jim Crow laws which legalized discrimination. Laws kept schools segregated, prevented blacks and whites from marrying, kept blacks from being protected from hate crimes. Now, current laws

prevent partner visitation in hospitals, prevent us from leaving our social security or hard earned pensions to our partners -- laws even prevent nursing home rights and military recognition. It's not about whether your church will accept me -- that's a question of faith -- it's about whether I have the same civil rights as everyone else. If I pay the same taxes, I should have the same civil rights. The law denies me hundreds of rights.

Both struggles have had its share of martyrs: Emmitt Till, Medgar Evers, Malcolm and Martin. So, too, there's Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepherd and Brandon Teena. Both struggles require courage to speak up, to stand up --they require the courage of our convictions. As with the black struggle, many queers fear retribution -- loss of jobs, loss of family, and hate crimes. And, just as blacks needed white allies, queers need straight allies -- we need allies of good conscience. Indeed, we must foster worldwide allies and work to end worldwide oppression.

Let us not forgot the name calling -- coon, buckwheat, sambo, nigger; dyke, faggot, sinner, abomination. We are made to feel inferior. Eleanor Roosevelt said that "no one can make you feel inferior without your permission." But basically our inferiority has been beaten into us. Simply put, from day one black has been made to represent evil and ugliness -- death is black, devil's food is black and angel's food, of course, is white. My flat nose and nappy head was called ugly.

And, simply put, from day one, our queer physical images and gender identities have been stereotyped and ostracized. Until I embraced the beauty of my blackness, I could not throw off the cloak of inferiority. Until I embraced the beauty of my queerness, I could not throw off this particular cloak of

inferiority. I have no shame. I can look my adversaries in the eye and be proud of my own self worth and dignity.

And, of course, there are many differences to the respective struggles. Briefly, I'll share a few examples:

First, the biggest difference is you don't have to tell your mother you are black. Automatically, with the black struggle, your mother and your family had a full understanding. You didn't have to worry about losing your family.

For the most part, in the black community, you couldn't pass. But many queers can easily pass. If all of us had the courage to step forward families would change, legislation would change, society would change. Most blacks do not have to live the biggest lie. Many queers are called "sinners," but is it not a sin to lie? To me, the biggest sin of all would be to live one's entire life as a lie.

Another major difference in the struggles is how "sex" is placed in the forefront of the queer struggle for civil rights. The word "homoSEXual" is said in such a way that it's all about sex. Many folks talk about one's orientation as though it is something one can change. Just as I cannot change my blackness, I cannot change my orientation. If I could, would I ever choose a life so very difficult??

I could go on, but I'll conclude with one final, but BIG difference: the queer struggle doesn't have any real protest songs like the black civil rights struggle -- or if so, I haven't heard them. So, of course, I wrote one. This song precipitated this CD. Whether we are closeted by our sexuality or perhaps by abuse or mental illness or poverty -- whatever might make us fearful and shameful, it is my hope that this song will be a song of freedom for all people!

