

...With Sexual Liberty and Justice for All

Lara Riscoll on February 9, 2009 - 8:00am

"COLORADO JUST OPENED ITS PUBLIC BATHROOMS TO EITHER SEX!"

The Focus on the Family ad screams above a waist-down shot of a man in combat boots waiting in front of a stall, toilet seat up, as a white girl in a long white smock, white shoes and bobby socks, sneaks open her stall door next to him. The message below blasts Colorado's Democratic governor and legislators for passing an anti-discrimination law to include sexual orientation and gender identity. After losing his campaign to kill the bill last spring, James Dobson, head of the Christian culture war powerhouse, warned "Every woman and little girl will have to fear that a predator, bisexual, cross-dresser or even a homosexual or heterosexual male might walk in and relieve himself in their presence."

Way to grind civil rights nuance into a black-and-white bathroom boogiemer. As early as the 1970s, antifeminist Phyllis Schlafly reduced her fight against the Equal Rights Amendment to protecting women and children from unisex toilets. Equality, whatever -- do you really want men and ladies in line for the john together at a ballgame?

Even without an ERA in place, unisex potties have popped up in public places. **At the recent [21st National Conference on LGBT Equality: Creating Change](#)**, I smile as I walk into the first of the site's many labeled Gender Neutral Restrooms. Aside from a mild jolt when first spying the row of urinals, I rather enjoy the multifaceted landscape on my way to and from taking care of business.

Speaking of a beautiful view, about 2000 mostly young people of all shades pour into the Denver ballroom for the keynote given by civil rights legend Dolores Huerta, who co-founded the United Farm Workers Union in 1962 with Cesar Chavez. For decades the Catholic mother of 11 has spoken out for queer folk in cross-movement struggles for social and economic justice, from campaigning for Harvey Milk to recording a bilingual ad against Proposition 8. Beaten 20 years ago so badly by police during an otherwise peaceful protest that she had to undergo emergency surgery to remove her spleen, she testifies to a religious right that scapegoats our communities for distraction.

"Feminists, gays and lesbians, immigrants are not the enemy," says Huerta. She says we're forced to respond now, "We need to educate each other's movements to create change. We have a mandate to remove the ignorance from society until we get the human rights that we all deserve." She closes with leading the chant she made famous: Si, se puede! She adds, "When I met Obama he said, 'I stole your slogan.' I told him, 'Yes you did!'"

The crowd roars with joyful laughter. Looking around, I feel as if I've floated into an Obama rally of color, youth and hope. A glance at the program shows how vast the diversity here with five days of sessions on sexual freedom and literacy, various communities of color, youth, aging, disability, religion and spirituality, feminism and straight allies. Evenings you might choose a social, recharge at a 12-step recovery, or worship at a faith service. As John Lennon's "Imagine" fills the room I think, this is America. After 16 years bludgeoned by zealots wielding sex as

weapon to divide and conquer Americans - from the smut of Clinton to the sanctimony of Bush - can it be time for a new sexual revolution in the age of Obama? Yes it can!

The last time I crammed into a room of 2000 around a pivotal election was the first Values Voters Summit in D.C., featuring conservative superstars, such as Dobson, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, Newt Gingrich, Rev. Jerry Falwell and four GOP presidential aspirants, including Gov. Mitt Romney. The ridiculed enemies were feminists, gays and liberals, who want to convert your kids to the dark side, who pose a greater threat to America than Al-Qaeda. One sexual demon summoned throughout the weekend to rally the evangelical troops was the children's book, "King & King," where the prince rejects the many princesses to marry another prince. The Abstinence Clearinghouse annual conference I attended later wasn't quite as meanspirited or ethnically and generationally monochromatic. But themed "Abstinence: It's a Black and White Issue," speakers - from a former beauty queen to a former welfare mom and woman who disavowed her multiple abortions - made absolutely clear that God's truth allows for one path to sexual integrity. Same call to arms against the feminists, liberals and the "condom crowd" who condemn marriage, family and America with their anything-goes moral relativism.

Having covered for 10 years the sexual schizophrenia of our nation's culture war, I've noted how purity politicians package and sell a retro feel-good salve of simplicity for society's complex modern ills. Like tax cuts for the economy and bombing for security, abstinence-only unless married is the far right's hawked magic potion for social stability, the silver bullet to slay the sexual dragon we call freedom. With Talibanesque fervor, "family values" powerbrokers demand a leap of social engineering faith: if we corral sex within marriage, then we disappear teen pregnancy, abortion, unwed mothers, poverty, crime and AIDS. Dismantle sex education and services, and reverse 40 years of the sexual revolution "if it feels good, do it." Drink the traditional kool-aid and you're for purity and good. Reject on grounds of reality, reason and moral sense, and you're for perversion and evil. It really is black and white.

But then dogmatic morality has proven to produce the Ted Haggards of the world. Denial of one's truth reliably breeds hypocrisy, betrayal and filth.

"We got to talk about what renders sexual honesty," said long-time LGBT community organizer Urvashi Vaid at Creating Change. "Diversity does not equal 'anything goes.' We got to get acceptance of the spectrum of sex, of the experience of being. No one wants to be pushed; we want our kids to be healthy and happy. Straight, gay, we have the same human aspirations." She pits our nation's clashing worldviews of pluralism, where we "relish diversity of opinion" against the fundamentalism of "one god, one truth." She adds, "Consensus doesn't mean conformity."

The overarching mood of today's political climate is to recognize commonalities and expand the movement for social change across feminist progressive identities. Vaid says, "Feminism is equality for both men and women. It's a re-imagining of the world. The push for women's freedom, liberation, and full equality is a precondition to any open society: freedom and opportunity for all. Feminist and queer movements share a framework: value of equality, social justice, and human rights. Not just civil and political equality, but moral equality."

In her State of the Movement speech, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director Rae Carey said, "Obama's 'we' challenges the culture of 'I' that has been so core to this country's identity - the image of rugged individualism, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. This imagery has been bolstered and perpetuated by scenes like Ronald Reagan riding his horse and by George Bush clearing brush on his ranch.... We are now off the ranch and have moved back into the we of urban energy and creativity, the we of close family ties and community in rural areas, the we that has been at the center of the farm workers, civil rights, feminist and labor movements."

Carey includes among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) playmates Planned Parenthood, AARP and NAACP. Where the Task Force and other progressive leaders have

linked issues for years, new politics and new media have opened a door for perennial underdogs to make their collective case for respect.

Republicans have successfully shrouded themselves in family values while demonizing Americans advocating sexual health and justice for all, not just the storybook few.

"Each progressive movement has a common narrative: the valuing of many kinds of people, of many ways to contribute to our communities, of many different cultural traditions," says Sue Hyde, head of Creating Change. "In valuing all of us we make a more perfect union, as Obama would say," she smiles. "The connective tissue, or pillars of human rights, is self-determination, bodily integrity, and freedom of choice and expression."

"We're cognizant that Roe v. Wade is about privacy and choice," says Ana Hernandez, head of Causes in Common, a national organizing initiative for reproductive justice and LGBT liberation. "Lawrence v. Texas is about privacy and choice. It's about picking up that thread and taking it to the next level, growing the analysis to sexuality, family formation, autonomy, peace, happiness and safety. It's more than privacy, it's about human rights."

Lifelong sex education, but much broader than the current comprehensive model, is the link between reproductive justice and queer rights, according to Joy O'Donnell of the National Sexuality Resource Center, which "sexual literacy" mission includes aging, disability, and religion and faith. "We need a national dialogue that incorporates, respects and celebrates pluralistic health and well being," she says.

Carey closes her State of the Movement speech with, "We will win complete equality! We will protect and defend our families! We will transform society!"

Sounds like a traditional culture warrior clarion call. Except that is the equality bit. Just no telling who might be sharing the bathroom stall next to you.