

## Countering Kirchik

February 10, 2009

We respect diversity of opinions. *A lot.*

However, while we respect the man and his right to disagree, we're having a really tough time respecting the piece that conservative writer James Kirchik has contributed to this month's *Advocate*. *At all.*

Here it is in full, along with our running commentary:

Play Nice, Folks

Why confrontation is exactly the wrong approach when it comes to getting what you want.

By James Kirchick

From The Advocate March 2009

Leave it to Melissa Etheridge to demonstrate more political savvy than the entire gay rights establishment.

When Barack Obama announced that Rick Warren -- pastor of the 20,000-member Saddleback megachurch in California -- would deliver the invocation at his inauguration, the Grammy-winning composer of the theme song to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* reached out to Warren. Overcoming her initial hesitation, Etheridge invited the reverend to her home for dinner with her partner and their children. They discussed the tribulations of breast cancer, which both Warren's wife and Etheridge have endured. More significantly, they found common ground on the status of gay unions, with Warren saying, according to Etheridge, that "he believed every loving relationship should have equal protection." Not bad for a rock star.

Okay, for starters -- this is factually wrong. Melissa and Tammy have not had Rick Warren over to their house (or at least they hadn't at time of Etheridge's 1/28 *Signorile* interview). Their run-in was at a December MPAC function at which they were coincidentally co-booked.

But hair-splitting out of the way: Melissa, by her own admission, was not nearly as informed about all of the issues as she could have been. In fact, she had never heard of Rick Warren, and said she'd only heard about the controversy on the news before meeting him. She didn't come into this situation as an activist, and she didn't discover the Warren developments in the organic way that those of us who cover this stuff did. Melissa came into it as a rock star. A bigger star than Rick Warren. Her every interaction, no matter how well-intentioned they were (and we sincerely believe her motives were pure), was informed by her thoroughly unique situation. Did Warren soften his wording in the presence of a rocker that he claims to enjoy? *OF COURSE HE DID!* And did Melissa, whose activism is an ancillary to her real career of making music, have a different perspective than those of us who stand on pro-gay soapboxes rather than arena stages? *OF COURSE SHE DID!*

Compare Etheridge's approach to that of activists and writers who immediately denounced Obama. The Human Rights Campaign's Joe Solmonese called the choice "a genuine blow to LGBT Americans," and the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** declared that Warren is

nothing less than “an affront to our common humanity.”

To be sure, Warren is not the gay-friendliest person in the country. But then, not many religious leaders are, and most Americans sit in their pews. Warren's detractors point out that he supported Proposition 8. But so did most Californians.

**Okay, more hair-splitting: The Task Force one is a bit of a misquote. We kind of understand why Kirchick made it, because the NGLTF press release does use that as its headline. However, the actual quote from the Task Force's Darlene Nipper reads: "Your call for us to walk hand in hand, even as you advocate for our second-class status, is an affront to our community, demeans our common humanity, and makes a mockery of the principles of fairness and equality."**

And as for Solmonese's quip: It's one I would argue that the vast majority of gays find little to no fault. Even if a blow they were willing to overlook or spin into a "teachable moment," few argued that it was a blow. A slight. Even Melissa seemed to see that part, even if she might have been willing to give the blow more of a pass or to accept Warren's apologies more than we were/are.

Now, that all being said: The Warren fiasco was not really about his Prop 8 support. That was a minor part. However, if you want to go there: Warren didn't merely support Prop 8 like those who benignly (and blindly) voted for it. Warren, an influential megapastor, made videos encouraging others to vote for it. He used his prominent religious position to influence this civil matter. There is no way to calculate how many people he rallied through his efforts and the reporting on them. But it's logical to assume that his reach extended well beyond his own home or home church. And it's more than a little disingenuous to put him in the same line with Bertha and Joe from San Diego who simply voted for Prop 8 without understanding its full effects.

As Etheridge discovered, Warren is a far cry from Jerry Falwell. Indeed, up until the Prop. 8 battle he had largely ignored homosexuality, devoting his time and attention to AIDS prevention and alleviating poverty in the Third World. Most important, he's on record as supporting some form of legal recognition for gay couples. Rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater, wouldn't it be smarter to try to persuade Warren and his flock that gay people deserve marriage rights?

The Jerry Falwell test is getting REALLY old. No, Rick Warren is not the late evangelical leader's carbon copy. No, he didn't dedicate a considerable amount of time to gay issues before (*including with his AIDS work, which he and his wife all but ignored when they thought it was just a gay man's disease*). But we do have a considerable body of evidence to which we can and should hold Rick Warren accountable! He has his own unique set of circumstances, and he has earned his own unique scrutiny!

And it's also not a tradeoff between scrutinizing offensive comments and pushing evangelicals to support equality. OF COURSE we are encouraging EVERYONE to support equality. But we're not going to ignore the verbal bashings in the meantime! In fact, we are going to use these unfair criticisms and false assertions to highlight both the weaknesses of our organized opposition's arguments, and the offenses that are so frequently waged against us! What's the alternative -- saying nothing in hopes that folks will connect the dots on their own?

As for Warren being "on record as supporting some form of legal recognition for gay couples"? We'll believe that when he actually advocates for the same, especially at times when a cloud of controversy isn't hovering over his head.

It seems that many gays, especially those living in liberal cocoons (that is, most gay writers and the gay rights establishment), take an all-or-nothing approach. "This tone-deafness to our concerns must not be tolerated," declared Kevin Naff, editor of the Washington Blade. But if anyone demonstrated tone-deafness over the Warren selection, it was Obama's critics. Contrast

their outrage over Warren to the way Warren himself reacted when Obama chose V. Gene Robinson, the gay Episcopal bishop who had joined the attacks on Obama just weeks earlier, to read a prayer at the opening of the inaugural ceremonies. Though Robinson has been the source of as much controversy from antigay forces as Warren has been from pro-gay ones, the Saddleback pastor rejected the easy antagonistic rhetoric of the religious right and opted for conciliation instead. Warren praised Obama by saying he "has again demonstrated his genuine commitment to bringing all Americans of goodwill together in search of common ground." Gays had a right to feel perturbed at the Warren selection. But with the 0-30 record we have in defeating antigay marriage amendments, gays are going to have to respond more carefully when such controversies arise in the future.

Comparing the Warren criticism to any criticism that Robinson might have received is a flawed juxtaposition that should offend every LGBT person on the face of the planet! Robinson's criticism comes from the sole fact that he is a gay man. That's it. That he believes he should be able to love his God and his guy is what earns socially conservative ire.

Warren's criticism, on the other hand, stems from rejecting the right of people like Robinson to serve, marry, pray within his church, etc! This sort of rhetoric is the exclusive yang to Robinson's inclusive yin. Equality is not a zero sum game.

Did Warren lash out against the (not-nearly-as-visible) Robinson selection? No. In his attempt to obtain positive PR, he would have been an absolute fool to. And who knows -- maybe he genuinely didn't have any problem with it. But his lack of negative thoughts on this direct situation do not negate all that he has said to indirectly slight people like Robinson!

We have no choice but to engage with the moderate majority of Americans. But rather than engage, too many of us are prone to attack, and messily at that. For instance, the most oft-repeated charge against Warren -- that he had compared homosexuality to incest and pedophilia -- was exaggerated. Asked in an interview if he thought gay marriage was equivalent to pedophilia and incest, Warren uttered, "I do." Yet not long after those comments were publicized, Warren recorded a video clarifying his remarks, stating that what he meant to say was that redefining marriage could lead to the legalization of other, less benign relationships. Many people, myself included, may find this slippery-slope argument to be silly and cynical. Still, it's not the same thing as alleging that gay people are morally equivalent to pedophiles or fathers who wish to elope with their children. Certainly, to mention these practices in the same breath as homosexuality is dog whistling, and it's good that gay activists got Warren to recant. Yet even after his clarification, many continued to peddle the line that he'd equated homosexuality with incest and pedophilia in a way that was misleading and uncharitable.

Unfair. Completely unfair. The fact that the comparison was even in his mind was telling! In speaking about evangelical marriages, would any of us have a thought within even the furthest recesses of our mind that compared those unions to incest or pedophilia? NO! But Rick Warren did. And his "Oh, I do" confirmation should not be overlooked because a few days (and much criticism) later, he saw how bad the situation looked and decided to backpedal!

Also interesting that Kirchick is here applauding that gay activists got Warren to "recant," yet has been decrying the outcry this entire piece. That's like enjoying the cake, yet faulting those who messed the kitchen in baking it!

Oh, and "peddle the line"? There was no line to peddle -- all we had to do was show people not only the video footage of this instance, but also the footage to what is arguably the more offensive statement: That gay people should not "act on" their truths! Why hasn't Kirchick acknowledged that one?!

Other aspects of the response to Prop. 8 have been similarly counterproductive. Looking at photos of the protests, I cringed every time I saw a poster with the equation prop. 8 = hate. A group of activists started a website titled Californians Against Hate, which lists donors to the Yes on 8 campaign. Of course, much of what is said about gay people could be qualified as hate speech. But not every argument against gay marriage is hateful. Many gay-marriage opponents support giving same-sex couples all the legal rights that straight ones enjoy but oppose calling these unions marriage for no more malevolent a reason than their stubborn resistance to change. We might disagree with these individuals, but in order to win legal equality we must persuade them, not hurl accusations of bigotry.

Now, as a writer, I never would have made this transition here. Why? Well, for one, because the Rick Warren surface has barely been scratched. If you're going to make a case out of that matter, then you have to look at the matter as a whole. What about the aforementioned Ann Curry interview in which he stated that gays should not act on their realities even if a bio-genetic link is found? What about gays' inability to join Warren's church? What about his lies about preachers being jailed under an equal civil marriage system? And if you want to talk about "unfair attacks" -- what about Rick's own attempts to write this whole thing off as being the product of mean bloggers and a biased media?

For another reason why I wouldn't have made this turn: I find it an unfair leap to go from the reasoned scrutiny that greeted the Warren situation into a discussion of the "[o]ther aspects of the response to Prop. 8." Because again, Prop 8 is not really what the Warren situation was all about. If Prop 8 would have failed but every other Rick Warren inaugural variable remained the same, the sweeping outrage (which, btw, extended well beyond the LGBT community) would have been just as loud! So to me, this transition is a hard turn that stops short of wrapping up the first set of arguments, before tying those same arguments into a different sort of discussion.

But since this is the journey of which Kirchick has taken us: Yes, many people see Prop 8 as hateful. But that is not to say that all of those same people see every last person who voted for Prop 8 as being a "hater." This distinction matters greatly.

Prop 8, in its form and wording, is a finite thing. And many, this writer included, do quite unabashedly see it as discriminatory. As anti-love. As a form of baseless bigotry. But again, that doesn't mean any Prop 8 voter should assume I think they are "bigots" or "hatemongers" any more than I should assume that those who find gay marriage threatening find me personally intimidating. In fact, I have written my own Advocate piece discussing this very matter.

For too long gay activists have operated as if the righteousness of our cause was self-evident. This attitude is certainly understandable, seeing that for gay people, the virtue of fighting for equality is obvious. It feels demeaning to have to seek validation from a world that remains averse to acknowledging our dignity. Yet this is the world in which we live. It's a far-from-perfect place. But we've made great strides over the past few decades. And the situation gets better with each passing day. Reassuring demoralized African-Americans who never thought they would see the time when their government treated them equally, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." He might as well have been speaking about the struggle for gay equality.

Reading the history of the African-American civil rights movement, one notices that what's missing from today's gay activism is a sense of optimism. The marchers on Selma and the men and women who sat at the Woolworth's lunch counters in Greensboro were beaten, sprayed with water hoses, attacked with dogs, spat on, thrown into jail. But they waged those battles -- and emerged from the centuries of slavery, lynching, and terrorism preceding -- still preaching love and understanding toward the white people who treated them like animals. Such absolutism seems unimaginable today, in part because so many gays reject religion, having realized at an early age that it supports an irrational rationale for homophobia. I'm not calling on the gay

community to find God. But if we can capture the same equanimity displayed by the Freedom Riders and act with their sense of faith that the wind of history is at our back, we'll do a better job persuading the persuadable.

I reject this overgeneralized presentation as largely false. It's a convenient literary device, but it paints with far too broad of strokes.

The first paragraph is mostly okay. Yes, too most of us equality is a no-brainer. Yes, we have made great strides. Yes, that oft cited MLK quote is a good one. However, what I reject is James' second paragraph here, in which optimism is stripped away from the modern gay rights movement, and willingness to overlook their opponents' faults is ascribed to those brave souls who engaged in the fight for African-American civil rights. Negative Nancys do not define LGBT activism, and love-preaching does not accurately describe every run-in and setback that Blacks met along their long path to freedom. Reasoned rage has always been a part of the puzzle -- and I would argue that while it may not be the most press-grabbing, it is the largest part of the 21st century's LGBT activism puzzle.

Yes, the Freedom Riders are a good model. But if you are going to reference that, you can't ignore that this concept has been replicated in the gay rights movement's own Equality Ride.

Yes, we need to "act with their sense of faith that the wind of history is at our back." But perhaps Mr. Kirchick just needs to attend more queer rights functions, rallies, galas, and dinners, because this is exactly what I am hearing whenever I attend the same.

Some activists have pointed to the civil rights—era boycott as an example of an effective protest tactic. It made sense for blacks to boycott a bus system that made them sit in the back. And it's more than fair to boycott companies that contributed large amounts of money to revoke marriage equality. But what message does it send to moderate Americans when we demand the boycott of a mom-and-pop taco restaurant, one of whose employees gave a measly \$100 to Yes on 8? Or call for the firing of a film festival director who donated \$1,500? Such a tactic might be a good way to release pent-up anger, but it's only that: self-gratification. We're not winning any friends by ruining people's careers. It's thus heartening to hear that another national march on Washington is being planned for this fall, styled on King's history-changing 1963 rally. Let's hope the message is positive and focuses on why gay citizens deserve the same rights as straight ones and not on why this or that preacher, this or that restaurant employee, is a bigot. As my friend Daniel Blatt of the GayPatriot blog says, most Americans are not instinctively pro-gay or antigay; they're anti-antigay. Let's use that temperament to our advantage.

Oh, the boycott thing. Okay, here's the thing: Donations are public record. When donations come to light, people have a right to react any way that they wish. You can't police that sort of thing. It's very easy to throw stones at the boycotters -- but like many of Mr. Kirchick's arguments, I reject this notion as convenient conservatism. It seems he is looking at many of these matters and acting as if GayCo Industries™ acted in a certain matter. However, as one who was intimately involved in the Eckern situation (*being one of the first to make note of the donation, which I posted without initial comment*), I know that reactions to these sorts of things are organic. Some get angry. Some write it off as typical. Some pledge to never again support the business, yet don't attempt to sway others' opinions. That's what happens in these sorts of situations.

Are there some sites and outfits who have taken on the boycott cause? Yes. That's another organic offshoot of the post-Prop 8 annoyance. They have the right to do so, just as Mr. Kirchick has the right to criticize gay liberals. But it's totally unfair to put the "ruining careers" burden on those gays who have noted the public record and acted accordingly. After all, we all knew (or should have known) that our donations, pro- or anti-, were going to be entered into the record. If you are confident in your actions and confident that public opinion is on your side, then you

should not fear that people are going to bring those contributions to light. In fact, you should welcome the attention. We know we would.

In 1991 a group of activists from the radical gay group Queer Nation infiltrated the set of The Arsenio Hall Show and interrupted the comedian's opening routine, demanding to know why he didn't invite more openly gay guests to be on his program. The audience booed the hecklers, and the stunt represented the last gasp of the in-your-face tactics that gay activists had utilized since Stonewall. In the 1980s, when a whole generation of gay men was dying and no one seemed to care, we needed angry, brash gay activists to wake up the rest of the country. But we don't have to scream at Arsenio Hall to interview Gus Van Sant anymore -- and not just because Arsenio is washed up. That confrontational approach is as dated as the slogans on the Queer Nation T-shirts: Queer Liberation Not Assimilation. We need a gay movement that reflects its amazing successes, not its continuing frustrations.

Again -- generalize, generalize, generalize. In the 22 years between Stonewall and this Arsenio protest, there were all sorts of kinds of protests, just as there are now. Yes, there was take-it-to-the-streets outrage, which, as James accurately points out, was much-needed in the early days of AIDS. Some would argue that this form of direct action would help us now (or would've especially during the Bush administration). But concurrently, both then and now, there are all sorts of other kinds of activism. There are family groups. There are peaceniks. There are performance artists. There are writers of every stripe, taking to various outlets to defend their existences against untruth. It's a movement, not a small band.

Nowadays do we have to scream at talk show hosts to book gay guests? *No*. Hell, today's talk show kingdom is mostly ruled by a lesbian and LGBT allies. But talk shows are not life, and there *are* plenty of other matters that need address. If some see direct action demonstrations as the best way to make an impact, who are we to say, "*No, not for this particular issue -- but maybe anger will be in vogue again someday.*"?

For now, to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld in a way he never imagined he would be paraphrased, we must go to war with the movement we have, not the one we might wish to have. And by recognizing the common humanity of those people who don't recognize ours, we'll make our movement stronger. "There are also good people out there, Christian and otherwise, that are beginning to listen," Etheridge wrote of people like Warren. "They don't hate us, they fear change." That's an inconvenient truth that the gay rights movement would do well to recognize.

"That's an inconvenient truth that the gay rights movement would do well to recognize." No it's not. What, that outreach is important? That many Christians are good? That even in difference, we all share a common humanity? That fear of change is the guiding principle of the "pro-family" movement? The majority of those involved in the gay rights movement would accept those ideas (to varying degrees).

The inconvenient truth that James Kirchick would do well to recognize is that our movement is not a liberal monolith that can be fairly reduced in 1600 words of *Advocate* prose.