

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

A Parent's Love Trumps Bias

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It appears likely that I'll be doing some work on gay and transgender workplace issues with corporate senior managers in Tokyo, Japan and in Mumbai, and Delhi, India this year. Anyone who is attuned to the potential power of education and love shares my excitement about the possibilities this presents for positively impacting the lives of gay and transgender people and their families there. As has been true throughout all of history, commerce has provided one of the primary vehicles for cultural change in the world.

That is not to say that I see these Marco Polo voyages as means of secretly engaging in social engineering. I'm just aware—as happened with my trips to Singapore and Hong Kong—that professional presentations on the need to value diversity at work have a way of enlightening the lives of people in their homes, too. After my two-hour presentation in Singapore, I spent two more hours standing with women from the workplace who wanted to talk about their children and other loved ones. It is indeed the heart of the mother and the father that prompts breakthroughs in attitudes and beliefs. Their innate desire to protect their offspring makes them more open to hear about the challenges their children face in the world.

Many of us are aware of the recent marriage of gay men in Argentina and of the same rights extended to gay couples in Mexico City. These government-sanctioned unions did not happen in a vacuum in these Catholic countries. They were made possible by the courage of gay and lesbian people to put a face on the issue, and by the need felt by many heterosexual parents and others to protect the people they love and admire. That is why there is no end to progress that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people will make throughout the world, even in Uganda, where the other historic vehicle of major cultural change, religion, has taken its toll. All of us have parents, and though some parents may respond by disowning or even killing their child (as a man in Turkey recently did), far more parents will face down their fears and cultural-based shame because of the love in their hearts for their children. A mother's love is so strong, as the readers of the *Harry Potter* series know, that it saved the life of her infant, Harry, the "chosen one", against the death spell of the "death eater" Voldermort.

The evil spirit of the fictional Voldermort lives around the world, including in Tokyo, Mumbai, and Delhi. It is the manifestation of ignorance, fear, and hatred. It creates havoc in the lives of people at home and at work. The impact at work is diminished productivity, and the inability to attract and retain the best workers. It also minimizes a company's ability to market effectively to all segments of the buying public. That's why corporations bring me, and others who do related training, to their workplaces—to help their employees understand and embrace the magic of valuing diversity in all its forms; to block the spell of intolerance with professional respect, and of open hostility with awareness of the consequences. I always trust in these situations that the most effective tools I have are enabling the audience to identify with my life goals and experiences of oppression, and to transfer their new awareness to the gay and transgender people in their lives whom they love.

Before I travel to Japan and India, I will work hard to become more culturally competent of—and attuned to—the thinking, feeling, laws, and customs of the people in those countries. If I want them to understand me and those whom I represent, I need to communicate that I understand them. That will mean reading books, communicating by phone and e-mail with people native to the countries, and spending time in their cultural museums as soon as I arrive in their countries, among other things.

Then I will rely on my skill to communicate my belief that everyone in the world seeks the same thing: To know, accept, and affirm their unique selves in an environment in which they will feel safe and valued.

Prepare yourself, you agents of intolerance. There is an army of people throughout the world whose love of themselves and of others will defeat you no matter where you fester. It may not be today that your ignorance-based fear and hatred is in the minority, but it will happen. Truth and a parent's love trump bias.