Who Should Survive?

I sometimes do an exercise in my sociology classes called "Who Should Survive" to make a point about the life or death impact of discrimination. The scenario is that a nuclear attack has just happened and only the following 15 people survived. They managed to squeeze into an atomic bomb shelter just prior to the attack. They are a black female teacher and her 8-year-old daughter, a white male college professor, his Jewish psychologist wife and their mentally retarded son, a Hispanic prostitute and her 3-week-old infant, a 13-year-old male honor student whose father was a Baptist preacher, a liberal catholic priest, a nun, a black female engineer, a Hispanic female college student who majored in nursing, a black gay man who wears hippy clothes, a 51-year-old Mormon male mechanic, and a 66-year-old male Hispanic doctor who's had a few heart attacks. It will take two weeks for the external radiation to drop to a safe survival level. The catch is that there is only enough food and water in the shelter to sustain seven people for two weeks, which means that only seven people can minimally survive. The task for the students is to decide which seven of the fifteen people get to live.

Students argue vociferously over who lives and who dies. They often debate as to whether college professors and psychologists are necessary, whether the prostitute and her daughter will be a help or a hindrance, whether the risk of keeping the doctor will pay off given his health problems, and whether anyone over 40 should be allowed to live based on their reproductive capacity. Usually after deliberation, the doctor, the priest and the nun get the ax, while the teacher, the honor student, the college student and the engineer usually get to live. People over 40 are a tossup and only get to live if there is still a space after they have killed everyone else off. Most significantly, the gay man always has to die.

While this exercise is a little dated, it does bring out the deadly impact of discrimination. We as a nation make decisions every day that affect our lives as well as the lives of our fellow citizens, including life or death decisions. And while it's easy to blame everything on our politicians and corporate leaders, the reality is that we are all partially responsible. Every vote that we cast (or don't cast), every product that we buy, and every decision we make to ignore or confront homophobia and other forms of bigotry have an impact on our survival in the long run. To vote for someone (for example, George W. Bush or Ken Blackwell) who has actively attacked the GLBT community and made it part of their political platform to deny us rights and discriminate against us (for example, promoting amendments to the constitution that would ban gay marriage) is to give our permission to those who wish to destroy us. In contrast, each time we make an effort to shop in a gay-friendly store or buy a product put out by a corporation that provides anti-discrimination protection and domestic partnership benefits to its GLBT employees, we chip away at the legacy of anti-GLBT discrimination.

I understand that many of you have been fortunate enough to not have experienced the kind of brutal discrimination that GLBT people faced in the 1950's when people faced violence (sometimes at the hands of the police), arrests, discrimination in employment and housing, and ostracism from their families just for being who they were. The reason that there is less of this today is that many GLBT people took political action. It was this political action that led to the election of gay-sympathetic politicians. These politicians in turn enacted gay-supportive legislation like hate crimes laws and the Ryan White Act. They also appointed sympathetic justices on the Supreme Court, which eventually led to the recent overturning of sodomy laws. It was this political action that also challenged corporations to enact gay-friendly (and in some cases trans-friendly) diversity policies and to offer domestic partnership benefits. It took years for these changes to occur. Unfortunately, in Ohio, we are already feeling the impact of anti-gay politicians who have fostered their careers by promising to take away the few rights that we have gained and to ensure that we don't get any others.

You might be wondering why I'm talking about such overtly political issues in a column that's oriented towards counseling issues. The answer is simple. Survey after survey links oppression to higher levels of stress and lower levels of mental well-being. These factors are directly related to some of the more common issues like depression, anxiety, and substance and/or alcohol abuse that lead people into counseling. By reducing the level of oppression we face, we reduce the stress we face and improve our mental well-being.

The activists of the 1960's and early 1970's had an expression: "The personal is political."   While this expression has become a cliché, the meaning behind it is still important. Your voting and shopping decisions have an impact on not only you, but on us all as a community. Check out the politicians before you vote. This is easy to do. Many organizations such as Stonewall PAC put out recommendations of politicians based on their voting record and their rhetoric. In addition, you can download a legislative scorecard from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) website at www.hrc.org . The HRC website also has "Buyers Guide" on their web site that grades companies on their gay rights issues. You can find this at www.hrc.org/buyersguide/buyersguide.htm .

Originally appeared in Outlook Weekly