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**AT LARGE**

## **My freedom linked to others -- including gays**

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This is for a reader who demands to know why I write about gay issues. His conclusion is that I must secretly be gay myself.

Actually, he doesn't express himself quite that civilly. To the contrary, his e-mails -- which, until recently, were arriving at the rate of about one a week -- evince a juvenility that would embarrass a reasonably intelligent fifth grader. The most recent one, for example, carried a salutation reading, ``Hi Mrs. Pitts.''

We're talking about the kind of thing for which delete buttons were invented. So you may wonder why I bring it to your attention, especially since acknowledging a person like this only encourages him. It's simple, actually: He raises an interesting question that deserves an answer.

### **PROBABLY A GUY**

If from that you conclude (or fear) you're about to read a stirring defense of my manly male masculinity, no. The guy is free to believe what he wishes; I really don't care. And here, let me digress to confess that, though I refer to him using masculine pronouns, I actually don't know if he's a he because his notes have been anonymous. Still, I assume it's a guy because the level of sexual insecurity the e-mails suggest strikes me as -- boy, am I going to get in trouble for this -- rather guy-specific.

Anyway, to get back to the point, I'm not here to argue sexuality. I just find myself intrigued by the idea that if you're not gay, you shouldn't care about gay rights.

The most concise answer I can give is cribbed from what a white kid said some 40 or so years ago, as white college students were risking their lives to travel south and register black people to vote. Somebody asked why. He said he acted from an understanding that his freedom was bound up with the freedom of every other man.

I know it sounds cornier than Kellogg's, but that's pretty much how I feel.

### **GAYS KNOW ABOUT BIAS**

I know also that some folks are touchy about anything seeming to equate the black civil rights movement with the gay one. And no, gay people were not kidnapped from Gay Land and sold into slavery, nor lynched by the thousands. On the other hand, they do know something about housing discrimination, they do know job discrimination, they do know murder for the sin of existence, they do know the denial of civil rights and they do know what it is like to be used as scapegoat and boogeyman by demagogues and political opportunists.

They know enough of what I know that I can't ignore it. See, I have yet to learn how to segregate my moral concerns. It seems to me if I abhor intolerance, discrimination and hatred when they affect people who look like me, I must also abhor them when they affect people who do not. For that matter, I must abhor them even when they benefit me. Otherwise, what I claim as moral authority is really just self-interest in disguise.

Among the things we seem to have lost in the years since that white kid made his stand is the ability, the imagination, the willingness, to put ourselves into the skin of those who are not like us. I find it telling that Vice President Dick Cheney hews to the hard conservative line on virtually every social issue, except gay marriage. It is, of course, no coincidence that Cheney has a daughter who is a lesbian. Which tells me his position is based not on principle but, rather, on loving his daughter.

### **RULE NO. 1**

It is a fine thing to love your daughter. I would argue, however, that it is also a fine thing and in some ways, a finer thing, to love your neighbor's daughter, no matter her sexual orientation, religion, race, creed or economic status -- and to want her freedom as eagerly as you want your own.

I believe in moral coherence. And Rule No. 1 is, you cannot assert your own humanity, then turn right around and deny someone else's.

If that makes me gay, fine.

As my anonymous correspondent ably demonstrates, there are worse things to be.