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Homo- phobia

A
Weapon
of
Sexism

ceptions the good lesbians or gay men, as in "You would ever guess she/he was gay."

We must take a very hard look at our complicity with oppressions, all of them. We must see that to give no voice, to take no action to end them is to support their existence. Our options are two: to be racist, or anti-Semitic, or homophobic (or whatever the oppression may be), or to work actively against these attitudes. There is no middle ground. With an oppression such as homophobia where there is so much permission to sustain overt hatred and injustice, one must have the courage to take the risks that may end in loss of privilege. We must keep clearly in mind, however, that privilege earned from oppression is always conditional and is gained at the cost of freedom.

The Common Elements of Oppressions

IT IS VIRTUALLY impossible to view one oppression, such as sexism or homophobia, in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism. They are linked by a common origin—economic power and control—and by common methods of limiting, controlling and destroying lives. There is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each is terrible and destructive. To eliminate one oppression successfully, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all or else success will always be limited and incomplete.

To understand the connection among the oppressions, we must examine their common elements. The first is a *defined norm*, a standard of rightness and often righteousness wherein all others are judged in relation to it. This norm must be backed up with institutional power, economic power, and both institutional and individual violence. It is the combination of these three elements that makes complete power and control possible. In the United States, that norm is male, white, heterosexual, Christian, temporarily able-bodied, youthful, and has access to wealth and resources. It is important to remember that an established norm does not necessarily represent a majority in terms of numbers; it represents those who have ability to exert power and control over others.

It is also important to remember that this group has to have *institutional* power. For instance, I often hear people say that they know people of color in this country who are racist. This is confusing racism with bigotry or prejudice or hatred. People of color simply do not have institutional power to back

up their hatred or bigotry or prejudice and therefore cannot be deemed racist. In the same way, women do not have the power to institutionalize their prejudices against men, so there is no such thing as "reverse sexism." How do we know this? We simply have to take a look at the representation of women and people of color in our institutions. Take, for example, the U.S. Congress. What percentage of its members are people of color or women? Or look at the criminal justice system which carries out the laws the white males who predominate in Congress create: how many in that system are people of color? And then when we look at the percentage of each race that is incarcerated, that is affected by these laws, we see that a disproportionate number are people of color. We see the same lack of representation in financial institutions, in the leadership of churches and synagogues, in the military.

In our schools, the primary literature and history taught are about the exploits of white men, shown through the white man's eyes. Black history, for instance, is still relegated to one month, whereas "American history" is taught all year round. Another major institution, the media, remains controlled and dominated by white men and their images of themselves.

In order for these institutions to be controlled by a single group of people, there must be *economic power*. Earlier I discussed the necessity to maintain racism and sexism so that people of color and women will continue to provide a large pool of unpaid or low-paid labor. Once economic control is in the hands of the few, all others can be controlled through limiting access to resources, limiting mobility, limiting employment options. People are pitted against one another through perpetuation of the *myth of scarcity* which suggests that our resources are limited and blames the poor for using up too much of what little there is to go around. It is this myth that is called forth, for instance, when those in power talk about immigration through our southern borders (immigrants who also happen

to be people of color). The warning is clear: if you let these people in, they will take your jobs, ruin your schools which are already in economic struggle, destroy the few neighborhoods that are good for people to live in. People are pitted against one another along race and class lines. Meanwhile, those who have economic power continue to make obscenely excessive profits, often by taking their companies out of the country into economically depressed countries occupied by people of color where work can be bought for miniscule wages and profits are enormous. It is not the poor or workingclass population that is consuming and/or destroying the world's resources; it is those who make enormous profits from the exploitation of those resources, the top 10 percent of the population.

That economic power ensures control of institutions. Let's go back to the example of the Congress. How much does it cost to run a campaign to be elected to the House or Senate? One does not find poor people there, for in order to spend the hundreds of thousands of dollars that campaigns cost, one has to be either personally rich or well connected to those who are rich. And the latter means being in the debt, one way or another, of the rich. Hence, when a congressperson speaks or votes, who does he (occasionally she) speak for? Those without access to wealth and resources or those who pay the campaign bills? Or look at the criminal justice system. It is not by chance that crimes against property are dealt with more seriously than crimes against persons. Or that police response to calls from well-to-do neighborhoods is more efficient than to poor neighborhoods. Schools in poor neighborhoods in most instances lack good facilities and resources; and a media that is controlled by advertising does not present an impartial, truthseeking vision of the world. Both schools and the media present what is in the best interest of the prevailing norm.

The maintenance of societal and individual power and control requires the use of *violence and the threat of violence*.

Institutional violence is sanctioned through the criminal justice system and the threat of the military—for quelling individual or group uprisings. One of the places we can most readily see the interplay of institutional and individual violence is in the white man's dealings with the native American population. Since the white man first "discovered" this country, which was occupied by large societies of Indians who maintained their own culture, religion, politics, education, economy and justice, the prevailing norm has been to lay claim to land and resources for those who have the power to establish control by might and thus ensure their superior economic position. This "might" brings with it a sense of superiority and often of divine right. The native Americans were driven from their land and eventually placed (some would say incarcerated) on reservations. By defending their lands and their lives, they became the "enemy." Consequently, we now have a popular culture whose teaching of history represents the native American as a cruel savage and through hundreds of films shows the white man as civilized and good in pursuing his destiny and the native American as bad in protecting his life and culture. Institutional racism is so complete that now great numbers of native Americans, having lost their land and having had their culture assaulted, live in poverty and in isolation from the benefits of mainstream culture. And on the personal level, racism is so overt that television stations still run cowboy-and-Indian movies, and parents buy their children cowboy-and-Indian outfits so that they can act out genocide in their play.

For gay men and lesbians this interplay of institutional and personal violence comes through both written and unwritten laws. In the 25 states that still have sodomy laws, there is an increase in tolerance for violence against lesbians and gay men, whether it is police harassment or the lack of police protection when gay and lesbian people are assaulted. The fact that courts in many states deny custody to gay and lesbian parents,

that schools, either through written or unwritten policy, do not hire openly gay and lesbian teachers creates a climate in which it is permissible to act out physical violence toward lesbian and gay people.

And as I discussed in an earlier chapter, for all groups it is not just the physical violence that controls us but the ever constant *threat of violence*. For women, it is not just the rape or battering or the threat of these abuses but also that one's life is limited by the knowledge that one quite likely will not be honored in court. The violence is constantly nurtured by institutions that do not respect those different from the norm. Thus, the threat of violence exists at every level.

There are other ways the defined norm manages to maintain its power and control other than through institutional power, economic power and violence. One way the defined norm is kept an essentially closed group is by a particular system known as *lack of prior claim*. At its simplest, this means that if you weren't there when the original document (the Constitution, for instance) was written or when the organization was first created, then you have no right to inclusion. Since those who wrote the Constitution were white male property owners who did not believe in the complete humanity of either women or blacks, then these two groups have had to battle for inclusion. If women and people of color were not in business (because of the social and cultural restrictions on them) when the first male business organizations were formed, then they now have to fight for inclusion. The curious thing about lack of prior claim is that it is simply the circumstances of the moment that put the original people there in every case, yet when those who were initially excluded begin asking for or demanding inclusion, they are seen as disruptive people, as trouble-makers, as no doubt anti-American. We still recall the verbal and physical violence against women who participated in the Suffrage Movement and the black men and women who formed the Civil

Rights Movement. For simply asking for one's due, one was vilified and abused. This is an effective technique, making those struggling for their rights the ones in the wrong. Popular movements are invalidated and minimized, their participants cast as enemies of the people, and social change is obstructed by those holding power who cast themselves as defenders of tradition and order.

Those who seek their rights, who seek inclusion, who seek to control their own lives instead of having their lives controlled are the people who fall outside the norm. They are defined in relation to the norm and are found lacking. They are *the Other*. If they are not part of the norm, they are seen as abnormal, deviant, inferior, marginalized, not "right," even if they as a group (such as women) are a majority of the population. They are not considered fully human. By those identified as the Norm, the Other is unknown, difficult to comprehend, whereas the Other always knows and understands those who hold power; one has to in order to survive. As in the television series "Upstairs, Downstairs," the servants always knew the inner workings of the ruling families' lives while the upstairs residents who had economic control knew little of the downstairs workers' lives. In slavery, the slave had to know the complexity, the inner workings of the slaveowners' lives in order to protect him/herself from them.

The Other's existence, everyday life, achievements are kept unknown through *invisibility*. When we do not see the differently abled, the aged, gay men and lesbians, people of color on television, in movies, in educational books, etc., there is reinforcement of the idea that the Norm is the majority and others either do not exist or do not count. Or when there is false information, *distortion* of events, through selective presentation or the re-writing of history, we see only the negative aspects or failures of a particular group. For instance, it has been a major task of the Civil Rights Movement and the women's

movement to write blacks and women back into history and to correct the distorted versions of their history that have been presented over centuries.

This distortion and lack of knowledge of the Other expresses itself in *stereotyping*, that subtle and effective way of limiting lives. It is through stereotyping that people are denied their individual characteristics and behavior and are dehumanized. The dehumanizing process is necessary to feed the oppressor's sense of being justified and to alleviate the feeling of guilt. If one stereotypes all gay men as child molesters and gives them the daily humiliations of perjorative names, such as "faggot," or "cocksucker," then a school administration can feel justified, even righteous, in not hiring them, and young heterosexual males can feel self-righteous when physically attacking them on the streets. In stereotyping, the actions of a few dictate the classification of the entire group while the norm is rarely stereotyped. Because of the belief that groups outside the norm think and behave in unified stereotypical ways, people who hold power will often ask a person of color, "What do your people think about this idea (or thing)?" When do we ever ask a white man, "What do the white men in this country (or organization) think about this?" They are expected to have and to express individual judgments and opinions.

Stereotyping contributes to another common element of oppressions: *blaming the victim* for the oppression. In order for oppression to be thoroughly successful, it is necessary to involve the victim in it. The victim lives in an environment of negative images (stereotypes) and messages, backed up by violence, victim-hating and blaming, all of which leads to low self-esteem and self-blame in the victim. The oppression thus becomes internalized. The goal of this environment is to lead the victim to be complicit with her/his victimization: to think that it is deserved and should not be resisted.

Some of the best work feminists have done is to change

attitudes from blaming the victim to blaming the abuser, a very slow change that is still incomplete. It is no longer automatically the norm to blame victims of battering, rape and incest for having somehow been responsible for the harm done to them; instead, people are more inclined to stop supporting male dominance by protecting the abuser. However, we have yet to examine thoroughly the blame we put on victims of racism, homophobia and anti-Semitism. People are condemned for being who they are, for their essence as humans. When we are clear of these oppressions, we will understand that the issue is not one's racial, ethnic, religious or sexual identity—one should have the inalienable right to be who one is—but the problem is racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia and the power they support and protect.

Blaming the victims for their oppression diverts attention from the true abuser or the cause of the victimization. For example, a commonly held belief is that people are poor because they are unwilling to work. The belief is supported by the stereotypes that poor people are lazy, abuse welfare, etc. What goes unnoted is the necessity for poverty in an economic system in which wealth is held and controlled by the few. If the poor are in poverty because they deserve it, then the rich need not feel any guilt or compunction about their concentrated wealth. In fact, they can feel deserving and superior.

Blaming the victim leads to the victim feeling complicit with the oppression, of deserving it. As one takes in the negative messages and stereotypes, there is a weakening of self-esteem, self pride and group pride. When the victim of the oppression is led to believe the negative views of the oppressor, this phenomenon is called *internalized oppression*. It takes the form of self-hatred which can express itself in depression, despair, and self-abuse. It is no surprise, therefore, that the incidence of suicide is high among gay men and lesbians, for they live in a world in which messages of hatred and disgust are

unrelenting. Nor is it surprising that the differently abled come to think there is no hope for their independence or for them to receive basic human services, for they are taught that the problem is with them, not society. Any difference from the norm is seen as a deficiency, as bad.

Sometimes the internalized oppression is acted out as *horizontal hostility*. If one has learned self-hatred because of one's membership in a "minority" group, then that disrespect and hatred can easily be extended to the entire group so that one does not see hope or promise for the whole. It is safer to express hostility toward other oppressed peoples than toward the oppressor. Hence, we see people destroying their own neighborhoods, displaying violence and crime toward their own people, or in groups showing distrust of their own kind while respecting the power of those who make up the norm. Sometimes the internalized oppression leads people to be reluctant to associate with others in their group. Instead, their identity is with those in power. Hence, a major part of every social change movement has been an effort to increase the pride and self-esteem of the oppressed group, to bond people together for the common good.

A major component of every oppression is *isolation*. Victims of oppressions are either isolated as individuals or as a "minority" group. Take, for example, those who experience rape or incest or battering. Prior to the women's movement and the speak-outs that broke the silence on these issues, women who had experienced abuse were isolated from one another, thought they were alone in experiencing it, and thought, as society dictated, that they were to blame for the abuse. It was through women coming together in the anti-violence movement that we learned that indeed there was something larger going on, that violence was happening to millions of women; out of that coming together grew an analysis of male power and control that led to a movement to end violence against women.

Another example: before the Civil Rights Movement, there were black citizens in the South who were isolated because of their lack of access to resources, in this case, to education and literacy. Because they could not read, they could not pass the tests that allowed them to vote. The Citizenship Schools that began on St. Johns Island, South Carolina, taught blacks to read the Constitution so that they could pass the test; in reading the Constitution, they learned that they too had rights. These schools spread across the South; people came together out of their isolation, and a Civil Rights Movement was born.

In order to break down the power and control exercised by the few, it is clear that people of all oppressed groups must come together to form a movement that speaks for everyone's rights. People will gain their human rights; justice, and inclusion through group effort, not through isolated individual work. However, those who hold power oppose group organizing efforts and use many strategies to destroy such efforts: invalidation, minimization, intimidation, infiltration, etc.

Two of the more subtle ways that society blocks solidarity within groups from ever occurring are the tactics of *assimilation and tokenism*. There are extraordinary pressures for members of any "minority" group to assimilate, to drop one's own culture and differences and become a mirror of the dominant culture. This process requires turning one's back on one's past and on one's people. Assimilation supports the myth of the melting pot in which all immigrants were poured in, mixed a bit, and then emerged as part of the dominant culture: white, heterosexual, and Christian.

Assimilation is a first requirement of those who are chosen as tokens in the workplace of the dominant culture. "She's a Jew but she doesn't act like a Jew." "He's black but he's just like us." Tokenism is the method of limited access that gives false hope to those left behind and blames them for "not making it." "If these two or three black women or disabled people

can make it, then what is wrong with you that you can't?" Tokenism is a form of co-optation. It takes the brightest and best of the most assimilated, rewards them with position and money (though rarely genuine leadership and power), and then uses them as a model of what is necessary to succeed, even though there are often no more openings for others who may follow their model.

The tokenized person receives pressure from both sides. From those in power there is the pressure to be separate from one's group (race, for instance) while also acting as a representative of the entire group. "We tried hiring a person of color but it just didn't work out." (Therefore people of color can't succeed here.) The tokenized person is expected to become a team player which means that identifying racist activity within the organization or working on behalf of one's community is seen as disloyalty. The pressure from one's community, on the other hand, is to fight for that community's concerns, in other words, to help from the inside. Of course, it is virtually impossible to work from the inside because the tokenized person is isolated and lacks support. It is a "no win" situation, filled with frustration and alienation.

At the heart of this strategy, which gets played out at every level of society, is an individualized approach to success. The example of Horatio Alger and the notion of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" still lives. Daily news reports do not show successful organizing efforts; in fact, the media minimize even undeniably successful ones as was the case with the reporting of the 1988 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. The media reported the march to have 200,000 in attendance when it was announced by Jesse Jackson from the stage that police and march organizers were reporting over 500,000 there. Instead of reporting group efforts, the media concentrates on "human interest" stories, following the lead of people such as Ronald Reagan who give accounts of individuals who beat the

odds and succeed. They become "models" for others in their circumstances to follow. But what good are models when closed systems do not permit general success?

Group organizing, even among progressive people, often gets replaced by an emphasis on *individual solutions*. Hence, instead of seeking ways to develop an economic system that emphasizes cooperation and shared wealth, people encourage entrepreneurship and small business enterprises. Union organizing is under seige in an effort to keep labor costs low and profits high. In the women's movement, more women choose individual therapy rather than starting or joining consciousness raising groups. In the area of health, communities do major organizing, for example, to raise enormous funds to provide a liver transplant for an individual child but do not work together to change the medical system so that all who need them can get organ transplants. The emphasis upon individual solutions is counter to movement making, to broad social change. The emphasis upon individual achievement feeds right into blaming those who don't succeed for their failure. It separates people rather than bringing them together to make change.

We must find ways to build coalition, to make broad social change for all of us. There are many more people who are considered the Other (though called, ironically, the minority) than those who are defined as the Norm. We must become allies in a movement that works against power and control by the few and for shared power and resources for the many. To do this work, we will have to build a program that provides an analysis of the oppressions, their connections, and together we must seek ways to change those systems that limit our lives.

Women in Exile: The Lesbian Experience

Internalized Homophobia: The Damage of a Homophobic World

WHEN GIVING workshops on internalized homophobia, I often ask all the lesbians who grew up in that city or that area to hold up their hands. Almost always the number is fewer than 25 percent, sometimes fewer than 10 percent. When I ask the others why they left their childhood homes and families, the majority say they had to leave in order to find a place where they could live with some freedom as lesbians. They were seeking wholeness. They speak of missing close connections with family loved ones, of seeking a sense of community, of creating families. Fearing loss of their families and communities if they stayed among them identified as lesbians, they left so that they could live a little more visibly in a place where they were not known. They are in exile, seeking freedom.

Many of the lesbians I meet have been deeply wounded by the ravages of homophobia. Some have told their families they were lesbian and were rejected; others were accepted but only conditionally so. Some have lost jobs, custody of children, acceptance in the church of their choice, friends; others have been incarcerated in prisons or mental institutions. Some have left their homes and families to live far away, only to learn that there is little acceptance of their sexual identity anywhere. Feeling so much alienation from the heterosexual world, many have put all their hopes and needs into their love relationships or their lesbian communities and have felt anger and despair when both showed human failings. Some have lived defiantly in the face of homophobia; others have chosen complete