

Recruit, recruit, recruit!

"Next, we'll hear from a gay woman who says it's all about recruiting," Montel Williams announced.

That gay woman was me. I was about to go on Williams's show and talk about children, sexual choices, and the reasons we need pro-gay curricula in our public schools.

I was ambivalent about the provocative line I intended to take. I've been in the strange position lately of saying things about homosexuality that piss off many, if not most, of the lesbian and gay activists I know. How to respond to far-right depictions of our movement is a question we are all increasingly tense about, me included. With the Christian right maneuvering to pass more laws like Colorado's Amendment 2, no wonder we're tempted to turn tail and run from some of the riskier implications of our lives.

Since Anita Bryant's day, 'phobes have claimed that we "recruit" children. Of course we don't—if the phrase is taken to mean we sexually abuse the young in order to make converts for our community. But I am increasingly impatient with the old chestnut that our movement for public acceptance has not increased and will not increase the number of gay men and lesbians in existence. "There are more of us than there used to be," historian John D'Emilio has written. Firmly believing this, I wanted to go on the show to argue the morality of teaching kids that gay is OK even if it means that some will join our ranks.

Other right-wing aspersions also have grains of truth in them. As a community, we are a sexually adventurous, gender-defying bunch. We have also come up with configurations for relationships and families that go a long way toward solving the problem that has kept heterosexuals sad for centuries—how to combine emotional fidelity with sexual freedom. One of the right wing's goals in making these attributes into smears is to force lesbians and gay men to abandon the most defiant, least heterosexual aspects of our lives. If we become the straightest gays in world history, they've already won half their battle. And if we are pushed into denying any smidgen of our own truth, we have allowed the Right to dictate our agenda.

We have been on the defensive far too long. It's time to affirm that the Right is correct in some of its pronouncements about our movement. Pat Buchanan said there was a "cultural war" going on "for the soul of America" and that gay and lesbian rights were the principal battleground. He was right. Similarly, 'phobes like Pat Robertson are right when they say that we threaten the family, male domination, and the Calvinist ethic of work and grimness that has paralyzed most Americans' search for pleasure.

Indeed, instead of proclaiming our innocuousness, we ought to advertise our potential to change straight society in radical, beneficial ways. Hets have much to learn from

us: first and foremost, the fact that pleasure is possible (and desirable) beyond the sanctions of the state. Another fact gleaned from gay experience—that gender is for all intents and purposes a fiction—also has the potential to revolutionize straight lives.

For some straight people, our movement will simply help them to live out their hetero desires to the fullest. Others, living on strawberry for years, will finally taste the pineapple almond fudge.

Let's take the offensive for a change, whether the issue is promiscuity or recruiting the previously straight. Remember that most of the line about homosex being one's nature, not a choice, was articulated as a response to brutal repression. "It's not our fault!" gay activists began to declaim a century ago, when queers first began to organize in Germany and England. "We didn't choose this, so don't punish us for it!" One hundred years later, it's time for us to abandon this defensive posture and walk upright on the earth. Maybe you didn't choose to be gay—that's fine. But I did.

Months before the presidential election, Robert Bray, public information director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, told me something that shocked me. "We want to provoke the Republicans to show their homophobic hand," he said.

I couldn't believe it. Why on earth would we want them to show it? Didn't we want them to hide their homophobia? It was much too scary, I thought, to prod George Bush into running an openly homophobic campaign.

Then the Republican convention happened, and Republican fortunes began to erode. Homophobia, it turned out, wasn't a winning ticket with most Americans. Lying low, pandering to it, asking Barbara Walters to stop raising the issue with candidates would have hurt our movement, not helped it.

What we need to give the Christian right is a solid sock to the jaw—not a whiny plea for forgiveness. The best gay and lesbian demo I ever saw was the zap of a speech Jerry Falwell gave to Virginia delegates to the Republican convention. Outside, Queer Nationals from around the country chanted, "Ten percent is not enough! Recruit, recruit, recruit!" Inside, tactics were even bolder: Whenever Falwell said anything negative about homosexuality, air sirens would go off and ACT UP members in Christian garb would start yelling things like "We are your families, and you are killing us!" These young men and women would be promptly beaten by Falwell followers and police, but they kept coming forward until it was impossible for all but the morally deaf not to hear their statement of resistance.

Tell America how much it can gain by emulating us. How much, like Madonna, it already envies us. Be guided by the dream of liberation, not by fear. Provoke the Right.

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HIV, sex, drugs, and divorce

Bars and clubs figure prominently in gay and lesbian cultural history. From the drag parlors of the '50s to the underwear parties of the '90s, clubs have provided much more than a place to get a drink. They have functioned as an oasis in a desert of heterosexual oppression, a safe space to see and be seen.

Making bars and clubs safe gay havens has involved hard-fought battles. In the '50s and '60s gays and cops played cat-and-mouse games during frequent raids. The most famous raid took place at 53 Christopher St. in New York City—the Stonewall Inn. This monument to gay rights was what one habitué called “a real dive, an awful, sleazy place.”

The fact that bars were for a long time virtually the only gay meeting places speaks to a legacy of homophobia. In many cities gay and lesbian bars are still after-hours, out-of-the-way places, out of sight and mind for the larger straight population. It was something remarkable when Twin Peaks in San Francisco's Castro District opened with street-front windows, reportedly the first gay or lesbian bar in the country to do so.

For many in our community, drinking and drugging were a significant part of growing up gay. Being drunk provided cover for those college-dorm trysts one could chalk up to the booze talking. Drugs helped stoke up the courage to jump into the fray at the local bar scene.

People go to bars because that is where the drinks (and drugs) are. Bars and clubs are home to that trinity of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. All three are fun, but as far as we know, only the first two can kill you. It worries me that HIV might not allow some younger gay men to grow out of their drinking-and-drugging phase. One need not be a rabid, sexphobic antidruggie—a “psychopharmacological Calvinist”—to be concerned about the connection between sex and drugs in the age of AIDS.

Living in Northern California, I'm surrounded by health nuts. People who would no more spread mayonnaise on a sandwich than they would rat poison. Folks who want to know not only if the chicken was free-range but also whether it had a happy life (if they indulge in animal flesh at all). Some of this “my body as temple” attitude has rubbed off on me (although I realize that there are many more worshippers at the temple of the other Jeff Stryker).

Recreational drugs no longer seem to jibe with a healthy lifestyle, and a healthy lifestyle is important to both those who are already HIV-positive and those who need to avoid infection. Virtually all the attention to AIDS and drugs has focused on injection-drug use. Although the most efficient way to transmit HIV is to share dirty needles, there are other ways in which drug

use contributes to the spread of the virus.

Epidemiologists who study the spread of HIV have shown that gay men who do drugs and alcohol are more likely to become HIV-infected than those who abstain. There is still much debate among researchers about the nature of the connections between drinking and drugging and risky sex. Researchers who study sex and those who study drugs are just beginning to cooperate in productive ways. They are wrestling with the fact that, especially where sex and drugs are involved, human beings have complicated motivations and drives.

In May, San Francisco's Public Health Department released new statistics about HIV risks among younger gay men. A survey of 474 men in San Francisco and Berkeley between the ages of 17 and 22 revealed 9.4% were HIV-infected; the level was twice this for African-American men. More than two thirds of the participants reported being “high, buzzed, or wired on one or more substances when they had sex in the past six months.”

The clubs are still where it is at. Pot and coke and ecstasy are all around. Nancy Reagan and her cronies can spout slogans until they are blue in the face, but it won't change this. As one wag put it, “Just say no” has done as much for drugs and sex as “Have a nice day” has done for depression.

We can't expect much help from the drug-policy establishment on this score. Just as the gay community banded together to adopt safer sex as a norm, we must continue to care for each other by recognizing forces that threaten maintaining safe behavior in a sex-positive atmosphere.

For too many gays and lesbians, sex and drugs go hand in hand. Sex and drugs must get a divorce, even if they still see each other occasionally as friends. Being high clouds judgment in a way that opens the door for dangerous activity; it provides an excuse for risky behavior. Just as society has finally begun to recognize the dangerous connection between drinking and driving, our community must wake up to the role drinking and drugging play in risky sex.

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