

Homophobia constitutes terrorism

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There is a book I like called "Lesbian Philosophy" by Jeffner Allen. In it, Allen defines "terrorism" as the constant threat of violence against people not because of their individual actions but because of their membership in a group.

To live with terrorism is to know that one may be victimized at any time, seemingly from out of nowhere, just because one is female or black or non-heterosexual, etc., or because one appears to ally oneself with members of such a group, even if one is not a member oneself.

Growing up in Alabama during the 1960s, I lived with terrorism. Obviously there was the terrorism visited upon the black community, such as bombings of black homes and churches. But what affected me most directly as a white child was the less-conspicuous terrorism of harassment, insults, threats and violence against whites who spoke out for civil rights, socialized with blacks or even just treated blacks with respect in public.

White people lived in fear of crossing some invisible line, being somehow

identified with a group despised by white supremacist vigilantes, racist politicians and corrupt police. So most white people, no matter what they felt or believed, kept quiet and kept their heads low.

Terrorism in the South physically and emotionally mutilated black Americans and killed many; terrorism in the South morally mutilated many white Americans. And while it prevailed, it destroyed democracy for us all.

About 10 years ago I decided to have students read Jeffner Allen's book for a class I was teaching. The bookstore stocked 20 copies. Not many were sold. It turned out that students were afraid to be seen buying a copy of a book with the word "lesbian" in the title. Those who did buy it reported being harassed and insulted by other students to the point that they were afraid to carry the book around or be seen reading it. Just doing their homework had suddenly become a politically charged dilemma for them. We talked about it. They realized they were being subjected to a form of relatively quiet but persistent-and-pervasive terrorism.

That was 10 years ago. You might

think things have changed. But just yesterday a librarian told me that some students had requested that the books on homosexuality be moved from their present location — the "H" section by the main stairwell — so that they could look at the books on the shelves without being seen by everyone entering the library stacks. They were afraid of what harm might be done to them if they were in any way identified with homosexuals. And during the same conversation a young professor expressed fear that if she introduced material in her courses that had to do with homosexuality, her student evaluations would suffer and she might not keep her job.

People here — whether gay or straight — are terrified that they will suffer harm if they speak openly about homosexuality, if they seek information about homosexuality, if they just do things that free people in a free society normally do. That is the level of repression that exists here.

It's fashionable to fight terrorism these days — much more fashionable than it was in Alabama in the 1960s anyway. And I'm all for that. To fight

terrorism is to fight for liberty, openness and democracy. But I suggest that we begin at home, that we start by fighting the terrorism that makes so many of us so afraid to be identified in any way with that socially despised and much harassed and maligned group, homosexuals.

Tuesday was National Coming Out Day. We should use that as an opportunity to come out as individuals — gay, straight, and everything else — who affirm sexual diversity, who stand firm with all members of our community including those who are not heterosexual, who will buy books with lesbian in the title, who will look at the "H" section in the library stacks no matter who leers or threatens us, who will introduce material about homosexuality in our courses, who will display a Safe Zone sticker regardless of the department chair's rolling eyes, who will challenge hateful anti-gay comments even if they come from close friends and who will support each other as we take these stands.

In short, let's conduct ourselves as people who love liberty and all that it means.