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The Need to Re-fight Stonewall

By Angela Bowen

Hello, I'm Angela Bowen, a mother and a writer, and I'm really happy to be here today, and I'd like to tell you a story.

When I was a young, married woman with a year-old baby, I moved with my husband to Connecticut to open a dancing school. One day a social worker called to ask if I could find something for a 14-year-old girl to do in exchange for dancing lessons. We met, she started babysitting for our son and eventually began staying late for dinner, and later into the evening, obviously hating to return to her foster home at night. When I finally won her confidence enough to find out she was being physically abused by the woman, who used to beat her with a broom handle, and sexually abused at night by the 55-year-old man of the house (an elder in his church, by the way), I told the social worker, who asked us to take her. After persuading a very reluctant husband, I did. She lived with us till she was grown. She's now a 35-year-old mother of two, and says I gave her love and the first respect she had ever had.

Two years after we got her, my husband's first wife died and we acquired his 11-year-old daughter. I legally adopted her, and raised her until she was grown. She's 30 now, with one child.

Now, I was always the main parent of all the children in our house — but when I took in that foster daughter, I was a new mother with an infant, and I was 27 years old, only 12 and a half years older than the teenager I was raising. But that was okay with the state of Connecticut. They pestered, called and kept pressing for the placement all the while I was trying to convince my husband, and looking for a new apartment so she could have a room. I don't recall any examination, but the social worker was extremely impressed with us: The ideal heterosexual couple with a little baby, and just beginning a business. No experience with raising children, but — no problem — we'd learn.

The judge who awarded the adoption decree for my stepdaughter also thought we were pretty ideal. He especially commented on my strong character. No problem. You see, I was clearly straight, so I had to be okay.

But now, five children later (and after a few thousand that I've taught, as well), if I applied to the Department of Social Services of Massachusetts, I couldn't get a foster child. I'm unfit, says the State. Everything's changed because now I'm aware that I love women. So, all the experience I've gained would be as nothing next to that of a young woman just starting out, as long as she had the shadow of a man beside her — whatever his character — willing or unwilling to open his heart to a child, or lying in wait to assault a child, with his cover of heterosexual respectability saving him from the slightest scrutiny. That's how this homophobic society wastes its resources, by throwing us away and wiping out our lives.

That's how they're trying now to wipe out the lives of two good men. Don and David have lived in a steady and loving relationship for nine years, about five times as long as I'd lived in such circumstances, when the state of Connecticut put a child's life in my hands — a child with a very troubled background, who just happened to trust me enough to allow me to help her. But two little boys who were beginning to build that same trust with two men were snatched away by political cynicism.

Much has already been said about the homophobic action of one particular man and the unprincipled reporter who began this witchhunt. So I won't repeat that. What I want to talk about is the potential solidarity this awful incident offers to us all. If some of us have felt alienated from one another, for whatever reasons, all the various factions of the gay and lesbian community can feel solidarity on this one issue, at least. As can all our principled straight friends, families and political allies.

It's a blessing in a way. Because it's made us remember that we'd better be ever-vigilant — no rest for the weary, you know. Just as pro-choice folks have to refight now the abortion battle we thought we were turning around in the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* victory — *we've got to refight Stonewall*. We've just got to pick our weapons carefully.

Just as Blacks are still waging the war on unequal education we thought was on its way when we won the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, *we've still got to refight Stonewall*.

Just as Mary Francis Berry is scrapping to hold the Reagan-revamped U.S. Civil Rights Commission to some measure of accountability as they deliberately chip away at our hard-won gains, *we've got to refight Stonewall*.

And look at Philadelphia — look at Wilson Goode. He's a perfect example of the need for eternal vigilance! The color of his skin lulled the MOVE people into not maintaining their vigilance. They knew what they were dealing with when they had Frank Rizzo. But they forgot that a person who craves to be accepted by the purported "right" people will go to incredible lengths to be included in their game. *Well, we won't! We won't be Wilson Goode turning our backs on our own humanness! We won't be Wilson Goode, turning our backs on our own kind, either — because it's suicide to believe that they'll leave any of us alone.*

I can stand up here now because I'm not endangered in the sense that my children are biologically and legally mine. Yeah, I've got my kids now, but they could decide to legislate on biological children being endangered by their own parents. Let's face it, if they come for you tonight and I don't stand with you, they'll be back for me tomorrow. Not one of us is safe, in or out of our closets, until each one of us is legally protected.

We were proud enough to come out today to honor ourselves and our own choices. Some of us barely out, scared, but here. Some stepping a bit more firmly each year, and

some of us *waaaay* out there. For myself, I've been sticking my head further out each year, but I feel daring and proud today because I'm speaking for the first time as an openly lesbian woman.

Yes, we're gay and we're proud, and I'm so happy for all of us smart enough to have figured our way past all the obstacles thrown up to prevent us from finding our natural partners in our own particular order of the universe. But let's also be smart enough to get together and *fight, dammit — fight*. We've got to enlist support. And *we fight*. And we're fighting not only for ourselves, but for all those children waiting hopefully for loving homes that we've already proven we can provide.

Fighting was a way of life in the various Roxbury neighborhoods where I grew up. And the kids in my family were not allowed to start a fight. But we weren't allowed to run away from one either. You could lose one, that was okay, *but your adversaries had better know they'd been in one with you*.

Look at the numbers of us here. Now, we didn't start this fight — but we can let them know that they've been in one, right? And the first step is to get registered and be ready for action. Because there is going to be some action!

Before I finish, let me just say that revolutionary movements pass strength to one another, over distance and over time. So I share with you the words and the spirit of a Black transplanted Jamaican poet named Claude McKay. It was written in 1922 and it's called "If We Must Die." Those of us who grew up with these words know that they refer to all who would fight back. And revolutionary that he was, I like to think that if McKay were around today, he would be — like his predecessor, Frederick Douglass — a feminist. So I automatically include women in his exhortations:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs,
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bar the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

This speech was given by Black lesbian Angela Bowen at Boston's Lesbian and Gay Pride march on June 15, 1985.

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