Electronic Conference Proceedings

Closing Comments May 2010

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At the close of this conference there are so many issues on my mind that I’m having some difficulty putting everything in perspective. First, I’m very pleased to be here and I’m extremely pleased that this conference is taking place. Indeed, just the negative stereotypical responses that Louis’ recent MEJ article generated illustrate the need for emphasizing LGBT issues.

In some ways I find it extremely hard to understand homophobic reactions. I realize that some might be the result of classical psychological “reaction formation” very much like the prostitute on the obscenity board, and might also be explained in relationship to an individual’s own conflicts. Regardless, overt hatred is still evident in many parts of society and is manifest in various ways. This “underground homophobia” seems more ubiquitous, deeper and therefore much more troublesome.

Years ago in the State of Florida we had the counterpart of Washington’s Joe McCarthy era in our state senator Charlie Johns. The infamous “Johns Committee” while fervently looking for communists really had a strong propensity for finding homosexuals in the academy. This came to my attention when one of my gay friends was arrested in his home and called me the night he was arrested asking me to teach his class the next morning (and by the way, whenever I hear anyone say: “Some of my best friends are gay, or black, or Muslim, or whatever…….” I always ask: When was the last time you had dinner with that friend. A workplace associate is not a close friend”. This person was a friend who taught our Music for the Elementary Teacher course and I began teaching it the next morning. Actually this was very nice for me. As a band director/brass instructor I found it exciting and subsequently taught the class every semester as an overload for the next ten years—I loved it.

He was not the only person extracted from his job that night. Two other colleagues were also removed—none ever returned. The basic wrongness and injustice of that night has lived with me to this
day. My friend sued and many years later received a settlement from the institution, however, that
damage was irreparable.

As most of you know my personal research orientation concerns what people actually do, as
opposed to “what they say or believe.” I remember how I first thought about this during that episode. I
first asked myself the question: How is it that people become so angry about one’s sexual orientation?
In this regard the entire issue might seem quite minor and I’ve heard some people say: “In a few years
no one will even care.” However, we all know that it is NOT minor and has been the impetuous for
heinous behavior of the highest magnitude, as has been expressed during this conference. Indeed, the
very reason d’être for this conference, as well as most everything discussed here, indicates that we are
not close to being there yet.

I asked a very close friend last week what he could tell me that would help me with my re
sponse to you today, and in the course of our discussion he recounted again how he had actually tried to kill
himself as an extremely lonely gay man in college who felt entirely isolated from everyone. I have known
him for many, many years. His entire life has been devoted to teaching at the elementary level and he is
the best teacher I know and one of the best musicians I know. I remember the first year we meet how
impressed I was with his teaching and I also remember a few years later when he came out to me and
sincerely asked if I thought that he could ever become harmful to children. How tragic—how terribly
tragic.

Research informs us that one of the worst aspects of any kind of prejudice occurs when the
afflicted class starts to believe the lies told about them. And just this last week in Tallahassee one of our
county commissioners made such a dastardly public statement as commissioners were debating passing
an amended discrimination regulation to include LGBT issues—fortunately it did pass. My dear friend
has lived in fear his entire life of beingouted and thereby losing the most important thing he does—
teach children. When I think about all of the hundreds of young minds he has touched and the suffering
he and many others have experienced I resolve anew my determination to fight this injustice.
One of the recurring themes we talked about at this conference has to do with power. While it is axiomatic, I sympathize and appreciate fully those who remind us that the whole of history has been written not only by the conquerors but by all those in power. Thereby the power establishment can always find a way to perpetuate itself. Indeed, history is written by the conquerors, not by those without power. One important exception today is the internet. Yet often internet and blog activities create other problems the worst of which concerns basic truthfulness. Statements can be propagated with little veracity which obliterate or compromise important issues. Unfortunately, this complete lack of control makes some of these blogs reinforcers of pure hate.

Power issues have not only been important historically—even today many people do not fully realize that they were “born on third base.” It is something that I think is very important because I am very fortunate. I should tell you my own biases here. I believe that it is especially incumbent upon me, an old white Anglo-Saxon man, to do something for folks who are not as privileged as I. I try to support and attempt to understand current problems concerning women. And I’ll continue to do it until someone asks a male to be secretary or to serve the coffee—which, by the way, I insist on doing at meetings. And every time I serve coffee and clean up at our weekly Senate Steering Committee meeting I know that however minor the act, I am sending a message. When a person notices my “Safe Zone” sticker which is at eye level when entering my office I know that I am making a small difference. (I’ve also observed that only LGBT folks see it; others just do not notice its being there.) When I talk openly about feminine and masculine stereotypes in all of my classes and the research that indicates the faulty entrenchment of these same stereotypes I know that it matters. I think of the many students I have had who “came out” to me and the struggles they experienced.

I also think that we all ought to be mindful about power issues as white folks in relationship to black folks and white/black folks, in relationship to English as a second language, and so on. For me this also includes children, anyone who is poor and of course any LGBTQ person, who just needs to belong. I continue to ask myself why is it that we do not take the evident opportunities to advocate for others.

Many years ago during another conference on this Illinois campus I told a story that I found in the Chronicle of Higher Education. It was about a young black gay man who had been in a situation...
where James Baldwin had been extolled, and four or five speakers had spoken at great length about Baldwin’s marvelous work, but not one of them ever said that he was gay. And in the Chronicle, as I remember it, this person had said: “That would have been important to me as a young gay person at that time, for someone to have said he was gay.” Again and again I have heard this same story across the past few days.

Some issues concerning power are very subtle and the disinterested do not even realize what it is that they do. For example, the teacher who calls mostly on men but fully intends not to do this—when the person thinks about it—or the music teacher who is not sensitive to young peoples’ perceived tessitura in assigning vocal parts, or the conductor who says something that is supposed to be funny but actually deeply hurts several individuals within the group.

Another aspect that has surfaced during this conference concerns supposed “different” reactions to LGBTQ issues having to do with national geography—this is disconcerting to me. I have lived in various parts of this great country and I have given workshops, spent a good deal of time in systematic observation as well as interacting with persons in almost every single state. It is my observation that one can “find bubba” both benevolent and sometimes vicious within these venues and certainly within as hour’s drive of any large city throughout this nation. I also believe that there is a tremendous amount of latent and even unknown geographical prejudice evident throughout even the most educated among us and it seems to me that this will be the last frontier to be abolished. One indication might be when one says “my investment went north or west instead of my investment went south.” While somewhat trivial it still can represent a general pejorative view of anything “south.” This issue is not unlike other stereotypical responses and the reason I don’t tell music “jokes”—someone always gets hurt.

I want again to reiterate that it is incumbent upon us, those of us who are in power, to help others. I think we should try to be as good mentors as we can. I think those of us who hold a power advantage ought to make sure that we mentor others in the long-term process of research and teaching, and that includes helping them with the fruits of academia, the coin of the realm in all of its forms including promotion and tenure. I am often asked to write concerning promotion and tenure evaluations. I simply cannot do them all. Someone asked how I choose. It’s easy, I do all of the people
who have been traditionally discriminated against 1) women, 2) persons of color, 3) LGBTQ persons—if out and I know who they are and, 4) general music teachers. Then I do the others for which I have time.

I have benefited greatly from the shared experiences of others and realized a long time ago that there are many things we as college professors can do to increase awareness and acceptance of LGBT issues. One very important aspect is to strive to include all allies who attempt to feel the pain of LGBT oppression and rectify historical injustices. Please include all of us who know that this should be a non-issue but realize that everyone has both the responsibility and needs to develop the courage to “stand up and be counted.”

Personally, I have learned to take the natural opportunities that present themselves to talk about these issues in class—especially when unique opportunities present themselves. One of my favorite gay male transgendered students showed up one day in a skirt. I thought it absolutely delightful that he felt comfortable doing it. When one class member said something derogatory about choosing to be gay under his breath, I took the opportunity to discuss it in class and asked that student “When did you decide to be straight?”

It seems to me the most parsimonious explanation for gender identification is that it is normally distributed—that is approximates a stochastic distribution. If one thinks of both male and female persons along a “normal curve” no pun intended, then it is apparent that most folks form the middle of the distribution and are heterosexual—more or less. As one contemplates the slopes from the middle then on one side there would be males who relate to each other; on the other side we would have females that relate to each other. There would also be approximately 14-15% on each side “leaning” toward complete same-sex identification with still fewer who would constitute the 3rd standard deviation (again no pun intended) on each side representing only same sex propensities. This explanation does not argue with “choice versus DNA” it just describes the state of an entire group of peoples’ orientation.

Last summer in England I participated in a very large Gay Parade. Indeed it had a cast of thousands. I used my participation to address LGBT issues in class the next day. In this discussion I
remember one young women who said that she attend some of the parade but when she first saw what she considered as outrageously dressed men, she thought, “That’s really awful but later when she reflected on it that evening she said: “Well, had they been really hot heterosexuals I don’t think I would have had a problem. And when I thought about it even more I decided that I was wrong, they should be able to dress any way they choose.” Since I have been teaching this class for many summers I regularly hand out list safe places recommend by former students as being both safe and interesting for the LGBT students within the class.

I also have learned to make sure that all of my university colleagues are on the same page concerning these issues and how to react to them in class. I think one of the best ways to do this with one’s colleagues is one-on-one with a face-to-face discussion, not in faculty meetings. I must admit however that as Coordinator of Music Education I don’t believe in meetings and even with over 30 faculty members we never meet—and I mean never across over 30 years.

I have learned to tell stories about the hurt and struggles LGBT persons whom I know have shared with me. And if a colleague has not had anyone do this with them yet I attempt to teach them how to become accessible. I assume all of you here do that—seriously and effectively. If one asks me where get started with understanding these issues I say, like the kids, just Google it. Start with the Stonewall movement, Queer Theory, the links will come.

Lastly, I have a personal request to make to all the people here. Please continue to do research about all the myriad issues concerning the LGBT movement. I think research activities that do this will be extremely useful in dissemination, especially qualitative research because it is more easily read and is more accessible and the narrative stories that it tells I think will touch other people’s hearts, minds and souls, in a very substantive manner, as do excellent plays and movies.

I hope that the LGBT movement and the seriousness, with which this conference is taken, can help ameliorate the historical problems assigned to LGBT folks for just being. I have been extremely impressed with what I have seen these past few days. I thank the Universities of Illinois and Maryland for sponsoring this conference and the privilege of my being here to attend it. I have learned a great
deal. I think this conference has found its voice, and thereby has provided the stimulus for an even greater voice in music education. I think it is eventually going to be a powerful voice. I hope that we handle it very well, effectively and gently and in a positive manner. I also hope that we do not become overly divisive from within yet attend to the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of what we are about and not compromise on important philosophical issues.

I’m delighted to have been here, it has been informative and enjoyable, and I do hope that this type of conference will continue—and more importantly make a difference for every young person who is not only struggling with learning music but struggling with unnecessary issues because of who they are. Indeed, every person needs music and they also need us, sometimes LGBT youngsters really need us and we must be there for them in every way possible.

Thank you.

Cliff Madsen