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Gay Rights: Time for a Return to the ACT UP Approach

When the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) organized itself in 1987 to inspire the queer community and others to get involved in HIV/AIDS activism, a simple but powerful adage carried their message far and wide: "Silence = Death." This little phrase became the AIDS mantra of the Reagan/Bush Era and gave ACT UP its fame as the most significant grassroots lobby of that generation. "Silence = Death" was so prolific as a political quip of protest that even still, as I walk about the streets of New York today, I will occa-

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sionally come across some artifact from those days when it was at the tip of everyone's tongue. I've seen remnants of graffiti with which it was etched and sidewalks in which it was carved before the cement set. Yet, the "Silence = Death" consciousness is, these days, noticeably missing from queer political discussions and organizing.

It's time to bring it back.

After the highly-publicized murders of Billy Jack Gaither and Matthew Shepard — as well as many other less publicized but equally gruesome beatings, tortures, and slayings — it seems appropriate to reflect on the ways in which silence and death are related. These murders and beatings should make us recognize that queer people still suffer under the tyranny of silence, especially in places like Laramie, Wyoming and Sylacauga, Alabama.

Judy Shepard, Matthew's mom, speaks of her son as having been someone who wanted to change the way the world reacts to difference. When asked recently if she was surprised to find herself in the role of an activist, she said that one of her reasons for starting a foundation (that will teach the values of diversity and understanding in memory of Matthew) is to spread the message that her son himself tried to share with everyone in his life. Now that his life has been taken from him, Mrs. Shepard is filling his shoes. She says, "He would love to be out there sharing ideas and talking and debating the issues. I owe it to him."

Even though murder does silence those who are killed, as a result of the violence, the rest of us may find ourselves talking more about things previously unspoken. The mother of Billy Jack Gaither told reporters that her son never spoke to her about his being gay. "If he was gay," Marion Gaither said, "he kept it from me." But, Billy Jack's death has provoked the reconsideration in Congress of Federal Hate Crimes legislation that aims to

classify gays and lesbians as a protected group of citizens, to be listed alongside people of color, women, and other minority groups that are already protected under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Justice Department.

We should learn from both of these murders that we cannot allow death to silence us. If we do, the murderers will have actually succeeded. They will have accomplished their goal of scaring us and overwhelming us with their ignoble displays of power.

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How tragic it is, then, that only 500 people participated in a public political funeral for Billy Jack here in New York City on Monday, whereas a similar event after Matthew's death drew nearly ten times that many. Rather than having thoughts of protest etched in our memories or carved in our history, we should be crying out with increasing clamor today. The more deaths there are, the more imperative it becomes for the rest of us to speak out. If our visible numbers decrease with each attack,

then the insufferable isolation that led to Matthew and Billy Jack's murders will put more and more of the world at risk. Nobody will ever feel safe without visible masses of queer people rising up in a unified voice.

Twelve years ago when ACT UP founder and famed author Larry Kramer began to recruit members, he said, "All power is the willingness to take responsibility." In this era, what he said bears repeating. And in connection with recent events, it behooves us to change the balance of power. We must shift power away from the murderers and hate-mongers by taking responsibility for our community and our rights when not one, not two, but hundreds of our own around the world are killed every year.

It is 1999, and in this week's issue of *The Advocate*, Kramer now says of queer people and politics: "I'm worried about too many gay people believing that things are not so bad these days." Things are bad, according to Kramer, because queer people and their allies are too silent. Silence will be the death of our political movement, our loved ones, and ourselves if we don't continue to take increasing responsibility. Now is the time to speak out. Now is the time to remember that silence very truly does equal death!

Frank Morris Susa is a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University. His column is nationally syndicated and runs on alternate Fridays. Copyright Frank Morris Susa, 1999. All rights reserved.

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Frank Morris Susa

Recent events prove that

silence equals death.

Anti-gay murders deserve

a vocal response.