

Oral History Interview: Bayard Rustin

Interviewee: Bayard Rustin

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B: I'm from a publication called *Open Hands*. I don't know if you've seen a copy. We're just a year and a half old. Essentially we developed resources, a resource and educational journal within the church on lesbian and gay issues. And the issue I'm working on right now—we have a national mailing list of about 1,000, and more specifically United Methodist, but we're not too parochial, want to try to open ourselves to other persons, too. And each issue is on a theme. The upcoming issue is on ethnic minority lesbian and gay concerns. And so that was the context in which I asked for the interview with you—

Bayard R: Okay.

Mark B: —looked for the opportunity to do that. A couple things I didn't mention in the letter that I just wanted to check with you, that from our conversation I will develop copy within a couple weeks and send to you, which you can read, and with your approval, and certainly we'd want your approval of whatever we printed, and so that would come to you in a couple of weeks.

Bayard R: Okay.

Mark B: Okay? And I had suggested if we could have a couple, take no more than two hours, I'm sure.

Bayard R: Okay.

Mark B: Is that okay with your schedule?

Bayard R: Yeah.

Mark B: I have sort of three groups of questions. I just wanted to check and make sure they were good for you. First talking about some of your personal experiences, personal stories, and then talking a bit about some of your observation in terms of the Black church and its dealing with issues for lesbians and gay men, and then to get some of your political analysis in terms of the lesbian and gay groups within Black movements. Okay?

Bayard R: Fine.

Mark B: If we could start back at the beginning, just in some of your origins and back in life in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and some of your observations on what you absorbed, spoken or unspoken, about homosexuality, being raised in Black community in West Chester, Pennsylvania in the early 20th century.

Bayard R: Well, my early life was that of being a member of a very, very close family. Pardon me just a minute.

Mark B: Sure.

Bayard R: Are you free now?

Male: No. I'll be back around 3:00. Is that all right?

Bayard R: That's fine.

Male: Okay. I hope it's major writing.

Bayard R: Not really.

Male: Okay.

Bayard R: I was reared in a very secure family, and I was illegitimate. My mother was about 17 when I was born. And consequently, my grandparents reared me, because she was far too immature to do so. And...but I was completely taken in. I was a member of the family. In fact, I was almost 11 years old before I realized my mother was my mother rather than my aunt—I mean, my sister, because I had been reared very closely. In this connection, there was a very free atmosphere. The family were largely, at that period, long before most other families, were Democrats, and my grandmother was one of the leaders of the NAACP. She helped found the Black Nurses Society, the Black community center. So that coming from a very mature family, I don't think that I knew of any homosexuals until high school.

And there were two homosexual boys in the high school. They were rather flamboyant. And the community, I think, looked down on their flamboyance much more than on their homosexuality. And I myself thought that they were fairly outrageous creatures who, you know, did everything they could, it seemed to us, to attract attention in a way which

is not very healthy. I was a member of the football team, championship tennis team, and track team, and most of the talk in the locker room about these boys was—at that time I didn't realize it was as outlandishly inconsiderate as their behavior, as I look back upon it was. But in general, the question, until I went to college, never emerged as a social problem, simply because there were...these youngsters were sort of social outcasts. And I really must point out the distinction between them being judged as gay people. I never heard that discussion. What I heard was why don't these people behave themselves? Why are they always doing something so outlandish? And I myself got caught up in that because I didn't have any better sense at the time than to realize that, well, there must have been some reason why they behaved that way, although I don't quite understand why. But I suppose something was happening in their relationships with people that I didn't know that made them very insecure and unhappy.

But as far as my life is concerned, there was one other thing, and that is that there was one young man who was very highly respected in the community that I can remember as a child hearing whispering about, but I never could put my finger on what it was that made him, in the eyes of people, different. But one of the reasons it was confusing to me was that he was very highly respected. He was a member of the church, he sang in the choir, he played the organ, and he seemed to be such a responsible, talented, and charming person that I could never quite get what it was that was being whispered about him. And I asked my grandmother once and

she said oh, well, he's just a little different than other people, and I wouldn't pay any attention to it. She didn't take it very well. And it was one of the concrete things I did have indicating to me what a wise woman my grandmother was.

On one occasion this fellow was visiting our home, and when he was leaving he put his arms around me and kissed me, which had never happened to me with a man before. And so I said to my grandmother later, when I was discussing him, I said, you know, it's very interesting that this is the second time that he's hugged me and kissed me, and I said it seems very unusual behavior. And my grandmother simply said, well, did you enjoy it? And I said no, I found it a little peculiar. And she said, well, if you didn't enjoy it, don't let him do it. That's all she said.

Mark B: If you don't enjoy it, don't let him do it.

Bayard R: Yeah. And that was the extent of it. Now some years later it was quite clear to me that my family were quite aware, of when I came from college and brought some of my friends.

Mark B: How did your self-consciousness of being a little bit different develop during that time, high school and...?

Bayard R: Well, it didn't really develop in high school because I was very much one of the boys on all the teams and all that sort of thing, and although I felt a certain physical attraction to one or two of the chaps on the team, it never translated itself into any conscious sexual thing. There was particularly

one guy on the team who was not very literary, but who loved poetry, and who really loved to hear poetry read. And occasionally he would slip on by the house and we'd sit in the yard. We had quite a large yard with a big tree in it. And we'd sit under that tree and I would read poetry for him.

And I felt very close to him, but I hadn't yet made a transition from a buddy-buddy who was very important to me, because he was a tackle on the other side of the line in football, and we had to be extremely careful because we were both running guards, and the main plays required his coming over to my side and my going over to his. And you get a certain relationship as young people in that kind of sport, it's that's the essential thing of life. Now it was in college that I came to understand that I had a real physical attraction to a young man, and...although he—

Mark B: Was it someone in particular?

Bayard R: Oh, yes, very definitely. And he used to come home with me at Christmas time. He lived far. He lived in California. We were both at the school, Wilberforce University in Ohio, and we had friends who drove east, but nobody was driving to California, so he used to come home with me for holidays. And I had a bedroom of my own, but it had twin beds in it, and he slept in his bed and I slept in mine. And we never had any physical relationship, but a very intense, friendly relationship.

But at that point I knew exactly what was going on, but I did not feel that I wanted to... Well, I didn't feel that I could handle a physical relationship at that time. And at that time I also felt very, very close to—and almost the

same emotional feeling—to a young woman who was also on campus and with whom I was very friendly. But I never was one of those who went through any trauma about it because by the time I realized what was going on I was also strong enough to keep going down the highway. I sympathize with people who go through big trauma, but I never had to do that.

Mark B: Can you say a little bit more about how it was you handled it? You said you were strong enough that you were able to do that.

Bayard R: Well, as an indication, back to my grandmother really knew because this is related. There was one young man at home, and when I came back from college he was interested in me. And this is what makes me know that my grandmother knew what was happening. She called me into the kitchen one Saturday morning. We always had sort of weekly talks on Saturday morning in the kitchen while we were preparing lunch. And she says, you know, I want to recommend something to you, that in selecting your male friends—that's what she said, male—you should be careful that you associate with people who have as much to lose as you have.

And I said, what do you mean as much to lose as I have? She said, well, you have a very good reputation, so you should go around with people that have good reputations. And you are becoming educated, and you must make friends with people who are educated. You have certain values, and you must make certain that people you go around with hold those values. She says otherwise you can find yourself in very serious trouble because

very often, she said, if they do not have as much to lose as you have, can be very careless in defending you because they are careless in defending themselves. So somehow or other I knew that she was telling me something very important.

Now I think that that kind of family, in which you're pretty certain that everybody knows—there were nine brothers and sisters, although they were all aunts and uncles—they, as it became quite obvious, that I was having affairs with this young man from college, they all sort of approved it. Not that anybody said oh, I think it's a good thing, but they would say oh, Dr. Henderson has invited us over for dinner tonight, and we told him that your friend is here, and they said oh, it's quite all right for him to come. And there was not any foolishness, and yet there was never any real debate of it.

And to this day Walter with whom I live accuses me of not wanting to talk about how I feel and what my reactions to things are. Well, it's really fundamentally because of at home we never had that, the need for that kind of thing, because there are very few [*inaudible*]. So the question you were asking—I've gotten lost, I think—was about my strengths.

Mark B: Right. That you were strong and it just sort of became—

Bayard R: I think that the strength came from knowing that I had a family which understood me, and thereby I was not under any emotional tension to try to deal with things as they came along. I felt that I was deeply loved, deeply appreciated, and, you know, every time we won a football game or

a tennis match or something there would be a big party, and they would invite people in.

Mark B: To jump a few years, you get to New York. And I just recently saw the movie “Before Stonewall” about a year ago, and that talks a lot about the clubs in Harlem in the ‘30s and ‘40s as sort of being meccas for lesbians and gay men. They mentioned a couple of clubs. Was one the Black Cat?

Bayard R: Yes. The Kit-Kat, the Black Cat, or any number.

Mark B: I also read that you sang the blues during that time, so there must have been some interaction for you in that world.

Bayard R: Yeah, well, that’s a totally different world. When I came to New York, after I’d been in college a few years, so I came to live with an aunt who lived on St. Nicholas Avenue, which was at that time the sort of aristocracy of Blacks. It was called Sugar Hill.

Mark B: Sugar Hill?

Bayard R: Yeah. That’s where the Black doctors and lawyers, professionals, and ministers, that represented the Black aristocracy, really. In the Black aristocracy, there were a great number of gay people. And unless they...and so long as they did not, I mean, well, publicize their gayness there was no discussion of it. A number of the poets, authors, musicians were gay, and as you say, the clubs made little distinction. In that early period there were no gay clubs because there didn’t need to be. The gay

clubs came later. The gay clubs came along in World War II and after. But up until that time there was absolute acceptance in the ordinary clubs.

Now I think that the Black community has been perfectly willing to face the gay elements in the Black community as long as those gay elements did not pretend to be gay. It was later, when the gay clubs came, and gay people wanted the right to be gay and to come out of the closet and all that that I think in some respects the Black community can be quite as difficult as the White community. For example, in the gay community any number of ministers are gay, and any number of church organists and choirmasters and the like. And so long as it's quiet and respectable, as it were, they were accepted. But no matter how respectable and decent they were, if they wanted to declare their gayness, it made problems.

Mark B: Why is that, in your observation? Why is it that that caused problems?

Bayard R: Well, I just think the community felt that we have, as Blacks, so many problems to put up with that we—and we have to defend ourselves so vigorously against being ignorant, being irresponsible, shuffling, etc., etc., there is so much prejudice against us, why do we need the gay thing, too? I remember on one occasion somebody said to me, goodness, gracious, you're a socialist, you're gay, you're Black, how many more jeopardies do you want? And you're politically progressive. It's enough. Well, I found that also later in regard to some of my experiences in the civil rights movement, that people were perfectly willing to accept me as long as basically I didn't declare myself gay.

Mark B: Through those years—and actually, I'll follow up to that in just a minute with a couple questions about that—but during those, were there any gay role models for you in those years in New York? And maybe other people who have been important in your life, Randolph and King and other people, were there any role models that you thought that you saw in terms of other Black gay men?

Bayard R: Yeah, there were a couple of very, very remarkable Black people who were gay and who...they were people who were writers and musicians, and whose homes I visited. I knew they were gay. They're gay. There was never any discussion of it, but I knew they were. They were living with other men, and they had parties and social affairs that were largely attended by men and gay women. But it was quite interesting that the women were really more interested in the women, the men were more interested in the men, although everybody was friendly.

But I must say to you that I, either because of the nature of the work I was doing, which meant that I was spending a great deal of time with really important people like Dr. King, and most of the gay people I was very closely associated with were largely literati or musicians, meant that there would have been much criticism of them in the general community if they had not been musicians or writers and poets. But somehow or other the community, American society, seemed to accept gayness on the part of stage people, literati and writers as being par for the course. And I would say that while people like Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and the earlier leaders

of the civil rights movement were people I looked forward to most of all, I also looked to some of the others, some of the gay artists.

Mark B: You were sort of plopped in the middle, because you had some musical background, but you weren't one of the literati and were in the other—

Bayard R: Right.

Mark B: So how did that tension play out for you?

Bayard R: Well, there wasn't any tension because I sang with Josh White, and [inaudible] and Mary D. Williams, and Tatum, the pianist, as fellow musicians who were appearing on the programs at various places where I was really making a living to pay my way through college. I was young during the day, and they considered me a bright college kid working his way through school. They wanted to be friendly and do everything they could to be helpful. And it was all very, very, very friendly.

And of course most of those people obviously knew, because I think people who have been around gay people have a certain telegraph system that goes on between them, as gays have a telegraph system amongst themselves. They do. But people in the theater and artists, it didn't bother them.

Hall Johnson, who was gay, and probably the most important Black musician who was responsible for most of helping train people like Leontyne Price and all kinds of other opera singers, was the inspiration for Leonard De Paur and many other musicians, was, I think, probably the key

role model for me. I used to go to his apartment. It was never a hangout for gays. It was a hangout for musicians and artists, and if you were gay—and there were many of us—they were there, too. But, I mean, it wasn't like a gay hangout. It was a hangout for artistic people.

Mark B: As you started moving into the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a lot of work in that, did it begin to feel like a double life to you? I mean, here there was this circle of musician friends that you traveled with but yet you said you were really spending more and more of your time involved within a ministry.

Bayard R: No. In fact as I look back upon it now, I feel that the...it was amongst the Fellowship people that you had more hypocrisy, and more so-called love and affection, and nonviolence toward the human family. It was there that I found some of the worst attitudes to gays. And particularly after when working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation was arrested in California in what they called a morals charge. They called it a morals charge. I have never called it a morals charge.

Mark B: [*Laughs.*] Of course not.

Bayard R: The people in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, many of them were absolutely intolerant in their attitudes. And I lost my job there because there was a concern on the part of these nonviolent Christians, and with all their love and affection for humanity, they were not able really to express very much affection to me during that period wherein members of my family, a couple of them who had actually been in the war, and who could

not quite understand the pacifist attitude of my friends or mine in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, they were absolutely completely loving and accepting. And so I think there may not be a relationship between people's philosophy and how they live that philosophy when they are faced with a person accused of a homosexual relationship.

Mark B: So you lost your job at the Fellowship related to the arrest in California?

Bayard R: Oh, yes.

Mark B: Okay.

Bayard R: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. And it was interesting that religious pacifists would not then give me a job, but the nonreligious pacifists in the War Resisters League offered me a job. Interesting commentary.

Mark B: Yeah. I know I've read that later it became, particularly more in the early '60s, at one point Adam Clayton Powell threatened to expose you, and J. Strom Thurmond did, also—did so on the floor of Congress make accusations about you. Did you experience a lot of other incidents like that during the '50s and '60s?

Bayard R: Well, not only during the—yes. For an example, Martin Luther King, with whom I worked very closely, became very distressed when a number of the ministers working with him wanted him to get rid of me. And Martin set up a committee to discover what he should do, and when the committee came in and said, well, we think despite the fact that Bayard has contributed tremendously to your organization—I drew up the plans

for the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and did most of the planning and fundraising for it in the early days—despite that, when Martin got criticism from a number of places, he set up this committee, and these committee people came to me and told me that they thought that I should separate myself from Dr. King.

Mark B: When was this, late '50s?

Bayard R: I don't know. Yes, late '50s. This is the time when Powell, late, this is about 1960, actually. And Powell threatened to expose my so-called homosexual relationship with Dr. King. Well, the fact of the matter is there was no homosexual relationship with Dr. King, and yet Martin was so uneasy about that that I said well, look, I don't want Dr. King to have to dismiss me, I'll leave if I'm going to be a burden. I've come here to help, and if I'm going to be a burden, then I'll leave.

But there's a new book now on Dr. King, and the book was filled with a discussion of Dr. King feeling at one minute that because of all this he had to get rid of me and then the next minute he was calling me in and asking me to do something. So while in 1960 he felt very under pressure about working with me, in 1963, of course three years later, then I organized The March.

Mark B: Did Dr. King ever address this with you personally?

Bayard R: Yeah, we discussed it, and I think he was ashamed of the fact that he was under these pressures, but I think also—

Mark B: He was ashamed to be...?

Bayard R: Dr. King was under pressure from a number of people about his own sex life, and I think he thought that was enough to have to deal with, so I can understand that.

Mark B: During those tumultuous times when your private life threatened to be exposed, how did you deal with that? How did you relate to that? Who did you find support from?

Bayard R: Well, I got support—when Strom Thurmond stood in the Congress as a senator in June of '63 and denounced the March on the basis that I was organizing it. Called me a communist, a sexual pervert, a draft dodger, etc. Mr. Randolph called all the Black leaders and said I want to answer Strom Thurmond's attack, but I think we ought not to get involved in a big discussion of homosexuality or anything like it. So what I want to do, with the approval of all the Black leaders, is to issue a statement, and that statement says we, the Black leaders of the civil rights movement, and the leaders of the trade union movement, and the leaders of the Jewish, Protestant and Catholic church which are organizing this march have absolute confidence in Bayard Rustin's ability and his integrity, and his commitment to nonviolence as the best way to bring about social change. He will continue to organize the march with our full and undivided support.

Now, he said, I'm going to call a press conference and say this on behalf of everybody—Walter Reuther, Rabbi Pinz, all Black leaders, the Bishop

of Washington, the Catholic who was on our committee, and the head of the World Council of Churches, who's also on the committee. And said if any of you are called, I do not want any discussion beyond that—is he a homosexual, has he been arrested, da-da-da—we simply say we have complete confidence in him, and for his integrity to do this. Well, the *New York Times* ran an article on it, and there was complete unity, so that the question of homosexuality was simply absorbed, not on the basis of we don't want to discuss it, but on the basis, well, it has nothing to do with it.

Someone came to Mr. A Philip Randolph and said, do you know that Bayard is a homosexual? Do you know that he's been arrested in California? Do you know he's been arrested in New York? Well, *nye-nye-nye-nye*. And I don't know how you could have anybody who's a homosexual working for you. Mr. Randolph said, now are you sure all those things are true? The other man said, they are all true and worse; I won't even go into all of them with you. And Mr. Randolph said, well, well, well, if Bayard is a homosexual and is that talented in all the work he does for me, maybe I should be looking for somebody else homosexual who can be so useful. Of course he just undid the whole...

I'm sure that Mr. Randolph would not have approved. He was a man almost 90 when he died. I'm sure that he would not have overcome all the prejudices of his generation to gays. But he was such a completely honest person who wanted everyone else to be absolutely honest, that if I had been a homosexual and not admitting it, I had gone to Mr. Randolph and

said Mr. Randolph, do you think I should openly admit that I am homosexual, his attitude, I am sure, would have been it will make problems for you, but you would be happier in the long run. That was his... Because his idea was you have to be what you are.

And one of the reasons I've never had any of this tension, I think, was I was never trying to hide it. I mean, I wasn't pristine pure. I didn't exactly walk out with a flag, with flags flying. I was sort of dragged out screaming, but you know, I was right.

Mark B: You were involved in many different human and civil rights groups in the '40s, '50, '60s.

Bayard R: Oh, yes.

Mark B: Did any of them at least begin to internally think about lesbian and gay rights and what was across the board never considered.

Bayard R: After my arrest, [I tried my focus]—

Mark B: The arrest in California?

Bayard R: Yes, I guess in '53. I tried to get the Black community to face up to the fact. Well, one of the reasons that some homosexuals went to the kinds of places where they could be arrested was simply because they were not welcomed. And always the feeling was like, well, now Bayard, we understand, we know who you are, and we know what you are, but you're really different. And I would say look, I don't want to hear that shit. I want you to do something to get some attitudes changed here. But they never

have been, and it's very difficult now, even on the question of the Black community doing something constructive about AIDS.

I wrote a letter to about 15 or 20 Black leaders saying AIDS is devastating the Black community, and I would like cooperation from you setting up some kind of a national conference of Black [inaudible] and the only one who responded [inaudible]...that doesn't mean I'm going to let it go. But you see how difficult, in fact, this is.

Mark B: During the late '60s you were...during the mid and late '60s you were sort of increasingly marginalized from the mainstream of Black political leadership and the Black power movement, from what I've read, because some of your policies were not where the mainstream was going. How much of that do you think had to do with your being gay?

Bayard R: None.

Mark B: None?

Bayard R: Yeah, I think the fact is by Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young all face the same problems as I faced at that point. It had nothing to do with their sex. It had to do with the fact that we were being faced now with a new Black leadership focused around Malcolm, Rap Brown and the others, and that they were proposing things that the established leadership, Dr. King, was, of course, even on the eve of his death was extremely unpopular with the people of SNCC and CORE and the Black Power movement, Malcolm X and all of them. Malcolm responds to Martin

Luther King's speech, "I Have a Dream," with very a simple one. He says okay, the pastor's got a dream he gave, and it'll be a nightmare in a few years. And that was his view. So that nobody jumped on me particularly because of my gayness. None of the articles [*inaudible*] on the side. Matter of fact, I spoke at a gay rally.

Mark B: When was that?

Walter N: Are you talking about the one last year?

Bayard R: Yeah.

Mark B: But it's last year?

Walter N: Last summer.

Bayard R: And there was a tremendous leaflet for that by some gay guy attacking me. What was he attacking me about?

Walter N: [*inaudible*]

Bayard R: Well, have you got the...?

Walter N: Yeah.

Bayard R: We have a copy of that leaflet. He might be interested to see it.

Walter N: A guy from the Communist Party who was acting out...

Mark B: Trash.

Walter NL Well, no, but I mean, you know, arguing some of Bayard's political views...some of his targets were reasonable, some of them were not.

Bayard R: And you might be interested to see that, because it's not only—in fact, some of the most vicious attacks that they made upon me have been made by gays who didn't mention the gayness.

Mark B: Are you talking about Black gay men, White gay men, or both?

Bayard R: I'm talking about in the Black civil rights movement.

Mark B: Okay.

Bayard R: I won't pull names because I don't like to do that.

Mark B: Sure. That's fine.

Bayard R: But two or three of the attacks that were made upon me by Blacks were made by gays. But there again, they didn't attack me because I was gay, they attacked me because I took a different political position than theirs in regard to how the problems could be solved.

Mark B: Mm-hmm. Looking back at the whole... in hindsight would you say in what ways did your being a gay man affect the person that you are, and the person that you have been—political views, social views, economic views?

Bayard R: Oh, I think it affected who I am very much, because I think when one has been... Being gay has affected my political life very much, not from the point of view that I was brutalized by the fact, but because when you are being attacked for something like being gay, it sensitizes you to a greater understanding of whoever is attacked, for whatever reason, and you realize the damage that being attacked can do to people. And therefore it makes

one very sensitive that one does not get involved in any ad hominem arguments in dealing with people.

I think it's quite all right that people should blast me for my politics when they disagree. That's their obligation. They should blast me if I carry on strategies or tactics to achieve an objective which are unsound. But to attack anybody because he's Jewish, or Black, or a homosexual, or a woman, or Korean, or that he recently came to this country, or...and he has big hair, and he speaks differently, or that he doesn't speak well, or that he doesn't have enough money to wear decent clothes, that he lives, because he's poor, in a slum, attacking people for any of these reasons is just, to me, all the more terrible because I know what it is to be attacked.

So it's been helpful. And it's given me a certain sense of obligation to other people, and it's given me a maturity, as well as a sense of humor, because I sometimes think of some of the really untalented, sad people who have attacked me who have nothing to pull from. And I find this almost an amusing irony about it.

One of the people—you were talking about a role model earlier—I think the best, the most helpful Black man in the Renaissance, the Black Renaissance in the '20s and '30s, the most important literati was a professor at Howard University whose name was Alain Locke. And I got to know Alain Locke pretty well. He was quite gay. And always had open house for...

Mark B: In New York or in—

Bayard R: In New York and in Washington. Had open house. But he spent a lot of time in New York. He had an apartment here. Open house for young people, like young Langston Hughes, from that period all the way through to Richard Wright, when he was young, all the young aspiring artists. And I think... And when it comes to gayness, he probably was more of a male role model for me than anybody else, in three respects: that he never felt it necessary to discuss his gayness; that he was always a friend to those who were aspiring to be writers, therefore he universalized his affection for people; and thirdly, that he carried himself in such a way that the most people could say about him was that he was gay, not that he was mean, miserable, not that he was unkind.

So in our time it is very important, if one is a member of a minority group, that one feels secure himself, and one limits, to the degree that he can, the attacks that can be made upon one by simply being a very, very decent human being. And I shall never forget once, at a meeting, a chap from the Fellowship of Reconciliation accused me of impairing the morals of minors, and that the Fellowship of Reconciliation should not permit me to have an association with these young pacifists. A young man who named [*unaudible*] stood up at this meeting and said something which was so amazing I have never forgotten it.

He said, all this useless and dangerous talk about Bayard Rustin impairing morals of minors. He said, I want this group to know, and I am now 21, that I went to bed with Bayard Rustin last year, and it was the culmination

of five years of the most profound and deep friendship and love that I have ever known. And I am not homosexual, and I will marry, and I promise you now if my first child is a boy, I will name him Bayard Rustin. And [I remember he told me] I learned so many important things from him, and that's the reason I want my firstborn named Bayard. And he did it. Now that took a tremendous amount of nerve—

Mark B: It sure did.

Bayard R: —on his part. And he did exactly...

Mark B: I didn't have this question down. If you had to do it all over, if you had to live life again knowing what you know now, would you want to be gay the next time around?

Bayard R: I think that if I had a choice I would probably elect not to be gay because I think that I might be able to do more to fight against the prejudice to gays if I weren't gay, because some people will say, well, he's simply trying to defend himself and his kind. But that's the only reason. It's the only reason. Because I want to get rid of all kinds of prejudices.

And quite frankly, one of the prejudices which I find most difficult is a prejudice that some Black homosexuals have to White homosexuals, some prejudice Oriental homosexuals have for everybody but Oriental homosexuals, and certainly the tremendous amount of prejudice that some White gays have to Blacks. And the reason this is sad to me is not that I expect homosexuals to be any different, basically, than any other human

being, but it is sad because I do not believe that they know that it is not prejudice to any one group that is the problem, it is prejudice itself that is the problem, and that by their expressing their prejudice to other gays who are not just like them, that they are in fact perpetuating the problem of prejudice, and then it will undoubtedly do something to them.

And that brings me to a very important point. People who do not fight against all kinds of prejudice, and become indifferent to prejudice and bigotry, are doing three terrible things. They are, first of all, perpetuating harm to others. Secondly, they are denying their own themselves, because every heterosexual is a part of homosexuality, and every homosexual is a part of the so-called straight world. Because every human being is an aspect of every other human being, and to deny that is in fact self-denial. And any human being that I harm by my bigotry, I am at the same time harming myself because I'm part of that person. And then finally, every indifference to prejudice is suicide because if I don't fight that bigotry it will be strengthened, and sooner or later, by the nature of bigotry, it will turn on me.

And I think that one of the things we have to be very careful of in the gay community is that we do not, under any circumstances, permit ourselves to hold onto any indifference to the suffering of any other human being. The homosexuals who did not fight Hitler's prejudice to the Jews finally got it. Now they may have gotten it anyhow, but when the Gestapo came up the stairs after them, they would have died knowing that they were human

beings rather than to die knowing that they might have saved themselves this monstrousness if they had only fought when the Jews were being murdered.

Mark B: Are you hopeful for the human race? Do you think prejudice will be overcome? Do you think it's improved in your lifetime?

Bayard R: Oh, I think it's improved some places and it's gotten worse others. But I have learned a very significant lesson from the Jewish prophets. If one really follows the commandments of the Jewish prophets, the question of hopeful or nonhopeful becomes secondary almost to the point of insignificance because they taught—and I put this in the religious context; it can be put in a nonreligious context—but they taught that God does not require us to achieve any of the good tasks that humanity must pursue. What the gods require of us is that we not stop trying.

And therefore I do not expect that we can do anything more than reduce prejudice to a minimum, and that we have a responsibility to try to bring about economic and social conditions which try and reduce it to a minimum. As long as there's this much unemployment amongst Blacks, and poor Hispanics, and poor Whites, you're going to get Howard Beaches. You may get Howard Beaches anyhow, but you will certainly get them when there is this much unemployment amongst youth. They will prey on each other. Secondly, we can try to deal with problems and injustice by setting up a legal structure which outlaws them and causes

people to be punished if they engage in them. There's a third way, and that is what I'd call the way of reconciliation.

Walter N: Excuse me. Could you talk...for a minute?

[Break]

Mark B: Let's start with reconciliation.

Bayard R: The point [is] reconciliation, and it grows out of the first two points. And that is if you can get enough law, and if you can get an economic structure, then you can get people to live together in harmony, to go to school together, to have in common meetings that they attend together peacefully like parent-teachers' associations, and you can have them cooperating in the workforce, then there is a deep learning process in which new stimuli create new responses.

Now those are the three ways in which you can try to deal with prejudice. But it is also very important to recognize that as one attempts to deal with it, that the individual is always central because if you ask, you know, like which came first, the chicken or the egg, you will never know. But if you raise the question what is more important to bring about changes in society, changed individuals or changed social structure, the answer to that is very simple. Because if you don't start out with individuals who are determined to change the thing, you will never get a political consensus that means you can then find law or social circumstances or economic

circumstances which make these three things possible. So this is all very important, and this is extremely important.

Now, I just want to say a word, while I'm on this, of the uniqueness of the gay community today. The gay community has now become the most important element when it comes to answering the question which you have raised about hope. Because the gay community today has taken over where the Black community left off in '68, '69. In those days Black people were the barometer of social change, Black people were the litmus paper of social change. Because at that time if a person was prepared to accept Blacks, then it followed almost like night follows day that that person was prepared to look at Jews, and Catholics and other things.

Today the gays have taken over, because it is now the central problem, and if people, if you want to go to the bottom line, if they cannot accept gays, they will not be able to accept anybody. There are plenty of people who accept Blacks and Hispanics and others, but who will draw the line. And unfortunately, a great deal of the church leadership today, including a man like Archbishop O'Connor, whom I happen to respect in most regards, is just completely so wrong on this question.

Mark B: Let's just sort of move into the political arena. In '76 [*inaudible*] was that the liberal concern with Vietnam, environmental issues, feminist issues, in some ways ended up proving detrimental to the Black liberation movement and Black social and economic progress. Have you seen that the development of lesbian and gay concerns in the movement in the '70s

had perhaps in the same way been detrimental to the development of Black liberation?

Bayard R: No, for exactly the reason I've just given, that... Well, to put it even in starker terms, there are plenty of people, Black and White, who are absolutely for racial equality, but they're not for equality for gays. And these are Black people as well as White. There are very few liberal Christians in the United States who would dare say anything other than that the Blacks are our brothers and must be treated so, but they will make all kinds of invidious distinctions when it comes to are gays our brothers and ought to be treated so. I don't know if you've been reading about the bishop, the Catholic bishop in Newark. There's a Catholic bishop in Newark—

Mark B: Oh, okay.

Bayard R: —who has now said that men and women who are unmarried and who have no intention to marry, but want to live together, should be given a special blessing by the church, just to recognize us now there's so many thousands of them. And he said the same is true of the church. It must now be prepared to give its blessing to homosexual marriages. He says our church is willing to send priests to bless dogs that are going on fox chases, but we are not willing to give the church's blessing to a man and a man who are trying to live together in love and affection? He says there's something wrong.

Well, I want to tell you great numbers of people who will accept all kinds of people—Blacks, Hispanics, Jews—will not accept that. That is what makes the homosexual central to the whole political apparatus as to how much further we can go in human rights. Now in that regard, that means there must be, amongst gay people themselves, tremendous political activity. And that means now that we have not only one good reason for gays coming out of the closet, which is that they have to...they cannot really respect themselves unless they're willing to say to other people exactly who they are, but there's now an additional reason why they must come out of the closet, and that is they have to come out and help carry on the real political struggle that can only be carried on when gays start it themselves, because if you do not fight for yourself in a very vigorous way, you cannot expect anybody to join in a fight for you.

Mark B: What do you think are some of those appropriate, most effective kinds of political action today for gays? What are the parts that need to be pushed?

Bayard R: Well, I think gays should join the fight. And this seems indirect, but it's a very important one. They must lend themselves to the fight for ERA, equal rights for women, because in the meantime they'll be doing...they'll be liberalizing the country, you see. Certainly I think that gays should organize in every city in the country for a law for equal rights for gays, which is a fight that took five years, six years in New York City. Thirdly, I think the gays must be deeply involved in the AIDS campaign, not merely because gays are struck down by it, because it's only now that gays are

being more struck down. In another five years they will not be the main target. But there is such a thing as nobody respects you unless you are first of all respecting yourself. You go back to the old Hillel saying, if I am not for myself, who am I? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? That's a bad paraphrase, but it's the general idea. So there's no such thing as gays working for something over there if they're not also working for themselves.

I think in addition the gay community must fight for the economic growth for full employment, fuller employment, and must fight with the nations who are taking responsibility for finding work for the uneducated, and the poor, and the ignorant, and untrained as we bring in automation, cybernation and so forth. Because you cannot do away with prejudice in economic disorder, and a great deal of that economic disorder will be directed to us. When young people have no jobs, and when they have no training, and are ignorant, then I can tell you they're going to prey on what are considered "questionable," quote, elements in the society. They're gonna jump on Niggers, they're gonna jump on faggots, they're gonna jump on Jews, they're gonna jump on the poor Koreans who are trying to make a living by opening up greengrocers. And therefore there's a very vested interest in doing away with economic disorder, not merely for ourselves, but first of all for ourselves, because people will prey on us if they don't have the jobs. And secondly, because we care about them, and we want people [*inaudible*]. The agenda is there.

Mark B: What about, you know, you've written about the development of the Black civil rights movement, periods of social protest, political action, talked about political action for the gay and lesbian community. There's also energy going into social protests, and the one example is a national march on Washington being planned for October. Do you think social protest is an effective part of the lesbian and gay movement at this point?

Bayard R: I think that I'm always opposed to marching for marching's sake. Now I was opposed to the marching into that county in Georgia. I was opposed to marching over here. Always in Black history, marching was important when it was for a particular thing, not against prejudice. The first major march was in 1941, led by Mr. A. Philip Randolph, to get [*unaudible*]. The second major march was in 1957, to get rid of discrimination in the armed forces. We marched to get a civil rights bill. We marched to get a voter rights bill. We marched to get the education bill. We marched to get the housing bill. When you march for a given thing that the state, the city, the society can in fact produce. Now the other place where you could march is to build a consensus for a central demand. But you can't march against prejudice. You can march, but what good would it do?

Mark B: So what's your advice for the national march in October for lesbians and gays?

Bayard R: My argument is that if it is a march which says we march because we are calling upon the American people, wherever they are, to see to it that in their town, in their state, in their county, there is a bill to give absolute

rights to gays, that gays will be included in all of the legislation for equality—fine...but just to march...

The other thing is I think we have to be very careful. We have no right to tell gay people how to live their lives. But there are certain rules that apply if you're going out into the larger society in terms of marches. One is that they be very orderly. One is—and here you get into very difficult ground—that people should act like human beings, and that they not use, in the march, any tactics which are designed to inflame people against gay people. You get what I mean. I think we have to be very careful about that, because a march to achieve some specific human right must not be mistaken for the annual Halloween parade in which you can be as carefree as you want. That's what it's designed for, right?

Mark B: Right.

Bayard R: But no Halloween parade is going to contribute to our getting equal rights.

Mark B: Right.

Bayard R: Because it emphasizes differences which are not even gay differences. Look at the number of heterosexual men and female who in their own way camp. But if they're going to go out to achieve some particular objective, you can't be.

Mark B: Do you have any observations, just looking historically at the Black civil rights movement, and lesbian and gay civil rights movement, where have there been similarities, where have there been points of differences?

Bayard R: Well, I think the moral question is similar. But after you get beyond that question I think there are not many similarities. The gay community is not a community which looks any one way. It is not a community which behaves in any one way. We even say Blacks all look Black—which is not true, but people think so—and they have certain things you can point to which—well, they were once slaves, they were once uneducated. Gays tend to belong to the, for some reason or other, the more educated, college trained groups in this country. Now not all gays are that.

Mark B: At least those who are more visible.

Bayard R: The visible gays are. And there are good reasons for that. It is far harder to pin down who they are. And the prejudice, frankly, very often is much deeper. Now the reason the prejudice is much deeper is that those who fight gays have carried on a propaganda which strikes deeply at the most fundamental concerns of our society, and the anti-gay propaganda has been directed to the gay being destructive to those fundamental principles. They will say humanity must have the family, and the gays are, whether they know it or not, anti-family; the society only advances as there are children, the gay will not produce children; the society will only exist as long as there is a high standard of moral behavior, the gays are pictured as running around fucking everybody in sight, and not concerned with anything other than their own immediate pleasure and satisfaction. Now you and I know that all of that is crap. The gay is looked upon, as a result of these other things, as being an unstable element when what you need in

the society is stability. The propaganda against us has been carefully designed.

Now the final thing is that segments of both the Old and the New Testament have denounced homosexuality as an abomination. Now when anyone went through the scriptures and picked out little pieces of this or that, it's almost possible to make of anybody something horrible. You know, those who believe you shouldn't have anything to drink find the little place in the Bible that justifies it. Those people who want to drink will quote St. Paul as saying a little wine is good for my stomach's sake. I mean, you can just piece through this and find anything. People pick out what they want. Moses set up the dietary laws. Well, the only Jews who pay any attention to the dietary laws now are the Orthodox. And you don't read them out of Judaism because at one point Moses talked about not mixing milk and meat in the same pot. But that's a very compelling thing for something people. It's just ungodly.

Now, the people who want to carry on racial prejudice will no longer talk about this is the way that God wants it. That's all shit now. But people will tell you that it is ungodly and destructive. That's all that I mean when I say homosexuality has now become the barometer, and the litmus paper of human rights attitudes and social change.

Mark B: So to sort of moving over to church, let's talk about that a bit. What role do you see the church playing in the developing lesbian and gay rights

movement? Will it continue to be a follower? Do you see it perhaps being able to be a leader at some point?

Bayard R: Oh, I think the church can be. Now where the church will stand firm it will be more important than any other institution because that's getting at the problem at the third level I talked about, reconciliation. I think the government gets at the first level, that is, to establish under law that people are equal, and to punish people who do not...who mistreat. The third area, as I pointed out earlier, is creating the kind of economic and social conditions where people do not need to prey on other people because they are...they perceive themselves as people in their own being.

It's a terrible thing when people do not look upon themselves—and this is one of the big problems of gayness, that I don't know how people can truly respect themselves as long as they are hiding their gayness. Now by this I don't mean that I expect everybody to go out and scream, you know I'm gay, any more than I would expect heterosexuals to go out and continuously announce well, I'm heterosexual, you know. But you know what I mean when I say not to obscure it, not to attempt to live an untruth, because that creates also internal tensions.

Mark B: Yeah, I had a final question I wanted to cover, but you talked a bit about the Black community's response to AIDS and some of your efforts there. Are there any other comments on that?

Bayard R: Well, I would say that I think I know why the Black community wants to avoid. The argument is oh my god, we've got so much against us, and we

have so many problems to deal with, we need to be spending our time dealing with unemployment, we need to be spending our time getting rid of dope. [inaudible]. It is dope that is one of the real causes of AIDS. Or they will argue we have such an edu—the kids can't be properly educated. We've got to do something about the school system. Well, my argument is you have to do something about everything that needs something to be done. [yawns] [Pardon me...]

Mark B: Sleepy time of the afternoon. I know the feeling.

Bayard R: That's right. There's only one way out.

Mark B: We really covered most of the things I wanted to talk about. Are there any other comments that you have or...?

Bayard R: Well, I...

Mark B: Thank you very much for your time.

01:36:51 [End of recording.]