

A New Name for Hate Crimes

It's time to change the terms of engagement.

by JON WILSON

The repugnance of the two most notorious hate crimes this year leaves me almost incapable of finding any hope and possibility in them. This is the challenge of bigotry gone totally mad. Maybe it's my deep aversion to bullies, but I think it's time we gave hate crime a new appellation: one that calls forth disgrace, not honor. After all, the perpetrators of these crimes are proud of their

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hatred, and of the power they believe it accords them. The news about Matthew Shepard, the college student in Laramie, Wyoming who was allegedly lured to a pickup truck, driven to the edge of town, brutally beaten, and left for dead by two young men—merely because he was a homosexual—is just the most recent

appalling example. It echoes the equally horrific dragging death last summer—behind another pickup truck—of James Byrd, Jr., in Jasper, Texas. To his tormentors, Mr. Byrd was of no more significance than a hay bale because he was an African American. Perhaps his desire for alcohol and companionship obscured his sense of caution that day.

These are the kinds of murders we call "senseless." As if the extinguishing of a life ever makes sense. The problem is that, sickening as it is for you and me, there's no disgrace in hate crime for the bigoted and benighted. Most of them feel, I presume, that they're doing their country a service; that people who are different are dispensable. But we should examine an important truth: We may be inadvertently dignifying hate

crime by giving it a name that, for some, means "good job!"

In the hours following Matthew Shepard's death, Wyoming's citizens were reflecting on the character of their beloved state. But Wyoming's character isn't in question, any more than that of Texas is, or New York, or Connecticut, for that matter. An act of hate is ultimately an individual one, like an act of love—except that acts of hate are so easily influenced by the incendiary words and actions of others. Legislation has now come before Congress, and the assault on a person because of his or her sexual orientation will finally become a federal offense, like that involving a racially motivated one. This is good, and overdue, but federalizing the crime will do little to solve the underlying problem, because bigots are hardly more afraid of federal laws than state laws, and some are less so. A law requiring background checks and waiting periods on buyers of pickup trucks might have as much effect.

We need a new name because hatred grows in places that legislation doesn't reach. Hate crimes thrive on an absence of understanding and empathy—which is why it's time to call them what they really are: crimes of *ignorance*. And ignorance, after all, is not an easy thing to take pride in, no matter what your prejudice. The moment we call it what it is, we extract from the perpetrators their pride of hate, which is the very essence of their dreadful courage. And suddenly what was unconquerable is within striking distance. Where hatred itself is almost unassailable—we do reserve the right to our loves and hates, after all—the battle against ignorance is one we can fight. We can challenge prejudice at the earliest opportunity by designing courageous role-playing exercises in elementary schools. We can make honest dialog about bias, belief,

and preconception a requisite part of the curriculum for every grade in school. And we can insist that our media explore the roots of bigotry as if a solution were fundamental to the future of our civilization. We *must*, for the fact that crimes of such medieval atrocity can occur at the dawning of the twenty-first century should be nothing short of staggering to us. Ignorance is something we can change from the outside. Hate crime is too gentle a term. Let's spread the word: These are crimes of ignorance.

Speaking of getting the word out, as Kim Ridley mentions in her Editor's Page, we're changing *Hope's* frequency to quarterly for a year or so, and here's why: In our nearly three years of issues, we've been working at focusing on what readers want and need. This summer we mailed a survey to a number of subscribers, inquiring into how we were doing. The responses told us much about how to direct *Hope* in a way that is more compelling, relevant, practical, and inspiring, and we are very excited and thoroughly committed. But we need time to do the tuning required, and changing our frequency from bi-monthly to quarterly will allow us that time. So our next (Spring) issue will be on its way to you in March. Your subscriptions, of course, will not be affected, and you won't miss any issues ordered. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to let us know. Our relationship with our readers is our sustenance. You are the critical component in all this, and we need and appreciate your continued support and encouragement. △

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