

On Inclusion: A Fairly Long Reply

By Peter H. Michael

This article began as the author's reflections to members of his extended family in an email thread in March, 2014, on the notorious homophobic practices of the Chick-Fil-A restaurant chain. The family email exchange stemmed from an offensive Chick-Fil-A story making the rounds of the Internet.



I was OK with, and touched by, the snow storm story until I got to the author's slam on "atheists, homosexuals, liberal standards and mainstream media." Homophobia and religious intolerance are un-Christian, immoral and un-American.

It was the Chick-Fil-A chief operating officer who caused the firestorm of national disapproval. After COO Dan Cathy, son of the Chick-Fil-A founder, made a series of gay-bashing remarks in 2012, it was revealed that he had caused the family foundation to divert millions of dollars in donations to homophobic organizations which oppose LGBTQ rights. He then publicly "rationalized" his homophobia by trying to cloak it in Christianity. In a single arm sweep, Mr. Cathy shamed himself, his company, his religion and his country.

Nationwide boycotts of Chick-Fil-A and huge bad press ensued. Boston, Chicago and other locales forbade opening of new Chick-Fil-A stores. Scores of Chick-Fil-A vendors and corporate partners ceased doing business with Chick-Fil-A. At the same time, Chick-Fil-A experienced a brief sales boost as gay-bashers flocked in. For them is reserved the hottest chamber of hell. Then sales fell.

It was public opinion which carried the day. Under pressure, COO Cathy and the foundation ceased the gay-basher donations by the end of 2012 and have recently been walking back some of their statements. The Chick-Fil-A website now sports an anti-discrimination pledge which includes equal treatment of gays. Coast-to-coast public shaming worked.

Sickest in all of this is how gay-bashers often seek to rationalize their fears by cloaking them in religion, cherry-picking and twisting 2,000-year-old scripture and thus perverting Christianity. Intolerance is unChristian. A just God could not have made one group to be mistreated by another. "Love thy neighbor" made no exceptions.

Homophobia is one more sickness of the heart just as are racism, sexism and xenophobia, each of which America has made great strides against. One of America's nation-defining strengths is eyes fastened on prejudices of all sorts and resolutely knocking them down.

It took 280 years—a very, very long time—to abolish slavery in the United States and then another century to outlaw Jim Crow, but we finally did it through unwavering moral insistence. Our Michael ancestors, grandparents, parents and some living Michaels had a lot to do with battling racism, Cousin Walt Michael as much as any of us.

I'm old enough to have seen separate water fountains, bathrooms and levels of opportunity in the South, and twerp restaurant owner Lester Maddox there get elected Governor of Georgia because he sold ax handles with which to beat black people.

I'm old enough to have seen women excluded from many occupations, states dictating what they could and could not do with their own bodies, and daughters expected to be content with life sentences as so much male chattel.

I'm old enough to have seen the Chinese Exclusion Act outlawed in 1965 and the opening of the American dream to immigrants from anywhere on the planet.

These advances against racism, sexism and xenophobia happened only because majority moral opinion made them happen, in each case over sick entrenched anti-Black, anti-woman and anti-immigrant resistance.

Today in my grandchildren, all of you have honor roll relatives, two of whom are each Black, White, Asian and Native American, and the third biracial, as American as one can get. All of my grandchildren have at least two immigrant grandparents. Cousins Eli and Jade have an immigrant parent. In cousins Kathe, Melaney and Kelly, our family now has 2.99 female PhDs and counting, and they are not excluded from any boys-club profession. (Ace that dissertation defense, Kelly.) Entrepreneurs Dana, Lee, Suzanne, Marya and Vicki have all started successful professional practices or small businesses. (Let's note that men in the family, past and present, haven't done too poorly either.)

So, racism, sexism and xenophobia have all very significantly been beaten down in our lifetimes, and few other countries can match our national record on these betterments over the last half century. But somehow, even though we continue to witness it, too easily taken for granted are these great national moral victories. Even in our own family, it seems too easy to take for granted the advantages which we, our children and grandchildren now enjoy that didn't exist until recently.

Melting-pot Michaels, doctorates for anyone willing to earn them, economic opportunity open to all: in fact, starting with the Underground Railroad and coming up through today, our family have been out-in-front, progressive trail-blazers who have been and still are pushing to change the American moral landscape for the better. As a family, let's be proud, but not boastful, of how what we have done to better the American moral landscape for nearly two centuries, and do everything we can to pass this exalted family heritage on down to our younger generations.

Now homophobia.

I for one am stunned at how fast that old American majority moral imperative is successfully overcoming discrimination against LGBTQ people. This success is not just happening in the courts but is driven by majority public opinion that has come to recognize the arbitrariness of sexual preference and the ugliness of homophobia. To a strong extent, the new inclusion of gays into the mainstream is led by Christians who are just acting Christian through love for *all* others, but at the same time there is a virulent homophobic streak among a shrinking minority of others that harms the image of the religion in the United States. My good wife Vicki the Catholic puts its better than I've ever heard it: "There is not enough love in the world as there is so let's celebrate all of it."

I want to suggest to the extended family that we carry on the very long Michael tradition of inclusion and tolerance by now moving on to the current frontier of inclusion of gays, and doing what we can to make them a full, comfortable, fully enfranchised and natural part of American life.