

## **Audio Snapshot II: A Few Words on Homophobia**

**George:** Teenage boy in Mobile, Alabama, beats a woman nearly to death. He finds out she's his sister's lesbian lover. And this was interesting because we're always prone to feel the other person did it.

Two people can have sons who are homosexual and lovers; the parents of one will say, "The other guy did it! Seduced by boy!"

There's always a blame that it's a contamination, that it's something sent from outside the way diseases, you know, the French disease, the Chinese disease, the gay disease, these pederasts are coming, you know.

The other example I gave was a high school coach who punished two kids by having them sort of act like sissies, like girls, and sit there and hold hands in front of their classmates.

It may not have hurt them as much as it hurt some other kid watching: "My god that could be me!"

You develop fears of transparency, fears that you're going to be outed and brutalized.

It's not the being gay; it's the hiding that you're gay, which is such a terrible source of self hate

**Stephen: When you were talking about the Associated Press's desire to ban the word homophobia, what were their arguments for that?**

**George:** Their chief argument was that it attributes motive and a psychological state to people we don't know that well.

And my counter was, so do many words, and in particular the term *Hate Crime* attributes a psychological state based merely on an observation of behavior.

**George:** Hate crime is a perfect example of a totally accepted term, which clearly articulates the motive of the other person. And the argument they make is that . . . the AP makes is that "we don't want to talk about motive, we don't want to infer motive." Well you would have to.

The most evident motive is in the phrase "hate crime." You're saying what the motive is. Why not eliminate that term?

Well, I think this is a kind of a selective act to attack homophobia . . . it's not catching on. Everyone uses the term anyhow and they just say, "What so-and-so called

homophobia.” You can’t get rid of the term. People need it too badly in too many contexts.

**Stephen: The other thing they argued, too, was that it wasn’t accurate or precise enough.**

**George:** Right, well no word is that precise. *All* words are agreements. Every word has some speculative, some penumbra of uncertainty around it. It’s a census essentially.

**Stephen: You also use the word “gay” as an example.**

**George:** Yeah, gay is also . . . who’s to say when a person is gay? Is one contact gay, or do you need five, or whatever? You know Voltaire had sex with a man, and then the guy wanted to do it again. He said, “No, the first time I’m experimenting, the second time I’d be gay.”

**Stephen: They said that perhaps a solution that they were coming up with would be to use neutral language. What would neutral language be?**

**George:** I don’t know what their neutral language would be.

If I can’t stand homosexuals and I fire them all from jobs, and I won’t interview them, and I laugh at gays, or I punch someone or accuse someone, what kind of neutral word would you use to describe me?

**Stephen: Why would it be terrible to eliminate the word homophobia?**

**George:** I think it would be terrible because vast numbers of gay people would start to wonder if they had a problem again.

The word inoculates them; it gives them an instant reflexive question; “Is something wrong with me or is it wrong with the other guy? Should I be isolated, indicted, beaten up, punished . . . treated?” And it was a great effort and great revolutionary, almost life-risking effort on the part of many people to establish the whole notion of homophobia. This word is a relative word arrived at by common agreement. And that we need it, because in extreme cases it’s indispensable.

### **Dr. Weinberg’s definition of Homophobia**

I defined it as . . . the dread of homosexuals, or anything reminiscent of homosexuality, which leads to a desire to avoid or expunge homosexuals or reduce their influence in one’s life or their freedom to exist. It takes away from the optimism, joy of life, tranquility of the homophobe, so that it’s a vulnerability . . . it’s kind of a handle that gets pulled on by anything reminiscent or suggestive of homosexuality, and it imposes a tremendous limitation on the life of the homophobe.

**Stephen: In your definition of homophobia you've identified disgust and revulsion as the roots of that phobia.**

**George:** Right . . . and a fear that these people, whoever they are, are going to do me some injury, they're going to contaminate me or in the defense of marriage they're going to degrade my marriage. It's obvious in the Defense of Marriage situation that it's a fear: "You're going to reduce the value of my marriage to my wife or my husband, my heterosexual marriage."

There's threat! How could anyone deny that that's a fear?

**Stephen: In terms of the fear, what are some of the fears, and I think the fear is more specifically felt by men?**

**George:** I do too. Because . . . the sense of being unmanned, emasculated is so strong.

That's why this little incident we talked about of having two men hold hands - men have always been more threatened - their identity is much more brittle. A man dressing, even a little bit, like a woman would be terrified, whereas women can dress like men much more easily. It's a much more flexible, pliable identity.

**Stephen: Some studies have been done saying that homophobia is more an attitudinal or moral social problem as opposed to one that is psychological.**

**George:** I don't see that they're contradictory. I think that psychological problems are at the heart of a lot of moral problems.

Gays were always considered immoral and also mentally disturbed.

If I'm deeply religious, I say that you're immoral, if I'm pretending to be sophisticated, I went to some educational program somewhere, then I say, well it's not just immoral, they're disturbed. They're almost alternative ways of saying, "I don't accept this. I don't like it."

**Stephen: We talked about the emotional component; it's also a psychological disturbance as you defined it. How so?**

**George:** It's psychological in the sense that it affects everything in the psyche if I know that you're a homosexual and you present an idea, or write a play, or write a poem, I can no longer see it except through my own jaundiced eye. And if all homosexuals look yellow to my jaundiced eye, then I've got a problem and I've lost out.

**Stephen: There's this alignment, and some argue that there isn't an alignment, in terms of homophobia being and actual mental illness.**

**George:** I only mean it as a mental illness in the sense that it internally causes disruption, pain, anguish . . . cheats you out of optimism, it cheats you out of creativity. How many gay people have been homophobic themselves?

Treatment of homosexuals, you know, which still goes on, so-called reparative therapy, only heightens that sense of self hate. It's both a manifestation and a cause of torment, of homophobia.

**Stephen: Is there a difference between the phobia associated with homophobia and other phobias like social phobia?**

**George:** The phobia springs from something deep and irrational. If I have, let's say, a phobia against heights, I won't go upstairs, even to sit in the 20<sup>th</sup> row of a theater because I have a deep sense that I'm going to be thrown off the balcony to my death, smashed to a million pieces.

Or, a phobia about getting on a plane; there, one could say "Well, I don't want to take the odds," which are one in a million, "it doesn't appeal to me" in which case, that's fine.

If I can't sit in a room with a homosexual, it's not simply a prejudice or a judgment; it's something stirring within me that I don't like. Even if the gay person does nothing, I've had a very bad experience. And I think the phobia refers to the morbid imbalance in my own experience in the presence of gays.

**Stephen: With any other kind of phobia, say of spiders, of flying, the response is "get me away from that." With homophobia, this is the only phobia where it's "get that away from me."**

If you have the power you say, "Get that away from me." And if you don't, you say, "Get me away from that." But I think homophobia consists of both. You know, "I don't want to live in that building; too many homosexuals there."

**Stephen: But the idea that someone says, "Get that away from me" has a different resonating tone to it.**

**George:** Right, because it's more punitive of the object. If I'm leaving the party because there are too many gay people here, they can go on with the party. But if I want to kick them out of the party, then I'm being punitive. There is that difference because in one case you're trying to operate on the dreaded stimulus, to destroy it or remove it. It's probably a more destructive form when you want to get the other person to move.

**Stephen: What do the feelings of disgust and revulsion and fear, in the overall person who is homophobic; what does that push them to do?**

One writer - Epstein - was famous for saying. "If it were up to me, I would wish all homosexuals out of existence."

And I think that's what a lot of homophobes want: "I don't even want to hurt you, just disappear. Don't join my club, don't run for President; don't push your agenda anywhere where I can see it; it upsets me. And that translates into a fear "you're going to spread your propaganda everywhere, and I will somehow be extinguished or annihilated, or I lose everything I've worked for.

**Stephen: Something that's changed today maybe a little bit is that you have more visibility of the gay community. You have more people supporting and accepting and allied with the gay community, but we still have this tension.**

**George:** The tension is still there, just as it is with almost all these issues; the same with the black community. There are still underlying distinctions being made.

**Stephen: In terms of homophobia and that kind of reaction to homosexuality; how does that push towards violence?**

**George:** When people are acutely disturbed by something, they tend to get violent.

Homophobia becomes violent when the homophobes can't regulate the world the way they want. The imagined threat as seen as a real threat and it becomes violent.

Nothing indicates more the psychological nature of homophobia than the violence.

**Stephen: There is still such a huge risk of being outed today, even though we have acceptance . . .**

**George:** People live in fear. It's amazing how people live in fear. Anyone who says, "Well, the problem is solved." They're totally wrong. "People don't have a problem with being gay anymore." That's totally false. A lot of people do.