

# Letter to a friend

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**Editor's note:** *We Alaskans* writer Frank Gerjevic recently wrote a column expressing his opposition to an ordinance that would protect Anchorage gays and lesbians from discrimination. He told the story of a friend, a writer he did not name, who confided over dinner several years ago that he was gay. Gerjevic explained why he found it impossible to condone his friend's homosexuality. The person in question former Anchorage Daily News sports editor Roger Brigham has since asked *We Alaskans* to allow him to publicly respond. His reply follows.

**D**inner, as I recall, was at the now-defunct Flippers restaurant, site of so many of our night-shift dinner breaks in those days. Over a burger or a BLT, I listened to Frank as he navigated his way through the early, stunned days of his divorce. He listened to me as I grew into my job as Daily News sports reporter and then sports editor.

On the surface we had so much in common: a couple of good old boys from Ohio who wandered north and fell in love with Alaska. A pair of thirtysomething workaholics in love with words and sports. I'd kid him every time Ohio Wesleyan drubbed Denison in football; we had a running bet on the Bengals and Browns (a bottle of Chianti vs. a six-pack of Vernors ginger ale) that still stands.

But the friendship ran (and still runs) deeper than that. He was the Daily News writer I respected most as a professional and a person. I used to tell our co-workers that if you took a poll in the newsroom, Frank would be named winner as the nicest person in the office hands down. Frank is one of the most decent men I know.

I think anyone who has ever worked closely with me knows about my passion for fairness, as well as my intolerance for bigotry and selfishness. In Frank I found a kindred spirit.

But kindred only to a point. Sometimes when Frank would talk about what was happening in his marriage, it all seemed so foreign to my experience that I felt it was misleading, dishonest even, not to speak up.

So I told him I was gay.

Let me offer a few words about the general subject of coming out in Alaska in the '80s, and about the particular subject of my coming out. I have always felt that those who worked in the news shouldn't make the news, and I've always been a very private person. Add the fact that I faced my sexuality relatively late (my mid-20s) and consider the amount of fear that a lifetime of hearing anti-gay slurs instills and you'll understand that although I do not lie about my sexuality, neither do I make a major issue of it.

Like Frank, I've never thought that what consenting adults do in private is material for a public forum. But there in the restaurant, Frank was talking about his private life and there I was talking only about my professional life. So I evened the playing field.

Frank said he thought being gay was wrong, that it was a sin. That bothered me, because I knew he was wrong.

Sins are those actions which hurt. Prejudice, violence, dishonesty, greed, insensitivity – now those are sins.

One's sexuality? Not much you can do about that. I laugh when someone tries to depict sexuality as a "preference," implying it is something one chooses. I can only ask: At what point does a man "decide" to be attracted to women, or vice versa? You either are or you aren't, and ultimately denying to yourself what you are is dishonest. That's a sin. And failing to accept others for what they are ... well, that's a sin, too.

So as Frank talked about his divorce, I thought about all the people in the world who think divorce is a sin, and all the legal and religious obstacles that used to be thrown up at those who decided to get divorced (since, unlike sexuality, divorce is a conscious choice). And I was glad that in this day and age, Frank would not have to put up with all of that crap. And when he told me that my sexuality was a sin, I felt bad for him that he carried that barrier in his heart, and I prayed for the day when this, too, shall pass.

And then, sonofagun, if he doesn't go and write about that conversation some 10 years or so later in the paper. To paraphrase Paul Simon's comment about Joe DiMaggio, I was not prepared to be a metaphor.

Certainly not a metaphor for something with which I have such a strong disagreement.

I read his column and tried to puzzle through why he thinks gays should not be protected from the actions of bigots. The inconsistent logic of his own arguments – and this from an otherwise intelligent and caring person – is appalling. His attempt to differentiate "between what a society tolerates and what it approves" is coy wordplay unworthy of a person of Frank's inherent decency.

So, Frank, let's talk about what a society approves and tolerates. Specifically, what you approve and tolerate. Forget the people we don't know, or groups we identify ourselves with. Just you and me, buddy, one on one. A bottle of Chianti vs. a six-pack of Vernors.

Here's the situation. You see me walking down the street and a couple of guys jump me, start threatening me because of who I am. Do you step in and say something? Or do you figure it's something I've got coming.

Or I lose my home. Do you tell me to enjoy the street?

Or when I worked at the paper and I told the company I was gay. If they had considered firing me, would you not have spoken up on my behalf?

I know what a friend would do, and in my heart of hearts I know you are a friend. And I know what a decent and moral person would do, and I know you are a decent and moral person. You would choose not to accept and tolerate the violence and the prejudice and insensitivity. I think you should demand the same of society.

So if you offer guarantees of safety to the other groups of our society that have suffered from widespread prejudices, if you protect women and racial minorities and religious

minorities – if you protect all of them but decide not to protect lesbians and gays, then are you not condoning discrimination?

Tell you what, Frank: If you came to my aid in the street, or gave me shelter, or spoke up for me, I would not assume it meant that you'd suddenly decided to embrace my sexuality any more than I'd think you were suddenly pulling for my beloved Bengals. If it's wrong to single out minorities for persecution, it's also wrong to exclude a threatened minority from protection.

*Roger Bringham is now sports editor of the Albany (N.Y.) Times Union.*