

The stoning of Andrew

Contributed by Chad
Sunday, June 5, 2005

While the Christian right attacks homosexuals and shames them as evil deviants, it fails to consider that many gays have faith in God, too.

(By Richard Tenorio)

On a cloudy spring afternoon, just after the bell rang ending lunchtime, Mrs. Shoemaker, the sixth grade school teacher at a tiny, Christian, private school in a small, rural, Southern town buckled deep within the Bible Belt, paced back and forth in front of her class with lips pursed and eyes staring blankly ahead.

She was deep in thought and full of reservations about the visitor who was to come and speak before her class in just a few moments. The children had been told to sit quietly and read their library books from which their next book reports would be written while they all waited for the day's speaker to arrive. Aside from the occasional whisper or giggle from one student at another clowning, the only sound to be heard in the room was Mrs. Shoemaker's tiny, low-heeled shoes clapping against the floor in a kind of staccato, military march from one side of the room to the other.

Mrs. Shoemaker's stride had been mocked by sixth graders for years, one class passing the torch of mockery to the other, and the most famous of these legendary taunts was Mrs. Shoemaker's "Big Bird Walk" as they called it. It was they thought that because her legs were short and her stride too long and wide for such limbs, she was surrounded by a huge, yellow feathered belly, carefully having to plot her course in three-toed footies attached to plushy legs of orange and red rings.

But Andrew, the strange little boy with new crooked teeth who sat on the third row, one desk away from the window, always thought that it was not only mean of the other kids to tease her, but actually inaccurate, for he had watched Big Bird on Sesame Street carefully and honestly never saw the resemblance between the two's paces. If there was anyone Mrs. Shoemaker could be compared to, it was a reserved, absent-minded, elderly, drill sergeant, in his opinion.

Of course, Andrew, the unusually thin little boy covered with freckles that matched his reddish blonde hair, never really understood childish mockery and pranks. He was never amused when a classmate would cup his hand up under his underarm and begin cranking the other like a chicken wing in order to produce some sort of farting noise that would leave the class in stitches. And Andrew never thought it funny when another would take scissors and cut the hair of the fat girl seated in the seat in front of her without the girl ever knowing, only to get a hearty laugh from all that sat behind her. And it certainly wasn't humorous when they would tie someone's shoelaces together or hide someone's glasses or whiskers, only to get a laugh, and point at someone, only to create some sense of amusement for themselves by alienating him or her. Yes, Andrew was different than all of them, and he knew it, and in a way, it caused him great despair.

However, at that moment, no one was engaged in any kind of fun-poking, and the students seemed consumed by their library books while listening to Mrs. Shoemaker's percussion melody. Andrew, on the other hand, was hardly reading, perhaps a word or two now and then, for he had become more curious about this mystery guest that seemed to leave Mrs. Shoemaker tied in knots and thoroughly distracted. The other children didn't seem to notice that there was a difference in her manner and demeanor, but he did, and he was sure that what was about to occur was something that would make things different. It had already changed Mrs. Shoemaker.

The knock on the door caused Mrs. Shoemaker to gasp, and she pulled her hands to her cardigan, fastening the top button. As she walked towards the door, she peered over her glasses towards the classroom. "Our visitor is here. Now I want everyone to be on your best behavior," she said somewhat nervously, and then seemed to brace herself before opening the door. In walked a petite woman, much younger than Mrs. Shoemaker, with her blonde hair pulled tightly into a ponytail. She flashed the class a virginal white grin and shook Mrs. Shoemaker's hand. Before she could utter a greeting, Mrs. Shoemaker abruptly pushed her towards a chair she had arranged at the front of the class, nonverbally declaring that this was still her classroom, and they were still going by her rules; therefore, she should not speak until Mrs. Shoemaker allowed her to do so.

"Students, this is Miss Singleton. According to our state's Education Department, all sixth graders must be led in a discussion of sex education." The class erupted in giggles and laughter. The word "sex" began flying around the room in a breathless, adolescent pants, and the kids looked to one another in amazement and hilarity. Andrew, however, looked shocked; his face went flush, his heart pattered, and although he knew he was unusual, he wasn't sure why his reaction was in such contrast.

“Silence! We will have none of that,” said Mrs. Shoemaker, demanding order. “As sixth graders preparing to enter junior high school next year, I expect you to be mature about this subject, a subject that I am certain your parents have already taken the opportunity to discuss with you.”

As if prompted, all of the children began looking at one another to see if they could determine who had had that talk with their parents and who hadn’t. Mrs. Shoemaker continued, “Nevertheless, because we are required to meet state regulations, we have invited Miss Singleton here from our county’s health department to speak with you this afternoon about this matter.”

“About sex?” laughed Jim as he nudged Brandon, who sat next to him.

Mrs. Shoemaker clearly looked flustered, and now her character seemed completely changed from the always-in-control matron she normally embodied. “Yes, regarding the way babies are conceived after you are married,” she said, turning a glare upon Miss Singleton, “which I would imagine would be some time from now.”

Again the class broke into laughter, this time a more nervous kind, and Mrs. Shoemaker stomped her foot. “Now I have said that we will have none of that! You are expected to be mature!”

Mrs. Shoemaker looked around the room sternly. The class became quiet. Then she proceeded, “Now, we thought it would be best to separate the boys and girls during this talk. One group will wait on the playground while the other has their talk. The girls will have their discussion first, then the boys afterwards. So, get up boys, and follow me. And no talking, girls, until I return.”

“Which group does Andrew go in?” a voice mumbled from the back for only Andrew to hear. Andrew closed his eyes. Was this the reason the visitor was here, to uncover exactly what it was that made him so different from everyone else? Suddenly, filled with his own apprehensions, Andrew felt more alone than he ever had before.

Once outside and on the playground, which was just north of the kickball fields, the boys were ordered to sit on the perimeter of the sandbox crafted of railroad crossties and filled full of pebbles instead of sand. Clouds hung low over them and a cool, fragrant, spring breeze was forcing dandelions to let loose their seeds in flurries of white puffs while also whipping its way around and through the swing sets, pushing invisible children back and forth. Andrew was grateful for the clouds. When the sun was hidden away, he felt more comfortable in his skin, as if the shadowy gray could conceal all the imperfections that tormented him. The sandbox was deep, and one could hide his entire foot underneath the pebbles or drown her hand within its rocky puddle. The boys all sat with their feet stretched out into the box. Some looked annoyed and seemed to be moping that they were to miss the girls’ talk and miss hearing all the secrets of their female bodies.

Mrs. Shoemaker looked at them crossly, “Now please behave. There is no one available to watch you, so I’m trusting you. Just sit right here, don’t move, and I’ll be back to get you in about ten minutes. And I’m warning you, if I hear of any of you fooling around, I will immediately be calling your parents.” With that she marched back to the schoolhouse, looking back once with a very forbidding warning before entering the school door.

Andrew was uncomfortable sitting here with all of the boys in his sixth grade class. True, he called some of them his friends, and they had, on the occasion, asked him over to spend the night. But since his best friend, John, moved away a couple of years back, he had yet to find that friend with whom he was paired and could truly be himself. Andrew watched the boys watching each other as they waited for someone to lead them, and he dipped his hand into the rocks and then watched them fall between his open fingers as he raised it. He listened intently to their tapings as they fell to the sandbox below, giving his attention to anything but the group that sat around him. He was nervous, and for an unknown reason, afraid, so Andrew prayed for the ten minutes to pass quickly.

It was Guy who first shattered the silence of little boys knowing not what to do under the strict provisions of their teacher to remain within the box. “So, Andrew,” he said smirking, taking the lead, bringing to light the game that they would play, “Why are you out here? Shouldn’t you be inside with the girls?”

He laughed and prodded Scott, who sat to his right and who immediately broke into laughter as well, “Yeah, Andrew, why are you out here with us boys?” Andrew looked around the circle hoping that one of the boys might be showing some sense of apprehension about the direction in which Guy’s teasing was moving. Maybe Jason would speak up for him. Yet he was discouraged to see all the boys with slight knowing grins or giggles at the thought of it.

He could have said something at that point. He could have protested, saying with mustered conviction, “Duh, I’m a boy. I’m not supposed to be inside with the girls;” however, for some reason, Andrew felt there was something almost true in Guy’s question, unlike the wrongness of the comparison of Mrs. Shoemaker to Big Bird, and it left him paralyzed in silence under the attack.

No one but God knew of the confusion that had always reigned in Andrew’s head about himself and his belonging. For so

many years, every night, after Mommy had pulled the sheets over his body, kissed his cheek with a "sweet dreams," and turned out the light over his head, Andrew had prayed and begged God to show him what made him so different from all others.

Yes, he knew he was completely abnormal, he felt it in every interaction, yet he couldn't quite understand why. He was flesh and blood, had the same shape, the same sound, the same smell, but something was altogether different on his inside. And so his pleadings with God to show him the reason why seemed to finally be answered. Yet now, in this instance, he was frightened of the clarity that he had long been seeking suddenly coming into view.

"Andrew! Why are you out here with the boys? Didn't you hear me?" Guy asked. He took a small pebble from the sandbox and chunked it at Andrew to get his attention. The stone hit Andrew on the chest and then fell into his lap, and Andrew looked at it, the tan little oval folded into his blue denim. He tried to mutter a laugh, perhaps trying to "laugh with them" as his dad had suggested that he do any time he was being laughed at, but Andrew could barely break a smile as he swam in deep thoughts that probed his heart over why this was happening, and it was then that the wondering as to why he was so different began to find a resolution.

All of the moments of questioning his belonging began reemerging. His memory began succinctly lining up all the episodes within his short life when the question had truly plagued him, causing him to take the look back that he had never been prompted to take before.

Like the slideshows he watched in children's church showing right from wrong, pictures flashed within his mind. Like the time when he was four, and Santa Claus at Goldsmith's Department Store pulled him upon his lap and asked, "So what should Santa bring this pretty little girl for Christmas?" and Andrew had to say he was a boy. The time when Andrew was six and received a severe spanking with the belt after telling Daddy he wanted their friend's blonde-haired, tan skinned, blue-eyed son to be his "boyfriend," a very wrong request for a boy. The time when Andrew was eight, and Mommy slapped his hand down from its seeming natural limp-wrist position, which was not a proper mannerism for a boy. The time when he was nine, when the little boy next door befriended him and even after two days of playing with Andrew finally asked, "Are you a boy or a girl?" to which Andrew cried in reply, "A boy!" For the first time, those pictures, played the story that Andrew had suppressed into confusion, and now Andrew understood why he wasn't like anyone else.

The lack of expression on Andrew's face enraged Guy, and he tossed another pebble at him, hoping that Andrew would do something, anything, to feed this entertainment that everyone seemed to be watching with great intensity. But Andrew could do nothing, remorseful over an answer that he had found and an understanding that there was reason for Guy's scorn. So Andrew sat with his head bowed and was hopeful that they would become bored of his target and move on to someone else less deserving.

"My dad calls him 'squirrely,'" Jim said, picking up a pebble from the sandbox and launching it towards Andrew. It shouldered.

"He's a girly girl," Jason said, tossing his own pebble at Andrew, hitting his forehead, leaving him stunned.

"Aren't you going to do anything, you sissy?" Guy screamed, grabbing a handful of rocks. "Aren't you at least something?" He pulled back his arm and held the rocks steady there, waiting, wondering, angered that Andrew was so strange and removed that he would not even put up a fight.

"He'll say something," Scott said, in alliance with the leader, also grabbing a handful of pebbles, pulling them back in threat against Andrew.

"If he knows what's good for him," Brandon said, gathering his ammunition, joining with the others.

Following suit, as most sixth graders do when faced with the option of rebelling against or conforming to their peers, each boy grabbed a handful of rocks and pulled them into striking positions, waiting for Andrew. What would his reaction be?

Guy laughed as Andrew lowered his hand into the pebbles and picked one up, rubbing it, feeling its texture within his fingers. All he would have to do to show that he was the same as them was fight back, even with just one pebble; pelt one laughing boy between the eyes, and perhaps it would be done. Perhaps they would laugh and say, "See, he is a boy; he's just like us." Or maybe they would even become scared, retreat, and worry, oh no, crazy Andrew has decided to fight and we don't know how far he will go. But Andrew wasn't angry; just sadder, and he gripped the pebble within his fist tightly, trying to figure out what to do.

Another image flashed from his memory, a more recent time when he was 11 sitting on a pew in the First Baptist Church sanctuary one Sunday morning, absently listening as the preacher breathed fire from his lungs. Andrew had imagined himself flying by way of white feathered wings high up near the church's arched ceiling, from stained glass window to stained glass window, in colored, filtered sunlight, around the heavy chandeliers, up and over the entire congregants.

heads, sprinkling everyone with love dust. This recollection inspired him, and he found a solace in this different kind of answer as to where he might belong: Simply, he did not belong on this earth at all. Instead, he was some sort of divine angel caught in between two worlds, sent here to earth only to help people with his gift of being both girl and boy. He was a Godsend.

This image and answer seduced him, and with the rock held within his grip, a familiar voice began calling inside him, giving rise to his white feathered wings, setting alight his halo, beckoning, "Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, and forgive them, for they know not what they do." So Andrew obeyed and dropped the pebble to the ground next to the others, hearing the single tap before the stoning began.

At first, the pebbles hitting his 11-year-old frame felt like the hail that he had run through a few years back when he was entranced by the unusual precipitation falling on his grandmother's farm on a cold twilight. Their second handfuls seemed to hurt a little, pelting his head, stinging his face, ricocheting off his chest. The dust mixed with the stones dried his eyes to red, causing water to run down his dirty cheeks. But what really drove the stake through Andrew's throat, what really dropped his heart into burning oil, was the feeling and knowing that by not belonging at all, he was left completely and utterly alone in the world, forever destined to live emotionally homeless, to have no one that would or could understand, and to once again be back to lonely in the empty wilderness starving for belonging. That was what brought Andrew's true tears, and suddenly, he was deaf to their chantings, calling him a baby, a mama's boy, a sissy, and he was oblivious to the rain of stones. Alone, Andrew cried.

It was at that moment when he completely lost consciousness of them, that a single hole in the low clouds broke open, and a ray of golden sunlight streamed from the heavens upon the sandbox. The other boys, grabbing more pebbles, laughing and continuing to lay waste to Andrew, didn't seem to notice the sudden change in the atmosphere, but Andrew noticed. No one but Andrew felt the warmth of the sun on his head and his face, a soothing calm within the fury, and he turned to look upwards; white tracks from his eyes, down his cheeks, glistening upon his dusty face. In a kind of majesty, of feeling heard, of no longer being alone, of belonging to something, he spread his arms wide, and accepted the ecstasy of the comfort in the single ray of promise which broke through the clouds to save him. He stayed like that for some time. He didn't know how long he was there held in the sun's embrace.

When Andrew finally opened his eyes and came into awareness, he found himself surrounded by his girl classmates sitting in a circle around the sandbox. Things had changed.

"Are you not going in with the boys?" Shelia asked Andrew.

Andrew stood, dusted himself off, and replied, "No. I don't belong." And he took off across the kick-ball fields towards hole in the bushes, which led away from girls and boys.

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RESOURCES >

Where the Deer and the Antelope Play URL: <http://groups.msn.com/wherethedeerandtheantelopeplay>

The Observer

URL: http://www.columbia.edu/cu/observer/issues/2004Fall/online_exclusive/sun.html

The Epistle

URL: <http://www.epistle.us/>

Gay Poetry Online

URL: <http://www.gaypoetry.com/design/search.asp?searchwhat=authorid&query=3060>