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M Peterson

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Saturday, February 21, 2009

Fear and Library Web pages

Hi everyone,

A few weeks ago, a local group of coconuts discovered that the WB Library webpage contained a list of books for LGBT youngsters. Shocked to discover that their sense of sexual orientation no longer matched reality, they filed a formal complaint.

And so.

[Saturday's column.](#)

Library Web page complaints reveal fears

A local group of parents filed a complaint with the West Bend Memorial Library last week because the library has a Web page listing books for young gay and lesbian patrons. The complaint will be discussed at the Library Board's monthly meeting in March.

Public library systems in Appleton, Madison and even Shorewood have links for age-appropriate literature of this kind and it is standard, established practice for libraries to provide coming-of-age literature for young people, without making value judgments about sexual orientation.

Admittedly, complaining about values we don't share is apple pie American – it's certainly one of my favorite pastimes – but the Supreme Court has already weighed in on whether such literature can be removed from public school libraries – at least with regard to books, if not to Web pages describing books.

In *Inland Trees School District v. Pico* (1982) the bench wrote, “In brief, we hold that local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to ‘prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.’ *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S., at 642.”

In a nutshell, you can't ask that certain books be removed from library shelves simply because those books violate your own religious worldview. What if, for instance, a local majority of ELCA Lutherans asked that all Missouri Synod Lutheran writings be removed from the library? How would that go over? You get the idea. In America, alas, we have to learn to cope with the ideas of our fellow citizens, even when we don't like 'em.

By a remarkable coincidence, just after the newspaper ran its story about these moral crusaders for sexual conformity, I received some e-mail from the first guy I ever knew who was gay. I was part of a conspiracy in high school to keep him from getting beaten up.

Now, being gay in Alabama in the 1970s was dangerous, but my friend had camouflaged himself brilliantly by “dating” one of the cutest girls in school. The slack-jawed red-neck bullies who would have beaten him to a pulp on a daily basis never saw through this cleverly staged misdirection and, to her credit, the girl played her part to the hilt. Things got complicated, of course, when she and I realized we liked each other. We went out secretly during the last half of senior year, but could never be seen together in public because it might have compromised his cover story.

All of this is funnier now than it was at the time, but things aren't a lot safer for gay or lesbian high school kids today. Violence, bullying and harassment are the rule in schools across the country today. According to GLSEN's 2003 National School Climate Survey, 39 percent of all LGBT students report being verbally or physically assaulted, often with a weapon, and, more telling, nearly one out of three LGBT students skipped school in the past month because they were simply too afraid to go.

Back to my friend in 1975. One night at a party, where the three of us could hang out together in relative safety, I finally asked him when he had decided to be gay. He laughed and fired back “when did you decide to be straight?” I said I'd never made a conscious decision – at some point my interest in model trains and Little League had been replaced by an interest in girls that filled, for practical purposes, every waking moment. “Ditto,” he said, “except for the girls.”

That was good to hear at 17. Still is.

The folks complaining about our library Web pages worry about exposing young people to literature with homosexual themes because they believe sexual orientation is a choice: as if deciding your gender preference is like ordering it off a menu, as if choosing to be gay is no different from ordering soup instead of the coleslaw. But if sexual orientation were a choice, then why would young men and women pick the one dish guaranteed to make their lives a living hell? Because they don't.

I wonder if it's true that the things we're afraid of in others are the things we fear most about ourselves?

Can anyone name the 60's cult movie from which I stole this closing line?