

A Study Guide to *Milk*
by Rev. Mark Belletini
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Description

Milk is Gus Van Sant's filmed biography of the later years in the life of Harvey Milk, who was a great leader of the 1970s Gay and Lesbian movement and, as an elected member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the first openly gay politician in the United States. (Note: BGLTQ- Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian Transgender, Queer and Questioning- was not an acronym used at that time, and even the word "lesbian" was sometimes not used, everything being subsumed under "gay".) Milk and San Francisco mayor George Moscone were assassinated in November 1978 by Dan White, who was also a member of the Board of Supervisors.

The film opened in theatres in December 2008 and is not yet out on DVD. It is two hours and twenty minutes long and contains a lot of historic footage as well as dramatic action, told in Van Sant's distinctive mode. Sean Penn's Golden Globe nominated performance as Harvey Milk has already been hailed as one of the most profound and touching of the year.

Background of the Film for Unitarian Universalists

The eight-year period covered by *Milk* explores the development of a full-fledged civil rights movement in the United States, the first to deal directly with same-sex affection, sexuality and relationships, rejecting prevailing notions that viewed homosexuality as sin or illness.

The road to civil rights for sexual minorities in this nation has been a long one, with many false starts. Most of the earlier steps along this path are unknown today, and were, largely unknown to people in San Francisco at the time, including those who were part of sexual minorities. Among those early efforts to advocate for the needs of GLBT people were organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, which provided advocacy, education, and assistance to gay and lesbian people beginning in the 1950s. In 1964, a group of Protestant ministers and gay activists held a conference entitled "Consultation on the Church and the Homosexual." In the 1970s, the Walt Whitman Bookstore, just a block from San Francisco's First Church, offered books written by GLBTQ authors. All of these events and organizations remained almost invisible to the public eye even in 1978. No one much remembered the various magazines out of World War II-era Europe, such as *The Circle* (interestingly, with a wide-brimmed flaming chalice set in a circle on the cover!) Few knew about the open gay and lesbian subculture in Weimar-era Germany, or had ever heard of the works of Magnus Hirschfeld, John Addington Symonds or other early activists at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the 1970s, there was a limited understanding of homosexuality among members of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, but it had become an issue of concern. The two ministers who came out in the late sixties and early seventies, the somewhat controversial Reverend Richard Nash and Reverend James L. Stoll, never found other settlements. Openly gay and lesbian ministers searching for settlements were routinely turned down at this time based on that issue alone. A large majority of both our gay and lesbian ministers and lay people were “in the closet” at this time. The 1970 UUA General Assembly passed a General Resolution to end discrimination against Bisexuals and Homosexuals, and called upon congregations to develop sex education programs that promoted a healthy attitude toward all forms of sexuality. In 1971, the UUA published *About Your Sexuality*, which attempted to teach a more positive attitude toward homosexuality and bisexuality. In 1972, *Invisible Minority*, an adult curriculum about homosexuality, was published by the UUA. As the decade unfolded, the UUA General Assembly created and funded the UUA Office of Gay Concerns.

For the Facilitator

Those who come to a film discussion about *Milk* will have seen this film at different times. Even after it is available on DVD, its length will likely preclude a discussion session that immediately follows viewing the film. This presents an opportunity to offer the discussion questions to participants ahead of time.

And those who come to discuss the film will undoubtedly come from wildly different backgrounds, and life histories. There may be those who have never heard of Harvey Milk until the release of the film. There may also be those who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area during that moving season, including those who met Harvey Milk or who marched in the candlelight march shown in the film. There may be those who were not alive, or who were children, when these events took place, and those whose contact with and understanding of GLBTQ issues is of more recent vintage. Some filmgoers may have never seen depictions of men kissing before, whereas to others this is nothing new. Some may still be sorting out their own unique sexual identity, while others may be officers in the local GLBTQ political organization. This guarantees a tremendously diverse response to the film!

Discussion of this film should offer an opportunity and create a need for further conversation, either within or outside of the Welcoming Congregation program.

Almost every discussion question in this study guide could engage participants for an extended period of time. It is neither possible nor desirable to explore all the questions. As facilitator, it is up to you to choose appropriate and stimulating questions for your own group from among those suggested in this guide. Making the questions available to potential participants in advance of your scheduled film discussion will be helpful. After your film discussion session, you and others may want to continue your conversations and take action to initiate a Welcoming Congregation or Living the Welcoming Congregation program in your congregation, or deepen the work you have already done

in this area. For more information about those programs, please visit:
www.uua.org/members/justicediversity/bisexualgay/index.shtml

Discussion Questions

- Before seeing the film, what did you know about Harvey Milk? Had you seen any articles or films about him before? Did you come to the film with expectations because of what you knew? Were you worried that the director might twist some facts to make a point, as is commonly done in American historic biographies? Do you think Van Sant omitted anything about Milk's life which you believe he should have included?
- When you saw the film, was there any audience reaction that stuck with you? Was there any unexpected laughter or loud comments? Any response you need to lift up because it affected you?
- One of the motifs in the film involves reflections: Scott and rioters reflected in the camera shop window, Dan White's reflection on the TV screen watching Milk's interview, even a reflection in a whistle. What do you think the director intends by using these devices? What other cinematic techniques did you notice? How does the use of such techniques illuminate or deepen the story Van Sant is telling?
- Milk is shown working to get allies outside the gay male community- speaking at union gatherings, talking to African-American men in a barbershop, and even approaching strangers on the street. Does this remind you of any social justice work being done in your own congregation? Have you ever considered yourself an ally?
- Dan White's humanity is not passed over, according to many critics of the film, and in general, there seems to be an attempt to portray the various characters in the story roundly, with both gifts and flaws. But one group of characters - the police - never really receive any praise. Do you think that is warranted in this case?
- Harvey speculated that Dan White was "one of us." A bisexual man? A closeted gay man? What do you think? Is such speculation warranted? If so, why?
- Harvey Milk is shown afraid to walk the street at night, the sound of ominous footsteps following him. When you have been involved in some aspect of social justice work, have you experienced fear of harm? How was that fear manifested in you? How do you imagine fear of hate-crimes plays out within marginalized communities? What role does fear of personal harm play in oppressing members of a minority community?

- Harvey was always confronted with threats to his life- written threats, implied threats, and innuendos. This is clear throughout the film. Dan White said that he felt threatened, too. What do you think was most threatening to him?
- Harvey wanted EVERYONE to come “out of the closet,” that is, say who they are aloud to everyone important in their lives. He felt that knowing someone who is gay or lesbian would make all the difference in transforming our culture into a more welcoming one. Do you think that is true? Do you think coming “out of the closet” is enough to transform our culture? In the film, Harvey pressures one of his deputies to come out to his own father right there on the phone. Do you think that was the right thing to do? If so, why? If not, why not? Is there anything in our Unitarian Universalist Principles which is helpful in addressing the question of “coming out” as an individual and encouraging others to come out?
- Harvey believed in “outing” people against their will. What arguments can be made both for and against this controversial practice? Are you aware of the risks associated with “coming out” in terms of employment, personal relationships, and personal safety? What are the spiritual, emotional, and relational benefits of “coming out”? How does our first Unitarian Universalist Principle inform you in this discussion? What other principles speak to these issues?
- In the film, Milk’s political style is contrasted with that of other influential members of the gay community, such as the owner of *The Advocate* magazine. The movie, *Iron Jawed Angels*, similarly portrayed activists Alice Paul and Lucy Burns as rebelling against the way the suffrage movement was being conducted—from inside more than without. Historians frequently contrast the tactics of Reverend Martin Luther King to those of Malcolm X. The tension between those who feel power is best attained by working patiently within the system and those who believe groups should demand their place at the table is an age-old one. Has one technique been more successful in the struggle for civil rights than the other? What has been your personal experience with these two strategies?
- Unitarian Universalist congregations have not always been open to gay and lesbian ministers. When those candidates who were gay or lesbian first sought settlement in our congregations back in 1978 and 1979, the Milk murder and Dan White trial years, the most common question they heard, was this: “But why do you folks have to talk about it? Who you are, we mean. We don’t talk about our sexuality, why do you have to talk about yours?” Can you think of other questions that might be hiding within this question? What do you know about how we arrived at our current situation, where gay and lesbian ministers are called to serve many of our larger congregations?
- Anita Bryant and John Briggs brought a religious slant to their anti-gay campaigns. The film outlines their language clearly. How does being a religious liberal inform your understanding of sexuality? How does your faith call you to speak out and act out in support of love and civil rights for gay people?

- When were you personally first aware of discrimination against sexual minorities? How have you been active in the struggle for civil rights for BGLT people? Has it cost you anything? Is there a spiritual dimension in this work that you have discovered?

Taking Action

- Is your congregation a [Welcoming Congregation](#)? If not, consider offering the Welcoming Congregation program, which provides resources for affirming bisexual, gay, lesbian and/or transgender people. If yes, is it time for a refresher? [Living the Welcoming Congregation](#) is a program to help congregations continue the process. Information on Welcoming Congregation can be found at the UUA website.
- Is there a rainbow flag on display at your congregation? Does your congregation advertise in periodicals serving the BGLTQ community? How does your congregation intentionally welcome BGLTQ people? The pamphlet "[10 Things Your Congregation Can Do to Become More Welcoming](#)" is a good place to look for ideas.
- Find organizations working for BGLTQ civil rights in your local community. Does your congregation belong to these organizations? How can you work with others in your congregation and community to support these organizations? Can you provide free meeting space? Would these organizations be interested in sending representatives to host a program at your congregation? If you participate in "sharing the plate", can one collection go towards a BGLTQ group?
- Research the history of "don't ask, don't tell" in the American military system. Prepare a list of congressional women and men and organize a letter writing campaign about the issue.
- Organize and host a prom at your congregation for gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning and/or transgender high school students in your city or organize a fundraiser for a local BGLTQ youth organization.
- Invite your adult education team to sponsor a BGLTQ "film festival" followed by discussions. Film suggestions can be found on the UUA website.
- Invite a group prepare an interactive workshop on the history of marriage. Include a section on the history of gay marriage. Explore the Beacon Press book, *What is Marriage For?* By E.J. Graff. A study guide for the book is available on line: www.beacon.org/client/uu_guides/4135dg.cfm

- Study the history and timeline of our own UU involvement with sexual minority rights. Consider presenting this information to your congregation in a sermon, a class, or a religious education moment during a service. Information to help with your presentation can be found on the UUA website.
- Educate yourself. Read the biographies of Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Peter Tchaikovsky, Langston Hughes, Edward II, Leonard Bernstein, Virginia Woolf, Leonardo da Vinci, Yukio Mishima, Greg Louganis, Garcia Lorca, and other gay and lesbian people. Explore some of the resources listed below.

Resources

Unitarian Universalist Association website:

- Book and film suggestions: [Welcoming Religious Education Library](#)
- [History of Unitarian Universalist Involvement in and Support of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Issues](#)
- [Welcoming Congregation program](#):

Other Resources:

Epstein, Rob, director, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, DVD, 1984

“Harvey Milk,” Wikipedia article, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvey_Milk (accessed 1/06/09)

Ichaso, Leon, director, *The Execution of Justice*, a made-for-TV movie based on a play by Emily Mann, Daly-Harris Productions, 1999.

Romanovsky and Phillips, “[Homophobia](#)” found on the album *Trouble in Paradise*, 1986.

Shilts, Randy, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1982, 2008.

Wallace, Stewart and Michael Korie, *Harvey Milk; an Opera in Three Acts*, CD, Teldec, 1998