Remembering Rustin

April 10, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

I was away when Bayard Rustin's birthday arrived on March 17th, so consider this a belated birthday acknowledgement. Bayard Rustin to me reflects the true junction of what it means to be gay and black.

As a brief history lesson for those who are not familiar with Mr. Rustin's influence, he was one of the main organizers for the famous March on Washington where he helped bring millions of people together to hear the words Martin Luther King makes in his famous speech. Ironically this was during the time when as a gay black man Mr. Rustin was fighting a battle not only from the white community, but also the black community, in particular the ones who knew about his sexuality.

Yet it didn't deter him from helping make the March on Washington an important milestone in America's history. Sadly his story in world's events has been erased or buried and little are aware that a gay black man helped assemble the masses to obtain civil rights.

In looking at Mr. Rustin I realize that much has not changed. Like the earlier years, Mr. Rustin had more to fear of being a black man than being a man who was gay and there are so many similarities today for those of color who are also gay. In society today to be gay is a luxury as it's the color of your skin the country reacts to.

With the recent headlines of Trayvon Martin and the random shooting of 5 black men in Tulsa of which 3 died, as a gay black man I have to watch my back not because of my sexuality but the skin I reside in.

I know personally growing up I have been called the 'N' word many times and yes this number includes people of my own race who claim they want to seek ownership of a word that never belonged to them. I have been denied opportunities because of my race. Demonized and eroticized because of my race. Looked at suspiciously by the police despite the fact I'm professionally dressed. Even recently shopping at my favorite store, fully aware that I'm being followed or observed.

There's no pause in sympathy because of my HIV status or how I identify. They don't care. But they won't admit it as, "they don't see color" and things are now better as we have a black president.

Yet my fortitude to race should have been tempered at a young age living in the south my mother,

along with telling us not to talk to strangers and looking both ways before crossing, also schooled us in not putting our hands in our pockets while in a store or dressing your best even if it's to buy a light bulb so you won't be put in the same boat as 'other blacks.'

She learned this sad rule from growing up in a segregated south during a time when race was not subtle. "White Only" signs were the norm.

I wish I could have met Bayard Rustin and ask how he managed both worlds. And maybe shared that when gay is an issue, it's an issue from my own community who members have the same mentality as their brethren and inflict the same pain that they may have endured. Water hoses and the bites of German shepherd's are replaced with groups of pounding fists and looks of condemnation and avoidance. I wonder if they saw the hypocrisy of seeking or asking for civil rights when deny their own civil rights.

In my imaginary conversation with Mr. Rustin he may have shared that the Promised Land can't be reached until we all get there together despite race, creed, color and sexuality. He may have emphasized that causes in the world are not someone else's cause but it's all of our cause. That Trayvon Martin is not just a black cause, that immigration from Mexico is not just a Mexican American cause, that HIV is not just a gay cause and women's rights are not just a woman cause but it belongs to all of us. That denial of rights shouldn't be treated like an a la carte menu. And no person can truly be in the Promised Land when injustice still exists for others.

Mr. Rustin's battle in civil rights shows how although he was denied as a gay man it didn't deter him from seeking justice. And even though he may not be on the curriculum in student history books, he will be remembered as seeking civil rights for all despite his sexuality and in spite that he was a brother outside.

So happy belated birthday Mr. Rustin and thank you for the legacy that has inspired others to fight dual battles all in the name of civil rights for all.

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