Remembering Urvashi Vaid

It’s time to build institutions and movements that can work across purposes.

November 8, 2022 By Paul Kawata

I went to the memorial for Urvashi Vaid. While I did not know her well, I was a fanboy for this powerful out South Asian Lesbian who opened doors. During these difficult times, the service was exactly what was needed. It helps to remember that our work stands on the shoulders of greats. The gathering was so New York and fabulous without trying. Watching Tony Kushner hold back tears as he tried to explain how Urvashi and Kate Clinton gave him a social life to the icon and GOAT Gloria Steinem who connected Urvashi’s work in the larger struggle for justice and equity. It was exactly what she deserved and our movement needed.

I am worried. I don’t know what’s happening to our country. I’m watching in disbelief and sadness. The world does not feel safe for people who are different. We are fighting for our right to exist, to love and be loved. This was not how it should be. Yet here we are, again. The war has started, and we are not ready. Last week the Supreme Court heard arguments to abolish affirmative action based on race. Where is the outrage? In Texas there is a case that uses the Religious Freedom Act to allow employers to stop paying for HIV PrEP because it offends their religious beliefs. They are trying to dismantle the entire Affordable Care Act.

Everything seems upside down and backwards. Regardless of how the elections work out, the struggle is not going away. I am not going to stop being Gay because it offends you or your God. My skin is the color of my skin. These are things I would not change even if I could, and I can’t. How do we live in the same country when my very existence is an affront to your God?

It’s time to build institutions and movements that can work across purposes. We need a NATO for social justice. If they go after one of us, we all stand together in solidarity. Supportive donors need to give like never before. The funding needs to be unrestricted and multiyear. Support should prioritize real political power so we can fight back and not be helpless as they decimate our worlds. The radical right has spent the last 50 years working to overturn Roe and reshape America. We must catch up before it is all gone.

This is how I will remember Urvashi. In 1990 she interrupted a speech by then President George H.W. Bush. I was in the room. It was thrilling and scary. Part of an inside/outside strategy about the Ryan White CARE Act.

Like so many in HIV, I’ve attended too many memorials. We are a generation of walking wounded who saw too much and hurt too long. We buried lovers and friends in numbers that are still

incomprehensible. I am tired and crushed to see our work going backwards. Make no mistake, this is a fight about our existence on the planet.

Yours in the Struggle,

Paul Kawata

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