

Friday, July 20, 2007

**Understanding intolerance and narrow minds by looking from within.**

Eraserhead. When I arrived at college, I walked to my basement room in a large house converted to a dorm, and found that my two roommates had already staked out their corners of the room. One roommate, PA, I took to immediately; he was from near Pittsburgh, and seemed very likeable, intelligent, and caring. The other roommate, LI, gave me cause for pause. He was from western Long Island, displayed no stereotypes of Western Long Islanders (which is not a bad characteristic in him), and chose the farthest corner from me, facing the door. By the second day of orientation, he had painted "his wall" black, ultimately explaining that the black wall helped him feel less confined. LI put a Kate Bush and Eraserhead poster on his black wall. He started getting on my nerves. One day he pondered aloud whether it would be too conformist to return his lunch tray to the cleaning area, determined it would be, and left it there, for the students on work study ultimately to clean up after him. Another day, when my friend called, out of the blue he asked if he was a homosexual. Another day, after stringing dorm doors together with toilet paper (later explaining it was his reaction to the disconnection he felt existing among many people in the dorm), he chewed out the woman who daily cleaned the dorm, for having the audacity to clean up the toilet paper. LI could not simply be marginalized; he was different, apparently brilliant, and quite a few people took a liking to him. Even I liked some things about LI, one of which was that he was musically inclined. One night, just spontaneously, I whipped out my trumpet, LI whipped out his banjo, and PA whipped out his accordion, and we started jamming in the TV room, and the other residents enjoyed the good music and positive energy. Things unravelled after that. Ultimately, I just wanted out of that overcrowded dormroom, the black wall, LI, and the dorm itself. As I started my visits to the campus housing office to find out about vacancies in other double rooms (freshmen didn't qualify for single rooms), I was in the cafeteria one day with two friends, and LI sat down with us. I felt he was taunting me by interrupting my respite from him. I did not say a word to him, and he did the same with me as we ate. During the semester that LI, PA and I shared the dormroom -- LI suspended college the following semester, I moved to another dorm, and I entirely lost track of LI after bumping into him on the street a few weeks after I left the original dorm -- I read *A Confederacy of Dunces*. *Confederacy* is about Ignatius Reilly, a brilliant but obnoxious hero who sucks jelly out of donuts and returns them to the box for others to eat, takes a filing job only to throw out papers to be filed, takes a hot dog stand job only to eat up the profits, and takes a library job only to spend an entire day gluing just one pocket for return cards into one book. He proclaims that he was born in the wrong century, and that medieval times would have suited him better. *Confederacy's* author became so tormented that he killed himself, apparently because he could not find a publisher for the book, with his mother finally finding a publisher, and with the book earning a Pulitzer prize. LI also liked the age before electricity, and belonged to the campus Society for Creative Anachronism, sometimes donning period clothing. In many ways, LI was my Ignatius Reilly, a brilliant yet obnoxious hemorrhoid in my life. Reading *Confederacy*, I always could close the pages on Ignatius. I could not do the same with LI. On the flip side, I was LI's hypocritical hemorrhoid. Around him, I had trouble summoning the humor -- often bent and pushing the envelope -- that I so often enjoy. I was to him a killjoy and a stick in the mud. I could not even tolerate that he had taped the front page of Communist Pravda to the room's front entrance when he was studying and soaking up Russian, while also honing his impeccable French, studying German, and studying English. Language filled his entire semester. Something was very off with me. While being all intolerant of LI, his black wall, and the Pravda front page, I was working actively with Amnesty International, which is all about tolerance. I believed strongly in the ACLU's First Amendment agenda, but was being intolerant of a black wall. Not long after we parted ways, I recognized more fully than ever what a fool I had been not to have just had a one-to-one rap session about what we liked and didn't like about each other, and to seek harmony, and to keep the black wall and Pravda out of it. I did not seek him out to tell him this. I just wanted to put it all behind me. But it still dogs me. LI had a poster for David Lynch's masterpiece and pre-Twin Peaks Eraserhead., displayed above on YouTube. I finally watched it thirteen years after its release. I wondered why I had not just talked to LI about the film, or talked to him more at all. I Googled LI a few years ago, but only found his father, who was a state legislator. I asked by e-mail of LI's well being and whereabouts, but received no reply. Maybe I will try again. Tying this all into my law practice, for me to understand why I face so many narrow-minded and intolerant judges, jurors, and prosecutors, I don't need to look much farther than myself and my intolerance and narrow-mindedness with LI and others. For me to help motivate others to shed their narrow-mindedness, I must recognize and shed my own. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:05