Thanksgiving San Francisco 1978

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Thanksgiving of 1978 came and went like most of the other Thanksgivings of my childhood in the 1970s. My mother, brother and I had spent the holiday with a group of my mother's friends either at our house or somewhere in the Bay Area. Other than my mother's pies, the holiday had not been particularly memorable, but it was about the only thing that had occurred that month in the city where I grew up that might have been described as normal.

In November of 1978, I was a child, albeit a progressive child of 1970s San Francisco, so on Thanksgiving that year my mind was on baseball, my friends, school, my upcoming birthday and other preoccupations of childhood. I was not focused on the recent mass suicide by members of the People's Temple, who had relocated to Guyana from San Francisco, that had been a blow to my city and had dominated Thanksgiving table conversations throughout San Francisco that year. San Franciscans of all ages had no way of knowing that those events would not even be the most traumatic thing to happen to our city that month or that the Jonestown Massacre was only the beginning of a tough decade for our town, one where the we were severely impacted by the AIDS epidemic, spending cuts in health and other social services during the Reagan years, increased costs of living and, just when the city was beginning to turn things around, the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989.

It was the Monday after Thanksgiving, thirty years ago today, however, that San Francisco again changed forever. That afternoon when I returned from lunch to my sixth grade science class, the nun who was our teacher was visibly distraught about something. She began class that day by somberly announcing that Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk had been assassinated. Some of us were as upset and shaken by the news as our teacher was. However, more than a few of my classmates greeted this news with cheers of celebration and even exuberant shouts of "they killed that f*g."

While he was alive, Harvey Milk had not been a major presence in my life. I was too young to be involved in city politics and was not deeply aware of all of the political struggles going on around me. Nonetheless, I was horrified and more than a little frightened by this reaction from the other boys in my class. At home I had learned that Harvey Milk was one of the good guys-and one of us. Now Milk, who like my family was Jewish and from New York, had been killed; and my classmates were cheering at his death.

San Francisco was a different town thirty years ago. It still had not become the city that Harvey Milk helped build, but never saw. San Francisco in 1978 was a city in transition; and Dan White, the man who had assassinated the Mayor and Harvey Milk was fighting against that transition and that progress. Dan White represented the reactionary and hateful elements that feared Harvey Milk who, in turn, feared nobody. Thirty years later, it is hard to imagine that San Francisco of the late 1970s was a city that was in some real ways was still divided. While the City Hall
demonstrations against Dan White remain important images from that period, it is occasionally forgotten that strong reservoirs of support remained in several parts of San Francisco for the policeman turned city supervisor turned cold-blooded killer.

The controversy or spin, a word we didn't use back then, surrounding the assassinations of Moscone and Milk and the subsequent trial of Dan White, who had been angry that Mayor Moscone had decided not to reappoint him to the Board of Supervisors, began almost right away. Over the next few months at school it was common to hear students, particularly in my older brother's class, saying that Dan White had led an exemplary life and should not be punished too much for making just one mistake. At home the one time when my brother or I made the mistake of repeating this line of reasoning, to use that term very loosely, out on my mother, we didn't get very far.

The famous and strange trial that followed the assassination, the now famous Twinkie defense, the slap on the wrist given to Dan White and his subsequent suicide after being released from prison are well known. While the justice system failed the memories of Harvey Milk and George Moscone, the City of San Francisco, and gay and lesbian people everywhere, ultimately Harvey Milk's San Francisco defeated Dan White's San Francisco. Within only a few years of Harvey Milk's death, gay and lesbian elected officials were no longer unusual in San Francisco as the political power that Milk had sought to create in the gay and lesbian community became institutionalized. The city has become responsive to gays and lesbians and has been at the cutting edge of most civil and human rights issues.

Harvey Milk's impact, of course, goes far beyond his adopted hometown. In his famous "Hope Speech", Milk spoke about the "young gay person who all the sudden realizes that he or she is gay; knows that if their parents find out they will be tossed out of the house, their classmates will taunt the child...and that child has several options: staying in the closet, and suicide..." Because of the work of Milk and other like him that child now had "two new options: the option is to go to California (read San Francisco), or stay in San Antonio and fight." Milk's greatest legacy is that all across America people chose to do both. While the forces of hate are still out there, and still winning some battles, such as the discriminatory Proposition 8 in California, because of the work of Harvey Milk and millions of other lesser known heroes, those same forces of hate will lose their war. Harvey Milk's America will defeat Dan White's America.

As we sit down to our Thanksgiving dinners tonight, progressives have a lot to be thankful for this year, but lets take a minute to remember that great San Franciscan and great American Harvey Milk and the work we all still have to do.