



STORIES OF COURAGE – CHAPTER III

"You may be 38 years old, as I happen to be. And one day, some great opportunity stands before you and calls you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid...You refuse to do it because you want to live longer...You're afraid that you will lose your job, or you are afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity, or you're afraid that somebody will stab you, or shoot at you or bomb your house; so you refuse to take the stand. Well you may go on and live until you are 90, but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90. And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit."

From a sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr., 1968

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A saddened mom's letter to her church

BY SUSAN AGER, FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Near midnight, as her husband slept, lifelong Catholic Joanne Polisano sat down at the computer in her home office in Wixom and pounded out a letter to her pastor.

She began: "Perhaps in some small way I can understand what a mother must have felt like, 2,000 years ago, when a group of people of her own religion decided to persecute her son."

Joanne is 67 years old, a former Sunday school teacher and a conservative Republican. She has never voted for a Democrat for president. She never misses weekend mass.

But her youngest child, 38 years old, is a lesbian and finally happy after years of self-doubt as she struggled to desire a man. Now she shares a home with a woman she has loved for 5 years. They talk about bearing a child.

And Joanne is angry, hurt and ashamed that her church is working so hard to support Proposal 2, which would etch into Michigan's constitution a ban against gay marriage, civil union and equal rights.

Joanne's daughter and her partner already have left the Catholic Church. Joanne is ready to, despite years of loyalty. "How can I support a church that would discriminate against my child?" she asked me. "Maybe I should give my money to the Triangle Foundation" -- a metro Detroit gay advocacy group -- "someplace that would help my child instead of hurt her."

It 'just flowed out of me' Joanne wrote her letter Friday, the day after she read that Michigan's bishops sent letters to more than 800 parishes urging priests to sermonize in support of the proposal.

Despite the hour, the letter "just flowed out of me," she said. "I hardly had to change a word." She woke up her husband, a retired banker, and read it to him. He called it excellent. In the morning, she called her daughter, who

cried to hear her mother's convictions and love.

Then Joanne hit "send" and e-mailed it to her pastor, the Rev. John Budde of Holy Family Catholic Church in Novi, where she and her husband have been members for 15 years. That night, she went to mass to give to her pastor a paper copy of the letter -- just six paragraphs -- including photos of her daughter and the woman she loves.

'What has she ever done?' Budde is in Rome. But the letter he'll see when he returns says that although Joanne's daughter isn't perfect like Jesus, she, too, is perceived as different. "Many feel threatened by her. Not enough to kill her, but enough to make sure that she is set apart from the rest of society. Enough to make sure that she cannot fully participate in the advantages that 'they,' the normal people, fully avail themselves of."

Although a state law already prohibits same-gender marriage, it continues, the church feels compelled to change the constitution to make sure gays and lesbians "will stop trying to live the same kind of lives we live."

"Let's make sure they not only can't marry," it says, "but they also can't obtain any type of civil union. Let's stop them from collecting benefits from their partner's insurance. Let's make sure they have no say in their partner's health decisions even if they've lived together for 20 years."

"Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, I look at my beautiful adult child ... and I ask my church, 'What has she ever done or would she ever do to make you (like the Jews of 2,000 years ago) feel so threatened by her and others like her?' "

Joanne can find no answer to her question. She has no hope her letter will make a difference. But she couldn't stay silent, not this time.

.WILL YOU BE OUR NEXT CHAPTER?