



PRIDE TALK'23

AMSTERDAM

David Mixner

*My concept of sin
is to not care*

DE NIEUWE KERK AMSTERDAM

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2

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For ease of reading, individual excisions are not marked, nor is it indicated when the case of a letter changes due to the deletion of part of a sentence.

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Hello, everybody, how are y'all?

Thank you, Boris, Paul, Astrid and my good friends and Steven. Your words were generous, and kind. But I'm going to try to begin tonight by making myself a human being again.

I'm quite aware that I'm here by default, or mistake. You see, I grew up in a time where 310 of my friends died of AIDS. I'm an HIV positive person. I gave 90 eulogies in two years, for my friends under 48 years of age. Most of them were more talented, more articulate, certainly more handsome than I.

But they're not here. And that makes it imperative that I speak even louder. So, through me, their voices will be heard tonight. And we don't forget them.

I grew up as a farm worker picking crops, we didn't have electricity or running water. We cooked by a wood stove until I was 10 years old. When I was 14, I got involved in community activism for the first time, because I'm a liberation theologian. What that means is, I believe that we're put here on this planet to save the planet and to serve others. My concept of sin is to not care. Anything else goes by the wayside.

Just so you know. I'm 77. I'm single and still fun.

I will tell you a little bit about my journey. Because, you know, part of our problem is they're trying to take our history. Out of the schools – they're trying to take our history out of the libraries. They're trying to make us a silent minority. And you see the problem with that is I grew up thinking I was nobody. Every institution in the United States told me to shut up about who I was. Now, this is in a country where honesty was the most prized character trait that you could have. Our first president said I never told a lie. Another President, Honest Abe, always said a father says to his son, 'I don't care what you did just tell me the truth.' Right?

We send people to jail for not telling the truth. Unless you're gay, unless you are a member the rainbow community.

Then they say to us, the rainbow community, from every institution – religious institutions or government or labour institutions – please lie to us. That's how I grew up.

I felt I was nothing. So, it's very important to know what we come out of something. Because what we come out of is a magnificent, courageous, extraordinary rainbow tribe that has fought through unbelievable obstacles to victory, each year. You have every reason to be proud of what you come out of. Rarely have I seen a community, such as ours, fight so hard for victory, and I've been involved with Dr. King, I went to jail with Dr. King. In fact, I've been to jail 15 times – well, I have a thing for handcuffs. What can I tell you? I'll just tempt you a little bit.

It's vital to remember you come out of something, we are somebody and we can't let them deny us the telling of our history. We can't let them forget all of those who died of AIDS. We cannot let them forget the 50 people who were shot to death in pulse in Florida because they were in a gay nightclub or the five who were shot to death in a bar. And in Colorado Springs, too. These are not just happening 20–30 years ago, but recently. We must remember the shootings in churches and synagogues as targets of others hatred.

I would receive and still receive death threats by phone, usually by a male, sounding drunk, in a southern accent. They say, 'I know you David Mixner, you faggot! I know where y'all live and I'm going to blow your head off with my gun when you step out'. It used to disturb me, but then I found a way to deal with it.

After they would get done, I would say with a little grin, 'this is hot. Do you want to go out on a date?' And then immediately, they wouldn't know what to do and they'd hang up the phone. You know, we have to laugh.

We can't allow them to stop our joy; joy is the most beautiful word in the English language. And if we stop from laughing and having joy in our life, how are we going to describe to others the kind of world we want to see?

We're going to come across as some cold ideologue. You know, we've got to live a life of love and joy and dancing and music and celebration. We have a lot to celebrate.

That's what pride is all about. Celebrating our journey. And for one day, having fun doing it, and if anyone doesn't like it, just say 'doei!' (By the way, that's my one Dutch word for today.)

You know, when I came out, I was 30 years old.

Overnight, I lost my family. For four years, they wouldn't talk to me.

People who I had worked with, side by side, in the anti-war movement and civil rights movement, wouldn't talk to me anymore.

But I have to tell you, the day I came out was the day my life began.

The day I came out, my family tried to have me institutionalized and have a lobotomy.

In the year I came out, 4,000 members of our rainbow community had forced lobotomies done on them. And that was just one year. I met a lot of those people who had that done to them. And it's one of the great tragic stories of our community. That goes untold. It was tough.

But I realized what I had fought all those years for beside Martin Luther King and I as co-chair of the largest anti-war march against the Vietnam War. When I finally came out, I was now fighting for the real me.

Now, here's how bad it was to be gay back then and why I took a long time to come out. They drafted me during the Vietnam War, saying that if I had the opportunity to be so busy opposing the war then I should not have any exemption as a student and could go to war. Now, in order to get out of serving in the military, all I had to tell them was that I was a gay man. And I could prove it by the way. But I was prepared to go to jail.

And for me at the time, it was better to go to jail for five years than to come out. I didn't let anyone know I was gay. That is the extent of depression and shame I felt. Think about that. That was my choice. I wrote my draft board and said 'fuck you and fuck your war. I ain't goin'!' But I was indicted, and I still wouldn't say 'I am gay' which would have kept me out. I often laugh that I, as a pacifist and as a person who really never thought of himself getting married, I spent half my life fighting for the right for gays to serve in the military, and the other half of my life fighting for the right to get married. And now gay weddings have cost me a fortune in wedding gifts and destination weddings. Oh my god, where did that come from?

But here's the thing ...

We overcame these challenges and have accomplished great things together. In the middle of the pandemic of AIDS, while gay men were dying, our lesbian sisters stepped up front and exerted leadership like I have never seen and at the same time, they took care of us while we were sick and dying. And from that, where there had been years of tensions between the two communities, became a rainbow community.

Our lesbian sisters had every right to turn their back on us. There was lots of misogyny among gay men. And I watched women step up into roles in leadership and made sure we did not stop our fight for freedom, while at the same time helping us take care of our sick and dying. And I will never, ever forget that kindness directed towards gay men. And I want to say thank you. We should never forget any of it. We got through it together. We became something stronger and united.

I remember, in the '80s, four of us went to see Governor Dukakis, who was running for president in 1988. We had fundraised from the rainbow community and wanted to contribute to his campaign. His campaign refused our check, as they wouldn't accept 'gay money'. At this point, we were becoming well organized because we had no choice. Our friends were dying and nobody cared. I always define courage as simply a lack of options. It's not like you put on your coat today and said, I think I'll go out and do something risky, so, I'm courageous. No, it's what you do when you have no choice. In the '80s, we had no choice. Unless you don't believe in freedom, unless you don't believe in love unless you don't believe in human rights. It should never be viewed as courageous; we had no option but to stand up, to be for our freedom. And now, I'll tell you what courage is – the people of Ukraine. I'll tell you what courage is – it's the woman of Iran, who are being stripped search filmed and tortured in Iranian jails, simply because they won't wear a Hijab. That's courage, that's real courage!

And let me be quite clear. If anyone thinks we're going to abandon or set adrift the transgender community, or the drag community because we, the cis community, might have it better, they could not be more mistaken. We are in this together the whole way. And if one of us is discriminated against, all of us are discriminated against. Put away any wishful thinking that someone can come in and divide us. They've tried all the time, and

they failed, and they will continue to fail. Because we know that our power comes as a rainbow community. Not gay men, not lesbians, not bisexuals, not just transgender not just the drag community. Our power is together as the rainbow community. And we must never ever give a politician or a person in power the ability to negotiate our freedom away.

You see, there's a difference between principles and values, and issues. Issues are a piece of legislation, and sometimes you get as far as you can get, knowing that you can come back the next session and get more. But principles or values are something you never, ever negotiate.

Freedom, love, equal rights, economic opportunity -those are principles and values, that you just don't give up. Someone would come to me and say, 'well, we'll give you this much and then maybe we'll come back.' I would say, 'you give me nothing. You don't understand. I'm already a free man. I, proud, free gay man. I don't depend on you to give me that. You don't have the right to negotiate with me about my basic freedom.'

We tend to overemphasize the word freedom, you know, it's almost become a cliché, but it can't be taken for granted. Now, our citizens and our community are facing a new onslaught of oppression, persecution, and censorship. Granted, we have come a remarkable distance in the United States, but new battles are rising. And I want you to hear me because it's coming your way if it's not already here. Don't kid yourself. Don't kid yourself! That's why I travelled my sick old ass across the ocean to chat with you. Nice ass, but old.

In the United States, we now have legal gay marriage adoption of children; we can now serve in the military. We've made enormous progress almost historic for any civil rights group.

But what we've been reminded of, oh, since President Trump was elected, that we can never let our guard down. And it's true whether it's in Uganda or the United States or Iran or the Netherlands. There are always people who will use us and persecute us and give people the right to hate us for their own personal political power. And Donald Trump gave permission for the hater to come out of the closet. They've always been there. But it was socially unacceptable in the United States for a good decade, to say anything antisemitic, homophobic, anti-immigrant. And suddenly he gave

the haters permission to be proud of their hate – to where we have people with Nazi flags pounding on the windows of our libraries demanding books be burned, and that drag queens not be allowed into the building. We have a city in Florida now that recently banned all drag shows. And now states, like Montana, Texas and Tennessee are banning drag shows too.

Think about it. We're not talking, just drag shows. We're talking about one of the creative forms of creativity as much a part of the arts as anything else since Shakespeare time.

Tootsie, Mrs. Doubtfire, La cage aux Folles. You know all, all are expressions of art. And so, what they do if they're successful, at banning drag shows, banning expressions of creativity that celebrates the humour of our community, the joy of our community. It's an attack and the first step towards censorship across the board. You cannot let them put their foot in the door, because they will then swing the door further and make more demands.

Now in Florida, where both houses are controlled by the same party, and the governor is the same party, and he wants to run for president. They have power and tax money. They have passed horrific anti-LGBTQ laws. For example, if parents are found to be supportive of a young transgender child or teen, the government will come into their home. Listen carefully, the government will come into their home, take their children away and charge their parents with a felony, with a penalty of up to five years in jail. They have passed 'Don't Say Gay' which means if you have a child, which many of us do, you cannot go to a parent teacher meeting as a gay couple because that would be an expression that you're gay. A child cannot mention that you have two gay parents or same sex parents.

Leaders have taken every book out of every high school, every grade school library, and many community libraries, in five states, any book that even mentions anything about gay or gay rights, or our rainbow community.

My book is banned in five states. My three books are banned in five states, an idea being forced by mobs – many of them carry Nazi flags, I kid you not, or Confederate flags, demanding that books like my own be withdrawn from the libraries and that no child should ever see them. The laws just keep going. They have made it against the law for any university to have diversity programs, or they will lose their state funding.

One city in Florida is wondering if they can allow the Gay Pride celebration because people will be there in drag where children can see them, which the 'mobs' believe will lead to rampant paedophilia. Ironically, the most paedophilia is involved with churches, the Catholic Church and the evangelical community. 190 evangelical pastors have been charged with paedophilia this year. I don't know if that many drag queens or even one, that has been charged.

So, you know, we are seeing the haters rise and the rainbow tribe is very much under attack. And now, what the message is for us and what we can learn? We must also look to the Jewish community and other minorities. Antisemitism is on the rise, Anti-Asian hate crimes on the rise. Hate crimes in the United States increased by 138%. Last year, those hate crimes were mostly directed towards our transgender family.

What we have learned is we never ever cannot be vigilant, that hate and the willingness of individuals to use us, to give away our rights, to increase their power will always be there. So, we have no choice but to mobilize to fight.

Now we start in a much better place than we did 50 years ago. They're not advocating lobotomies. We can marry. We can adopt children. We got national legislation to protect us on that. And we're out. We're not in the closet. We don't have to convince people to take a risk and come out of the closet. So, we're going to win.

We're mobilizing already for the next elections. We've pledged in our community to raise \$100 million for Canada to support our rights. We are directing events and registering, in record numbers, our rainbow community and our allies to vote. We are working with students because 85% of the students in America from between 18 and 25 support us. And I'll give you an example. We recently had an off-year election, which means usually 15-20% of the people vote. And it was to be a Supreme Court member in the state of Wisconsin. Now, this election would mean whether progressives or the haters kept control the court. And the court had already made some very homophobic decisions. But we organized, and we organized on the campuses. The Republicans response was, well only put one polling place at the University. Students at the University of Wisconsin stood in line 10 hours to vote, and they didn't budge. And we ended up with a 72% turnout and winning by 12 points.

And that's what we got to do. And we can't coast.

And I want to say something. And then you can say 'doei' to me. We have been given so much. Just being in this room means we've been given so much. We are so blessed.

We all have our personal struggles, whether it's mental illness or mental challenges, or loneliness, or whatever. You know, domestic violence in our community, we all have our struggles. There's no one who doesn't sit in this audience who doesn't have a personal challenge. And it's our job to love each other through it.

And love is not a cliché, by the way. Unconditional love is a weapon. People can't resist it. Because it's so beautiful.

And by being here, we're not in the Ukraine. We're not getting the death sentence in Uganda. We're not being hung by the Iranian police, which gays have been recently strung up, or not being forced to lose their jobs or their homes because of the persecution.

We're not that drag queen in the library who's looking at an angry crowd with Confederate flags pounding on the window, saying they're going to kill them. We're fortunate and blessed.

However, that puts a special, special moral imperative upon us. It is imperative since we're so blessed, that we give voice. Thereby our actions and by carefully choosing our words, by our love, to act for those who are in jail or don't have the capacity to give their own voice. We will give voice to the people in Uganda, we will give voice to our rainbow community in Iran. We will give voice to the gay and lesbian soldiers fighting on the battle lines in Ukraine. We will give voice in every place, Russia included, where they are taking our community down and killing them. Literally.

We will give voice. We will stand up. We will be counted. We must remain united. You will not commit the sin of indifference. There's no room for it. Because if you think it doesn't concern you, I got news for you, buddy, it does. When they come for you, they're not going to say, 'oh, well, this person didn't speak out, leave them be'. They're just going to round us up. So, you and I, not as an act of courage, not as an act of activism, but as a moral imperative,

have to give voice to the powerless, to the disenfranchised, and to those who are suffering under the hand of oppression, that is your job. That is my job. And not one of us, including me, can do it alone. Not one of us can do without the other.

You know, I say that one of the greatest dangers in our community is self-righteousness. We think we have the answers, and we'll fight over the smallest thing, like who's the appropriate person to buy donuts at the meeting. I almost called my memoir, who will buy the donuts? You know, those are 'nothing' issues.

Yes, they need to be discussed and yes, each and every one of us must strive to do better in our language, and our actions and in our words, that's required for us just to become better people.

You know, I would think we all would like to be good people filled with love.

So, it's quite clear, give voice, stand firmly together, organize, and develop an unconditional sense of love, especially for our rainbow community.

Thank you for listening. I'm very grateful. And thank you for having me here.

Just remember, I'm still single.

BIOGRAPHY

David Mixner (b. 1946), writer, fundraiser, activist, and performer, is a veteran of many battlegrounds. In the early sixties, he campaigned for John and Bobby Kennedy and for Martin Luther King. He became a prominent leader in the anti-Vietnam War movement and is now, since his coming out in 1977, a figurehead for the LGBTQIA+ rights movement in the United States.

Davis Mixner giving his Pride Talk '23 at De Nieuwe Kerk, 20 July 2023
PHOTO Isabell Janssen



PRIDE TALK AT DE NIEUWE KERK AMSTERDAM

12

Every year, with Queer & Pride Amsterdam, the LGBTQIA+ community celebrates its achievements and reflects on the emancipatory struggle that remains to be fought. Every year, on the eve of these weeks of celebration and remembrance, De Nieuwe Kerk gives the stage to an international activist and amplifies their message. The church asks them to look at our country and Amsterdam from an outside perspective and gives them the chance to warn us, take the measure of us, encourage us or give us a heart to heart or all of the above.

De Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam is one of the most famous monuments of the city. A venue for royal and national commemorations, exhibitions and concerts. This year's Pride Talk is the very first edition of a new initiative. Being able to amplify the voices of the often ignored or unheard is a privilege De Nieuwe Kerk is honoured to employ.