

The Code of the Callboy

By Dan Savage

From The New York Times

8 November 2006

I ONCE had a friend who did sex work, which is a nice way of saying that he was a prostitute.

He was based in Los Angeles and one of his clients was a movie star. Not just any movie star, but a top male movie star. A sex symbol. This guy used to fly my friend first class to far-flung locales, usually to unwind after a big location shoot.

Sorry, but I can't tell you who this movie star is. It's not that I'm afraid of being sued or that I disapprove of outing. Nope, the reason I can't tell you the name of this movie star is, well, I don't know it. No matter how many times I asked, no matter how much I pried, my friend simply wouldn't tell me the guy's name. My friend wouldn't even tell me where he was meeting his famous client, lest the places where his films were being shot offered a telling clue.

My friend took the callboy's code of silence seriously.

Besides the sheer scale of the hypocrisy, the Ted Haggard scandal doesn't tell us much we don't already know about closeted gay or bisexual men; closet cases will take enormous risks to get their needs met and will often do great harm to themselves and to those they profess to love. What's new in the Haggard scandal — perhaps we should call it a flameout — is the refusal of Mike Jones, a former male prostitute, to honor the callboy's code of silence, the omertà of gay hookerdom.

On the Web site where Mr. Haggard is said to have found Mr. Jones, the callboys describe themselves as discreet. That's their solemn promise not to blab to the wife, if you're married; to the tabloids (or prying friends), if you're a movie star; to your congregation, if you're one of the most powerful evangelical ministers in the country. The fear that callboys can no longer be trusted will make the lives of men like Ted Haggard that much more lonely and difficult.

Back in the bad old days — the mythical 1950s, the era social conservatives pine for — most gay men were closeted, which made it relatively easy for them to arrange discreet trysts. You could rely on the discretion of your sex partners because they were relying on yours. It was the era of mutually assured destruction, both in terms of nuclear warfare and gay sex. Your partner couldn't reveal your secret without revealing his own.

Needless to say, a sex life infused with cold-war-style tensions didn't lead to many healthy or lasting relationships.

Today gay and bisexual men live openly, making the modern closet a much less crowded place. While once all the best gay men were closeted, now the only adults you find in the closet are the fearful, the pathetic and the hypocritical. The men you

meet in today's closet are the ones with a great deal to lose if their secrets are exposed. They're gay men with lucrative careers that would collapse if they came out; gay men whose obscenely wealthy families would disown them if they lived openly; or gay men leading large congregations that would dismiss them if they knew the truth about their pastor.

A less crowded closet doesn't just mean slimmer pickings for men like Ted Haggard, but unreliable ones as well. While once you could be certain that the closeted gay man you were sleeping with would still be closeted 10 or 20 years in the future, now you never know. The closeted gay man you entrust with your secret today may be out next year. As he has nothing left to hide, your secret is no longer safe. Better hope you parted on good terms.

Which is why so many powerful closet cases turn to callboys. It's not just the callboy's promise of discretion, but the sense that the old dynamics — mutually assured destruction — remain in force. A callboy can't expose your secret without exposing his own. There's still a stigma attached to selling sex.

So why did Mike Jones speak out?

Because today it is arguably more shameful and damaging to be a hypocritical closet case than it is to be a sex worker. Even those delighted by Mr. Haggard's disgrace — disclosure: I count myself among their number — ache for his five children, all suffering now for the sins of their father. And let me be clear: their father's sin is not his sexual orientation, but his deceit and hypocrisy. His sin is the closet.

When Representative Mark Foley flamed out, Pat Robertson said: "Well, this man's gay. He does what gay people do." That lie might have worked when most gay Americans were closeted, but it doesn't work anymore. Seventy percent of Americans today know a gay person; for straight Americans, hitting on teenagers, hiring prostitutes and snorting meth are not things their gay relatives, friends and co-workers typically do. (Or not at appreciably higher rates than their straight friends.) An openly gay man is accountable to himself, his family, his partner and his community. He is free to form healthy relationships, which is why he is far less likely to be I.M.'ing teenagers or hiring hookers than some desperate closet case.

Ultimately it was Ted Haggard's hypocrisy — railing against homosexuals and campaigning against gay marriage while apparently indulging in sex romps with a gay escort — that prompted Mr. Jones to shove him out of the closet. The homophobia promoted by Mr. Haggard and other agents of intolerance, if I may use John McCain's phrase (he's not using it anymore), undermined the callboy code of silence that Mr. Haggard himself relied on. Most callboys are gay, after all, and most are out of the closet these days.

And while most callboys will continue to respect a code of silence where the average closet case is concerned, the Ted Haggards of the world have been placed on notice: You can't have your callboy and disparage him too.