**Case Study 12: Reluctant Hero**

On September 22, 1975 at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, a good samaritan foiled the attempted assasination of Gerald Ford. Just as Sara Jane Moore attempted to shoot the president, Oliver Sipple, a Vietnam veteran who just happened to be in the crowd that day, pushed her down. Though he was hesitant to accept the label, Sipple was lauded as a national hero. There was just one problem: he was gay.

Sipple was out to his friends in San Francisco, but was still closeted from his family in Detroit. He had asked reporters to not comment on his sexuality for fear of estrangement. However, Harvey Milk, a prominent gay activist and Sipple’s friend, intentionally outed Sipple to Herb Caen at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Caen published the story, it was picked up across the nation, and his family in Detroit was hounded by reporters and harassed by neighbors. Though some in his family came to accept Sipple, most continued to be uneasy with his sexuality up until his death in 1989.

Sipple had worked on Milk’s campaign for mayor, and Sipple was active in the gay community. Milk had even loaned Sipple money when he was between jobs. Still, Sipple knew his family wouldn’t be able to accept his life and didn’t want to be outed to them. At a time when gay men were seen as perverts by society, Milk justified outing Sipple because he thought it was important to promote gay people in the media. He said, “It's too good an opportunity. For once we can show that gays do heroic things."1 For Milk, Sipple's hesitance to share his sexuality was doing a disservice to his identity. To him, pushing aside your sexuality means abandoning a core aspect of yourself–something that is completely unacceptable. He said in a 1978 speech, “Every gay person must come out...As difficult as it is, you must tell your immediate family, you must tell your relatives, you must tell your friends if indeed they are your friends…once you do, you will feel so much better.”2

Sipple didn’t see it this way. He said in a statement to reporters, “My sexual orientation has nothing at all to do with saving the president's life, just as the color of my eyes or my race has nothing to do with what happened in front of the St. Francis Hotel on Tuesday. My sexuality is a part of my private life, and has no bearing on my response to the act of a person seeking to take the life of another. I am first and foremost a human being who enjoys and respects life. I feel that a person’s worth is determined by how he or she responds to the world in which they live, not on how or what—or with whom a private life is shared.”3

**Study Questions:**

1. Did Caen have an obligation not to run the story? In what circumstances is it morally acceptable to divulge information about someone against their will?
2. To what extent did Sipple have an obligation to support the gay community, especially given his heightened platform? More generally, what obligation do people with larger audiences have to support social causes?
3. What inherent moral value is there to authenticity, if any? How does this factor into Milk's decision to out Sipple?

1 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/30/AR2006123000160.html>

2 <https://www.onearchives.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/1978_harvey_milk_gay_freedom_day_speech.pdf>

3 <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/oliver-sipple>

Note: the third reference expertly goes over this entire series of events in far more detail including more about Sipple's life, relationships, and death.