

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

WHY I PERFORM GAY MARRIAGES

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Today, I want to talk about “Why I Perform Gay Marriages.” Actually, I *don’t* perform gay marriages since gays and lesbians cannot yet be legally married. So, what I perform are called Union Services which, in most respects, look like weddings, but, strictly speaking, carry no legal implications.

Our Reading for this morning is what is called a Resolution Of Immediate Witness – one which was passed by the delegates at last June’s Unitarian Universalist General Assembly – which is the annual meeting of our denomination. You may remember that at about that time there was a veritable rush among the politicians of our nation, including both Bob Dole and President Clinton, to sign on to the so-called “Defense of Marriage Act,” which would seek to deny federal recognition of same-sex marriages should any of the states legalize them – as, indeed, Hawaii may well do.

Here, then, is the Resolution of Immediate Witness.

RESOLUTION OF IMMEDIATE WITNESS

BECAUSE the first Principle of Unitarian Universalism is to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person; and

BECAUSE marriage is held in honor among the blessings of life; and

WHEREAS many states, the Congress, and the President of the United States are acting to void the recognition of same-sex marriages and to deny “full faith and credit” to such marriages formalized in Hawaii or any other state that sanctions them; and

WHEREAS the debate about extending legally recognized marriage to same-sex couples has focused on the objections of certain religious communities; and

WHEREAS the Unitarian Universalist Association has adopted numerous Resolutions over the last twenty-six years supporting equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons, including support for Ceremonies of Union between members of the same sex; and

WHEREAS the UUA Board of Trustees and the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association have voted their support for the right to marry for same-sex couples;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Unitarian Universalist Association adopts a position of support of legal recognition for marriage between members of the same sex; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Unitarian Universalist Association make its position supporting legal marriage between persons of the same sex known by means of [the] press and other public media; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Unitarian Universalist Association urges its member congregations to take an affirmative position in support of the value of marriage between any two committed persons, whether of the same or opposite sexes, and to make those positions known in their home communities.¹

¹ Please note that this does not include final amendments from the floor and, thus, is not a final draft of the resolution.

WHY I PERFORM GAY MARRIAGES

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

The climax of Harvey Fierstein's play *Torch Song Trilogy* is a dialogue — well, a shouting match, actually — between a mother and her son about traditional marriage and its gay variant. The situation is such that Arnold's lover, Alan, has just been killed.

Arnold: [I'm] widow-ing.

— —

Ma: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Are you trying to compare my marriage with you and Alan? Your father and I were married for thirty-five years, had two children and a wonderful life together. You have the nerve to compare yourself to that?

— —

What loss did you have?...Where do you come to compare that to a marriage of thirty-five years?

— — —

It took me two months until I could sleep in our bed alone, a year to learn to say "I" instead of "we." Are you going to tell me you were "widowing." How dare you!

Arnold: You're right, Ma. How dare I. I couldn't possibly know how it feels to pack someone's clothes in plastic bags and watch the garbage-pickers carry them away. Or what it feels like to forget and set his place at the table. How about the food that rots in the refrigerator because you forgot how to shop for one? How dare I? Right, Ma? How dare I?

Ma: May God strike me dead! Whatever I did ... to deserve a child speaking to me this way. The disrespect!...

Arnold: Listen, Ma, you had it easy. You have thirty-five years to remember, I have five. You had your children and friends to comfort you, I had me! My friends didn't want to hear about it 'Cause everybody knows that queers don't feel nothin'. How dare I say I loved him? You had it easy, Ma. You lost your husband in a nice clean hospital, I lost mine out there. They killed him — there on the street. Twenty-three years old, laying dead on the street. Killed by a bunch of kids with baseball bats. Children. Children taught by people like YOU. 'Cause everybody knows that queers don't matter! Queers don't love! And those that do, deserve what they get!²

Fierstein's fictional play, unfortunately, is corroborated by reality. Consider the following true story from Richard Mohr's 1994 book called, *A More Perfect Union: Why Straight America Must Stand Up for Gay Rights*.

On their walk back from the neighborhood bar to their Victorian home which, over the years, they have lovingly restored, Warren and Mark stop along San Francisco's Polk Street to pick up some milk for breakfast and for Sebastian, their geriatric cat. Just for kicks, some wealthy teens from the Valley drive into town to "bust some fags." Warren steps into a convenience store, while Mark has a smoke outside. As Mark turns to acknowledge Warren's return, he is hit across the back of the head with a baseball bat. Mark's blood and vomit splash across Warren's face.

² Fierstein, Harvey, cited by Mohr, Richard D., *A More Perfect Union* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 31-32.

At San Francisco General, Mark is dead on arrival. Subsequently, a California appellate court holds that under no circumstances can a relationship between two homosexuals — however emotionally significant, stable, and exclusive — be legally considered a “close relationship,” and so Warren is not only left grieving for his dead partner, but is barred from bringing suit against the bashers for wrongful death or emotional distress.³

Consider another true story.

Years of domesticity made Carol and Edna familiar figures in their middle-class neighborhood. Edna drives a city bus. Carol worked on the power lines for the power company until a freak accident set aflame the cherry-picker in which she worked. She tried to escape the fire by leaping to a nearby tree, but lost her grip and landed on her head. Eventually, it became clear that Carol would be permanently brain-damaged. After a few awkward weeks in the hospital, Carol’s parents (the next of kin) would not let Edna visit anymore. Eventually the parents moved Carol to their home, where Edna is still not allowed to visit her partner of many years.⁴

II

All of this is only too sadly familiar, for while homosexuality is clearly gaining acceptance in America, nevertheless, in many quarters, it is still widely and deeply loathed, hated, and feared. For many, homosexuality is considered either a sin or a sickness — or both — though, in my judgment, I am firmly convinced that it is neither. Gays and lesbians, in my judgment, are simply an invisible minority that have been subjected to the worse kind of prejudicial stereotyping and persecution. Between the church, on the one hand, and the mental health establishment, on the other hand, gay men and lesbians have been officially condemned as either sinful or sick for a long time. They have been burned at the stake, stoned, gassed, castrated, shunned, and exiled. They have undergone hormone injections, aversion therapy, electric shock therapy, vasectomies, and pubic nerve sections. They have been taunted, teased, beaten, thrown off bridges, hit over the head with baseball bats, and murdered. Like Arnold, they have been vilified by their families; like Warren, they have been denied redress in the courts; and, like Edna, they have been denied next of kin visitation rights.

This kind of deep, long-standing cultural homophobia, I believe, is the root problem and the chief obstacle to the acceptance of gay, or same-sex, marriages in our culture. There is, in other words, among many of us, a gut level, emotional reaction to same-sex marriages that ranges from uneasiness at the novelty of the notion to outright fear and loathing. I attribute this response largely to the homophobic culture in which we have been raised.

I personally have shared in this experience of growing up in a homophobic culture. “Queers” and “faggots” were objects of derision, easy condemnation, and scapegoating, in my experience. I didn’t know any gays or lesbians, and I wouldn’t want to. Being gay was utterly repugnant to me, and I was deeply threatened by it.

It wasn’t until I met a wonderful, well-adjusted, Unitarian Universalist minister about 25 years ago, who happened to be gay, that I started to seriously challenge my own prejudices. Over the years, the more

³ Mohr, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34, paraphrased.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33, paraphrased, though I have also changed the names from male to female names to bring more balance to my examples.

gay men and lesbians I came to know, the more comfortable I became. More often than not, I found that they were *wonderful* people – and that I had nothing of which to be afraid, let alone to hate or vilify. One’s sexual orientation, I came to realize, is but a small part of a person’s personality and character. Still, over the years, while my comfort increased, my uneasiness persisted, and with respect to the prospect of performing gay marriages, my cautious nature still presided. I was ready in my “head,” but not yet in my “gut.”

I had moved through what I have since learned are the identified stages from repugnance to tolerance to acceptance, but was not yet to the stage of affirmation – and, thus, was still not ready to perform gay marriages (or union services). About two years ago, however, I found I was ready. I performed my first Holy Union service in July of 1995, and a second last summer, and they were both great: genuine, sincere occasions celebrating a mutual, responsible, loving commitment. And while I may have been slow to embrace it, I now have no doubt that gay and lesbian marriages should be fully accorded the blessings of both the church and the state. For I truly believe, as I have said before on this subject, that we have nothing to fear where love exists, for mutual, responsible, loving commitments are good and right – and neither Papal bulls, nor legal maneuvers, nor vilification, nor the gates of hell shall, in the end, prevail against sincere, honest love.

III

Now, having acknowledged the underlying emotional issues, which, in my judgment, have so much to do with how people respond to the idea of same-sex marriages, let us examine some of the arguments for and against the idea.

First, some people are concerned that same-sex marriages would irrevocably erode the concept of the family. As the conservative William Bennett writes in *Newsweek* in an article called “Leave Marriage Alone,” “[Marriage],” says Bennett, “is an honorable estate, instituted of God and built on moral, religious, sexual and human realities. Marriage is based,” Bennett continues, “on a natural teleology, on a different, complementary nature of men and women – and how they refine, support, encourage and complete one another.”⁵

Now, the underlying notion, here, as I understand it, is that the family is an eternal construct, instituted, as Bennett suggests, by God. The reality, however, I would suggest, is that the customs and laws governing marriage, and the configurations of individuals constituting families, have long been changing, albeit slowly in some instances.

- For centuries, for instance, it was unthinkable for society’s elite aristocrats to marry “beneath their class.” But that has changed.
- For centuries, marriage entailed a lopsided legal contract wherein the wife was technically her husband’s legal property, and the men ruled. But that has changed.
- For a long time in this country, one could not sue for a divorce without cause – say, desertion or adultery. But, again, with our “no-fault” divorce laws, that has changed.
- And, likewise, for centuries, legal marriages could only be obtained by a man and a woman of the same race. Indeed, not only was it against the law right up until the 1960’s here in the United States, but, it was unthinkable – it was thought to be “unnatural,” that is, it was against nature’s teleology, to use Bennett’s term – for a black person to marry a white person! But that, too, thank goodness, has changed.

⁵ “Leave Marriage Alone,” *Newsweek*, June 3, 1996, p. 27.

And, indeed, just as all of these other changes have been made, we can change the laws and society's expectations with respect to same-sex marriages, as well. As Katha Pollit, who writes for *The Nation* magazine, observes:

The kernel of truth grasped by anti-gay-marriage conservatives is that same-sex wedlock is part of the modern transformation of marriage from a hierarchical, gender-polarized relationship whose permanence was enforced by God, law, family and community into a more equal, fluid and optional relationship whose permanence depends on the mutual wishes of the partners.⁶

And I believe that is correct.

And, likewise, just as marriage has changed considerably over the years, so, too, have families. What with double-income couples, wide-spread divorce and single parents, couples without children, artificial insemination, blended families, out-of-wedlock births, interracial and interfaith marriages, interracial and multi-cultural adoption, couples living together without marriage, couples married but living and working sometimes hundreds of miles apart — what with these and many other innovations in today's family life, clearly we no longer live in an Ozzie and Harriet world — if we ever did.

So, again, the customs and the laws governing marriage, and the configurations of individuals constituting families, have long been changing. And thus, neither marriage nor the family is an unchanging institution, or an eternal construct, instituted once and for all by God.

Secondly, some people object to same-sex marriages on religious grounds, for most churches are, indeed, a long way from recognizing same-sex marriages — many of them don't even recognize the equality of women, after all. But it may be helpful to note that having the state recognize same-sex marriages (and issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples) in no way obligates any church or any temple or any minister or any rabbi or any priest to *perform* such marriages or to change any church doctrine whatsoever! With our time-honored separation of church and state, the state does not, and should not, dictate which *marriages* any particular religion should perform or recognize, just as no particular religion should dictate which *couples* will get, and should get, civil marriage licenses from the state.

Now, one of the arguments put forward in *favor* of same-sex marriages is the idea that legalizing them, as the *New York Times* editorialized, would help, "foster stable, long-term relationships and clarify important legal and economic issues....Contrary to the rhetoric on the other side," the *Times* continues, "this is the real family values issue."⁷ As Robert Bray of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force explains it, "We're labeled promiscuous, but when we ask for recognition of our long-term relationships, we're denied."⁸ Or, as Andrew Sullivan of *The New Republic* writes, "[Same-sex marriages seek] to promote monogamy, fidelity and the disciplines of family life among people who have long been cast to the margins of society....Why would [anyone]," Sullivan continues, "seek to oppose those very family values for gay people that he or she supports for everybody else?"⁹

⁶ *Colorado Springs Independent*, May 15-21, 1996.

⁷ "The Freedom to Marry," *The New York Times*, April 7, 1996, p. 10.

⁸ "Some States Trying to Stop Gay Marriages Before They Start," *New York Times*, March 15, 1995, p. A 18.

⁹ "Let Gays Marry," *Newsweek*, June 3, 1996, p. 26.

Another one of the arguments put forward in favor of same-sex marriages is the notion that, indeed, on a practical level, legalizing gay and lesbian marriages, as *The New York Times* suggested, would clarify important legal and economic issues for gay couples. Issues of justice and equity.¹⁰

First and foremost, marriage changes strangers into next-of-kin with all the rights and responsibilities which this status entails, including the right to enter hospitals, jails, and other places restricted to “immediate family,” the right to obtain “family” health insurance and bereavement leave, the right to live in neighborhoods zoned “single family only,” and the right to make medical decisions in the event a partner is injured or incapacitated, as Edna’s partner Carol, who worked for a power company, was incapacitated.

Marriage also provides income tax advantages. It governs the equitable control, acquisition, and disposition of property. At death, it guarantees rights of inheritance in the absence of wills. For the wealthy, marriage virtually eliminates inheritance taxes between spouses. It confers a right to bring a wrongful death suit, such as Warren might have brought in the case of his partner Mark, who was murdered with a baseball bat. And it confers the right to receive survivor’s benefits.

At the present time, gay men and lesbians are denied all of these rights because they are barred access to legal marriages, even though these rights and benefits are clearly as relevant to committed gay relationships as to committed heterosexual relationships.

In short, while, as always in this church, it is certainly your prerogative to disagree with me, I would suggest it is time for a change. It is time to legalize gay and lesbian marriages.

IV

Edna, will you have Carol to be your partner to live together in Holy Union? To live together in laughter and in tears, in sickness and in health, in hardship and in ease, in doubt and in trust, as your partner and as your equal?...

Edna and Carol, for as much as you both have committed yourselves to one another, by the authority vested in me as minister of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee, and by the power of your own abiding love, I do now solemnly recognize you as joined in Holy Union.

Amen.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Mohr, op. cit., pp. 43-44, for his articulation of the rights and benefits of marriage, only some of which I have included below.