

Commentary

Making Our Own Rules

by Jim Roche

My teenage daughter finally asked me the big question, "Are you and David going to get married?" I said we hoped to, pretty soon. We just hadn't worked out all the details. Then she asked, "Whose going to wear the dress?" I hear comments like that all the time. When I speak on gay issues at colleges and universities someone inevitably asks me a similar question, like, "Well who's, you know, dominant?" Or something even more direct like, "Who likes being on top?" The list of questions that would amuse you goes on and on. Gays and lesbians, it seems, are a real mystery to most people. What we do, how we act, what we think and feel. But a more important point is that so many people seem to think that a relationship, gay or straight, means someone on top and someone on the bottom. Something inherently unequal. Opposites attract is the theory I guess. And that's why so many gay and lesbian people don't want to have anything to do with marriages or weddings or anything similar. It just seems to reflect the worst that heterosexual relationship have to offer - inequality and oppression. So, why would two gay men or two lesbian women want to have anything to do with one of the most oppressive and hierarchical systems around?

As a couple there are certain things that my lover David and I want to share. Time together. Interests. Friendships. We al-

ready share lots of things, but because we're gay we can't share some things without a hassle. Like health benefits. Legal rights to belongings, property and so on. If one of us were to become ill the other might not be included in choosing a doctor or hospital or treatment. Those decisions might be relegated to "immediate family members". We might not even be allowed to visit each other.

Now there are legal ways around most, but not all, of this. Wills, powers of attorney and probate forms. But after all is said and done, it would still be a relationship that is legalized in spite of the community we live in instead of with its help. It's still second class citizenship no matter how you look at it. Slowly we are beginning to get our rights here and there across the country. But a growing number of people oppose our rights to state sanctioned or church sanctioned relationships.

Why do they make life harder for us because we're gay or lesbian? What's threatening to people who oppose actions like the San Francisco domestic partnership act, church recognition of gay relationships and so on? They feel we gay and lesbian couples threaten the "institution of the family." But how can we threaten family because we want to be a family? Sounds sort of crazy, doesn't it?

Our idea of family, one that many gay and lesbian people accept, is one that is in

direct opposition to the status quo. Traditionalists see family as a pre-established pattern into which each individual fits. In a family you have and know your place. And our concept of family, the gay and lesbian concept, is one in which we easily switch roles and often do it for what appears as no other reason than fun. Taking this lightly, as we sometimes do, is even more upsetting to traditionalists. We switch roles, we make up new ones and we relate to each other from the same role or no role at all. It's a concept of family based upon mutuality. Equality. Individuality. Gay couples can be both masculine and feminine. Same with lesbian couples. We act like men, and we act like women. Sometimes we act like something in-between. We totally destroy the boundaries that traditionalists rely on to keep the present system of "family" going. It doesn't matter to us, and as a matter fact, after years of dealing with such stereotypes, we have fun with those rules and enjoy testing those limits. My daughter is right to wonder who's going to wear what. Who knows?

We are a threat to the family. A threat to its oppressive male oriented foundation. A threat to its dominance oriented mentality. To its set rules and regulations. But in spite of what marriage and family has grown to represent to many of us gay and lesbian people, marriage, church unions or domestic partnerships demonstrate that we can keep the best of relationships going while we toss out what isn't of any value. As time goes on and gay and lesbian relationships in all their different forms are recognized by city and state governments, churches and organizations like the California Bar Association, we will help redefine marriage. Redefine relationship. What I hope people will learn from watching us is that we bring more to relationships than the roles we are supposed to play, or the clothes we're supposed to wear.

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