

## Marriage: For Better or Worse

by Beth Robinson

The question of whether the government should recognize civil marriages between partners of the same gender is skyrocketing to the top of the national debate as Hawaii is on the verge of recognizing such marriages. Our enemies are racing around trying to pass laws in every state, and Congress is considering preventing recognition of the marriages. All of the leading national g/l/b/t organizations in the country have come together in an unprecedented coalition working to win—and keep—the freedom to marry. For better or worse, our freedom to marry will be the gay rights issue that sees us through the millennium and into the twenty-first century.

That's fine for those of us who wish to marry, but what about those of us who don't? What about those who are deeply suspicious of the institution of marriage, with its roots in male ownership of women, and its continuing patriarchal traditions? What about those who believe that the centrality of marriage as a social institution only marginalizes those who do not marry? Should such opponents of marriage sit this one out, or perhaps take this opportunity to weigh into the debate with their own critique of marriage?

I believe the answer is an emphatic "no."

First, the question of whether we *should* marry should not be confused with the question of whether we should *be allowed* to marry on the same terms as everyone else. What does it really mean to reject the institution of marriage when it's not even available to someone anyway? For those of us who do not marry, let it be because we *choose* not to do so, *not* because someone who hates us, or who doesn't even know us, believes that our relationships and families don't merit the same legal consideration and protections as *theirs*.

Second, the marriage debate, and our ultimate success therein, will help everyone in our community, whether we choose to marry or not. Marriage is the most prized "heterosexuals-only" institution in our society. Recognition of our freedom to marry would represent a major advance in our quest for full civil rights. Moreover, the public debate about marriage focuses the straight world's attention on our existence not only as individuals and responsible members of our communities, but also as members of *families*. Such a focus can only help humanize us in the eyes of those who fear us, or simply don't know us.

The debate about marriage can only raise everyone's consciousness of the legal and economic privileges associated with the marital relationship—a consciousness that will likely promote rather than undermine the drive for domestic partnership benefits and more inclusive governmental policies towards everyone's families.

Third, I don't mean to sound hopelessly idealistic, but the participation of gays and lesbians in marriage can only improve that important social institution for everyone. As E.J. Graf noted in the May/June issue of *Ms.* magazine, state recognition of our marriages reflects a psychic decoupling of the institution of marriage from the act of procreation—a paradigm shift that will endure to the benefit of everyone, especially women. Plus, we can only hope that many of our marriages will provide positive models for everyone.

Fourth, theory aside, under our current laws, the practical benefits of marriage are undeniable. Our laws provide family medical leave for us to care for our ill spouses, ensure that we can make the

important medical decisions concerning our spouses if they cannot do so themselves, allow us to file our taxes jointly, and presume that if our spouses die without a will, then we are the beneficiaries of their estates. Married people enjoy many benefits, such as health insurance and certain government benefits to the spouses of eligible beneficiaries, or estate tax planning benefits. And our laws ensure that if the marriage does end, the more economically vulnerable party to the marriage isn't left holding the bag.

In return, our laws impose some burdens and responsibilities on married people. Regardless of their philosophical bent, many folks in our community simply can't afford to forego these benefits, which are taken for granted by straight people. Recent polls have indicated that a majority of gay people would marry if they could.

Finally, the political reality is undeniable. In 1993, when the Hawaii Supreme Court said that denying our freedom to marry is discriminatory, our world changed dramatically. The political-religious extremists are using the issue to beat us up and score political points. We can expect a lot more national interest in the issue in the coming months. What are we supposed to do—take a dive? Our internal debate and discussions about the merits of marriage can continue, but it's time to engage with the other 90% of the country who are actually ready to talk with us about it. Our failure to do so could prove disastrous.

There is no question that mixing the age-old debate about whether we *should* marry into the current public debate about whether we *should be allowed* to marry will confuse the issue for many, provide fodder for those who will argue (as if it matters) that we as a community don't even have our own act together on this issue, and undermine our collective efforts to advance all of our civil rights. I'm not saying that we should cut off debate about the merits of marriage, but we need to realize that most of the straight world is now seriously considering, for the first time ever, treating many of our families and relationships as legally equal to their own.

That's a huge deal. Let's not blow it.

Beth Robinson is Co-Coordinator of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force.

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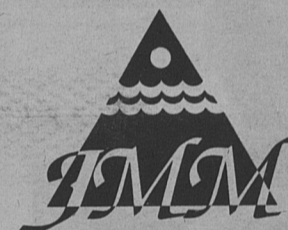
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