

**opinion**

# Working Within the System is Fundamentally Radical

BY CAROLYN ASHBY

Catie Curtis sings, "I'm not being radical when I kiss you/And I don't love you to make a point." And she's right.

For one woman to kiss another woman, for one man to love another man, is not inherently radical. Love, of any persuasion, is so basic a human impulse as to be beyond our definitions of traditional and radical. Or perhaps love encompasses both?

In its definition of radical, Webster's lists "relating to the origin, fundamental" before "departure from the usual or traditional, extreme" and "dis-

feelings about love and relationships and what is traditional and what is radical are in the forefront as well. Recent discussions on the VTPRIDENet email list, and probably many private conversations around the state, have included phrases such as "prevailing assimilationist attitude," "capitalist patriarchal institutions," "self-appointed leadership," "party line," "values of white middle-class suburban society," and juxtaposed conservative with "real social change," "there are no leaders," protest, confrontation, radical activism.

The underlying assumption: those who believe the fight for

ceed, people who are for protest-style activism, the promotion of diversity and social change of many kinds, and the inclusion of queer, non-white, and lower class concerns do not believe that equal marriage rights and mainstream political work are worthwhile.

These are the same kinds of assumptions made by those folks who truly are socially and politically conservative and against the inclusion of queer people in any facet of public life. What is the difference between "all gay people are sick, promiscuous, radical and want to destroy traditional social and political systems" and "all gay people who work within the system, take action that puts them in leadership roles, and believe in marriage rights are assimilationist, conservative, elitist, and white?" Do we really need these assumptions and labels as much, and as desperately, as our opponents do?

Yes, it's a lot more complicated to have to think about the situation of each individual community member as they express

themselves, and to respond taking that into account. Of course, it means putting away easy categories, easy ways to respond, easy ways to put others in "our" camp or another on a number of fronts: straight v. gay v. lesbian v. bi v. none-of-the-above; white v. black v. Hispanic v. Asian v. Native American v. mixed; male v. female v. transofmanykinds;

privileged v. working class v. homeless; Catholic v. Protestant v. fundamentalist v. Hindu v. Muslim v. Jewish v. pagan v. atheist; married v. single v. poly v. partnered v. wantotobemarried v. divorced v. widowed.

It means a radical shift in ways of relating to people who are different in some way from ourselves. It's the same radical shift that we, in our many ways, are asking our state and our communities to make.

I believe this country, and the gay community as well, needs serious radical social change toward diversity of all the above kinds if it is not to implode, and I believe civil marriage rights are a necessary part of that process. I believe that the restriction of civil marriage rights exclusively to opposite-sex couples is a symptom of the pervasive homophobia in this country. I believe that fighting for equal marriage rights for same-sex couples is fighting homophobia on both a personal and systemic scale.

I believe that the folks who chose to pursue their rights using the system to change the system are radicals. They took the radical step of refusing to believe that, as members of an outcast group, they didn't have the right to access the legal remedies given freely to others. They took the radical step of sticking their necks out on the chopping block of both the "conservative" majority and the "liberal" gay community. They took the radical step of standing up and claiming their rights. They scare the hell out of the religious right far more than the stereotypical gay man in leather or drag.

Remember, despite all their fuss, the religious right is not really afraid of the folks who take part in San Francisco's gay pride parade: the flamboyant queers, the drag queens and bull-dykes, the polyamorists. The right knows that J. Q. Straight-and-Narrow can and does pretty easily dismiss them all as freaks, and will a freak really challenge his assumptions about whether gay people deserve the same human consideration as he claims himself? I don't think so.

On the other hand, what about that nice couple who wants to sign a marriage license and raise their children in the church just like he does? Will that maybe rock his assumptions about who is radical, dangerous, immoral, not-quite-human? Will that perhaps make him wonder whether, if these folks are okay, that means he has to expand his mind to include their friends who are drag queens, who do wear leather, who like to sleep in a crowd, or who, despite the piercings and gender-bending, also want to get married? Is it going to make him look more closely at how he relates to his own spouse, own family, own friends and community?

I think it would, and I think the right knows it. There's nothing more scary and radical than opening up to unconditional acceptance and love of humanity in all its diversity.

And there's nothing more fundamental, and radical, than the right to love as one wishes. The GLBT community, all of us, should know that better than anyone. Let's act like it.

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posed to making extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions." Radical is, at its root, a word signifying that which is most fundamental. Why do we so often forget this in favor of extremism, using it to attack and divide?

With civil marriage rights for same-sex couples squarely in the spotlight these days, our

equal marriage rights is important are conservative, believe in the same (or similar) traditional values as all (it's assumed) straight white middle-class folks, are intent upon becoming leaders and keeping power to themselves, and do not want social change in any arena.

On the other hand, so the assumptions logically pro-

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