

From the editor Semantics

opinion

I cry easily. I mean, I cry just thinking about that old telephone company commercial. You know the one, "I just called to say I love you, Mom."

Hence, I expected to shed a few tears at the first civil union ceremony I attended. I've stopped trying to fight it; I just go prepared. My daughter goes prepared, too. She's prepared to don the oh-geez-there-goes-Mom look and hope that I don't embarrass her completely by actually sobbing out loud.

So I wasn't surprised when tears welled up in my eyes as Michael and Joseph stood in the doorway of the building greeting their guests. Those were tears of pure joy – what else, when the grooms were wearing matching ties that were covered in tiny yellow ducks?

The more traditional tears came later as the two men looked into each others' eyes and renewed vows they made to each other several years ago. That part gets me every time.

What I wasn't ready for was my reaction, and that of virtually everyone else in the room, when the presiding justice of the peace said, "By the power vested in me by the State of Vermont..." There was a collective gasp, followed by almost audible smiles, and then rivers of tears. I just hadn't anticipated the impact of those words on us.

By the State of Vermont... amazing. That's what has been missing from our ceremonies. The phrase that follows, or its reasonable facsimile, is what usually starts the tears in the heterosexual ceremonies we

attend – "I pronounce you spouses in civil union." But the spontaneous emotional reaction from this crowd, and most others attending civil unions in the past month, was in response to the State of Vermont part.

There was something amazingly powerful in hearing those words, after having watched and participated in the struggle to get those powers vested. Sitting around me amongst the onlookers were attorneys and plaintiffs and activists and legislators and supporters who helped make this happen. After all that we've experienced in the past few years, particularly in the past six months, you might think we'd be jaded, but the unison intake of breath as the words came from the justice of the peace's mouth was

unrehearsed and heartfelt.

It was the best kind of celebration we could have had to the new law – actually taking advantage of it.

It might be assimilationist of me – a direct result of my heterosexual upbringing – but I can't wait to partake of it myself. I know it isn't for everyone, and I don't look down upon couples who don't want to take this step, but I want to do it. I want to plan it and have my friends and family come in from all over the country. I want the party. I want the service, I want the community recognition that my partner-in-everything and I are as valued as a couple as anyone who stands up there with a member of the opposite sex.

But what do those words really mean?

By the powers vested in me, I pronounce you legally responsible for one another, even though you've already done years of richer, poorer, sickness, and health together?

I pronounce you legally

bound to one another, even though you've been committed to each other for longer than many heterosexual married couples I know have even known one another?

I pronounce you entitled to share in each others' possessions and money, even though you already share everything and the word 'mine' was replaced with 'ours' years ago?

I pronounce you acknowledged by the state of Vermont, whether you want it or not, as a family unit, even though you've been inseparable for years and have built a home and maybe even raised children together?

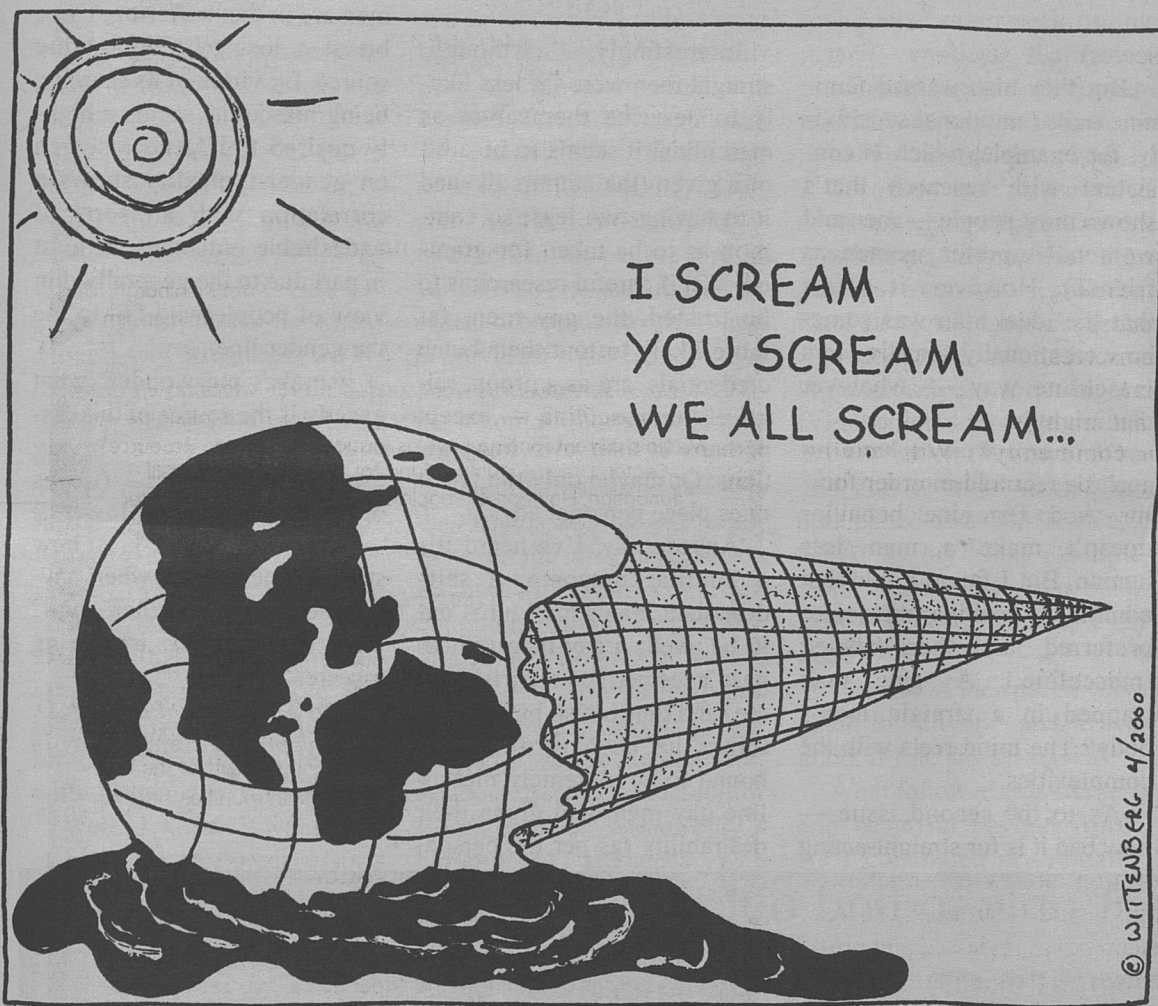
Just why did those words matter so much?

I pronounce you equal – or almost equal – to heterosexual couples? That doesn't make it.

I pronounce you protected better now and here than anywhere else in this country.

That works.

-- BGD ▼



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