

A Real Marriage

The first time I saw Eve I knew I could marry her. I didn't know that I *would* marry her, of course, but I saw something in her eyes that startled me—an expression of thoughtful self-possession, calm and gentle, without even the mildest trace of arrogance. It struck me that this was a woman who could see into the heart of things, and trust herself.

That was three years ago. The other night she came home and said, "Honey, I've had an epiphany. I don't want to get legally married. I don't want to be recognized by an institution that won't recognize my friends." As soon as she said it, it was obvious to me that she was right—again.

Sometimes I flatter myself by imagining that I'm something of a radical. I voted for Nader in '96. I continued to wear my hair down past my shoulders well after most of it had turned gray. I committed civil disobedience a handful of times in my twenties, and even walked across the country once for peace.

But when I'm honest with myself, I have to acknowledge that my instincts are conservative. I'm a sucker for authority. When my parents didn't approve of my going on the cross-country peace march in 1986 (they viewed it as a glorified "jaunt" and felt I should be focusing on graduate school instead, and getting serious about a career) I defied their wisdom, but I spent an absurd amount of time during the peace march—the adventure of my life to date—in my tent reading, in preparation for going back to school. If I can't disregard what my parents say, even when it contradicts my own common sense and conviction, then imagine how difficult it is for someone like me to defy society, to dismiss the legitimacy that the state offers my relationship in the form of a legal marriage license. I want to feel like I'm *really* married. On the other hand, I don't feel right enjoying a privilege denied to our gay friends.

One of our lesbian friends, herself in a committed relationship for over seventeen years, encouraged us to go ahead and have a legal wedding. After all, it wouldn't help her and her partner if we sacrificed ourselves, and down the line were stuck without the benefit of each other's health insurance, social security, hospital visiting rights, and what-all. She saw it as a simple economic equation, and opined that the government probably sees it similarly. "Think how much money they're saving. Even if only five percent of the couples in this country are gay, if the surviving partner in each of those couples can't get the deceased partner's social security, that's a huge amount of money that the system doesn't have to pay out."

Other gay friends felt differently, especially Eve's two best friends, Lisa and Andrea (not a couple). Lisa said she'd be deeply touched if we decided to reject legal marriage. Andrea didn't see why we needed to bring the state into our marriage anyway, since the state is a fictitious legal entity while marriage is a matter of spirit—not to mention that our taxes would go up in the short run.

Now, of course I know the state is a lumbering, often oppressive hodgepodge of social contracts, economically driven legislation, imaginary borders, symbolism, and propaganda. But this fictitious entity happens to issue my driver's license and my teaching credential, among other things. It has a lot of real power, this fiction. On the back of our money, it says, "In God we trust," but I wonder if the real slogan shouldn't be, "In power we trust." That which has power has legitimacy.

It's not that I'm afraid that the state will do anything to Eve and me (or even notice us) if we choose to decline its stately sanction of our union. It's simply that a part of me really wants the approval of society. I want to feel married in a "grown-up" way, which is kind of silly considering our ages: I'm over 40 now and she's not far behind. But so much of my life I've been afraid of two things—that I'm not a real adult, and that I'm not truly capable of love—so I'd love for the almighty state to bestow its seal of legitimacy on my

marriage. But do I want to lend my own legitimacy, for whatever it's worth, to a bigoted institution?

Is marriage a legal contract or a spiritual bond, or both? If marriage is the province of religion, then why does the state get involved with its stipulations? Whatever happened to the highly touted separation of church and state? There are clergymen and clergywomen in this country marrying gay couples, yet politicians across the left-right spectrum wax solemn about their duty to preserve the "sanctity" of marriage. Neither Gore nor Bradley is willing to endorse same-sex marriage.

As my cousin Ira pointed out, "It would be political suicide for Gore to advocate gay marriage." (My cousin, like my wife, is usually right.) So then if Gore (who favors gays in the military) is reading the electorate correctly, a majority of Americans must feel strongly that the "sacrament" of marriage should be protected against encroachment by gay people. This same majority may be ready to allow gay couples all the economic and contractual rights of straight couples—just not marriage. It seems that the public implicitly wants religion and politics to mix, at least on this one issue, by not wanting to leave the definition of marriage in the hands of the clergy. Society says, "No, this is sacred. We must draw the line here." So what makes marriage sacred? The only answer I can imagine is that marriage is deemed to be the sacrament of love: deep love, true love, the highest love.

But if the state says you can't really love, does this mean you really can't? If gay people believed that, they'd really be screwed—and sadly enough I've known a couple of gay people who did sorta believe it. Both were convinced, despite gay liberation and living in the Bay Area and everything else, that there was, after all, something fundamentally wrong with them, and that they were not as "okay" as straight people. They're like people who were emotionally wounded in childhood, criticized all the time or abused by their parents, whom you have to tell repeatedly, "No, it wasn't your fault. You're really okay. You're creative, intelligent, beautiful, loving." Deep down they can't believe it because of what they've been through, especially the "loving" part. As they're growing up, gay

people get cultural messages from everywhere that straight is what's okay and that gay is not, and chances are they were born into a religion that, speaking on behalf of almighty God, tells them the same thing.

Personally, I would never bow to a God who dislikes my friends. If you're talking hellfire and damnation, then all I can say is I want nothing to do with any vindictive, narcissistic, egomaniacal God who wields a big stick and has a sanctimonious temperament. I pray to a personal God, and she's humorous, kind, forgiving, understanding, accepting, and easygoing enough to laugh at fart jokes.

What do we really need and want to know about ourselves in order to feel like full-fledged adult human beings, to feel *real*, more than the knowledge that we can love well? And if we can grow that knowledge within ourselves, perhaps the need for recognition will become less critical.

A day or two after Eve's epiphany, we were in the car, and I said, "You know, before we make up our minds absolutely, we should research this a little and find out just what the economic and legal ramifications are, and what exactly we'd be losing or risking." Eve murmured, "All right," but she looked tired. Later that evening, I said, "You know, I don't care what the details are. Let's just say we've made up our minds because it's the right thing to do." "Yeah!" said Eve.

We still don't know the details. Maybe if Gore or Bradley becomes our next president, we'll eventually get all the "contractual rights" of legally married couples. In any event, we won't feel we've sold our souls for a benefits package.

Until Eve had her epiphany, we had been leaning toward getting legally married, and somehow making it up to our gay friends. One idea was to put something on our wedding invitations about the injustice of it all, and to encourage our wedding guests not to bring

us gifts, but rather to make donations in our name to a gay and lesbian marriage rights organization. We even considered starting our own organization of straight couples for gay marriage rights, although the dilemma was that such an organization would have to, by definition, exclude gay people. Ultimately, Eve cut the Gordian knot. It's just so much easier to simply make the statement with our lives.

I feel a lingering, perhaps irrational sense of have given up some measure of security. At the same time, it is exhilarating to live what we believe and damn the torpedoes. I don't think I'll regret ever having passed up security. Besides, what's safe or secure about marriage? I think marriage is about putting yourself on the line and committing yourself to someone, offering all you have to give and all that you believe in to the core of your being—including your belief in your ability to sustain love for another person. So does the blessing of the state or the church afford some measure of assurance that the covenant is sealed in the heart?

I think not.