

Is marriage gay?

Some afternoons I walk to the local park where you can see many reasons for marriage riding bikes through the shifting shadows of old oaks. Other reasons stumble through the thick grass on their thick legs half blinded by their bonnets and their eyes, untutored, held too wide under an Australian sun. Some reasons are daring their sisters or their grandfathers to push them higher on the swings, their courage growing each year with their strength. I see the fresh mothers and the occasional young dad grappling to enjoy, teach, understand and discipline these precious troubles. A Canadian author and mother once wrote that the day we become parents is the day our hearts are walking free outside our bodies and, as parents, we are at terrible risk of having our hearts thoroughly broken many times. And it takes years. It demands of us the best we are and have, from the calcium in a woman's bones to all the wisdom we will ever be capable of to the solemn priority that a child has on every dollar in our bank accounts. New life is costly.

It is not that marriage; whether state, religious or de-facto (what we used to call 'common law' marriage) is only about children or that all marriages can or do have children, it is that marriage is the place where children are best "... born and brought up in secure and loving care." - to quote an old wedding service. Marriage is the place not only to provide intimate partnership for the present but to prepare for the future.

We do not need longitudinal studies to tell us what works well for the raising of children (but those studies teach us that a good marriage works best) because each of us was a child, each of us was formed by a heterosexual union and the childhoods that followed, even the unhappy ones, teach us what we need to know. Those of us who feel the lack in our childhood are perhaps more keenly aware of how things could have been different. We know that not all marriages are good ones, not all parents are wise or as loving as a child needs. Not all people deserve the trust children natively place in those responsible for them. These exceptions prove the rule to us every day that the shelter of a good marriage would have been a better place for us to grow up in physically, economically, socially and emotionally. We all know deeply what children need – though we may not provide it ourselves. The historic and scientific doubt is whether those needs can generally or consistently be met in gay marriage. For a child to be robbed of their natural father or mother is rightly considered a tragedy, to be raised in a fatherless or motherless home with the consent of the state in order to serve the notion of gay marriage may be seen by future generations as the state legitimising wrong rather than reducing or preventing the damage of wrong. It may prepare Australia for another stolen generation.

The crime fiction writer, P. D. James, in her autobiography noted, when commenting on the rising divorce rates of the West from the 1960's onwards, that we sacrificed our children for the sake of our sexual freedoms. It is worth asking if her comment applies to the new sexual freedoms we are now seeking in homosexuality. To say, as some in Australia say, that extending the marriage laws to include homosexual couples is to gain marriage equality sounds broad and inclusive; it sounds like we are increasing the sum total of freedom in our society which we have done before in civil or women's rights. However, equality is a good principle and easily misapplied in political debate because equality, like freedom, is more complex than we think. Just as the freedom we enjoy in wealthy democracies is not the freedom to do anything we please but is a collection of freedoms, of varying degrees, where we are free to choose to act according to our abilities and the needs of others. So, I am not free to drive as I please or to drive when I am drunk but, I am free to drive according the laws of the State and according to my ability to afford and control a motor vehicle. Likewise with equality; to insist on equal rights for women in the work place or the ending of apartheid in South Africa is not to insist that women stop being women or those of different races become the same. True equality is more complex than that, it recognises women have different needs to men at different stages of life (especially when raising children) and recognises that races have different cultural practises, some of which are more helpful to the wider society than others. This is why legislation for equality is a lengthy battle to recognise the realities we are dealing with and a process seeking the wisdom we need to bring in the nuances needed to deal with that reality. I may have a right of equal access to a good education in Australia but much is determined by what financial resources I have to pursue that education and what abilities possess. I do not have a right of equal access to a Master's degree from an Australian University simply because I am an Australian

citizen because the principle of equality needs to recognise merit and the nature of the reality we want people to have equal access to.

The danger of applying the principle of equality to gay couples seeking access to marriage is that we will narrow the value or meaning of marriage rather than broaden it. To being with marriage, as it stands, is a union of differences not likes, marriage contains the expectation of begetting and nurturing life which is a messy business and only possible through a heterosexual union. Marriage is linked with the expectation of growing old with another and the family you have made, it requires the discipline of the exclusive intimate relationship where we are learning to love the other and not the same. Marriage means the sharing of all our worldly goods and the possibility of growing into love through all the hardship we encounter as families, not only as couples - for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish from this day forward until death do we part. The promise to love the other rather than the same; the potential fruitfulness of the partnership - that is the varied and challenging dynamic of marriage.

Marriage has existed long before our laws were ever written and will outlive any laws we write in this generation. We do not write laws to establish or define marriage we write laws to recognise what marriage is because marriage is greater than our laws. Marriage is like language, a universal mark of our humanity and how well or not marriage is done affects every person who has ever or will ever live. To redefine marriage to suit the principle of equality, to make it a right for people of any sexual orientation, simply because equality is our chief value for marriage is to risk narrowing our thinking into deep social illness.

In response you may say that this is a warning about a future that may or may not happen and we should be bold and undertake the experiment of gay marriage nonetheless. We can dispute the research on what works for raising children and hold up an idealised form of gay marriage where children are well and happy; obviously happier than they would be in some heterosexual marriages. We are also fearful of offending people who appear to be deeply in love and deeply committed to their gay relationships. However, when we think about the last two generations it is hard to miss the trend that our society is following a theme that undermines the values of life. Even though we're yet to find life, or even the building blocks of life, anywhere other than earth we are taught by our current culture that life, even human life, is not sacred. Our arguments for abortion have devalued life's beginning, our arguments for euthanasia devalue its end, our philosophies render life's meaning tenuous and arguments for marriage equality devalue the way we have nurtured life. All that remains is for the West to accord the same value to the middle of life that the majority world is often forced to give it and I suspect that we will find ourselves to be more cruel than we would have believed was possible. It is likely that our cruelty will emerge as our wealth moves on to more deserving cultures and necessity revises our values radically. It is always difficult to write about the future with certainty and the gay marriage argument relies on those doubts (let's break with the past, the future can be more just ...) just as much as it relies on our current social stability and wealth in the West (we would not be having this discussion if we were in the majority world). All I can do is observe that if the values which created and sustained our social stability and wealth have been rejected then their fruit can only remain for a time.

I think homosexuality is more complex and frail than our newspapers have time to admit, just as they have no time to question the premise that our choices, especially our emotional choices, are the final arbiters of right and wrong. We fall in and out of love with many people and things during our lives and occasionally, some of us at least, have that sense of being overwhelmed by another as if that person is an addiction we need to be near. That emotion, or better perhaps, possession, can find the object of its desire in someone of our own gender and suddenly we are gay, or, at least the right sort of gay for those who advocate marriage equality. In our contemporary world view there is no response or criticism that can be made for we are, at that moment, in a committed love relationship and our choice is the final arbiter, the end, the meaning and the consummation of our lives in a consumer culture. And this is so frail. We like to think that the power of choice is the new freedom which our insight, skill and bravery has finally made possible – now that our world view has dismissed the old traditions and superstitions that held us back. The irony is we all feel that our choice is a lonely and temporary judge of our moral lives and not a helpful or practical guide in a crisis at all! But, there is nothing else left to guide us because we have dismissed the objective discussion

of values; the end, use or right function of human beings. We've even argued that biological determinants are accidents to be overcome by IVF, surrogacy, foster care, sex change surgery and adoption. Biology is a lie, our love, our choice is the truth. We have also dismissed the revelation in God's word describing the joy we were made for and we have belittled the filtered guilt of our untrained consciences from the time we entered the workforce or University onwards. We are not even encouraged to question our hearts and motivations closely even though experience teaches us they are unreliable and get us into trouble. So, we only have our variable and frail choices to fall back on which, like the minor gods of the ancient world, we fear abandoning or questioning because, having rejected all else, if our frail choice is not truth then there is nothing left to guide us save the fear of force.

I do not want to belittle our experience of homosexual love; I only wish to point out that it has less natural and social supports than a marriage. Like nearly everyone else, some of us seeking love in gay relationships will hope, even if we've been hurt before, that *this love this time* will grow into a deepening companionship with the security of a committed partner and become a gentle certainty in an uncertain, betrayed and betraying world. Even if sometimes we suspect this gay love looks narcissistic, a love of the same rather than learning to love the other, we hope and know that such love is capable of producing brilliance, at least in gifted people.

I remember one gay friend describing how he found gay relationships far less complicated than heterosexual ones as he, being male, already knew what his gay partner was thinking and how he'd react in most situations. A heterosexual relationship was like a cross-cultural diplomatic mission to him, full of unforeseen differences and communication traps. This is another reason why marriage to the other, to the different, is not the same as a gay relationship.

Marriage can be as unruly and as unpredictable as fast growing life, it works changes in us and if a marriage produces children it will work even more changes more quickly. It will break our hearts and make us proud and change our bodies and make us desperate and destroy our houses and our peace and make us weep with pleasure and drive hard lumps of sadness up into our chests. It will make us medical experts on all childhood diseases and school us in Walt Disney and Pixar. We will not listen to any real music for at least a decade. We'll become negotiators and find we can be as hard as nails towards anyone who threatens our kids. We will be shocked by pools of untapped anger deep within and our biases and favouritism. It will make us uncomfortable and take us to places we do not want to go because our hearts are wandering free of our bodies. And we will seldom regret any of it - except that we could have done it all better by knowing at the beginning what we knew by the end, but, this is why Grandparents can have so much fun – it is often good to get older.

Sexual revolutions are odd things – I know these words in defence of marriage as it stands won't matter to the majority of gay people I've known who either just want good sex or are content with the de-facto relationships they already have. Some, I know, will be appalled and hurt by these words just as I might be when I am labelled a bigot and a homophobe for writing them. But I have a suspicion, because in my job I get to listen to the children of the last sexual revolution often – 'my parent's divorce was a world of pain' one man said to me recently. I suspect that in twenty years I will be hearing the stories of children raised by gay couples, and all the evidence suggests they will not be happy ones. I will be hearing the experiences of middle aged men and women who experimented with homosexual relationships in their youth only because that was what socially acceptable radicalism looked like then, and the stories will be fraught with the regrets of avoidable pain and only some will have recovered. And marriage between a man and a woman will, at that time, still exist but it will be weaker than the future needs; and worse, I suspect we will not remember what we have lost.

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