

The closet of marriage

enter into heterosexual marriages, the fear of losing those children keeps them there, often at the expense of their own identity and fulfillment. The fears are well-founded. Maddox reports that in 1970, the Lesbian Mothers National Defense Fund in Seattle said only 1 percent of contested cases were decided in favor of the lesbian parent. In 1982 that figure stood at 15 percent.

Portland's record is considerably better, but one woman observed, "Maybe that's because other places don't have a Katharine English." The Portland law firm of English and Janet Metcalf win most of their lesbian custody cases. "I've been fortunate to win most of my cases that have gone to trial," English said. She stressed, however, that societal prejudice against the gay parent is still very strong.

Rates will improve as judges establish precedents which refuse to allow homosexuality as a consideration of a person's parenting abilities. For example, a case in Denver in 1979 saw the court award custody of a girl to the lover of a deceased lesbian mother.

More lesbians have been married than have gay men, according to a 1978 study by the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research in San Francisco. Researchers Alan Bell and Martin Weinberg reported that of the nearly 1000 people interviewed, one fifth of the men had been married at some point. In contrast, one third of the white lesbians and nearly half the black lesbians interviewed had been married. The study suggests "the female variety of homosexuality is hidden more frequently in the closet of marriage."

Bell and Weinberg also advance the explanation that many women did not realize they were lesbian until after they married, while the men knew or suspected they were gay much earlier in life.

Even for those who knew, though, Bell and Weinberg report two thirds did not tell their wives prior to marriage. The London Gay Switchboard estimates only about 10 percent tell their wives. Those who do often promise to change their ways upon entrance into the straight world.

That disclosure triggers different responses from different people. Earl's wife, whom he describes as basically conservative, offered to allow the marriage to continue and to allow him to have homosexual affairs as well. Maddox chronicles other cases like Earl's.

Her acceptance has changed to "mis-directed anger," Earl said. He attributes that to her feelings of betrayal, an unhappy second marriage, and like women in that situation described by Maddox, an anger toward her father. Earl does not see resolution of the situation as possible. His divorce was final ten years ago.

Some gay people do not divorce their heterosexual mates, and openly admit being gay. The social acceptability of marriage, the opportunity for children and sexual partners of their choice would seem to place these individuals in the type of Utopia being sought by many gay people who marry. Maddox says most of these relationships are between gay men and straight women. Can these arrangements be mutually beneficial? Maddox raises some questions, summarized well in a disturbing interview with a gay male journalist.

"My wife knows, but she is a remarkable woman, a very noncurious woman. It is perhaps surprising that she's never asked me where I've been, but she's a very private person. Her attitude has made it easy for me. I have the best of both worlds. I play the game by certain rules."

Marriage has been pushed for as a cure for homosexuality for many years by well-meaning counselors, clergy and families. The young gay male is advised to find himself a wife and settle down with a house in the suburbs, a double car garage and 2.5 children.

He continues, "She accepts it and lives with it because she loves me. I have had every sort of venereal disease. And have passed them all on to my wife. She's never complained. It's a measure of the sort of woman she is. She's had treatment; we've been to the same VD clinic."

The counterpart of the "remarkable" wife, according to Maddox, is the "denying husband." She cites one husband who drove his lesbian wife to visit her lover, waited in the car, drove her home and never asked what was going on. The most visible example is Larry King, husband of tennis professional Billie Jean King. Maddox tells of an interview following Billie Jean's admission that she had had a lesbian affair with her secretary. When the three traveled together, Larry King disclosed, he would go to his room and they would go to theirs without any anxiety or tension or any admission that things were out of the ordinary.

As things change, will the incidence of heterosexual marriage for gay people decrease?

Societal pressures, are easing in many places and marriage is not as likely to be viewed as a cure for homosexuality. Gay people wanting to parent are finding it easier to form families through artificial insemination, adoption and foster care programs.

According to Maddox, "Gay liberation is too recent for anyone to know whether or not homosexuals will lose their interest in marrying heterosexually. What is clear now is that many homosexuals, in or out of the closet, male or female, feel that two sexes are needed to make a home, and that marriage is their goal, if only they can find the right person."

That assumption is certainly open to debate and question. Reasons for such a move can range from love, to attempts to cure or conceal homosexuality, to the desire for children, to the desire for quick riches or a better job. Whatever they are, the serious long and ramifications of that decision merit careful consideration.

Trust me. I tried it twice.



photo by Sherri Riggs