

The ties that bind (some people)

Truth is, what seems like a ritual — good and enriching for everyone — is actually a privilege, accessible only to some

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

This is a story about commitment and ritual and dining room tables. Not necessarily in that order. In fact, it was the dining room table that got me thinking about commitment and ritual in the first place. It was the dining room table that made everything concrete.

On June 21, two of my best friends decided to get married. To each other, that is. And because these two friends also happen to be my housemates, I have been granted the equivalent of front-row seats to the events that have unfolded since then.

Here are some of the things that happened. Rachael's parents sent flowers. John's parents dusted off the diamond ring, a family heirloom. For a week or so, there were lots of phone calls to and from various relatives and a fair amount of shameless grinning all around.

In that first giddy week after June 21, I found myself swept along on the tide of delight. I listened, and even shuddered with pleasure once or twice, as Rachael told the good news to her parents, her sister, both sets of grandparents; as John phoned his family. The whole thing seemed like such a desirable, such a *necessary* rite of passage, this ritual of separation and joining — children from their parents, members of the next generation to each other.

At times, I almost felt as though I were witness to a miracle — or at least, to a rich and ancient marvel. Two individuals' lives cross, quite arbitrarily, and they fall in love. From that unlikely collision, a community develops — of mutual friends and colleagues, grandparents and nephews and sisters-in-law. A ring handed down from the past. A promise cast like a net into the future. A whole happier than the sum of its parts.

The tradition unfolding in my house struck a chord of reverence in me. It just seemed so — well, so *right*.

Until the dining room table came along. A couple weeks after Rachael and John got engaged, Rachael's mom came to visit from Ohio. The three of them spent several afternoons shopping for a table and finally, after much discussion, selected one. It has not arrived yet, but I am told it is beautiful and durable, made of oak, with a claw-footed pedestal and leaves that turn it from a circle to an oval.

The idea of that table made me feel so ornery and sad, I wondered if I might just be jealous. Was I envious of the attention garnered by the soon-to-be-married? Did I wish my parents would buy *me* a solid piece of real furniture?

Well, maybe. But there's more to this story than a sting of envy over someone else's durable goods. That table is a symbol of something — of the willingness of one generation to honor the promises of another, of the generous embrace that greets news of an engagement, a commitment. Two people decide they want to be together, for better, for worse, and everyone gets pretty excited about it. Excited enough to bank on that pledge, to believe in it, to want it to last, to buy furniture that will last with it.

The thing is, only some commitments, some partnerships, get that kind of support. You can say all the cynical things you want about marriage. You can talk about the sexist economic roots ("take my daughter — please") and the staggering rate of divorce. You can say it's just a crazy promise on a sheet of parchment.

Truth is, there are couples who'd like to

make those kinds of crazy promises to each other, in public, in front of their friends and tearful relatives. And they can't. Truth is, what seems like a ritual — good and enriching for everyone — is actually a privilege, accessible only to some.

Well, people get engaged, and the world hums right along. A couple of pretty interesting things happened since June 21 — things that are not strictly related to my friends and their impending marriage, but are not entirely irrelevant, either.

•In New York, the state's highest court expanded the definition of "family" to include gay couples by allowing a man to remain in his rent-controlled apartment after his lover, whose name was on the lease, died. ACLU lawyer William Rubenstein called the decision "the most important single step forward in American law toward legal recognition of lesbian and gay relationships."

•In Vermont, Susan Hamilton was killed in a car accident, leaving as survivors Susan Bellmare, her partner of 12 years, and her baby son, Collin, conceived through artificial insemination. Over the objections of Hamilton's parents, who wanted custody of their grandson, a probate judge awarded temporary custody to Bellmare.

•Two conservative clergymen gathered 27,000 signatures to challenge a San Francisco law legalizing gay and lesbian partnerships, as well as those of unmarried heterosexual couples. The domestic partnership law, unanimously approved by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and signed by Mayor Art Agnos, would be the first such legislation in a major metropolitan city.

You can't legislate human connection. You can't determine by law who will fall in love with whom, who will want to conceive and raise children, who will feel inclined to call each other family.

But you can legislate — and states do, all the time — the granting or denial of public sanction to those human connections. You can build legal fences that mark some partnerships as sacred while excluding others.

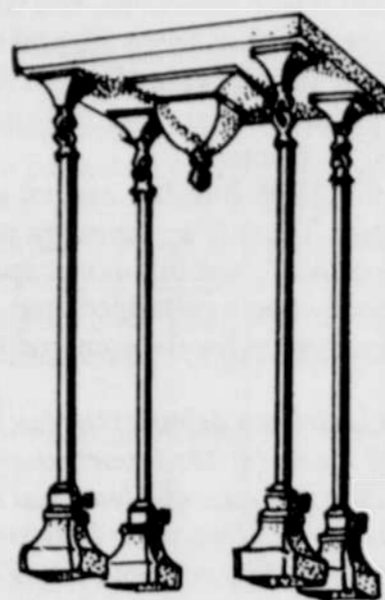
This culture is changing fast, leaving a huge gap between the realities of human relationships and the laws that govern them. The New York and Vermont cases show that the law is capable of catching up. The San Francisco challenge shows it won't be an easy trip.

Whatever else my friends' marriage means, it has already brought two families closer to their children and, potentially, to each other. It has multiplied the amount of delight available to all of them. Putting a fence around a ritual and making entrance conditional doesn't make the ritual more sacred. Allowing others in doesn't dilute the power of the promise.

Our story — the human story — is really about love and separation, about commitment and ritual, about promises and trust. But it's also about who gets the dining room table and who gets snubbed by the grandparents; who gets custody of the children and who gets left out of the family album.

To leave anyone out impoverishes us all. These are hard, crazy times we live in, and we're fools to let anyone's happiness fall through the cracks.

These days, I'm actually looking forward to the arrival of the new table. I say we put it smack in the middle of the dining room, add the extra leaves, cook all day, invite a bunch of folks and serve up some celebration. I believe there is enough to go around.



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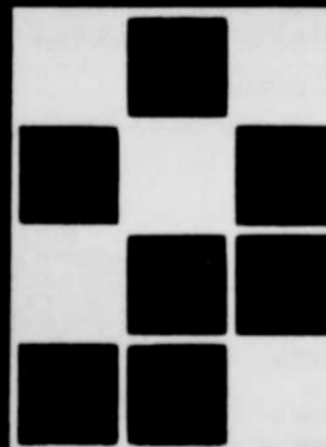
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