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The ultimate perk

Can the "sacred" institution of marriage be rescued from its own history as a package of authority-sanctioned entitlements?

by Patricia Nell Warren

For months now, the news has echoed with angry sound bytes from enemies of same-sex marriage. Homosexual nuptials, it's being said, will tarnish the "sanctity" of heterosexual marriage.

Gosh, do these folks ever read the newspaper? Or a history book? Marriage has already been deeply de-sanctified by centuries of festering heterosexual pragmatism.

Admittedly my views are colored by experience. For 16 years I tried to be the perfect straight wife. But I never felt sacred—just felt more and more stifled and dishonest. When my homophobic spouse finally found out, he told me I was "sick." My first and only visit to a shrink revealed that he shared my spouse's opinion. So I ran for my life: divorce and coming out.

Apologists for "traditional values" seem to forget the real history of marriage. Christian civilization was built by royalty and nobility who saw marriage as dynastic. People wedded for titles, wealth, feudal estates, vassals, heirs—to link empires and win wars. Lifelong compulsory monogamy and chastity belts were invented to ensure that a husband passed his power only to his genetic offspring. While these marriages were sprinkled in holy water by ministers of "heaven," many of them were made in hell, as the tortured histories of blueblood families can tell us.

When the American Revolution separated church and state, it also separated marriage from church control. Marriage became basically a civil arrangement. Today, many nuptials in the United States still start with church bells, but the "sanctity" of civil marriage is arguable, since it boils down to a list of heterosexual legalities that judges can rule on. These include inheritance rights, tax breaks, hospital visitation, pensions, joint custody—all things that homosexuals want too, and are told they can't have, in the name of "sanctity." Since when do the arbiters of "holiness" include probate courts, hospital receptionists, company pension plans and the Internal Revenue Service?

People in this country also rely on marriage for certain perks and conveniences. For minors, getting married is a way of evading parental custody. For embarrassed parents of a pregnant teen, shotgun marriage (it is hoped) preserves the family honor. Marriage can get you free airline travel, a dental plan, diplomatic privileges, free housing on military bases, U.S. citizenship, the boss' daughter, and slave labor in the form of lots of kids. Marriage routinely enhances a celebrity career, even serves as cover for some CIA intelligence work. Repeated marriage-and-divorce allows some folks to cloak sexual adventure in legality. Years of living together in "common law" can equal marital status, or at least get you a nasty "palimony" lawsuit. To the man or woman who marries for nice things, marriage may equal prostitution.

Are these profane perks protected by state and federal law? Yes. Are they sacred? Hardly. It is amusing to think how many heterosexuals would scream bloody murder if they lost their "right" to this array of conveniences. Yet they would turn around and deny those same perks to gay people.

Closet marriages go beyond perk into prevarication. "Closet" is how homosexuals historically conformed to the old feudal mandate. Nobody tries harder to make marriage work than a fag or dyke or bi who is hell-bent to pass! We have even pumped out children to be cannon fodder for feudalism.

Indeed, the gay community's love of drag and theater may be instilled in us by long centuries of performing with that sword held to our throat. But an Oscar-winning act is still an act, no matter how brilliantly sequined in "sanctity" it might be.

Interestingly enough, homosexuals don't monopolize the closet. Marriage is a good place for certain straights to hide too. Like the prostitute with heart of gold who hides her past by marrying Mr. Respectable with heart of gold. Or the "missing person" who hides in a marriage to start a new life and cover the trail. Or the straight military man who grudgingly marries to advance his career, because the brass don't like to promote bachelors to admiral.

Marriage has no global agreement about what makes it "sacred." It's social Silly Putty, squished into a thousand shapes by bias and blind belief. To the Israelites of the Ten Commandments, "sanctity" of marriage included polygamy and a man's

right to kill his wife and children if they got out of line. To feudal lords, the "sacredness" of a serf wedding required the bride to give her virginity to the lord. To the U.S. colonists, a woman could work her way into marriage through contract labor or being an indentured servant. To Southern slave owners, marriage was out of bounds for black people. To my Irish Catholic forebears, the marriage knot required a priest's "authority." To my Protestant forebears, Catholic sacraments were "evil popery," so only a preacher's words could authorize the knot. But to bride and groom on the high seas, a ship captain's authority is "sacred" enough.

Some of my Native American forebears had more sensible views. A couple stood before Creation and married each other on their own authority as human beings. They had no concept of being married by the power of some other person's religion or authority. "Nobody tells a Cheyenne what to do," my cousins used to say.

Can today's marriage overcome its sorry history as a list of perks? Can a person today make it sacred and wonderful?

Yes, I believe so. Real sacredness is infused into any relationship only by the two people themselves, be they straight or gay. They build a balance between their own self-respect and their respect for each other—and for their children, if they have them. If this sacredness is not deeply felt on the personal level, no law or sermon or tax break can put it there. Not even God and Goddess.

Not every heterosexual wants this kind of relationship. Not every homosexual does either. But those who do deserve the best that marriage can offer.

So yes, marriage in the '90s is darkly tarnished. But denying marriage to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people will not untarnish it.

Heterosexuals have to take responsibility for the mess they've made of marriage. They were the ones who wanted to have marriage. They have spent 3,000 years making it a juggernaut of Judeo-Christian empire, politics, patriarchy and property, including their "right" to control of wife, children and genetic heritage. Now, in the ultimate paradox, heterosexuals may actually need the help of us homosexuals, if they want to put some sacredness back into marriage.

Patricia Nell Warren is the author of *The Front Runner* and other books



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