

comment

GAY MARRIAGE: THE ISSUE

Marriage matters, no matter that skeptics like Bob Ostertag would have it otherwise [Comment, "Why Gay Marriage Is the Wrong Issue," Jan. 14]. While straight conservatives would agree about the importance of marriage and use that as an argument to exclude gay men and lesbians from the institution, from the opposite side we have gay liberals who would deny the premise and eliminate marriage altogether. As that is not likely to happen, the practical effect of their arguments is the same: heterosexuals will continue to enjoy access to marriage and its benefits, with gays remaining strangers to this right.

Ostertag is far from the first gay man to belittle the push for same-sex marriage. Michael Warner made the same arguments both earlier and better in his *The Trouble with Normal* (Free Press, 1999). What these jaded naysayers have in common is membership among a social elite who view marriage either as a way for others unfairly to claim part of their material wealth, or as a hindrance to their promiscuous pleasures—what Ostertag euphemistically refers to as his "various men." While these are valid reasons for any individual to refrain from choosing marriage, the error comes when, without comment, they are offered as reasons to eliminate marriage altogether. Mired in their self-centered values, they would elevate their personal preferences to a normative social good.

The mistake Ostertag makes is to assume that he is somehow representative of most other gay men and lesbians in his disdain for marriage. Most "of us won't marry even if we have to right to," he tells us, and therefore the pursuit of that right is a "stupid issue." Even if it is true that most gay men and lesbians will not marry, it doesn't follow that this is because we are uninterested in marriage. It may be that we haven't found anyone worth marrying. We would dearly love the option of marrying, should we find ourselves in that fortunate position. More to the point is a 1994 *Advocate* poll in which only 15 percent of gay men were utterly uninterested in the possibility of marrying someone they loved. While Ostertag may be sincere in the description of his own desires, he represents only a very small slice of the gay community.

Contrary then to Ostertag's claim, most people, both gay and straight, aspire to marry. This hope is far from an irrational indulgence. It is trite, but still important, to recognize that with marriage come the benefits of the 1,049 federal laws identified by the Government Accountability Office "in which marital status is a factor," with a similarly large number to be found in state statutes. But the truly powerful benefits are not the ones legislated, however useful they may be. The indirect, intangible effects are far more profound.

The first of these is the impact of marriage upon the relationship itself. The anthropologist Margaret Mead observed that there "is no society in the world where people have stayed married without enormous community pressure to do so." The expectation that you will stay

with your spouse can give an added motivation to try to stay together during inevitable stormy periods, a motivation lacking when everyone views a relationship as transient. Domestic partnerships are nice, but no one is surprised that they are more fragile than marriages, simply because they are not marriages. In both cases social expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. To exclude gay couples from marriage thus denies to them this broader support that straight couples take for granted.

We learn more about the specialness of marriage in other empirical data showing married men earn higher average salaries than single men and enjoy significantly longer life expectancies. These benefits come from marriage, not from cohabitation. It merits repeating: Marriage matters.

Such realities go unnoticed by Ostertag. For him marriage is nothing but a mélange of political and social "privileges denied to others," rights that can be effectively reproduced outside of that context to tear "down the walls of privilege enjoyed by the nuclear family" and attain "equal rights for all." He offers the naively simple opinion that the pursuit of marriage distracts from goals he considers more important.

He mentions "job discrimination, housing discrimination, health care discrimination, immigration discrimination," as just a few.

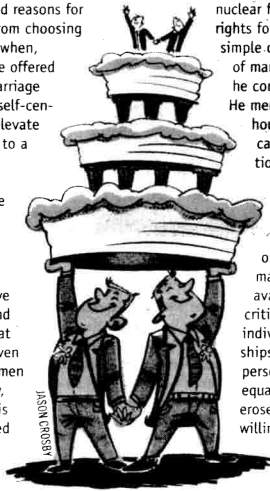
What he fails to realize is that many of these problems would be well on their way to solution if marriage were more widely available. The injustices he criticizes involve not just the individual, but our relationships. Companies will hire a gay person, but not give his partner equal benefits given to heterosexual spouses; the landlord willing to rent to the single person might refuse a lease to a lesbian couple; and immigration discrimination is wholly about the right

to bring our alien partners into this country. A nationally recognized marriage will solve these problems almost automatically due to the deeply entrenched cultural value placed on true marriage, a deference we know does not exist for marriage substitutes like civil unions. If these inequities are his genuine concerns, he should recognize that rather than an uncertain piecemeal approach, the most efficient single solution is a universal right to marry.

While the fight for marriage has always been part of the "gay agenda," the need became critical during the AIDS crisis when our relationships were torn asunder and ignored, just when most needed by the desperately ill. Gay criticisms of the pursuit of marriage are therefore even more galling than those from religious conservatives with whom Ostertag admits he is now "ready to make common cause." But they are equally wrong.

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