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Gay and Committed, But Against 'Coupledness' Norm

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Hed: Gay and Committed, But Against 'Coupledness' Norm

Art: (Ackelsberg and Plaskow) Ackelsberg and Plaskow

Caption: Martha Ackelsberg and Judith Plaskow

by Ackelsberg and Plaskow

WeNews commentators

BLURB: While wincing at the Republican Party's vehemence against gay marriage, one lesbian couple in Massachusetts explains why they are choosing not to marry. An intimate arrangement, they say, should not be tied to federal and financial benefits.

(WOMENSENEWS)--Although an effort to pass the Federal Marriage Amendment barring gay marriage was defeated in the Senate last week, Republican leaders are making it clear that this is just the beginning of the battle.

"This is a national problem and it requires a national response," Senator John Cornyn, the Republican from Texas, said after the amendment's defeat. "Marriage is worth it; marriage is important enough to warrant the full legal protection of our laws."

Such vehemence puts people like us--gay and not personally inclined to marriage--in a strange position. Must we make the issue of same-sex marriage a priority even though we are critical of marriage as an institution?

We are residents of Massachusetts who have been in a committed relationship for 20 years. Yet, two months ago--when the state began allowing same-sex weddings--we made a decision not to get married. Although we affirm the right of gays and lesbians to marry, we chose not to do so because we wanted to challenge the ways our society distributes rights and benefits according to marital status. Now that Bush-camp Republicans are preparing a major offensive on the supposed threat to the social order posed by gay marriage, we find ourselves walking a familiar tightrope.

[Subhead] Struggling to Find a Balance

As feminists and social-change advocates, we have often struggled to find a balance between fighting for particular rights in the world as it exists and maintaining a vision of a transformed world in which those rights might be irrelevant.

For instance, we believe that women should have equal access to positions along the corporate ladder, but we would also like to see an end to the power of corporations. We believe that women and gays should be able to serve in the military, but we also hope for a day when the military will be obsolete. Gay marriage confronts us with an analogous set of tensions.

On the one hand, the right of gays and lesbians to marry is a matter of basic civic equality. In 1967, the Supreme Court made clear, in the case *Loving v. Virginia*, that the freedom to choose an intimate partner is a fundamental dimension of citizenship. When the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled in November that it was unconstitutional to deny gays and lesbians the right to marry, we celebrated along with many others. An important barrier to our full citizenship had fallen.

[Subhead] Federal Benefits Tied to Marriage

As the Massachusetts justices noted in the Goodridge decision, “marriage provides an abundance of legal, financial, and social benefits.”

In fact, in the United States, over 1,000 federal benefits are linked to marriage--benefits that include Social Security, inheritance, tax status, child custody and immigration status, to name just a few. In addition, significant private-sector benefits--most especially health care and retirement accounts--are often pegged to marital status. Thus, to allow gays and lesbians access to marriage could make a great difference to those in committed relationships with a partner who has health care benefits or who has financial or other assets to share.

On the other hand, focusing on the right to marry perpetuates the idea that these benefits ought to be linked to marriage. The word “marriage” is ambiguous: It refers to both a religious rite and a package of civil rights and responsibilities.

Many on the left have responded to the Republican assault on gay marriage by calling for expanded access to the social institution, but without questioning either the conflation of religious and civil marriage or the institutional role of marriage in our society.

As the Massachusetts judges themselves noted, marriage is a conservative force. “The exclusive commitment of two individuals to each other...brings stability to our society,” they said. Ironically, in affirming gay-marriage rights, the judges invoked the same traditional argument Republicans are using in their opposition. Both are telling us, in different ways, that marriage is central to the social order.

[Subhead] Perpetuating Coupledness Norm

A focus on the right to marry contributes to the perpetuation of a norm of coupledness in our society. That norm marginalizes single people, single parents, those widowed or divorced and those living in nontraditional households; including many in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

Seeking expanded benefits through marriage also contributes to what amounts to the increasing privatization of responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, the ill and disabled. Thus, in the case of children, the Massachusetts decision argues that gay marriage is good for society because children ought to be raised by two parents. Yet, precisely such arguments tying benefits to marriage are being used to justify repressive

federal “marriage promotion” policies that pressure single mothers receiving welfare benefits to marry, and deny them (and their children) significant benefits if they do not.

Meanwhile, working to increase the numbers of people with access to health or retirement benefits through their spouses can easily lead us to ignore or deny our societal responsibility to provide basic health care and old age security to all our citizens, regardless of marital status. In this way, pro-couple arguments also lead us to neglect our social responsibilities to provide adequate child-care, day care, elder-care and other types of care for all those who need them.

As feminists and as lesbians, we have considered ourselves to be part of social movements that were modeling a variety of ways to be in the world, and to be in meaningful relationships, other than through marriage.

What happened to the radical visions of the early women’s and gay liberation movements that called for a basic restructuring of society? Where are the radical, feminist--even liberal--voices calling for the separation of civil and religious unions?

Why not argue for the disestablishment of marriage as a legal form and the creation of a status of "civil union" that will allow people to create their own forms and have them recognized by the state?

Rather than rivet ourselves on marriage as the ultimate form of social organization, we should set our sights on more equitable structures. We would love to take advantage of this political moment to open, rather than close, conversations about the varieties of intimate relationships and the need to provide for everyone's health and well-being.

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For more information:

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Alternatives to Marriage Project

<http://www.unmarried.org>

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere

www.colage.org