

LOVE AND MARRIAGE FOR ALL February 11, 2007

Jeff read you a poem by Mary Oliver in which she reflects on *Oxygen*—that necessary support of all life. It is clear from her words that her beloved partner is dependent on a machine for the oxygen that supports her life.

Those of us who love the work of Mary Oliver, who have followed her development through at least a decade, have learned something about her life. Most of her work is centered on appreciating the wonders of nature, and only occasionally does a snippet of biography appear. However, some of her early work reflected a very difficult relationship with her father. A large and greatly loved dog appeared in some of her work. Later there were a few poems that reflect on his death. Now there are the “Percy” poems—ones that express her joy in the presence of a puppy in her life.

There is never the mention of married life, but slowly hints of a partner appeared. Oliver is not a public poet. She doesn't star at academic conventions. She doesn't give interviews about her personal life. Her poems tell her story. In the poem read today, we learn that her partner is very ill. Her latest book, *Thirst*, (which I have not yet read) is the first one published after the death of that partner.

Mary Oliver is one of many Americans who was denied the right to marry the partner she chose. She, like many others, is talented, intelligent, and contributes to the world. She, like many others, was unable to obtain the civil rights that married couples enjoy. Today we explore the world of our friends and relatives who are forbidden by law from wedding the person they love.

In November 2004 the citizens of Michigan voted to amend the state constitution to protect marriage. The amendment read, "To secure and preserve the benefits of marriage for our society and for future generations of children, the union of one man and one woman in marriage shall be the only agreement recognized as a marriage or similar union for any purpose." I must confess that I am surprised when voters choose to deny civil rights to citizens. On this nation's long road to inclusiveness we have gradually expanded our notion of citizenship from white male property owners to include black males, women and we dropped the requirement to own property.

However, at this time and this place in our history, there are those who put on the brakes. “You can vote,” they tell gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, “but you can't marry.” The effects of this declaration vary from state to state.

1

Proponents of the amendment in Michigan denied they intended to rescind agreements about benefits for same-gender partners between institutions and their employees. However, three years after it passed, such agreements are being challenged and overturned. It pains me to see such actions, and I despair for our families who are often denied insurance.

Now Massachusetts, which has been a shining star in the gay marriage movement, is facing a movement to overturn their law that allows marriage between same-gender couples. Several of my Massachusetts colleagues are active in organizing to keep the law. Let us hope that they are successful.

I am going to tell you a series of stories this morning, about same-sex couples. They were collected in *Gay Marriage, Real Life*, by Michelle Bates Deakin, and published by our UU imprint, Skinner House. This first story is about Rich and Gary, who live in Massachusetts and were plaintiffs in the lawsuit that resulted in an affirmation of their right to marry.

Rich and Gary had been committed partners for four years when they began to explore the possibility of parenthood. Before they got very far along in the adoption process, they learned of an 18-year-old in Maine who was pregnant, but felt she could not rear a child. After meeting them, she agreed to allow them to adopt her child. It is an open adoption, and Paige, the attractive brown-haired, brown-eyed girl to whom she gave birth, visits her every seven weeks. Paige was the impetus for their decision to fight for the right to marry. At a family gathering when she was eight, a 10-year-old cousin told her that her two daddies were not married. Paige denied that could be possible, and went to Gary to make sure that she was right.

“You and Dad are married, right?” she asked. Gary had to confess that they were not. He and Rich decided they had to pursue marriage. In April of 2001 they went to the courthouse in Northridge and applied for a marriage license. They were, of course, turned down. Then they joined six other couples in the lawsuit known as *Goodridge et al vs. the Massachusetts Department of Public Health*.

During the four years the case wended its way through the courts, Paige looked forward to the wedding. Although she lived a comfortable life with Daddy Gary, an educator and Daddy Rich, a nurse, she knew they needed to be married. And she wanted to be part of the wedding, and the celebration.

In the suit Gary told of being unable to put Rich on his health insurance plan or his pension. Paige was there, but Rich was not. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial court found that “the marriage ban works deep and scarring hardship on a very real segment of the community for no rational reason.” (Deakins, Michelle Bates, *Gay Marriage, Real Life*, Skinner Press, Boston, 2006, p. 30) The court continued:

Because (marriage) fulfills yearnings for security, safe haven, and connection that express our common humanity, civil marriage is an esteemed institution, 2 and the decision whether and whom to marry is among life's momentous acts of self-definition. Therefore, without the right to choose to marry, same-sex couples are not only denied full protection of the laws, but are excluded from the full range of human experience. (Ibid.)

Paige got to participate in two weddings. On the day same-sex marriages became legal in the state of Massachusetts, Gary and Rich obtained a license and a waiver of the three-day waiting period. They were married in the Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester in a small, simple ceremony. A few months later, on the 16th anniversary of their commitment to each other, they had a larger ceremony, a confirmation of their vows. Paige attended, dressed as all 12 year old girls wish to dress, in high heels and lipstick. Their families and friends who had supported them through the years celebrated with music and dancing until the wee hours. Paige took off her high heel shoes and danced and danced and danced. (Ibid. story on pages 27 - 34)

So, why is this picture so threatening to a majority of the citizens of Michigan and other states? Why do people who are good citizens in other areas of their lives lose all rational thought when confronted with the idea of same-sex marriage? The short answer is that they are often manipulated by self-seeking politicians or pastors who tap into deep fears and biases to shape

the world for their own ends. However, they could not be so successful if the fears and biases were not already present.

Data shows that traditional marriage is fading away. More and more couples are skipping the legalities and living together without benefit of license. This is more true for people who are poor than for people with high incomes. Our society has so glamorized the *princess* wedding that most girls think that is the only proper way to wed. Currently a wedding complete with wedding planner, long, white dress and veil, attendants, an abundance of flowers, musicians, photographer, limo, reception and dinner with champagne can cost \$10,000. (This officiant receives only a modest \$250.) Working class people can seldom afford that expense. So, instead of planning a smaller, perhaps more meaningful wedding, they just skip the whole thing. And they tell each other that when they can afford the wedding they will have one. Some of them do, most don't. This is one reason that more people are partnering rather than marrying.

Some people may have decided that marriage is a masculinist, heirarchical institution, and they want no part in it. They have a principled opposition to the institution. Unwed parenthood is less stigmatized. With many celebrity couples skipping the church and the courthouse and going directly to the birthing center, role models for young people are discouraging marriage.

In the forward to Deakin's book, editor David Moats writes:

Fear follows the advance of gay rights like a shadow.

Every step of the way, as gays and lesbians push to widen the scope of their rights, they encounter resistance derived from that fear. 3

The idea of gay marriage goes to the root of that fear, which in many places has blossomed into fierce opposition. ...

The idea of gay marriage challenges traditional assumptions and threatens the authority of some religious teachings.

Clay and Rashad are directly challenging those teachings. African Americans who live in Atlanta, they are founding a new church that will welcome LGBT people. Clay grew up in a fundamentalist faith, and began preaching at age 12. He did missionary work in Europe and Canada. He attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, and was scheduled to take over his uncle's large church in California. However, he could no longer deny his homosexuality and came out to his family. Most of them have now rejected him, and his uncle is searching for someone else to inherit his church. Rashad works for the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in their AIDS department.

Clay and Rashad planned and executed a beautiful private wedding on the beach at Hilton Head. They had communion, and jumped the broom. They vowed to love and care for each other. A passing woman walking her dog took their pictures. And they found a church in Atlanta that proclaimed itself "a place of love and acceptance to all." Although they are welcome there, they want to build their own church "that fully embraces people of every sexual orientation, family configuration, race, gender, mental condition and 'all other distinctions that are part of the rich tapestry of God's creation.'" (Ibid, p. 3) (Clay and Rashad's story, p. 1 – 12)

The reaction of traditionalists to stories like that of Clay and Rashad, Rich and Gary, is panic. "The sky is falling, the sky is falling..." they call to one another.

Those people who base the meaning of their lives on adherence to the jot and tittle of the Christian Holy Bible cannot abide change. Since their claim is that every word of the Bible is true and cannot be altered, re-thinking the meaning of marriage is impossible. Thus, the definition of marriage endorsed by a powerful segment of the faith community is enshrined in law. And those of us who have an open and affirming faith are denied the right to fully practice it.

Mandy and Angela live in Kansas City. Angela is a paramedic in the National Guard, and Mandy attends a Methodist seminary. Angela has traveled to Afghanistan and Iraq on medical missions, and is an Emergency Medical Technician in civilian life. Mandy loves the Methodist faith, and wants to serve people. Methodists do not allow out lesbians to become ministers, so she thinks she will become a deaconess. There is a mission in Trinidad that seems to be calling to her. Mandy and Angela were married in a ceremony presided over by her fellow seminary students. Although Angela's family accepted her gender orientation, and Mandy; Mandy's large Italian family took a long time to come to terms with their relationship. (Story on pages 35 - 47)

Mandy's church refuses to accept her as an appropriate leader of her faith. Much of the Protestant world is embroiled in a continuing battle over homosexuality. 4
The Episcopal church is very close to a schism. Most of the African bishops are adamant that homosexuality is a sin, and sinful people cannot lead the church, nor can priests perform ceremonies of union. They are planning a conference of bishops in Africa next week to discuss the problem. One bishop mourns the fact that so much time and energy is devoted to this. He asks why they cannot devote it to solving the problems of hunger and illness that plague the continent. "That's what Jesus would do," he said.

In our own liberal faith, we can be proud of our record. In this matter, as in most, we do not speak for everyone who is Unitarian Universalist. However, since the mid 1970's Unitarian and Universalist ministers have been performing ceremonies of union for same-sex couples. We believe that same-sex couples should have the right to marry, and have passed resolutions to that effect. When the Massachusetts legislature was crafting the laws that allowed same-sex marriages in that state, our headquarters, located next door to the state capitol, was bedecked with a large banner that read: *Standing on the Side of Love*.

Meanwhile, up in Falmouth, Anne Toran was working constantly for the passage of a same-sex marriage bill. Anne's daughter, Kate, is in a committed relationship with Joanna. For most of her life, Anne was a dutiful Irish Catholic, who raised a family of six daughters. Kate was her youngest. She was also a school secretary. However, when Kate told her she was a lesbian, Anne became an activist. She joined PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.) She wrote letters to the editor. And she began to question her Catholic faith.

At her first Gay Pride march she met two clergymen who inspired her to further action. One was a rabbi, and one was a Unitarian Universalist. Anne eventually left the Catholic church and joined the UU Church of Falmouth. There she led the Welcoming Congregation committee and founded the Celtic Diversity Dinner—an alternative to the St. Patrick's Day Parade that refused to let gays and lesbians parade.

Kate's father remains a Catholic, but goes to early mass so that he can accompany Anne to church. And he hosts the Celtic Diversity Dinner.

Kate and Joanna live in California, with their daughter, Saiyana. They missed the opportunity to

marry in San Francisco because Kate, pregnant with Saiyana, was close to her delivery date. They would like to marry someday, and have built a supportive community in Berkeley.

What can we do to ensure that all our people are able to marry who wish to do so? I think Anne is an inspiration for us. An Irish Catholic who became a activist after her 50th birthday is in some ways a very Unitarian Universalist image.

One way to approach this is to talk about Religious Freedom. We, and other liberal churches, should be free to perform religious ceremonies that unite couples, no matter their gender, in loving relationships. 5

Other churches should be free to refuse to perform such rituals if it is against their beliefs. Indeed, we UUs have done this for many years. Thus, we can argue that the guarantee of religious freedom cuts both ways: it protects our right to perform ceremonies, and the rights of conservatives to refuse to perform them.

The next step is, however, more difficult. I believe that we should be working to ensure that all our people have the right to civil, as well as religious marriage. It is civil marriage that gives spouses the right to employment and inheritance benefits. All our people should be able to receive the benefits that civil marriage bestows.

It is also our task to teach our children well. Most of our children did not grow up with the prejudices and biases that some of us had to overcome. We need to continue teaching them that all people are worthy and beloved by the divine. We teach most effectively by example. Our Welcoming Congregation banner shows the world what we believe, but even more important, it shows our children that we are unafraid to declare to the world that we welcome people of all races, genders and affectional orientations.

And, when we work for justice we teach even more effectively. At some point that amendment to the Michigan Constitution needs to be rescinded. This may not be the time. However, there will appear a leader or leaders who decide that the time has come to repeal that blot upon our state. It may start here, or somewhere else. When it does, I hope that you will embrace the opportunity to work for gender justice.

I have a vision that some day, even in the cold state of Michigan, all of our people will be free to marry. I have a vision that some day we can hold a wedding in Hackley Park or at Pere Marquette Beach of two loving women, and that all will accept it as right and proper. I have a vision that St. Paul's Episcopal Church will be the site of a wonderful wedding of two men, and that their families and friends will celebrate together. And in my vision, these weddings will be legal, with all the rights that accrue to that state.

May it be so.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.