

This summer the movies have been filled with crude language, bathroom humor and sex scenes that include the defiling of an apple pie. Brace yourself for the fall television season. . .It is all part of what some television executives and social scientists see as the rapid disappearance of most taste and language restrictions in mass media, a trend fueled by shifting standards of what is socially acceptable. . ."

The shocking thing in decades hence
Will be to see our innocence!

THE GAY NINETIES

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I found I approached this, my second literary paper, in much the same manner that I had approached my weekly sermon these past 37 years. Which is to say, never easy. As I did, it seemed that I had fallen into my same old routine, waiting for a last minute revelation, searching for a theme that would be novel, personally challenging and ripe for the moment. But, surprisingly, and hopefully in time, a theme for this occasion quietly arose, but it came with some angst.

The paper would focus on homosexuality, at least some aspects of it, for it is as broad as heterosexuality, that is, of humanity itself.

My refinement of the subject was also a squirmy process until I thought why not address what the nineties has uniquely brought to the fore and what the critics of homosexual behavior ultimately fear - the legality of same-sex marriage. In my view, because of our fair-minded society of egalitarian law, such marriages seem both necessary and inevitable and,

hopefully, ought to be a subject of some interest to the Literary Club.

The principle that I feel worthy to support in this paper is found in the marriage resolution now being circulating by human rights groups in our country. It reads,

"Because marriage is a basic human right and an individual personal choice, resolved - the State should not interfere with same gender couples who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities, and commitment of civil marriage."

But I am aware that advocating such a resolution is pressing a hot button. As to homosexuality, our city is quite conflicted about it. Five years ago, we citizens overwhelmingly voted to change our city charter making it clear that gays and lesbians are not as valued as the rest of us. It is the only city chartered in the United States to do so.

Judge Arthur Spiegel, who determined the Charter amendment unconstitutional for several reasons, admonished the effort by reminding us, "That in our society we adhere to the 'self evident' truth that all people are created equal," and this amendment, "violates even rudimentary notion of fundamental fairness, and undermines the integrity of our nation." His decision was reversed, however, and after other challenges, the Supreme Court finally decided not to rule on the matter even though it had already found identical legislation unconstitutional. The City Charter remains intact. A repeal referendum is now underway.

But sensing my subject's controversial nature, I decided to reconsider its appropriateness for this forum. So I took off my shelf that orange covered booklet, the "Annotated Concordance for the Club" that we were all given when joining this body. Found there, in two excellent papers, by Edward Merkel and, especially, Roger Newstedt, are some of the unwritten rules we should all seriously consider when standing under the bold, golden pronouncement, "Here comes one with a paper."

As to my choice of topics, Merkel's advice was reassuring. "Write about anything that interests you; but write because you have something to say, not because you have to say something."

Good enough, I thought. But then Newstedt's words caught my eye and moved my visceral organs. ". . . It has been predicated," he wrote, "that this podium should not be used as a Political Forum, or a Religious Pulpit, or a Legal Debate, or a Medical Diatribe, or to advocate any special polemic bias which might strongly motivate a given member." And there were other words of such caution.

After a little reflection it became clearer that when Newstedt said to avoid that "which might strongly motivate a given member" he was not talking about motivation at all, certainly not in the sense a homiletics teacher might desire in a sermon. Roger meant, don't make anyone upset, that is, don't piss anyone off in the Club.

Now I would never use such vernacular in the pulpit. I would consider it vulgar, inappropriate and a hindrance to the message. I dislike profanity generally and, believe it or not, I have never used the "F. . ." word even in private conversation. But I felt more comfortable slipping it into this paper because we are a private club and, we are all males, who everyone knows is the more vulgar sex. But mostly because it is clear that really was what Newstedt was counseling.

I might add, access to the free use of profanity, someone once told me, was one of the reasons we would rather not have women in the Club.

But surely some sensitivity when speaking here in this sanctuary of literacy is required. Since our papers are to be originally written for this body, and our pledge is to attend and listen regardless to the speaker or topic, it all suggests we should tailor our remarks accordingly and not try to bash anyone with polemical passion - with an in your face diatribe.

But I admit, being an ideologue, that passivity is not easy for me. And, actually, what subject is out of

bounds when it comes to a person's worldview - one's faith? I have always appreciated the most contemporary of theologians, Paul Tillich, and especially his remark, that "you can't reject religion with ultimate seriousness because the state of being ultimately serious is itself religious."

So I frankly admit the topic I speak of is one of ultimate concern. If I had been in this club as long as Bob Hilton, I would call what I am doing in this paper what he implied he was doing in his fine paper last month - preaching to the Club. ("My Last Sermon") But if I am doing that, I wish to only to put forth reasons, not sectarian doctrines, which mostly damn homosexuality anyway. Further, even though I personally perform same-sex services as marriages, believing them to have the same spiritual validity as marriage for heterosexuals, this paper is concerned only with civil marriages, which I believe the Constitution supports for all.

Still, I am not that naïve to think that what I am proposing has the unanimous concurrence of the members of this club. Some, not agreeing, may find this paper insolent or ridiculous or both. I hope not for I have no desire to be offensive.

Two other comments before I play my hand. At the 150th Anniversary Banquet, after our historian John Diehl read his delightful paper describing the rich and varied attitudes, styles, issues, and personalities of the earliest members of this club, I certainly felt more comfortable being a member here. I hope you did, too. Diversity of ideas and persons, like biological diversity in nature, not only adds to a group's vitality but its resiliency as well.

And, secondly, that same joyous night, I deeply appreciated President John MacLeod's strong paper seeking to move this body away from the world of patriarchy that we are all so deeply conditioned by. Certainly I have no longer any desire to worship a patriarchal God, or a heterosexual God either, but John's remarks about patriarchy were, I thought, helpful and not at all intended to denigrate our

maleness or to undermine the kind of joy and delightful camaraderie we receive by being in this all male club.

But this is enough of an apology for a paper that addresses a topic about persons whose being and behavior are generally described as an abomination - a perversity of nature - an objective disorder - as a "love that dare not speak its name". The latter description was uttered by Lord Alfred Douglas in describing his relationship with Oscar Wilde and, because of such love, Wilde was unjustly sent to prison, contributing to his unfortunate and premature death. It was comforting for me to hear, so affectionately told by Robert Smith in his paper, "A New Stained Glass Window", that Wilde is now so enshrined at Westminster Abbey.

In my treatment of this subject, I must disclose that I never had a first hand acquaintance with a homosexual person until rather recently - really only at the beginning of the 1990's. A few years ago The Cincinnati Enquirer reported that I was a practicing homosexual and many of my friends called inquiring how my practicing was coming along. Some even suggested they would help. The Enquirer graciously apologized.

But the fact I lived most of my life without personally knowing a homosexual is not remarkable. Such was true of most of my generation and previous ones. Gays and lesbians have had to be invisible in Western cultures for centuries. Of course, it is no longer possible to not know about them.

It was just thirty years ago this summer when the police raided the tavern and dance bar, Stonewall, in Greenwich Village, with its large concentration of gays. Tired of being continuously harassed and arrested, a minor riot ensued. That night the Gay Liberation movement in the United States began. This led to Gay Pride Day, grass roots political organizing, and, mostly, the realization that staying in the closet was no longer a healthy defense for a gay person.

Since then, our society has gone through a great cultural shock. Gays and lesbians are appearing everywhere, and in all walks of life. The revelation

that Rock Hudson, that handsome epitome of a romantic lead, was really attracted to and loved men, was just one shock among many to the heterosexual community. The love that could not be named was now being shouted.

But back in 1978, the first time I ever spoke from the pulpit on homosexuality, I hardly knew about gay persons except those of literary and artistic fame. I certainly knew none personally. Why then preach on the subject? The reason was my Presbyterian denomination was then preparing to decide if persons who are actively engaged in same-sex relationships are morally fit to be ordained as clergy or as elected leaders in local congregations. Twenty-one years later, we Presbyterians have continued to say no. But the issue will not go away and, I believe, will lead to a major schism.

Still, my sermon of 21 years ago, attempting to make clear the rightness of ordaining gay persons, was not based on personal experience at all. For me, it was simply a matter of justice.

I knew then as I spoke, that same-sex behavior was unnatural for me, even though my Slavic heritage made male kissing and embracing a positive experience. Same-sex behavior, in itself, did not seem morally wrong to me, but, if I were to be totally honest, down deep, I found it not only strange and disturbing but abhorrent. I didn't even like the word Gay attached to the practice and thought it tarnished the use of a good word and attitude.

But even without any empathy for the interior feeling of gays and lesbians, and only bewilderment about their erotic behavior, I still felt justice was the issue. A person is a person is a person and intrinsically all should be equally accepted.

Ethical behavior is what counts when judging a person and the same standards, the same rights, should equally be applied. Besides, if we are speaking of sexual malpractice, it is just as clearly present in the heterosexual community and, in some ways, more so.

Justice was the issue. Equality! And so I spoke that homosexual practice, in and of itself, should not be a barrier to being a minister or to any other leadership position in the church. I knew the Bible had little to say on the subject or even understood what homosexuality was. Jesus said nothing at all about it except to love our neighbor, nor did any of the great prophets before him. It seemed clear to me that those passages that did speak against same-sex acts were culturally archaic and a product of patriarchal tribalism. By that time I had come to agree with William Sloan Coffin, former Chaplain at Yale, "That the essential problem before the church is not reconciling homosexuality with the Bible but to reconcile the continuous abuse and condemnation of Gay and Lesbian persons with the love of Christ."

One response from the 1978 sermon, however, was very telling, for it continues to be a hurdle regarding this whole sexual matter. Ralph, a pillar in that church and a very fine person, approached me after the sermon and with some gravity offered that what I had said was surely right but wondered why I had to bring the subject up during a regular worship service. His concern that even talking about homosexuality is an X-rated, not for polite company subject, is widely shared and has been a great barrier to any progress or more light on this matter. Most would rather keep the closet locked. It has led to such unenlightened policies as "don't ask, don't tell" in the churches and the military.

This is certainly a prevailing attitude in both conservative and liberal communities. That is, gays and lesbians are acceptable, certainly should not be persecuted, and it is even good to meet or have them at one of your parties - as long as they don't flaunt their homosexuality in public. This, of course, is a blatant double standard, the same kind of apartheid that prevailed regarding blacks. They are all right - in their place. But this fear of gays and lesbians, being even slightly romantic in public, or even demonstrating in a parade for their civil rights, completely disregards how they are sexually constituted. It asks them to suppress what is more

fundamental to their identity than their vocation, ethnicity or even religion.

In reality, the first lesson gays and lesbians have had to learn was that their survival in our society depended on their self-concealment. In order to be safe, they had to learn to be experts at hiding who they are. Even though their fear was surely justified, how can that be healthy for anyone?

The main line Protestant groups, along with the Roman Catholic Church, have now grown in their understanding that homosexuality is not chosen nor is one's sexual orientation changeable. Unfortunately what these religious bodies have required of gay people for their salvation, to correct something that they had no control over in the first place, is rather bizarre - celibacy for life. That, I suggest, works as well as choosing at random a portion of the heterosexual population and demanding they never behave sexually. It can't be done. Celibacy is fine for those who choose it freely, even though there is much healthy wisdom in the old biblical warning, that "it is not good that man should be alone."

Surely, what homosexuals must do for themselves, as must we all, is to be just that - themselves. Nor can they remain what we liberals sympathetically claim them to be - victims. That healthy realization is why so many gays and lesbians have come out, and are now saying, "Hey, I exist and I am fundamentally and sexually drawn to the same gender."

Of course, any discussion of homosexuality gets entangled with our sex-ambivalent culture to begin with. There is no more confusing, mysterious, and yet tantalizing subject in culture than sex and we all have strongly developed differences regarding it.

I consider myself rather prudish. I do know I have a distaste for letting everything "all hang out". When Wilt Chamberlain confessed to 20,000 sexual encounters with women, it did detract from my personal regard for his character. It wasn't because I was sexually worthy to throw stones. I am not. But Chamberlain's excessiveness, his boasting and the

obvious exploitation of women, I found quite distasteful. It made everything he did so magnificently on the court pale in light of his sexual character.

So I was greatly relieved to discover in a recent interview, just before his death, that he regretted giving such a preposterous number and added, "With all of you men out there who think that having a thousand different ladies is pretty cool, I have learned in my life. . .that having one woman a thousand different times is much more satisfying." But that bit of philosophy is not too interesting to the media.

I cannot address the complexity of sexuality in this paper but its shadow is always intensely present. Largely, but not always, it rears its head on this topic as homophobia. Oh, the evidence seems strong that the fear and revulsion of homosexuals increased in this country as the women's movement grew. Men in the 19th Century were much more comfortable and intimate among men than they are today.

But I can only speak with any assurance out of my own tangled experience. And it was this that totally surprised me. Since 1978, my feelings regarding homosexual behavior have dramatically changed. From one of discomfort and bewilderment with it, to being at ease, non-threatened and no longer finding it abhorrent. For me, the nineties restored gayness to gay behavior. It was no longer just a justice issue but a good part of the exuberant forms that nature takes.

This unexpected change came about only because of the church I was pastoring. There, in 1991, the ruling board established a policy that gay and lesbian persons are fully invited - that they need not hide their sexual orientation - that they could be ordained to church office. In that congregation, there would be no double standard - one for gays and one for straights.

Such a novel welcome in this metropolitan area soon attracted a host of new members with a ratio of about one-third gay and two-thirds straight. My involvement with gays, thus, greatly increase. And

through many counseling sessions - private confessionals - officiating at their marriages - attending them in sickness and in death - baptizing their children - celebrating with them at parties - working together in ministry - all began to displace my negative feelings and fortified an absolute conviction within me that gay and lesbian persons are intrinsically no different from anyone else.

I found that it is not always true that familiarity breeds contempt. What had been abhorrent to me was no longer.

Of course, I had not changed my sexual orientation, but I found myself rejoicing when gays and lesbians found mutual, loving, intimate companionship.

This change felt good to my soul, but, in my case, it all came as a gift, not an achievement, and the gift was made up of a wealth of different gay folk - full of integrity, creativity, compassion and courage.

Homophobia has many complexities, but one simple fact must be recognized and it is so simple that it is often overlooked. It is just a natural existential fact, and has nothing to do with right and wrong, that ninety plus percent of us feel the opposite as to our affections, attractions, desires and lusts than do gays and lesbians. What gets skewed is that we in the vast majority impose our interior feelings and constructions on a group who are constituted in a completely different way and who will remain that way. Surely, both groups need to get used to each other for homophobia still remains as our nations most enduring form of prejudice.

But for those whose negative feelings or religious convictions may never change regarding gays and lesbians, we need to put this sexual-social conundrum in the larger context of our most revered values.

Ken Wilbur in his book, The Marriage of Sense and Soul, has traced what is called the "dignity of modernity." By that he means the collective positive social values achieved since the Western Enlightenment. Applying equality, freedom and justice to all, it

brought about freedom of speech, religion and assembly - equality before the law and the guarantee of a fair trial - the elimination of slavery, and most all of the personal choices we hold so dear. These practices hardly existed in any large scale in pre-modern society and surely they have become essential to our being.

Yes, modernity, whatever the critique we post-modernist give it, surely has much in it to be celebrated, even beyond what Alfred North Whitehead offered when asked: "What have been the two greatest developments in your lifetime?" With only a slight twinkle in the eyes, he replied: "the discovery of anesthetics and the decline of dogmatic theology."

The point I wish to make, however, is that the "dignity of modernity" has not yet produced equal civil rights for gays and lesbians. They are still pressured to live in a medieval world.

Historically, of course, homosexuality has always been present, and, in some cultures, greatly accepted. The first recorded same-sex marriage was in Egypt some 4,500 years ago. Primitive societies, in which people lived closer to nature, were surprisingly tolerant of same-sex relationships as well as intersexual persons in which both male and female biologies are present.

Homosexuality is not as unnatural as we thought. In the just published mammoth study of homosexuality in animal life, Biological Exuberance, Bruce Bagemihl clearly and quite convincingly documents that "Homosexual behavior is found in every major animal group." Such gay behavior actually observed in their natural habitat, he estimates to be between fifteen to thirty percent of all animals.

Noah's ark needs to be revisited if it is to be truly a historical record.

Just last month, the zookeepers in Jerusalem, seeking to protect the endangered Griffin vulture species, have been giving eggs to two unbreeding, but life-bonded males, to hatch and to raise. The zookeepers have declared "they are the best parents we have seen."

But if modernity has not yet arrived for gays and lesbians, the 1990's have produced some hope to bring about what Senator Robb of Virginia characterized on the floor of the Senate as "the last frontier in the ultimate fight for civil and human rights."

Yet, the leader of the free world, the United States, is lagging behind. South Africa in 1996, and who would have thought it, became the first country in the world to constitutionally prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.

But when Hawaii's Supreme Court rules in 1993 that denying same-sex couples marriage, and its concomitant rights and benefits, was discriminatory on its face, for the first time in our land, same-sex marriage was openly discussed and seemed even possible.

Just a few months ago, the Supreme Court of Canada rules in favor of legal spousal rights for all persons, including gays and lesbians. In their most recent poll, a majority of Canadians now favor same-sex marriage. That is not yet true in the United States.

The final decision in Hawaii will soon be forthcoming. The court there has waited for a compelling argument why same-sex marriages would be harmful to the State. None has yet to be found. Regardless, the reaction to Hawaii's pending decision sent Congress, and practically every other state, into turmoil and a quick backlash occurred.

This resulted in the hurried passage by Congress of the so-called, "Defense of Marriage Act" in 1996. Its primary purpose was to prevent the action of one state that permitted same-sex marriages being binding on the other states. In spite of its very questionable constitutionality, President Clinton signed it.

Still it does appear that we are closer to same-sex marriage than ever before. And not simply because of the courage of so many gays and lesbians to come out openly and identify themselves, or the large number of corporations and governmental bodies that increasingly are providing domestic partner benefits to gay couples, but because of society's increasing awareness

that the only pathology associated with homosexuality has been in our attitudes about these persons.

This past month California became the second state to grant state wide registry for domestic partnerships for all homosexuals and even for unmarried heterosexuals age 62 and older, all in order to give them some of the same benefits the rest of us married folk enjoy.

But as helpful as domestic partnerships are, they appear only as a temporary compromise which undoubtedly will be viewed as a kind of back-of-the-bus, synthetic, version of marriage. Denmark and Holland seem ready to grant full marriage rights to same sex persons while partial rights are springing up in countries around the world.

Yes, there are voices in the gay community who reject same-sex marriage as a priority or even a goal. They believe it to be too restrictive - or it still remains a product of patriarchy - or are hesitant to allow the government to be involved in the arena of their most intimate lives - or simply because they have seen so many failed marriages.

But as Andrew Sullivan, the former editor of the New Republic, and widely read gay author, notes, "Gay men and women cannot reject the institution of marriage, because the institution of marriage has never been offered to them."

We should ask, "Why not?" It should be rather plain that same-sex marriage is really a conservative social good. After all, the goal is to expand marriage not to destroy it. How can persons who have no choice over their sexual orientation threaten the marriage of heterosexuals in any way? But if the conservative agenda is to have the state encourage some forms of behavior over others, and in this case it would be fidelity, domestic tranquillity and long term carry relationships, how can conservatives be against it?

It seems obvious that the most comprehensive way to enhance the social dignity and equal status of gay and lesbians is their legal right to marry. If

marriage is a civilizing good for straight America than its extension ought to be just as civilizing for gays. Certainly it would be a means of conferring on them, writes Sullivan "the highest form of social approval imaginable."

Can there ever be equality, first class citizenship, without it?

And in addition, there would be some very practical help. In 1997, the United States General Accounting Office listed 1,049 "federal laws in which benefits, rights, and privileges are contingent on marital status." Of course, none of these supportive marital rights and benefits is available to gay couples. And yet society condemns anything that looks promiscuous in their behavior or any failure they have in creative long term relationships. The legal possibility of marriage for them would, of course, be supportive for both long term and faithful commitments.

Historically, we have seen that civil rights have not been fully in place for others without the right to marry. This was true with racial minorities and with women.

In the long road to racial equality, much culminated in the civil rights legislation of 1963. But our minority races still were not rid of legal sanctions that denigrated them. That happened in 1967 when the Supreme Court, in Loving v. Virginia, declared unconstitutional laws prohibiting interracial marriages. With that decision, a person's racial identity no longer matters. Race was no longer a social taboo or a second class status.

Equality within marriage was also the ultimate goal of the women's movement. Abigail Adams was right when she wrote to husband John in 1776. "I desire you would remember the ladies. . . Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could." This sound advice came in the climate of Lord Blackstone's expansion of British common law a few years earlier, that "in law husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person."

Equality in marriage for women came about only in long stages, as patriarchy lessened and women asserted their equal worth. It came about when women could make their own consent regarding marriage - when they could initiate divorce when necessary - when marriage property rights were divided equally - when they could control their own pregnancies and legally avail themselves of contraceptives and abortions - and when, in 1993, every state got rid of the perverse notion that rape wasn't possible within marriage.

So, too, must marriage be legalized for gay and lesbians, providing them with the equal protection of the laws, which, the 14th Amendment guarantees.

Really, what in law prevents it?

Isn't marriage an egalitarian arrangement of two persons, freely chosen, in common trust, for mutual love and enduring companionship? Isn't it to care for one another in sickness and health? Isn't it meant to be a blessing - a home for the heart's happiness - yes, of romance, sexual intimacy, friendship, encouragement, counsel and solace - a school for love?

These are the interior goods of marriage, of the heart and soul, and they are primary. But these, obviously, can be achieved and are celebrated by same-sex couples.

The exterior goods of marriage must also be considered - security, financial support, property, the possibility of children - and these are primarily the concern of social legislation and the courts, and should be. Of course, there would be no need for the state to be involved at all if we treated one another with perfect justice.

But, again, these exterior goods also apply to same sex couples and should be protected by laws as with heterosexual couples.

If you took even a quick survey of history it would reveal marriage to be anything but traditional. At one time in our own Western heritage, marriage vows were said before a notary and not a priest. Economics

was the controlling factor. At one time, if you had too many daughters you could be driven into bankruptcy.

Even so, marriage, always in flux and adaptive, has outlasted its critics and will continue to do so. But in our time, it will be a matter of private choice of two equal persons without predetermined gender roles or social status. After all, what essential human values really depend on one's gender?

And yet same-sex couples are excluded in our great land, no matter how rich their love or strong and enduring their commitments - no matter how rewarding their common life together or the fidelity of their partnership.

Yes, no matter what, same-sex couples are denied the institution of marriage, which Justice Douglas so impressively described in *Griswold v. Connecticut* as,

"a coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred.

It is an association that promotes a way of life, not causes; a harmony in living, not political faiths; a bilateral loyalty, not commercial or social projects. Yet it is an association for as notable a purpose as any involved in our prior decisions."

In summary, then, marriage is a legal right for convicts, divorced parents who still owe child support, for persons who have anti-American political ideologies, for persons of all kinds of sexual disorders and health conditions, but only a right if they are not homosexuals.

Call up the Hamilton County marriage bureau and you will hear that, except for age, anyone can get an instant marriage license - except homosexuals.

I asked the nice clerk there how you can tell if the applicants are really male or female? "Oh," she replied, "just by looking at them."

That, I suggest, isn't always possible. As we know, between three and ten million Americans are neither male or female at birth, and even as adults they may actually have a different gender than what their own parents suppose.

Nevertheless, the equal right to marry remains incomplete. Gay people are really the only group in our society that are not allowed to marry the person they love. That just doesn't seem to be equal justice.

Let me conclude by noting that at our glorious 150th Anniversary Party, we sang "The Literary Club" song, resurrected from seventy-five years ago. Perhaps you recall the opening line. It was, "Here comes one with a paper, wise or grave or gay."

I shall not claim this paper wise, oh, yes, surely grave, but I hope you will all remember that it was, indeed, gay.

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