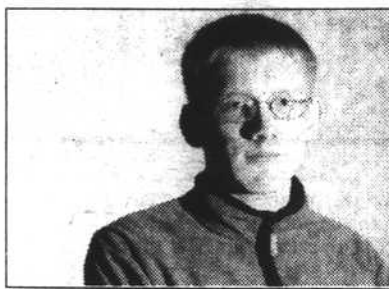


Vermont stumbles into equality

Equal rights for gay people a must, but marriage provides wrong answer



On December 20, 1999, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that the state must provide the same protections and benefits to homosexual couples as it does to heterosexual couples.

This is actually an unprecedented move in the battle for gay marriage. By choosing not to force the state to institute gay marriage, the Supreme Court has actually taken a much stronger stance.

The court compelled the state legislature to find a way to protect and benefit gay couples in a way fully consistent with the way it protects and benefits married couples. Further, since coming up with a full domestic partnership plan that is essentially equal with marriage would be difficult, many legislators predict that simply expanding the definition of marriage will be the best thing to do.

On one hand, I'm against gay marriage.

Being gay, after all, often means so much more than "I am attracted to people of the same sex." Coming out is as much a re-evaluation of social norms as it is a coming to terms with a queer sexuality. I questioned everything when I came out - I had to.

It's healthy for each generation to question the prejudices and the teachings handed down to them by their parents. Attitudes should be evaluated, mistakes discarded, wisdoms treasured.

Our current social standing on marriage is a big mistake.

The problem with marriage right now is that it's held up as the highest form that a relationship between two people can reach. Countless youths (that is, those our age) pursue this shining beacon of happiness as if it were the one true path to our self-fulfillment.

Truth be told, it's not.

Meaningful relationships are of different forms and different intensities, and it is a myth to think that marriage is the highest, or most intense relationship that can be had. So we're better served by thinking creatively and originally with every new person we become involved with, instead of

thinking in terms of, "Is this the right one?"

In coming out, a chance to really pursue new forms of relationships and attachments has presented itself. We can take this opportunity not necessarily to be promiscuous, but to redefine the borders of emotional and physical attachment we have with the people in our lives.

The widespread acceptance of gay marriage serves as a block to these new creative opportunities. It will do for gay society the same thing it has done for straights, which is to say it will limit the variety of intimacies that are possible with people in our lives.

Marriage would ostracize queers like myself, who love freely of our own volition, just as it has already done for straights (for example, take heterosexual poly-amorous groupings).

On the other hand, gays need something.

Marriage isn't just about spending two lives together. It's about tax codes, child-rearing, financial planning and hospital visitation.

Gays have been living together for ages, either openly or in secretive arrangements. If a gay couple wants to visit one another on the death bed,

it is simply humane to allow them to do so.

It comes down to equal protection and benefits.

Whether conservatives choose to acknowledge them, gay relationships do exist, and these relationships are perfectly capable of being infused with meaningful love. Two genuinely attached adults must not be told they cannot visit one another in the hospital, blend their financial lives together or raise children in a loving, capable environment.

Gays don't need marriage, but compassion compels us to give them that. The "moral majority" is guilty of inhumanity by denying even the most basic privileges to gay unions.

But what about the Family?

Conservatives are quick to claim that gay marriage will dilute straight marriage. Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, said of the Vermont decision, "While this legal decision is designed to elevate the status of same-sex couples, it really represents a slap in the face for marriage between a man and a woman," (New York Times, Dec. 20, 1999).

I don't understand the reasoning here (because there is none). True, allowing gays to marry will change

the notion of marriage from one that implies procreative sex, but it does not preclude the rearing of children, the founding of a home or any other of the society-building aspects that conservatives point to as so important in marriage.

In fact, most gays who want to marry want to do so for reasons that are inexplicably straight - they want to have children, they want to form a household, etc.

The real weakness of marriage in modern times is its connection to intense love - that feeling that begins any substantial long-term relationship. People are trained to think that marriage is nothing more than the sanctification of this intense, transient love. So when it dissipates, divorce follows.

The real solution to weak marriage is strong anti-divorce movements - such as the elimination of no-fault divorce - not the virulent attack on gays who benevolently want to bring their lives together.

So, one should encourage the Vermont Legislature in its efforts to satisfy the Supreme Court's decision. Whether legislators choose marriage, domestic partnership or something new and different, they will be taking a step toward equality.

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On living in Nebraska

Small-town boys reflect on big-city break



(MURDOCK) - 12/31/99

The wandering 36th Street minstrel and I hitched a ride back to Murdock, Neb., over Christmas break. I felt bad, but he had to turn away after noticing Murdock's pride and joy, the sign reading, "Transients Turn Back. No Jobs Here."

It's unfortunate because I really do like his music. I mean, you're not going to walk into some bar in Spain and hear it playing on the jukebox, but it's nice. I encouraged him to try Mead.

"They'll let almost anyone into their town," I told him.

Sadly, I had to leave my friend and enter the village that I had called home for eighteen years. Charles Kuralt may have described Murdock as a "Rural Eden," but I doubt it. He probably would have spit on one of the town's four sidewalks and left.

Murdock's more like Mayberry without the clever antics or witty banter of Don Knotts. I think everyone knows that "The Andy Griffith Show" would have gone off the air by 1963 if it had focused strictly on Opie's adolescence and puberty. "Gee Pa, I'm starting to get fiery red hair where there wasn't fiery red hair before. Betty Jean's been lookin' damn fine lately, too. Oh, and I'm sorry about all of those pies, Aunt Bee. The coconut creme was the warmest."

Anyhow, traveling home brought more than I would have liked into my consciousness. Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp became my best friends once again. I can't complain about that.

What did distress me, though, was the urge to wander aimlessly up and down the same country roads over and over again, an urge that not even the most stoic small-town boy could escape. Suddenly, I felt hayseed

enough to look west toward Lincoln and wonder who was looking back.

This particular break made me much wearier than was necessary. Apart from it being my first semi-extensive time period home as a college student, it also held the supposed "millennium" on a pedestal that was much too high for me to knock down with my bashing stick.

This worried me. I knew that nothing was going to happen to the world (damn). I was simply worried about what in the fiery pits of hell would happen to me.

As I explained to my friends, I felt dirty for my lack of millennial excitement. I attempted to pass the hours leading to the new century by thinking, writing, and smoking cigarettes.

Someday I'd like to ask the surgeon general exactly which war it was he commanded in. I feel awfully sorry for his troops. Maybe I'm crazy, but nicotine fits and high-powered weaponry don't seem like a great tandem to me. He's always nagging about how smoking is hazardous to your health. However, he's never said anything about what it will do to mine.

I have a feeling that my millennial thinking and writing were far short of successful. It's hard to say, though. Morgan Stanley-Dean Witter can claim that success is measured one investor at a time all it wants. My personal suspicion is that, more often than not, it's measured with an anal thermometer.

If I'm right, I know that everyone on this campus has had his or her success measured more often than he or she would enjoy discussing: "100.7 degrees. It looks like it's straight to the factory with you, Jimmy. Now pull up your pants and start assembling those boxes."

My best thoughts for the next millennium have been laid to rest in the ground. However, I've already forgotten where. Damn. Who knows? Maybe if I recall where exactly it was that I buried them and am able to unearth them in the 10 years that I've planned for, I'll actually know what my goals for the next 999 are.

Maybe I'll have fled from my small-town roots and cashed Bruce

Springsteen, Barney Fife and plain white T-shirts in for Armani suits and a lick of the shiny brass ring.

Somehow I doubt it. I guess those of us who care will just have to wait and see. Till then, I'm going to assume that "The Boss" has never been that far off.

However, I think that my search for contentment is going to involve a little less running and a lot more ink. Till then, tramps like us, baby, we were born to write.

(MEAD) - 12/31/99

The Mead skyline appears more diminutive with each visit home, back-lit by the nighttime lucidity of Omaha. Not that there is much of a

skyline - a half-mile of tree-obscured houses, a few street lamps and the towering Frontier grain elevator.

Although I know the village is exactly as I left it, I can't help feeling that it's collapsing, not on itself, but on me, my friends (some of whom tried to escape) and others realizing their destinies and giving up after graduation.

I know I've changed. Even as the new millennium prepares to bring utopia or apocalypse, I'm being slowly drawn back. While the move to Lincoln a year and a half ago seemed to tear me from my rural roots, I flourished in this larger environment, and I

thought, momentarily, that I had won.

As the year wore on, however, my resolve eroded, leaving me foundering in my own crapulosity, partaking of pleasures I had shunned during my high school years.

Although spring break in Seattle helped me regain some of my lost fortitude, I was soon rejoined with my failing habits. I realized that this was a prophecy enacted throughout history. Small towns create their own and will have them back. Oh sure, there are some who escape, become successful in life in some faceless metropolis, but most are drawn back. They may fight it, or pretend to fight, but in the end, it's their own doing.



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