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No Threat To Marriage

Dear Editor,

As a woman married to a man for the last 18-something years, I find the argument that my marriage – or any straight marriage – must be protected by a state constitutional amendment to be ludicrous, offensive and dangerous to all our liberty. Loving, committed relationships need to be honored and cherished, and protected only against the forces in our culture that diminish such relationships.

What threatens marriage? Divorce obviously, but more to the point, the rampant consumerism that places undue financial pressures on couples; the media emphasis of those “in love” always looking young and sleek, which denigrates the loving bonds of those growing old and soft; the cultural myths that name love a fleeting feeling rather than an everyday way of acting and being in the world with someone else. Families are threatened by the isolation that many suffer in our culture where there isn’t nearly enough intergenerational mingling and interdependence. Children suffer – not by whether they have one parent or two moms – but by growing up in situations where they’re neglected or abused, and denied the freedom and structure necessary to become responsible, self-assured adults who can delight in themselves and their communities. Everywhere we have people suffering from deadly addictions and/or intense loneliness, spouses abusing or neglecting each other, people walking out on a marriage for dreams of greener pastures or to heal broken dreams. What threatens marriage? Isolation, intolerance, false expectations, abuse and neglect, addictions, and most of all, commitments not strong enough to work through the big and little stuff that, inevitably, comes.

When I look toward gay and lesbian families I know around the country, I see people dealing with the same issues I am or have or will be dealing with as a straight woman in a marriage: picking up kids from after-school and then feeling guilty for doing a drive-through dinner, deciding between cloth or disposable diapers, figuring out how to help a college-bound kid fill out a complex college application; staying up late at night calculating how to stretch our dollars to enroll the kids in a special activity; and eventually going out just by ourselves although we talk way too much about our kids.

Two lesbians raising two adopted children chat with me about how much t.v. is too much. Another lesbian couple I know discusses the merits of various strollers with my husband. A gay couple who visits sometimes for holidays stay long after everyone else has gone to do every last dish and talk about favorite books. A widowed gay man helps his teenage son pack for college. I see example after example of no real difference between the day-to-day concerns my gay and lesbians have and my own – aside from one biggie: fear and reality of discrimination on all fronts (financially, legally, in the workplace or in school, etc.). As a straight woman, I can only imagine the occasional terror that comes from knowing a custody battle from an angry relative could cost you your child, the frustration over having to pay higher taxes each year, the isolation of having to hide your home life from your colleagues at work, the sheer fear of not being able to hold hands with your partner while walking down the street just in case anyone watching would want to inflict violence on you for a simple act of affection.

Instead of guarding straight marriages against gay and lesbian unions, we should do the opposite: embrace and seek to protect – by becoming a more inclusive, tolerant, and connected community – all kinds of committed relationships between two people. By doing so, we help to create a safer and more loving environment for children, one that values love and deep commitment over dogma and fast retreat from what’s different. By doing so, we also strengthen families: giving gay and lesbian parents the rights they absolutely deserve to care fully for their children and not live with the sometimes debilitating threat of losing their children based on their sexual orientation. And by doing so, we give those of us married more opportunities to see up-close a higher number of committed relationships that work and learn from them more ways to make our own marriages work – a godsend in this time of half of all straight marriages ending in divorce. It’s not time to protect straight marriage; it’s time to protect gay, lesbian, and straight committed unions in order to weave together a stronger society that puts families – of all stripes and spots – first.

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