

“To Love and to Cherish, For Better or For Worse”
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
October 3, 2004
The Rev. Judy Welles©

Invitation to Worship
Christopher Lemelin, Worship Associate

Three years, three months, three weeks, and three days ago, **I became real.** When I calculated that time period, I knew exactly what I would say this morning – the magic in those numbers was unavoidable.

Three years, three months, three weeks, and three days ago, I became **real.**

You’re probably asking, “What do you mean, REAL? What is REAL?”

In the children’s story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Rabbit asks this same question of the Skin Horse, the wisest of the nursery’s inhabitants, who was “so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and... the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces.” Only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand nursery magic, that strange and wonderful, free and careless logic of pure hearts.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When someone loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. By the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Three years, three months, three weeks, and three days ago, **I** became real. That was the day that Mike and I committed our lives to each other; that was the day I knew someone REALLY loved me, and not just to play with; that was the day I knew nothing else mattered except REAL LOVE.

Come, let us worship together.

Readings

Letters to the Editors of *Newsweek*
in response to the July 7, 2003 issue "Is Gay Marriage Next?"

"I have been married to the same man for 30 years and it is because I hold marriage sacred that I wish to see it available to gay people. The right to stand up in public and make binding promises to one's beloved is absolutely core to equality."

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"...I am a member of a traditional nuclear family: a heterosexual male with a wife, two kids and dog and a four-door sedan. Conservatives approve of me today, but 30 years ago, they would have cast me out in the cold along with the gays, because my wife and I do not share the same skin color. Perhaps someday social conservatives will realize that they don't need to destroy other people's families in order to protect their own."

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"Congratulations on your July 7 cover story, "Is Gay Marriage Next?" We shudder to think of the venom-filled letters you will get, and are dismayed that our fellow Christians use their religion to justify hate and judgmental attitudes. We sit in the pews, too, and are the proud parents of a committed lesbian daughter and daughter-in-law, eagerly awaiting the birth of their first child so they can begin their family. There are millions of parents like us who love their gay and lesbian children and celebrate that they have found people to spend their lives with. Isn't this every parent's dream?"

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"My partner of 20 years and I have attended each of my brother's three weddings. During each one, he has openly wished that the sanctity of marriage that he enjoys could extend to us, while we have hoped that our understanding of the principles of marriage would finally be learned by him."

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Second Reading An Open Letter to President Bush

February 24, 2004

Dear Mr. President,

This morning you felt compelled to introduce an amendment to the Constitution of the United States defining marriage as existing only between one man and one woman.

You say that this will create "clarity." I would like you to share this clarity with my first grade daughter on her school playground, when the children, imitating their role models as they always do, will take up the issue. Because I dread those conversations with every fiber of my being.

Challenged by another child, my daughter will declare forthrightly that of course her two moms are married. After all, we have wedding photos in our home, as any

couple does. They show her two moms, fifteen years ago, in front of our Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Smiling, with many of our friends and family members around us.

You see, we have not yet discussed with this seven year old, precocious as she is, the distinction between civil and religious marriage. She knows only that we are her parents, the only ones she's known. She knows that we got married in our church, as her aunts and uncles did, and that our neighborhood and church, her school and social circle, involve a significant number of kids with two moms and a few with two dads...

Of course she knows that there are people who say that two men or two women cannot be married. She knows that, not very long ago, some people said that no one could marry someone of a different race, but now of course we no longer believe that. But I haven't yet been able to break it to her that some people want to change our Constitution to say that our family isn't part of "We the people.". I just haven't found a way to fit it in between soccer and karate and church.

Tonight I will sit her down, after we've done her homework, and have the conversation that I hoped I could avoid. I will tell her that you, the President of the United States, have decided that only a man and a woman can be married, and that you want to make that part of our Constitution... I will tell her that I don't believe this change in the Constitution will happen, not enough people will vote for it. But it does mean that people may say very mean things to her at school about our family. She will be afraid. I will project confidence and good humor, but I will be afraid, too.

I do not want to teach my daughter that the President of the United States does not include our family in the people he serves and protects. I do not want to say to her that the very flag she loves will be waved by people who believe that it does not belong to our family.

Please, Mr. Bush, tell me how I should conduct myself "without bitterness or anger" at this time, as you instructed me today. Come over to my house tonight: you look at my daughter's eyes as they absorb the fact that you, the first President she has ever known, think she can no longer be included in the very Constitution of this land. You tell me how to "conduct this difficult debate in a matter worthy of our country." Because I am at a loss.

Sincerely
The Rev. Meg A. Riley
Unitarian Universalist Association
Washington, DC¹

Sermon "To Love and to Cherish, For Better or For Worse"

Perhaps you've heard that on Thursday the House of Representatives emphatically rejected the federal Marriage Amendment. I wasn't too worried. I don't think this amendment has a snowball's chance in Heck of *ever* passing, even if it somehow manages to get through Congress. If we couldn't pass the Equal Rights

¹ "An Open Letter to President Bush," <http://www.uua.org/news/2004/040308.html>

Amendment, they will never get this bigoted and unfair amendment through the states. Even legislators who oppose gay marriage don't think it's a good idea to fiddle with the Constitution this way.

And I just learned this morning that legislation has been proposed in Spain which would make it legal for gays to marry and adopt children. Apparently it has a good chance of passing. This would make Spain the third country to legalize gay marriage.

But this issue is really less about legality and more about feelings, and the feelings cut very deep. The issues here are fear, bigotry, civil rights, prejudice, fear, love, hatred and fear. What we hear most when we pay attention to the rhetoric against marriage for same-gender couples is that "the institution of marriage must be protected." And I've always wondered, "Protected from what? What's the problem if two men or two women want to get married and enjoy the same civil and legal rights as heterosexual couples? Where's the harm in that?" It has never made sense to me.

This summer I decided to find out, and I sent a request to a woman I met on the Internet through a gardening forum. Although we're not supposed to discuss politics or religion on this forum, it was easy for me to tell that she was the polar opposite of me in both areas. But she was also articulate, funny, and kind, and I thought we might actually have a chance at an electronic *conversation* about the issue of gay marriage. I asked her to explain to me what the problem is, from her standpoint as a traditional Christian. And I promised her that I would not try to change her mind. That seemed only fair, since I was absolutely sure that there was no way on earth that *she* would change *mine*.

So she sent me a bunch of references, and I dutifully read them all, tightly clenching my teeth the whole time. It's amazing what absolute lies are told in defense of prejudice! And I quickly realized that there was no way I could even respond to my garden forum friend; there was nothing I could say with any integrity that she would not experience as insulting. There was nowhere to go with her on this topic except directly into a fight, and I didn't want to do that.

But I haven't been able to let go of it either — to let go of the injustice of it all, and to let go of how upset I am about it. I thought that preaching a sermon might force me to think things through clearly and articulate what I believe the problems are. Maybe I can help you to understand where your more traditional friends or acquaintances are coming from, should the topic come up for you.

As I said, a lot of the arguments put forth against the right of same-gender couples to marry have to do with fear. Fear of losing something, fear of having something taken away, fear of being forced into something. This is really important to remember: hatred and bigotry are often masks for the deeper, underlying feeling of fear. In this case, it's really a fear of change. Yet the reality of life, perhaps the only true thing we can say about life is that everything changes. Everything. Change is inevitable. And for some people, that in itself is very frightening.

One of the common arguments against gay marriage is that gays already have the same rights as everyone else, and there is a particular "gay agenda" which is asking

for special rights and privileges. Start with gay marriage, and the next thing you know we'll have a resurgence of polygamy, the end of free speech, the destruction of the family, no separation between church and state, the breakdown of the rule of law, anarchy, the demise of society as we know it. Some people actually believe this.

But let's start with the first question. Do gays already have the same rights as everyone else? In one article published by "Focus on the Family," I was stunned to read this sentence: "In fact, people who practice homosexuality have always been viewed equally under the law."

Here's a story about how equal it is to be gay: About a year and a half ago, the Rev. Bob Wheatley, a gay Unitarian Universalist minister, had a massive heart attack at the age of 83 and was taken to Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was pronounced dead on arrival. His life partner of fifty-two years, Kenneth, was with him in the ambulance.

"Who are you?," the hospital demanded when Kenneth presented himself. "I'm his life partner," Kenneth said. "You have no status," they told him. "We need the name of a relative to identify him and give us directions for what to do with his body."

"I've been with him for 52 years," Kenneth replied. "He has no living relatives." "Prove it," the hospital staffer responded. "He wanted to be cremated," Kenneth said.

"You have no power to authorize his cremation. You may be wanting to cover up evidence about his death. We'll put his body in the morgue until we get some reliable direction."

There was not a lot of help to be found. Bob had never given Kenneth power of attorney, made out a medical proxy, or any other legal document. His will was inadequate to express his request for cremation. Kenneth called a crematorium which said they couldn't pick up the body until it was released by the hospital. The hospital would not release the body. Every day Kenneth went to the hospital or phoned. No, they would not release Bob's body. This went on day after day for over a week until the hospital gave in. They didn't want the body there any more and they were willing to bend the rules.²

For the \$40 that it costs to buy a marriage license in Cumberland County, heterosexual couples receive 1,049 federal protections, rights, and responsibilities that are denied to gay couples. Some of these are: making life-saving or life-ending medical decisions for each other without power of attorney or medical directives; inheriting each other's estates without wills; co-habiting in public housing; the protections of divorce court when relationships end; obtaining legal U.S. residency if one spouse is not a citizen; tax-free dependent health benefits; jointly filing tax returns; receiving Social Security survivor benefits.

² Excerpted from testimony given before the Massachusetts Supreme Court, October 23, 2003 by the Rev. Eugene Navias, located on the UUA web site at http://www.uua.org/news/2004/freedomtomarry/ma_031023.html

I might just point out that some – only some – of these “privileges” that gays are denied can, in fact, be arranged through drawing up expensive and complicated legal documents. That is, if the couple are resourceful, educated, and financially secure. But marriage inequality falls particularly hard on those living on the margins: the poor, less educated, immigrants, the elderly, the ill, and those otherwise most vulnerable. So this becomes not only a gay rights issue; it’s also a matter of blatant classism.

One of the frequent arguments about how gay marriage will destroy the family states that the children will be damaged. Another article found on the Focus on the Family web site makes the disingenuous argument that:

“It took a generation for inner-city families to fall apart after the government began issuing welfare checks to unwed mothers. Likewise, creating counterfeit marriage will damage the real thing and put more children at risk.”

“Indeed, there is overwhelming scientific evidence that boys and girls not raised by both of their biological parents are much more likely to suffer abuse, perform poorly in school, abuse drugs and alcohol and wind up in trouble with the law.

“Only a callous, self-absorbed culture would create legal incentives to engage in immoral, destructive behavior with children as guinea pigs. America must be better than that.”³

What this author is saying is that children who are raised in any family constellation other than their two biological parents (one male and one female) are statistically *much* more likely to be damaged. (I found this particularly curious coming from the garden forum friend, who is herself a divorced single mother of eight children. How could she possibly believe this?) This premise disregards that those inner-city families which are falling apart are suffering under poverty, racism, violence, poor educational and health resources, and a host of other social disadvantages that threaten their future. The constellation of their family probably has less to do with their potential to become fully functional adults than economics does.

Okay, they say that the family is threatened. Let’s talk for a minute about real families whose parents are both of the same gender. I want to tell you about a family I know. Take a look at your Order of Service, which shows the cover of *Newsweek* magazine about a year ago. The man on the left, Dominic Pisciotta, is almost family to me, as he is the cousin of my new son-in-law, Frank. I’ve met this couple several times. The other man’s name is Andy Berg; they live in Manhattan.

They are resourceful, financially comfortable, and well-connected – and of course, like many other issues having to do with life as a gay couple, this admittedly makes things somewhat easier for them. A year or so after their civil union ceremony in Vermont, they found a woman who was willing to be a surrogate mother, and she became pregnant with their children, twins Olivia and Spencer. Dom is the children’s

³ “Homosexual Marriage Arrives in U.S.,” Focus on the Family web site, May 17, 2004, found at <http://www.family.org/cforum/feature/a0032053.cfm>

biological father. The babies were born a year ago last spring. Though I've never seen them, I feel like I know Spencer and Livvie because I'm fortunate to be on the distribution list for baby pictures taken by the Daddies, and my daughter Katy and her husband Frank do a lot of babysitting for these twins.

I sent Andy and Dom a brief message a few days ago telling them I was doing this service and asking for any thoughts they had about being gay parents, and this was Andy's reply:

"What can I say about being a same sex parent? My life is about as "alternative" as any other parent. I get up at 7 a.m. every day, even if I don't want to. I covet the phone number of my babysitter in an attempt to keep anyone else from stealing her on a Saturday night. My heart aches as I leave for the office every morning as one, or the other, of my children comes running to the door with alligator tears yelling "daddy!" "daddy!" I think about my kids all day long and share stories about them with my colleagues. ...I'm in awe of the idea that everything in the world is new to them, and I dread the day they'll ask me a question that I can't really answer. I love to squeeze them and kiss them and carry them around on my shoulders, or cuddle them in my arms. The sound of their giggles and screams make me melt.

"Has it been hard to be a same sex parent? Not really. But it has made it clear that our society doesn't value fathers enough. When I'm out with the kids, someone inevitably says that I have a lucky wife, or that I must be giving her a break. They constantly marvel at my ease with the twins and say that their own husband would never be able to go shopping with the kids or take the kids to a park by himself or feed the kids with such confidence...

"Am I worried that Spencer and Olivia don't have a mother figure? No. They have two amazing grandmothers, lots of aunts, and a whole slew of heterosexual mommies who have become my friends, confidants, and support system over the last year and half. Our babysitter is a woman and most of our neighbors are women. There is no shortage of females in our lives. Although I do think that poor Olivia – the only girl in a house filled with three boys – will most likely be falling into the toilet more often than she should be.

"Our kids have enriched our lives and our relationship with one another. They've made our family complete. They've altered our social life, totally redefined the idea of a beach vacation, and reminded us that it's the little things in life that are so important. Being a parent is the best thing I've ever done. And I think that the fact that our children have two dads will only enrich their lives and hopefully give them a more well-rounded view of the world."⁴

This is new territory in American culture. We don't have a lot of data yet on children who were raised in households with parents of the same gender. It's all anecdotal at this point, and there aren't even that many anecdotes. Last year at General Assembly I ran into Karl, whom I had known as a pre-teen at the Oakland U.U. church when I was in seminary, an active and involved kid who was being raised by his

⁴ Andy Berg, personal communication

mother and her partner. Karl is now in his mid-twenties, a college graduate living in L.A. and working in the film industry. He's articulate, committed to his Unitarian Universalist faith, heterosexual, opinionated... he seems pretty normal to me!

This matter of the potential damage that might occur to children raised with same-sex parents strikes me as misguided. We need to be concerned about the children being raised by people who don't even like them, or who don't like each other. We need to be concerned about children raised in households where there is violence, substance abuse, neglect, malnutrition. That's where the threat to the future lies – not with children who are raised in security by parents and extended families who love them and pay attention to them. The number and gender of their parents is not nearly as relevant as many other factors.

And furthermore, think about how well-rounded these children will be who are raised in an environment of such diversity. Just as with children in mixed-race families and communities, what they will learn by experience and observation is that there are many ways to be a family; that people can be utterly “normal” even if they don't fit society's narrow mold. What better way for them to learn to appreciate the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

President Bush and others who support the Marriage Amendment say that we have to protect the hallowed institution of marriage, which has existed for thousands of years and is now suddenly under threat. That argument doesn't hold any water either, when you realize that the way we understand marriage is less than 200 years old, and if you figure in the repeal of the miscegenation laws (which prevented inter-racial marriages), then marriage as we know it has only existed since 1967. The institution of marriage has been constantly changing and evolving, just like other human institutions.

Marriages were originally undertaken as a peaceful way to transfer property, consolidate power, and assure inheritance. Love had nothing to do with it. Marriage was a business arrangement, and the bride was a commodity, often with no more legal rights than a child or a slave. Polygamy was common until the Catholic Church decided to support monogamy for its own reasons, probably to cut down on promiscuity and to control procreation. It wasn't until the Council of Trent in 1563 that the Church decreed that a marriage must take place in the presence of a priest and two witnesses.

And therein lies one of the current misunderstandings in the controversy over gay marriage. People don't make a distinction between civil marriage and religious marriage. But there is a distinction, and it's an important one. Civil marriage is the legal contract that two people enter into which gives them the rights, privileges and responsibilities I mentioned earlier. The marriage license is the legal document that confirms a civil marriage. Religious marriage is the ritual whereby a community blesses a couple who are joining their lives by making promises to each other in public. With language and ritual specific to the faith community, the union is acknowledged and celebrated.

In this country, it's common for a minister to sign the marriage license, to certify that this couple is legally married. Therein lies some of the confusion. So it's important

to remember two things: other people than ministers can conduct legal marriages (such as Justices of the Peace) *and* ministers can conduct marriages that aren't legal. That's what I did for Christopher and Michael three years, three months, three weeks and three days ago. That's what I've done and Duane has done for several other couples, both in California and here in Pennsylvania, and we will continue to perform these religious marriages for same-sex couples regardless of the fact they're not legal. They aren't *illegal*, they're just *not* legal. Some of my Unitarian Universalist colleagues will no longer sign marriage licenses until the legal right to marry is available to all couples, regardless of gender. They will conduct a religious ceremony with all the bells and whistles, but the couple will have to find someone else to sign the license.

Because of the confusion between civil and religious marriage, one of the arguments that traditionalist conservatives are making against gay marriage is that if it's allowed, clergy will be forced – against their religious beliefs, against their will – *forced* to conduct marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples. This is absolutely absurd nonsense. The state can never force clergy to perform sacraments that are outside of their religious system or tradition. (It can't force clergy to perform any sacrament at all, in fact. This is none of the state's business.) But unfortunately this argument against gay marriage is out there, and I'm sure some people believe it.

People believe what they want to believe, often regardless of the truth or the facts. The issue of gay marriage is an emotional one, and while there are factual, historical and legal arguments in favor of it (and possibly against it, though the ones I've seen are pretty weak), ultimately this matter will be decided not on facts, but on public opinion, on emotion, on a collective understanding of what is right.

My gardening forum friend wrote to me “we do not have the right to do what is wrong. ...The freedom we enjoy does not mean we are free to do anything we wish without consequence. It means we are free to do what is right.”

Actually, I agree with her. We do not have the right to do what is wrong, and it's *wrong* to withhold rights from some citizens which are freely given to others. It's *wrong* to blame society's failures on gay parents (or on single mothers, for that matter.) It's *wrong* to shame people about who they authentically are, and force them to keep secrets or tell lies about such an important aspect of their lives. It's *wrong* to deny to people the right to pledge their futures together, to raise a family together, to live publicly with the same commitments and the same social acceptance that the rest of us enjoy without even thinking about it. It's *wrong* to say that some people can love each other, and other people can't.

At the end of her e-mail messages, my gardening forum friend uses the verses from First Corinthians that appear as the epigram at the top of your order of service. “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” This sermon is done in solidarity and in love.

Let the people say Amen.

Closing Words “Vows,” from *An Epithalamion*, by Tony Kushner

Conjunction, assemblage, congress, union,
Life isn't meant to be lived alone,
A life apart is a desperate fiction,
Life is an intermediate business:

A field of light bordered by love,
A sea of desire stretched between shores.

Marriage is the strength of union,
Marriage is the harmonic blend,
Marriage is the elegant dialectic of counterpoint,
Marriage is the faultless, fragile, logic of ecology:

A reasonable system of give and take,
Unfolding through cyclical and linear time.

A wedding is a conjoining of systems in which
neither loses its single splendor and both are completely
transformed; as, for example:

The dawn is the Wedding of the Night and the Day,
And is neither, and both,
And is, in itself, the most beautiful time:
Abundant, artless beauty,
Free and careless magnificence.