

## ***THE TEST IS IN THE EYES***

**By Michael Ventura**

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The state of Vermont is not exactly a hotbed of radicalism -- at least not since 1777, when, declaring independence from England, it was among the earliest governments to abolish slavery and grant universal male suffrage. (Giving the vote to men who didn't own property was feared by many in those days to portend chaos.) According to my almanac, Vermont's entire population is not much larger than Austin's: 599,978; 98.6% are white; and nearly all are Christian. Its largest city, Burlington, numbers only 39,000 souls (Waco outnumbers it by about 130,000). The next largest, Rutland, has only 13,000. It wasn't until 1982 that the state repealed the "blue laws" which forbade stores to open on Sundays. You get the idea. A quiet, rural, law-abiding place, not given to generating scary headlines. Yet Vermont is throwing a scare into lots of folks these days, because its Senate and House have passed, and its governor has said he will sign, a "civil unions" law that gives gay couples many (though not all) of the rights of marriage. If the governor doesn't chicken out, the union of gays will gain limited but significant legal recognition -- not so legal that a Vermont civil union has to be recognized by other states, but legal enough for gay union to obtain a foothold in American law.

California, a state that ignites scare headlines almost daily, has responded to the possibility of legal gay unions by recently voting "yes" on a plebiscite proposition defining marriage as the union between a man and a woman. (Other states plan similar legal reassurances.) The law was intended as a bulwark against any future legalization of same-sex union in the state, and its rallying cries were "Save Marriage!" and "Protect Marriage"! Well ... when a state government has to proclaim, in the most shrill terms, "Hey! *A marriage is about a man and a woman!*," then it's clear that many are less and less certain of that assertion. For you may measure social confusion by how loudly large numbers of people feel compelled to insist upon what used to seem obvious.

The question is: Those who insist so loudly that marriage must be strictly heterosexual, are they talking to others or talking to themselves? More accurately: Are they talking to others *in order to* talk to themselves? Is their hold upon their sexual identity, and upon the security of their marriages, so fragile that they can't feel secure unless they are reassured not only that a majority agrees with them, but that a minority will not be allowed (in practice, where it counts) to disagree? Since such questions can't be answered by sound bites, the public discourse ignores them, but these are the real questions that underlie the debate and make the issues so hot. One thing is clear: A sizable number of heterosexuals feel threatened by the concept of gay marriage.

Which is queer. Because marriage is not an abstraction. There's "the institution of marriage" and there's *your* marriage, and the marriages of your parents, friends, kids, and neighbors -- living, breathing, difficult, joyful, struggling, paradoxical relationships, with jobs and bills and TVs and PCs and cars and toys, sex or the lack of it, illnesses and vacations, arguments and passions, defeat and victory, boredom and excitement, loyalty and betrayal, and souls that exchange qualities such that after years it can be hard to know where one ends and the other begins ... or souls that fail this exchange, and live in daily dull bitter resignation of that failure. Marriage, *your* marriage, is the constant and

inescapable realization of what can be shared and what can never be shared ... of how little and how much can be known of each other ... it is recognizing that some part of you will always be a stranger to your loved one, and some part of your loved one will always be a stranger to you, and living with that (or failing to) ... it is watching someone you love change, while you are also changing, and trying to reach each other across the inevitability of your changes. A marriage is never final, never resolved, for every year brings elements that didn't have to be dealt with the year before. Marriage is the bare stage upon which is enacted, without script or props or prompters, this truth: Living with ourselves is the medium through which we live with each other.

So my question is: If you are heterosexual, how can the legal union or marriage of a gay couple have an impact on *your* marriage? How can it change anything between you and your spouse? The sacredness of your marriage is in your hands; how can that sanctity be changed or diminished by any other two people getting together? If *your* marriage is threatened by the very concept of "a gay marriage," what's that say about your marriage? If, when you look into your loved one's eyes, you're still troubled by somebody's gay union; if, in that look, you feel that your marriage is somehow less protected because gay people are marrying -- how can a law help you?

In a condition of chaos one is reduced to the obvious. These questions are painfully obvious, but they are also the whole point. If your (heterosexual) marriage can be threatened by anyone else's (gay) marriage, then you're living in a state of fear and you're married not to your spouse but to your fear. Your opposition to gay marriage is simply an admission of this. And the angrier you get, the more naked is your admission. Your anger has stripped you, you're walking around naked and exposed, and somewhere within you know this, and you are tempted to hate anyone else who knows it. People find hate wonderful because it allows you to forget yourself and forget the humanity of anyone else. In hate there are no more burdens. We no longer feel fear because we've become our fear, and we are finally free of responsibility.

Well ... we're all scared. That, too, is a given in a condition of chaos. And the law of chaos is: When you scream for order, the screaming only increases the chaos.

The only antidote is a long, level look into each other's eyes -- an act of courage that becomes harder and harder, even (especially) between intimates.

For tens of thousands of years marriage was necessary for survival. It took a large family to do all the work that was necessary to feed and clothe themselves and their community. People rarely went more than a day's walk from where they were born, so choices were limited and the vast majority of marriages, in all cultures, were arranged. Romantic love was not a factor. The elders determined the law, while the youth had no rights and did what they were told, because there was no survival outside the community. A marriage was a unit of production within a community. People stayed together not out of love but because there was no where else to be. Love grew in those circumstances -- because we want so desperately to love and be loved -- but every marriage, every family, was needed for the survival of the community, and *that* was why the community celebrated each new union. In every village and tribe, nobody was free but nobody was isolated.

But in a technological society an individual can survive alone, so the usual motivation for union is romantic love. But romantic love is volatile, is revelatory, is an agent of change, and therefore people in the grip of romantic love are in the grip of change. Marriage is conceived of as permanent, but marriage motivated primarily by romantic love cannot help but change and change and change. Thus, for many, the art of

staying married becomes, sadly, the art of ignoring the changes in each other -- so it becomes an art of unknowing. Success becomes measured by the extent to which the stranger in one's spouse can be tolerated or worked around or combated or subdued. Then, to the extent that you're afraid of the strangeness in your spouse, you're afraid of all strangers and all strangeness. The idea that gays and lesbians can be happy when you're not becomes intolerable, for then strangeness has won, and you cannot help but feel that your self-perceived and self-condemned inadequacies are part of its victory.

And speaking of strangeness, a strange thing has happened in France that has gone pretty much unnoticed here. After much controversy, France created a legal entity called a "*pacte civil de solidarité*," a civil-solidarity pact enabling gays to have many (though not all) of the privileges of marriage. It's like traditional marriage, but not quite. It's easier to get into, easier to dissolve, and the legal obligations aren't as extensive and deep. But dig this: Many entering into these civil solidarity pacts are heterosexual couples, especially young heterosexuals -- straights who want to deepen their commitment to each other without all the baggage of a traditional marriage. Straights who, in effect, want the freedoms of gays.

In Vermont, too, many straight couples have voiced their intention of taking advantage of the new civil-union law. So, as always with minority struggles, the gay fight for freedom has enlarged the options of everyone. But, whether in civil union or traditional marriage, at the end of the day the test will be the same: Have you looked deeply into your partner's eyes? If not, why not?

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