

GENDER FLEXIBILITY

By Michael Ventura

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An unfair headline: “Clinton Seesaws On Question of Gay Morality” [*The New York Times*, March 15, p.25]. It should have read “Clinton and Obama Seesaw.” Asked if homosexuality is immoral, Hilary Clinton made the remarkable statement that the issue was “for others to conclude.” Later, she put out a press release “saying she did not think being gay was immoral.” Clinton wants no sound-bites for future attack ads. Nor does Barack Obama, who “was asked the same question three times and sidestepped the issue.” Following suit, Obama then put out a release echoing Clinton’s. Both their statements are in the negative: not “homosexuality is moral,” just that it is not immoral.

When Clinton and Obama were born no one would have dreamed of asking presidential candidates such a question -- in most of America, homosexuality was against the law. Now, no matter how lamely presidential candidates fudge and no matter how loudly religious fundamentalists shriek, the genie (and a lovely genie I think it is) has leapt from the bottle. What began as a primarily American issue is now being faced, one way or another, the world over. France is supposedly sophisticated, but its high court voided its first gay marriage [*The New York Times*, March 14, p.13]. However, Italy’s cabinet “approved rights for gay and unwed couples” [*The New York Times*, Feb. 23, p.15]; and Italy’s law “doesn’t go as far as already-enacted laws in the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain” [*The Week*, Feb. 23, p.15]. Canada’s prime minister tried to strike down that country’s law allowing same-sex marriage, but the Canadian Parliament defeated his proposal by a hefty majority [*The New York Times*, Dec. 7, 2006, p.5]. Same-sex marriages have also been approved by the Parliament of South Africa [*The New York Times*, Nov. 15, 2006, p.12].

The list goes on: “The highest legal body in Conservative Judaism, the centrist movement of worldwide Jewry, voted... to allow the ordination of gay rabbis and the celebration of same-sex commitment ceremonies” [*The New York Times*, Dec. 7, 2006, p.26]. “New Jersey Legislature Votes to Allow Same-Sex Unions. [However, New Jersey] stopped short of using the word ‘marriage’ [*The Washington Post*, Dec. 15, 2006, p.0.3].” The League of American Families opposed New Jersey’s bill, “saying marriage should be between a man and a woman.” But once you need to insist that marriage “should be” between a man and a woman, the very fact that you’re arguing means you’ve lost the argument. Until recently the traditional definition of marriage was taken for granted. Now it’s only the *traditional* definition.

This is but the beginning. A few decades down the road, when new generations in many countries take gay marriage for granted, the ground-rules of human relationship will have changed irrevocably, enabling people to live out a far wider spectrum of their psyches than has yet been possible.

Even the American military is softening on the issue of gays. *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, p.2: Retired Army General John Salikashvili, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, “I now believe that if gay men and lesbians served openly in the military, they would not undermine the efficacy of the armed forces.” A Zogby poll says 73% of the military are “comfortable” with gays, but a Military Times poll shows that – comfortable or not – so far only 30% want gays to serve openly. Some, in any case,

are beginning to see that our strained military cannot afford the loss of “nearly 11,000 [who] have been discharged under the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy... including about 750 personnel in jobs critical to the war on terrorism, like translators.” (Who is crazy enough to care that the person who translates a crucial piece of intelligence is gay?)

Gender flexibility has shown up on several fronts lately. The U.S. Census Bureau is experimenting with simplified forms for its 2010 survey. As reported in *The Wall Street Journal* [Feb. 23, p.B1], “Question 3 asks gender, with the admonition to ‘Mark ONE Box’ -- male or female. Whether the Census Bureau included that instruction or left it out [of its] 2005 field test, the results were the same. Either way, 0.005% of those asked -- that would mean 150,000 in a population of 300 million -- still checked both.” As I would. I’m not gay or bi, but I’m way too complicated to be all one thing or another when it comes to anything important -- male or female, good or bad, old or young, present but perhaps not accounted for. As the poet Cid Corman put it: “*Don’t tell me/ who I am./ Let me guess.*”

“All but three states [Tennessee, Ohio, and Idaho] now allow people who have had a sex change to get a new birth certificate [indicating change of gender]. New York City has done so since 1971 [*The Washington Post*, Nov. 8, 2006, p.9].” Recently the city of New York almost went a step further -- a step that may seem radical now but will be commonplace 10 or 20 years from now. *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2006, p.9: “The city wants to make it easier for transgender New Yorkers to switch the sex listed on birth certificates without undergoing sex-change surgery, putting the city at the forefront of efforts to redefine sexual identity... People born in the city would be able to change the documented sex on their birth certificates by providing affidavits from a doctor and a mental health professional... Applicants would have to have changed their names and shown that they had lived in their adopted gender for at least two years, but there would be no specific medical requirements.”

Wow. Yet that feels so right -- and our great androgynous poet, Walt Whitman, would have loved it. You are who you feel you are. You are who you think you are. You are who you imagine yourself to be -- if (and only if) you live it out and walk your talk. Your body doesn’t define you. You define your body.

Is that really possible? I have no idea. Possible or not, it *is* the ultimate declaration of independence, taking the “pursuit of happiness” to the edge of the envelope, then tearing up the envelope and throwing it over your bare shoulder -- for luck.

That *Times* article went on: “The change would lead to many interesting questions: For example, would a man who becomes a woman be able to marry another man? (Probably)... Would a woman who becomes a man be able to fight in combat, or play in the National Football League? (These questions have yet to be explored.)” They’ll be explored, I’m sure -- but not yet. New York chickened out. On December 5, 2006, the city’s official Web site reported that the proposal was rejected because it “would have broader societal ramifications than anticipated.” No kidding. But the concept is in the air. When a concept is in the air, everybody inhales it, like it or not. New York’s temporarily rejected proposal is the wave of the future.

For example: They used to be called tomboys or sissies but now “children as young as 5 who display predispositions to dress [and behave] like the opposite sex are being supported by a growing number of parents, educators, and mental health professionals...

Massachusetts, Minnesota, California, and the District of Columbia have laws protecting the rights of transgender students [*The New York Times*, Dec. 2, 2006, p.1].”

I had a sex-change operation. It was called birth. Sometime in Mama’s womb I went from being many things to being a physically defined male. But my psyche hasn’t quite gone along with that. It’s reserved the right to feel womanly, sensually, when it feels like it. That this impulse goes solely towards women is defined in this culture as “heterosexual” -- but is it?

In 1953, James Baldwin, a gay African-American, wrote the most telling sentence of the 20th Century: “The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” He was right; the primacy of white power was soon to end. Now marriage and gender are no longer defined strictly by heterosexuals. Heterosexuals will not cease to be the majority; but -- an enormous sea-change in human history! -- they have ceased to be the sole “official” definers of sexuality. Eventually this will expand our relationships in ways we can not imagine. We’ve embarked, as a species, upon unmapped spectrums of sex. Baldwin would be pleased that half a century later his sentence could be refashioned to read: “The world is heterosexual no longer, and it will never be heterosexual again.”

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