

# EQUALITY KNOCKS

## It's Time to Stretch!

A reflection delivered August 1, 2004  
at the Unitarian Society of Hartford  
by John K. Currie

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Love Makes a Family

This morning I want to look with you at a topic  
that has touched my life. It is at the center of  
national debate. This topic appeared recently in  
the Beetle Bailey comic strip. It will  
be highlighted on a fall episode of the  
*Simpsons* TV show.

What is this topic? Gay persons are  
moving from being *invisible* to being *visible*—in  
their personal lives and in our institutions.

I grew up in a conservative blue-collar family in suburban Detroit. My father was a union auto-worker at the River Rouge Factory. That was large scale industry. Iron ore came in on the Great Lake freighters. Finished Ford cars rolled off the assembly line.

I was heavily involved in music, sports and the large local Baptist church. Billy Graham was considered a religious liberal.

There were two things I believed about gay persons. First, they were *somewhere else*. They were in Provincetown or San Francisco or New York City or Key West. They were not in my world.

Second, I knew the Heterosexual Family Myth. This myth is very powerful. It tells us that there is only *one* way to be really happy – that is to partner with someone of the opposite sex, get married and raise children. The myth has a *corollary*. It tells us that gay persons *do not* have the possibility of real happiness. This myth has real power. Heterosexual family life has brought happiness to many. This myth, however, is not true for everyone. I didn't know it then, but I know it now.

### Something to tell you

Experience is often the best teacher. Maybe not the easiest teacher, but the best. I learned by experience that gay persons are not somewhere else. They are everywhere and with us all. I married at age 21. My wife was an educator. I attended law school. Our son Peter was born when I was 27.

Let me take you to the time when Peter was in second grade. Peter was visiting at a friend's house in West Hartford. I was with my wife at the dinner table. She said, "I have something to tell you."

She proceeded to come out as a lesbian. She was deeply in love with a woman. We divorced. We shared custody of Peter. My ex-wife and her partner have been good nurturers for Peter.

Our readings today include a poem by New Yorker Jan Clausen. Her poem describes a woman who is attracted to women—she has just spent a sexually exciting evening on the dance floor with women. Yet she is living with a man. "I lie down

in bed / beside the dark shape of a man / thinking of women."<sup>1</sup> Denial and game playing abound when you hide your sexual orientation. Deception in relationships about sexual orientation is a recipe for pain and disaster.

Now I fast forward to Peter Currie at age 19. While I was working at my computer one evening, the AOL flag went up. I clicked open my email. Peter was a visiting student at Harvard University that semester. The email started, "I have something to tell you."

Peter had fallen in love with his roommate. This email was his coming out to me as a gay man.

When you hear the phrase "I have something to tell you" I learned that you better be ready for big news. Gay persons are not somewhere else. They are with us at all levels of life.

The best evidence shows that sexual orientation is in place by an early age. We do not choose our sexual orientation. What we choose is whether to accept the orientation we have.

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**I learned gay persons are not somewhere else**

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For most of recorded history we thought all people were straight. We knew nothing of a gay orientation. This assumption is true of writers in the Hebrew Bible as well as St. Paul in the New Testament. St. Paul thought all persons were straight. He assumed that all homosexual activity was done by heterosexuals.<sup>2</sup> We know differently today.

### The Big Coming Out: Response Demanded

Our second reading today, from Exodus chapter three, tells an important coming-out story. I dare say it is one of the Top Ten stories from the Hebrew Bible.

Moses had recently fled Egypt for his life. The setting was at a mountain beyond the wilderness. His world was polytheistic. Each tribe had its own local gods—local gods of war, local gods of weather, local gods of fertility.

Moses saw a burning bush and heard a voice speaking. The voice told Moses, "Go confront Pharaoh. Go oppose Egypt's power." Moses asked, "Which god are you?" The reply was, "I AM WHAT I AM." This was the coming out of Jehovah—the god that would ultimately lead to a monotheistic Hebrew nation.

This was not just a coming out. It was a coming out that called for a *response*. Moses did respond. Moses went back to Egypt. There he liberated his Hebrew brothers and sisters.

We have heard a similar coming out disclosure from our gay friends. Gays have told us: WE ARE WHAT WE ARE. This disclosure is about elemental selfhood.<sup>3</sup> Non-gay people need to hear this disclosure. It calls for our response.

### **How can you respond?**

There are a number of organizations where you can become involved. One is Hartford PFLAG—Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. We meet monthly in Hartford for support, education and advocacy around sexual orientation issues.

Another area organization is True Colors. True Colors has a focus on gay youth and families. It annually holds the world's largest gay youth conference.

Stonewall Speakers Association was founded in response to a 1988 Connecticut gay bashing. Richard Reihl graduated at the top of his Cheshire High School class. He excelled in college and was a rising young executive at The Aetna. He was also a gay man. He was attacked at his Wethersfield home by two high school students from Hartford. They used duct tape to cover Richard's mouth and to bind his legs and hands. Then they brutally clubbed him to death with a fireplace log. One of these murderers was the star football quarterback at Hartford's South Catholic High School.

Stonewall Speakers tell their personal stories to high school students, college students and other venues around the state. Recently I was on a panel of speakers at Windsor Locks High School. In an unusual arrangement, there were parents and clergy also in attendance.

A gay college student had just told his story when a local minister called out, "You are a sinner. You are poisoning the minds of our children." The 19-year-old energetically responded, "God made me gay and I'm not going away." Students erupted with cheers for him.

### **Marriage Equality**

Today the most important step toward positive gay visibility is marriage equality for

same-sex couples. Gays in Connecticut are asking for the right to obtain marriage licenses. They rightfully wish to have available one of our primary institutions. This is not a religious issue. It is a civil rights issue.<sup>4</sup> No church will be compelled to marry gays.

There is strong, well-funded opposition to marriage equality for gays. Opponents have generated more heat than light. When you boil down their arguments, I think you will hear two points. First, they argue, marriage is *4,000 years old and we can't change it*. That assertion is patently false. Marriage as an institution has not been static. It has undergone dynamic changes. Secondly, they argue, *gays are not competent and stable enough to be married*. Not true. Such speakers have segregated themselves and do not know the many happy, stable gay couples.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most vocal and powerful opponents of marriage equality is a national organization named "Focus on the Family." James Dobson and his organization are highly homophobic. I have one simple suggestion for him. I saw it on a bumper sticker. Focus on your own *damn* family!

Marriage in the United States is first and foremost a civil institution.<sup>6</sup> Marriages are created and governed by state law. Marriage in Connecticut has been a civil institution since at least 1638.

Our legal system of marriage was imported from Europe. The philosophy behind our laws was best stated by Lord Blackstone in 1765: "In law husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person." A married woman was treated as an incompetent 10-year-old child. She could not own personal property; could not enter into contracts; could not bring a lawsuit in her own name; could not execute a will. Thankfully this system of marriage coverture has changed. Wives now have adult status in marriage.

Interracial marriages were banned for most of our country's history. In 1966 a Virginia Court cited the Bible and God's plan for the races in upholding the Virginia interracial marriage ban. In 1967 the United States Supreme Court struck down these interracial marriage bans.<sup>7</sup>

Restricting marriage to one race was a symbol of white supremacy. Restricting marriage to heterosexuals is a symbol of male supremacy. Look at who opposes marriage equality for gay couples. It is generally those who also oppose full equality for women.

I moved to Connecticut in 1980 and renovated an old Manchester house. I found wedged beneath the basement stairs a 1915 *Hartford Courant* newspaper. A front page article proclaimed that women were not competent to vote and that their doing so would signal the end of civilization! Today the very same thinking is used to oppose gay equality.

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Every couple will have a different story. My son Peter studied for three years at Oxford University in England. There he fell in love with his partner Philip. Philip accompanied Peter back to the States; however, they have had to spend thousands of dollars to legally keep Philip here. If Philip were to marry Britney Spears in Las Vegas, our federal government would automatically provide naturalization rights. Why shouldn't my son and his partner have the same naturalization rights?

Love Makes a Family is a coalition hard at work to bring marriage equality to Connecticut. Millions of children in this country have at least one parent who is lesbian or gay.<sup>8</sup> The psychiatric, pediatric and psychology academies have endorsed same-sex marriage as in the best interests of children.<sup>9</sup> Having the choice, having the freedom to marry, is also good for the adults who are same-sex partners.<sup>10</sup>

There are 20 known gospels from the early Christian era. One of the 16 gospels that did not make it into the Christian New Testament was the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Our third reading today from the thirteenth chapter of that gospel tells a carpenter's story about Joseph and his son Jesus. A rich man wanted a bed built for him. He sent the

expensive lumber to Joseph. When it arrived there was a major difficulty. One important board was too short. Joseph was beside himself. The child Jesus said "No problem" and solved the situation. He lined up the

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**We want to stretch the institution of marriage.**

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lumber, grabbed the short board and stretched it.

We may smile at the story, but that is exactly what needs to happen with the institution of civil marriage. We don't want to change heterosexual marriage. We want to stretch the marriage bed. We

want to stretch the institution of marriage so that gay couples can fit in as well.

Other solutions have been offered: civil unions, domestic partnerships and so on. None of these is marriage. None of these arrangements will ultimately force the federal government to overturn its DOMA. Anything but marriage creates a "separate but equal" category for gays. We know in our country's history that separate is seldom, if ever, equal.<sup>11</sup>

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**Winning a lawsuit is only the beginning.**

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What needs to happen? My recent trip to Mississippi and Alabama may point to an answer. I visited many civil rights sites, starting in Mississippi and working my way to Selma, Alabama. Here, in March, 1965 Martin Luther King, Jr. led black marchers. When they tried to cross over the Alabama River on the arching Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were attacked, bloodied and beaten back by Alabama state troopers.

A call went out for allies. Individuals from outside the South came to join the effort. One of these allies was James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister from Boston.

A second scheduled march was derailed by a federal judge's order. That day Rev. Reeb, walking with blacks after a rally, was clubbed to death by a white racist. Enormous TV coverage resulted. Four days later, President Johnson delivered a voting rights bill to Congress.

The civil rights movement in the South needed allies. A decade earlier, Rosa Parks' action of boarding a Montgomery bus and sitting down in one of the seats reserved for whites had helped to launch the civil rights movement. As we know, that was not enough. Supporters became allies, and the movement grew.

So it is with the march for marriage equality. Allies are needed. Hillary Goodridge became the lead plaintiff in the successful Massachusetts lawsuit for marriage equality.<sup>12</sup> Winning that lawsuit was not enough. To achieve widespread and enduring marriage equality we need non-gay allies to join our gay brothers and sisters.

National polling about marriage equality finds us divided into three groups. Roughly one-third supports marriage equality; one-third opposes it; and one-third is undecided. When I first thought about

marriage equality I was in that undecided middle group. Then I kept meeting good gay couples. I kept receiving good information on the topic. It moved me to become an ally. Have dinner with a happy gay couple. I predict you too will become an ally.

One of our famous American philosophers also happened to be a baseball catcher. Yogi Berra once observed, “The future ain’t what it used to be.” I saw this clearly demonstrated last year. I walked out of a West Hartford restaurant. At the curb a mother was holding the hand of her eight year-old daughter. The young girl said, “Mommy, when I grow up I’m going to marry my best friend Sally.” Her mother quickly replied, “Don’t be silly. You know that two women can’t marry each other.” Several months later the Massachusetts Supreme Court replied, “Oh yes they can!”

Lucy Ferriss is a local Connecticut author who recently published a short story entitled “Husband Material.” I can tell you today that gay men are *husband material* for each other. That lesbian women are *wife material* for each other. They are *marriage material* for each other.

The future ain’t what it used to be. Thank God. We can see the horizon. Gay couples are being married. Gay office workers. Gay teachers. Gay musicians. Gay physicians. Gay attorneys. Gay clergy. Gay parents. Gay cops. Gay factory workers. Gay students. Gays of all sorts—becoming more visible in their relationships. Asking us to stretch the institution of marriage—to open it up to them.

Marriage equality for same-sex couples is a true and worthy goal. This is so whether you are a theist—or a humanist—or somewhere in between.<sup>13</sup> A worthy goal, whether you look to the Buddha or to Jesus----to the Torah or to Emerson’s Over Soul----to the Goddess or to the universe----to your neighbor or to your inner self.

Marriage equality. How can we in this Unitarian Meeting House seek anything less? Our denominational principles call for us to promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

*Equality is knocking.* Marriage for same-sex couples arrived first in Holland. *Equality is knocking.* Marriage equality has followed in Belgium, Canada and Massachusetts. *Equality is knocking.* It is *time to stretch* our marriage laws in Connecticut. Will you be an ally?

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup>From poem by Jan Clausen entitled “After Touch.”

<sup>2</sup>Acknowledgement is given to Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. for thoughts expressed in his 1999 book entitled *The Heart Is a Little to the Left* and, in particular, in the chapter entitled “Homophobia: The Last ‘Respectable Prejudice.’”

<sup>3</sup>See p. 51 of Parker Palmer’s book, *Let Your Life Speak*. “One dwells with God by being faithful to one’s nature. One crosses God by trying to be something one is not.”

<sup>4</sup>See George Chauncey’s *Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today’s Debate Over Gay Equality* and Evan Wolfson’s *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People’s Right to Marry*. Both authors deal with civil rights history in the United States. Both books recognize the highly effective legal work of Attorney Mary Bonauto of GLAD in the Vermont and Massachusetts marriage equality cases. The United States Supreme Court ruled in 1987 that the freedom to marry was so important that it could not be taken away from convicted felons in prison. *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U.S. 78 (U.S. Supreme Court. 1987).

<sup>5</sup>See E. J. Graff’s 1999/2004 book entitled *What Is Marriage For? The Strange Social History of Our Most Intimate Institution*.

<sup>6</sup>See “A Chance and a Choice” by Rev. Peter J. Gomes (*The Boston Globe*, February 8, 2004). Rev. Gomes’ newspaper article is reproduced in the 2004 edition of Andrew Sullivan’s book *Same-Sex Marriage: Pro and Con*.

<sup>7</sup>*Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (Supreme Court of Virginia, 1966).

<sup>8</sup>See George Chauncey, p.105.

<sup>9</sup>See transcribed testimony from Informational Hearings before the Connecticut Judiciary Committee in Hartford on December 9, 2002 and December 16, 2002. See also George Chauncey, *Why Marriage?* pp. 132-133.

<sup>10</sup>Evan Wolfson, *Why Marriage Matters*, pp. 13-18. He discusses the mix of reasons for marriage: emotional and economic, practical and personal, social and spiritual.

<sup>11</sup>Wolfson, p.141. He discusses the Opinion of the Justices of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court to the Massachusetts Senate in 2004.

<sup>12</sup>*Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, 440 Mass. 309 (Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, 2003).

<sup>13</sup>See Rev. John Buehrens' book *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals* (2003). At p. 76 he refers to the 1976 essay of theologian James Luther Adams called "The Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism." Adams suggests that we not arm ourselves with heavy creeds, doctrines, and confessional statements. Rather he would have us carry only five well-worn principles of progressive religious living:

- 1) The conviction that "revelation is not sealed." Scripture is useful, but never God's final word.
- 2) Relationships should be covenantal; that is, they should rest on mutuality and persuasion as much as possible, not on coercion and power-over.
- 3) We share a human obligation to work toward what Dr. King called "the Beloved Community" of love and justice.
- 4) Merely thinking ourselves virtuous and well-intentioned won't get us there. We must forgo notions of the immaculate conception of our own virtue and instead practice the organization of power and the power of organization in order to realize the social incarnation of the good we love.
- 5) With all the universe provides and with the openness of history, we are never justified in an ultimate pessimism but must ever keep faith with the future.

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