

A Valentine Viewpoint...

At the occasion of Valentine's Day, we take time to celebrate that "special someone" who has brought joy into our life. Many of us are also blessed to have long-term, committed relationships that bestow the additional happiness of family -- the joys of sharing and caring, hoping and dreaming, loving and protecting.

Ours is a somewhat different love story.

We met nine years ago and had an immediate connection that has strengthened with time. We celebrated our relationship in September of 1999 with a commitment ceremony that was officiated by a long-time family friend, Rev. Chuck Arnold – a Presbyterian minister and retired military chaplain who has served as interim minister for United Church of Christ congregations in Lompoc and Atascadero.

Although we certainly know that our relationship has changed our lives, it was very moving to us when Rev. Arnold recently spoke of, "the blossoming that I have seen in Paul since he met Rick."

Most of us would hardly deny that love can transform us. Yet our relationship, whether blessed by a religious leader or not, is not recognized as "marriage" by our government.

Why not?

The state certainly cannot tell us who we can love nor can it restrict churches from performing marriage ceremonies, if they so chose. So what is same-sex marriage really about? Why do gays and lesbians clamor for the *Freedom to Marry*?

We believe that, mostly, it's about love.

And it's about inclusion...

We held our ceremony on the bluffs overlooking Shell Beach. We chose such a very public location to acknowledge our place in our larger community.

We have been leaders in our religious congregations. We participate in local artistic, social and civic organizations. We support a variety of charitable causes – both with our time and our finances. We are responsible individuals committed to supporting each other emotionally, spiritually and financially – through good times and bad.

It's about having our relationship accepted by our community and being included in the social and financial benefits that marriage provides.

So the *Freedom to Marry* is about inclusion.

It's about caring for our families.

We all do our best to make sound financial and personal preparations that will provide for our loved ones. We make detailed plans for security in our golden years when our dear ones can no longer nurture us in this present life. Yes, we work hard to take good care of our families.

So what if, no matter how hard you work, many of the arrangements you would make for your family are not available to you? Imagine that you are deprived of pension funds or Social Security. What if you suddenly had no legal right to care for the children you had looked after and helped raise for years? What if it meant the loss of your home? This is the reality for families of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples.

So it's about caring for and protecting our families.

Finally, it's about fairness...

Gay and lesbian couples have been a part of your community all of your lives. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyons, the first couple married by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom on Valentine's Day 2004, had been together for 51 years. They have now been together for 55 years – a milestone few couples achieve.

Is it fair that such a committed relationship be denied the recognition that is offered to others? Is it fair that these women are denied the Social Security and other benefits – even though they have contributed no less than other citizens?

Gay and lesbian families in California are caring for some 70,000 children. Can it be fair to these children to deny them the same legal and financial protections that are enjoyed by other children?

Gays and lesbians serve as your firefighters, your peace officers, and in your military. They risk their lives and sacrifice for their communities and their nation. Yet, often cannot do so with honesty and dignity. Can that be fair?

Last May, a CNN poll showed that 79% of our citizens think gays & lesbians should be able to serve openly in the military yet only 49% of Californians support the *Freedom to Marry*. Can it be fair to ask us to fight and die for others' freedoms but say to us that we are not deserving of the *Freedom to Marry*?

So, it's about fairness.

It's about love. It's about caring for our families. It's about being fully included in our communities. And it's about fairness.

We wish these blessings for everyone and only ask that our fellow citizens open their hearts and minds to grant them to us as well.

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