

## Same-Sex Marriage: It's a Spiritual Thing

Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Tikkun Daily* blog post, June 30, 2010; updated June 12, 2022 but the assumption that same-sex marriage is not yet legal is left in the post

I can imagine the conversation I would have with someone who opposes marriage equality. They might tell me apologetically that they have nothing against me personally, or against my same-sex relationship of more than 20 years, but that marriage is...different, not for me. They might tell me calmly that my sexual brokenness can be healed if I will only accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, and that the state has no business condoning sin.

For years, I would have told them that it was a matter of equal rights, and that society should stand behind same-sex couples who want to marry because they are just as much in love as any opposite-sex couple. I would have said marriage is marriage, regardless of the couple saying "I do," and that conservative religion has no business intruding on the state. I might have gone so far as to say that same-sex marriage should be legal as a matter of religious freedom, not to mention the hundreds of state and federal rights now systematically denied to same-sex couples because we cannot legally marry.

Today, without denying the truth of the above arguments, I would say something different, something much more controversial: as long as we live in a society that treats marriage as a matter of state interest and prioritizes it above other types of relationships, same-sex couples must be allowed to marry for spiritual reasons. Same-sex marriage is a spiritual matter for the couples involved and for society as a whole. Spirituality here is not opposed to politics, but is of a piece with it.

This kind of argument is rarely made because of how the same-sex marriage debate has been framed. Opponents make the case that marriage is heterosexual by definition. Same-sex couples who want to get married, or who support marriage equality as a political matter, argue that love is love and marriage is marriage. LGBT/queer-identified people who want to see all types of relationships equally valued claim that marriage itself is the problem; they want marriage off its pedestal and every form of coupling (or tripling or...) held up as equivalent. None of these groups necessarily talk about same-sex marriage as a point of intersection between politics and spirituality.

If our politics are to be spiritually informed, however, they must support human flourishing at all levels. Marriage has a particular role to play in that flourishing. That's not because of anything inherently better about marriage; any and every kind of romantic/sexual relationship, as well as singleness, can be turned into a venue of self-healing and world-healing, depending on the honesty and integrity with which it is undertaken. But at this moment in time marriage provides a web of security for those couples that risk undertaking spiritual deepening in their relationship. In marriage, the trust between the couple is also a trust between the couple and society, and as such marriage (when at its best) makes certain demands that can be part of its spiritual component.

Legal sanction, public blessing, cultural expectations, life-stage rituals: all these combine to create in marriage a social institution with deep meaning and deeper opportunities. To exclude same-sex couples from this institution is to harm us as well as the heterosexual couples who are less able to receive the gifts that we would bring to marriage. Ultimately, it is to harm a world sorely in need of healing.

Here, to start the conversation, are examples, one each, of how legalizing same-sex marriage might provide spiritual support to same-sex couples; how it might facilitate spiritual growth among thoughtful heterosexuals; and why it would be good for society and the planet as a whole.

First, the discipline of living in a committed relationship offers continual opportunities for spiritual growth, and while this is true of any committed relationship it may be truer of one in which the couple is formally bound to society, not just to itself. I know a lesbian couple, just married in Iowa, that strives to live together spiritually, in part through the use of Don Miguel Ruiz's "four agreements." [insert link to book] My marriage (now legal) has taught me a multitude of lessons about disagreeing gently, forgiving, becoming comfortable with differences, accepting frailties (mine and hers), holding my tongue, and cultivating compassion. Some people undoubtedly put this much work into a more casual relationship, but I and many people I know find that it makes a difference to have stood up in public, asked the blessings of our friends and the spirit, and offered promises in front of those who will help us while inviting us to be our best selves. Because of its social and legal standing, marriage provides support and demands accountability, both of which can only help the spiritually-minded same-sex couple.

Second, when marriage is defined as a matter of body part mechanics or archetypal gender complementarities, something of the spirit is lost: precisely the humility, openness, sense of discovery and negotiation that same-sex couples often bring to our relationships. When we don't fit into "traditional sex role stereotypes," our very navigation through couplehood can be a means of spiritual development. Of course, some same-sex couples are gender-traditional, and some heterosexual couples are gender-interesting. But for the rest of us, same-sex couples may have a gift to offer opposite-sex couples, one worthy of cherishing and protection through marriage laws that legitimate our versions of constructing and encountering ourselves as families.

Finally, people who are more whole lead to a planet that is more whole. A couple, supported by the legal, social, and cultural elements of marriage, can work to cultivate the "fruits of the spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23) in their lives and their relationship and then extend these blessings to society. Whether the couple consists of two men, two women, or a woman and a man doesn't matter. What matters is whether they actively choose "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" rather than their opposites – as individuals, in their pairing, and in their work in the world. Here in particular, politics needs spirituality as much as spirituality needs politics.

Perhaps there will come a day when this way of thinking about same-sex marriage will be meaningless because all types of relationships (and a wider variety of gender definitions) will be equally valued, and the wisdom they have to offer will be cherished widely. I look forward to

that day, and until then, I will look forward to my next opportunity to discuss same-sex marriage with someone who opposes it.