

Same-sex marriages: what do the children think?

A man who was raised by a lesbian couple offers his thoughts



During the oral arguments about Proposition 8, Justice Anthony Kennedy referred to children being raised by same-sex couples. Since I was one of those children—from ages 2-19, I was raised by a lesbian mother with the help of her partner—I was curious to see what he would say.

I also eagerly anticipated what he would say because I had taken great professional and social risk to file an amicus brief with Doug Mainwaring (who is gay and opposes gay marriage), in which we explained that children deeply feel the loss of a father or mother, no matter how much we love our gay parents or how much they love us. Children feel the loss keenly because they are powerless to stop the decision to deprive them of a father or mother, and the absence of a male or female parent will likely be irreversible for them.

Over the last year I've been in frequent contact with adults who were raised by parents in same-sex partnerships. They are terrified of speaking publicly about their feelings, so several have asked me (since I am already out of the closet, so to speak) to give voice to their concerns.

I cannot speak for all children of same-sex couples, but I speak for quite a few of them, especially those who have been brushed aside in the so-called “social science research” on same-sex parenting.

Those who contacted me all professed gratitude and love for the people who raised them, which is why it is so difficult for them to express their reservations about same-sex parenting publicly.

Still, they described emotional hardships that came from lacking a mom or a dad. To give a few examples: they feel disconnected from the gender cues of people around them, feel intermittent anger

at their “parents” for having deprived them of one biological parent (or, in some cases, both biological parents), wish they had had a role model of the opposite sex, and feel shame or guilt for resenting their loving parents for forcing them into a lifelong situation lacking a parent of one sex.

I have heard of the supposed “consensus” on the soundness of same-sex parenting from pediatricians and psychologists, but that consensus is frankly bogus.

Pediatricians are supposed to make sure kids don’t get ringworm or skip out on vaccinations—nobody I know doubts that same-sex couples are able to tend to such basic childcare needs.

Psychologists come from the same field that used to have a “consensus” that homosexuality was a mental disorder. Neither field is equipped to answer the deeper existential dilemmas of legally removing fatherhood or motherhood as a human principle, which is what total “marriage equality” would entail.

I support same-sex civil unions and foster care, but I have always resisted the idea that government should encourage same-sex couples to imagine that their partnerships are indistinguishable from actual marriages. Such a self-definition for gays would be based on a lie, and anything based on a lie will backfire.

The richest and most successful same-sex couple still cannot provide a child something that the poorest and most struggling spouses can provide: a mom and a dad. Having spent forty years immersed in the gay community, I have seen how that reality triggers anger and vicious recrimination from same-sex couples, who are often tempted to bad-mouth so-called “dysfunctional” or “trashy” straight couples in order to say, “We deserve to have kids more than they do!”

But I am here to say no, having a mom and a dad is a precious value in its own right and not something that can be overridden, even if a gay couple has lots of money, can send a kid to the best schools, and raises the kid to be an Eagle Scout.

It’s disturbingly classist and elitist for gay men to think they can love their children unreservedly after treating their surrogate mother like an incubator, or for lesbians to think they can love their children

unconditionally after treating their sperm-donor father like a tube of toothpaste.

It's also racist and condescending for same-sex couples to think they can strong-arm adoption centers into giving them orphans by wielding financial or political clout. An orphan in Asia or in an American inner city has been entrusted to adoption authorities to make the best decision for the child's life, not to meet a market demand for same-sex couples wanting children. Whatever trauma caused them to be orphans shouldn't be compounded with the stress of being adopted into a same-sex partnership.

Lastly, it's harmful to everyone if gay men and lesbians in mixed-orientation marriages with children file for divorce so they can enter same-sex couplings and raise their children with a new homosexual partner while kicking aside the other biological parent. Kids generally want their mom and dad to stop fighting, put aside their differences, and stay together, even if one of them is gay.

In my family's case, my mother was divorced and she made the best decision given our circumstances. Had she set out to create a same-sex parenting family in a premeditated fashion, I would probably not feel at peace with her memory, because I would know that my lack of a strong father figure during childhood did not result from an accident of life history, but rather from her own careless desire to have her cake and eat it too. I am blessed not to contend with such a traumatic thought about my own mother. I love her because I know she did everything possible to give me a good life. Still, what was best in our specific circumstances was a state of deprivation that it is unconscionable to force on innocent children if it's not absolutely necessary.

Justice Kennedy alluded to the views of children being raised by same-sex couples as if our desires and concerns are identical to and uncritical of the decisions made by our parents. The reality is far more complicated than that.

Putting aside all the historical analogies to civil rights and the sentimental platitudes about love, the fact is that same-sex parenting suffers from insurmountable logistical problems for which children pay the steepest lifelong price.

Whether it's by surrogacy, insemination, divorce, or commercialized adoption, moral hazards abound for same-sex couples who insist on replicating a heterosexual model of parenthood. The children thrown into the middle of these moral hazards are well aware of their parents' role in creating a stressful and emotionally complicated life for kids, which alienates them from cultural traditions like

Father's Day and Mother's Day, and places them in the unenviable position of being called “homophobes” if they simply suffer the natural stress that their parents foisted on them—and admit to it.

Same-sex marriage would pose no problems for me if it were simply about couples being together. As a bisexual I get that. But unfortunately the LGBT movement decided that its validation by others requires a redefinition of “marriage” to include same-sex partnerships. So here we are, stuck having to encourage problematic lives for children in order to affirm same-sex couples the way the movement demands.

That’s why I am for civil unions but not for redefining marriage. But I suppose I don’t count—I am no doctor, judge, or television commentator, just a kid who had to clean up the mess left behind by the sexual revolution.

Full Story: What do the children say?

Source: Mercator.Net

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