

Right of Rite
Rev. Hannah Petrie
September 23, 2007

This past week, San Diego mayor Jerry Saunders went through a rite of passage. Part of him died, and part of him was born. In a moving statement which can be viewed on-line, he explained a change of heart. Only the day before, he was planning to veto the resolution that the City Council had passed, which directed the City Attorney to file a brief in support of gay marriage. But in the course of an evening, he had a conversion experience, and chose to sign it. "As I reflected on the choices I had before me last night," he said, "I just could not bring myself to tell an entire group of people in our community they were less important, less worthy or less deserving of the rights and responsibilities of marriage, than anyone else – simply because of their sexual orientation."

His family went through the rite of passage, too. His wife was standing beside him, and it was his gay daughter, in part, who led him through. She never pressured him; she had always told her father that whatever he decided about gay rights, she would support him. Later, he commented that all these years he believed he was protecting his daughter. But then he realized that she was protecting him. There was a letting go.

It reminds me of when a father walks his daughter down the aisle to be married. Sometimes it's really the daughter walking the father down the aisle.

Weddings have been on the brain. As I think about how important marriage equality is to this congregation, and reflect on my own wedding two months ago, the meaning of this rite of passage has scarcely left my brain. In fact, weddings do weird things to your brain.

After Kit proposed to me back in April of 2006, I experienced a temporary loss of short-term memory. I was so happy and excited to be engaged, that as I shared the news with my friends, I also asked several of them to be my bridesmaids. Then I promptly forgot just who all I had asked, and I was not sure who all I had not asked yet. Two of my closest friends didn't know they were bridesmaids until I started talking about it at my bachelorette party. "You never informed us that we were your bridesmaids!" they said. "I didn't? Oops. Well, you are!" Meanwhile, my mother and my fiance informed me that I was not allowed to have ten bridesmaids, as I had envisioned, that I would have to narrow it down to five total. Why did I want so many damned bridesmaids? I still wish I could have had ten bridesmaids. That is embarrassing, I realize. I guess I wanted everyone to see how many friendships I'd worked hard over the years to maintain. I'm almost 34 years old, so for much of my young adulthood, my friends were my family.

I was disappointed in those friends who chose not to come at all. As my mother said, "you never forget who didn't show up at your wedding." Whether they came or not, I noticed in the time leading up to the wedding that many of my friendships were changing. Some of them strengthened and some of them weakened. It has surprised me how much sadness can surround such a happy occasion. It is a time when relationships change, and with those changes comes loss. When you look back at your own wedding, or the wedding of a significant family member or friend, do you remember which relationships changed? If there were snags in the planning stages, in retrospect, did it have more to do with changes that are difficult to accept?

Weddings can also be times of personal change, but not just for the couple of the hour. The conventional wisdom in social sciences is to see rites of passage as individual events. But it is the families themselves that are going through the passage, and some of them may actually go through more change than the two people who are getting married.¹ Relationships change because people change.

In the time surrounding a wedding, on what is often a subconscious level, close friends and family are presented with the opportunity to change themselves, to perhaps let go of an outgrown identity. In effect, parts of us die. It's at the heart of why rituals are done at all – any ritual worth doing facilitates

¹ Generation to Generation, Edwin Friedman, 1985, p. 164.

the passage of death and of birth. It marks both an ending and a beginning. And since a wedding is a family rite of passage, anyone participating may experience this. I'll never forget the sensation of my mother, my sisters-in-law, and my aunt lifting my wedding dress over my head and outstretched arms, and me in the strange half-light finding my way to the top – I was going through a birth canal, in preparation to be born, to be a wife. And because I was born, it also meant that I had died. What milestone events in your life, whether it was a wedding, a funeral, the birth of a child, or a retirement, left you feeling that something had died and something was born?

The concept of weddings makes some of us uneasy – many weddings are not meaningful, and all the frilly to-do and financial extravagance can seem awfully shallow and wasteful. Some of us have bad memories associated with weddings, and they only remind us of disappointment. But these feelings about weddings disguise the much more significant, and holy function of this rite of passage – weddings give birth to the deeper changes in the families of the bride and the groom, for better or for worse. Of course, this family process is just as important for the wedding of a same-sex marriage, and it is one of the more insidious ways in which gay couples are deprived of their human right to marry. The denial of legal rights conferred by legal marriage, of which there are over a thousand, is bad enough, but the full potential of the rite of passage itself in the context of family process is often minimized. The families of gay couples also miss out on the catalyzing effects of the wedding ritual.

Not all individuals wish for marriage and family as destinations in life. But marriages are, nevertheless, building blocks of our civilization, which is why it is difficult to measure the cost to society when same-sex couples are denied the right to legally marry. It's great that we are happy to perform the ceremony for a same-sex couple – that is no small thing. But until it's a hundred percent legal, it is not the same – and never will be – because it cannot necessarily invite the same deeper family processes. Every extended family, as we know, contains more progressive and more conventional members. Until all marriages mean the same thing to all people, the potential of those family processes are not on a level playing field. Mayor Sanders touched on this when he said in his statement that he used to believe that civil unions were a fair alternative. He now recognizes that a "separate but equal" institution is not good enough.

What are these 'family processes' I'm speaking of? Not all weddings produce obvious or dramatic shifts in a family system, but I would challenge us to consider that there are always some subtle changes happening beneath the surface of our consciousness, even if it's on the level of the Jungian 'collective unconscious.' If marriages are building blocks of our civilization, then we are all affected by how seriously we choose to take them, and how deliberately we prepare to ensure their success. One way we do this is by investigating and becoming aware of the generational processes at work.

During the year before the wedding, I watched how my family of origin was going through their own passage, individually and collectively. The main theme of change that was difficult for my family to accept was that the eldest generation – my parents' parents – are becoming too old to participate in rites of passage, that, in effect, my grandparents' lives are nearing their end. My maternal grandfather and his second wife, who had airplane tickets and hotel reservations, didn't make it because his health failed, and my grandmother simply declined to come, because she didn't want to be away from her husband, whose health is fragile. It is sad that the eldest generation has to withdraw at some point. This year was also the ten-year anniversary of my paternal grandparents' death, and the ten year anniversary of my brother's wedding – which was the last time we saw my grandparents together as a family before they died.

Family process addresses themes of separation and letting go on other levels. Beyond the context of marriage, all of us have family scripts that are handed down to us, that we inherit. There are themes in the scripts that repeat themselves generation after generation, as a system repeats patterns. As we mature into adults, we come to crossroads – and we decide which parts of the family script do we like, and which parts would we prefer to re-write ourselves? Which way shall I go? The more aware we are that these decisions are taking place, the more power we have. A wedding can be such a crossroad, and who we choose to marry can indicate if we're going to write our own scripts, or stick with the one that was handed to us.

There are darker themes in a family script that you may be familiar with, patterns of personality development and relationship – ideally, we rewrite these patterns in an effort to let them die, to pass them over. Perhaps it's a difficulty expressing love and affection. Maybe it's the need to control, or the fear of success. Maybe there are patterns of depression, low self-esteem, addiction. The list is as limitless as the list of patterns we do want to continue – family traits like generosity or inquisitiveness, courage and perseverance, a hilarious sense of humor. A tremendous capacity to love, despite the odds. The capacity to forgive.

As you can tell, I am a great proponent of family process; it is central to my spiritual view of life. It's how I ensure that I keep re-writing significant parts of my family script, which I love. I wish to write a chapter in which our story soars to the highest ideals of my best self and my family's best traditions. This is a spiritual endeavor because life is about relationships and who we are in them. We understand better whom we are when we look carefully at the stories of our ancestors. When we know them, critique them, honor them, and celebrate them.

Critiquing our family script is not always fun. It's often painful and heartbreaking. However, the most significant spiritual growth only happens in tension. Just as it happened in tension with Mayor Sanders this week.

The bonds we have to our family members are spiritual – they go back generations. I believe we experience the holy when our relationships deepen and become more complex and meaningful. Unquestionably, new bonds are formed and reformed at a wedding – but it takes time, it doesn't all happen the day of. Rites of passage begin six months to a year before, and end a similar length of time after the ceremony.²

Edwin Friedman, one of the founders of family system theory, says that rites of passage “function as ‘hinges of time.’ All family relationship systems unlock during these periods. More doors open or close naturally between various family members than can be swung at other times . . . life-cycle events,” he goes on, “are not as random as they appear. They are almost always manifestations of deeper family processes that have been coming to fruition, often for long periods of time . . . a wedding is like an iceberg: only one-eighth of the moving mass will be visible.”³

Weddings are spiritual events – a lot more is happening than meets the eye. Which is why denying something that can be as spiritually powerful and meaningful to us – to ALL of us - is not only denying a human right, it is denying us the freedom to practice our religion. We religious liberals are often accused of belittling ritual. Rituals work on our hearts, and we often feel safer in our heads. But if we really believe in marriage equality, let's start loving rituals and articulating their deeper meaning. Let's point out the spiritual significance of marriage as well as the legal significance, because the most effective argument is a nuanced argument. We are religious people demanding a religious right. We demand the right to this rite.

Even though I didn't have ten bridesmaids at my wedding, I was well-represented - many people came out at great expense to attend. I know not all of those people would have come if I was marrying a woman. But I needed all those people to be there to mean as much as it did. I needed those people to wish for me the same thing Mayor Sanders bravely wishes for the people he knows personally in the gay community:

“I want for them the same thing that we all want for our loved ones. For each of them to find a mate whom they love deeply and who loves them back, someone with whom they can grow old together and share life's experiences. And I want their relationships to be protected equally under the law. In the end, I couldn't look any of them in the face and tell them that their relationships – their very lives – were any less meaningful than the marriage that I share with my wife.”

Mayor Sanders, amen.

² Friedman, 167.

³ Friedman, 164, 179.