

# INVISIBLE SISTERS

Questions about gender inevitably involve questions about sexuality. Nowhere are these questions more fraught and difficult in the contemporary church than in questions surrounding homosexuality. The two pieces in this section consider women whose sexuality troubles both doctrinal and cultural notions of women's sexuality:

lesbians and women involved with gay men. They illuminate the anger and pain that surround these questions, the hope for understanding and reconciliation, and the incomprehensible potential of human love in all its forms. —K.H.

## MAKING SENSE OF SUNDAY

by Deborah Farmer Kris



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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** In May 2006, the Church asked bishops to read a letter in sacrament meetings that stated, in part: "We are informed that the United States Senate will on June 6, 2006, vote on an amendment to the Federal constitution designed to protect the traditional institution of marriage. We, as the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, have repeatedly set forth our position that the marriage of a man and a woman is the only acceptable marriage relationship. . . . We urge our members to express themselves on this urgent matter to their elected representatives in the Senate." For me, the Church's rhetoric about homosexuality—and the resulting attitudes and actions of some of the membership—has created much more internal conflict through the years than issues of gender equity. But I talked little about it, and I certainly didn't write about it publicly. After hearing this letter, I finally sat down and wrote out the emotions I had protectively sequestered for a decade.

What is the most important commandment, Lord?

*Love God and love your neighbor.*

But who is my neighbor?

*The Samaritan.*

Who is the Samaritan?

*The one left on the side of the road, the one you hope will disappear.*

(Who is my Samaritan?)

Oh, and what is Love?

**A**LICE AND CAROL have been partners for more than twenty-five years. For the last five, Carol has been unable to stand—battling one infection after another in her long quest to have a double hip replacement surgery. Alice

spends long hours reading *Harry Potter* aloud, acting out the voices, cooking healthy meals, bringing news of the outside world. I have known my husband for five years. I hope I would bear up as well under the strain of long-term care. I don't know if I am that strong yet. Alice replaces the gauze on an open wound. I go home to hug my husband, with hope for Us twenty years from now.

**T**HE PHARISEES INVITED Jesus to dinner. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating there, she brought perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the host saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

Jesus sensed his thoughts, turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman has not stopped kissing my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

What is this thing, love? A power that trumps powers, that revises our histories; strong enough to heal a woman's soul. The name of deity itself: God is Love. "Do you see this woman?" Really see her. I think of the bishop in Cambridge who implored us with Christ's own fervor to make the ward "a safe place for sinners—we are all sinners."

**W**HEN I WAS three days old, my parents placed me in a crib in the room of my five-year-old sister, Rachel. We shared everything, and I was her grand pupil: she taught me how to read, how to open my junior high gym locker, and how to manage the hallways in high school. When she went to BYU, she let me spend each Friday night with her in her dorm room. I wouldn't have been such a generous big sister. She is shyer than I am—and certainly kinder; an artist and a teacher, making her way in the big city. But she has *chutzpah*, "coming out" while still in college. Provo is not the safest place to be a kind, shy young lesbian. The very place that should be most



Deborah and Rachel, 1997

welcoming and embracing—a church house—becomes an emotional landmine. Memories of anti-gay comments I heard from LDS peers in high school still make me wince; I did take it personally—every joke—but in silence because I didn't have the courage to tell them to Stuff It. Years later, she harbors no bitterness (I'm still making sense of that); she lives a vibrant life and supports my decision to remain a member of a church that has effectively shut its doors to her.

**I** FINISH A Relief Society lesson. Somehow Rachel had come up, our friendship, navigating these waters. After one then two—and later three and four—women come up to tell me about their brothers, fathers, sisters. It's like confessing a secret, like we have kept it as a skeleton in our closet long after loved ones have come out of theirs.

**I** DIDN'T WANT to come home crying on Sunday. I had pre-read the announcement on the web and thought I had the grit to attend. Later that evening, I looked up the story of Ruth—balancing two worlds for love of a woman—thought of my sister, wondering: Who is Ruth, and who is Naomi? Protecting and loving each other, trying to worship the same name of God: Love.

Ruth  
for sisters

*And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest I will go:*

*and where thou lodgest I will lodge: and thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God.*

Ruth, you were a good daughter-in-law,  
Provider where no husband was  
Daughter where only a son had been.  
And when Naomi cried out with bitterness  
You went to work. You brought home food. Kept house.

But what did you miss  
In those lonely hours in the field  
(stranger in a strange land)  
As you stooped to gather the discarded?  
When the wind came to Moab, how the fields blew?  
The gossip of the women who know  
The story of your birth?

When Israelite women wondered, shifting-eyed,  
At the hue of your skin,  
The fabric of your hair,  
The angle of your voice,  
Did you want to shout out what you lost?  
To name your dead?  
Did you want to carve your sacrifice on your palm  
And say, pressing it into passing souls:  
Here is my goodness and it is hard.

**I**'M TRYING TO make sense of it all. Love and loyalty. Church and family. I don't expect to any time soon. ☺

# CLEAN-SHAVEN: NO MORE BEARDS

## *Straight Women, Gay Men, and Mormonism*

by Holly Welker



HOLLY WELKER is working on a memoir about her friendships and relationships with gay men.

**AUTHOR NOTE:** At the 2005 Sunstone Symposium, I attended several panels on homosexual issues and noticed that not only was the predominant focus of such panels male sexuality, most participants were male. In one case, “Steps in the Right Direction? Evaluating New LDS Publications on Homosexuality,” they were exclusively male, though not exclusively gay. Just as when I read the Book of Mormon or surveyed the artwork in any LDS visitor’s center, I found myself wondering, *Where are the women? More specifically, where are the lesbians, where are the wives, ex-wives, ex-fiancées of gay men? There were plenty such women among my acquaintances, but we weren’t discussing homosexuality, at least not at Sunstone in 2005. No one asked us, and we didn’t volunteer. Why not?*

*In an attempt to begin addressing the imbalance I saw in 2005, I organized a panel the following year: “Will, Grace, and Angels in Brokeback America: Straight Women, Gay Men, and Mormonism.” This essay is based on my presentation at that panel.*

**E**XCLUSION OF WOMEN AND THEIR CONCERNS from weighty discussions of weighty matters is not a new thing. It’s been twenty-five years since I first read Plato’s *Symposium*, but I remember the discussion in my Western civilization class of Athenian society, its marriage laws and customs: all citizens (who were exclusively male—women could not be citizens) were expected to marry and sire children, preferably sons. In this discussion in 1982, we talked frankly about the flirtation between Socrates and Alcibiades, and considered what it meant for a homosocial, homosexual, patriarchal, misogynist society to require men to marry women and impregnate them as part of their duties as members of the community.

If marrying a woman and fathering children aren’t *quite* as obligatory for good male citizens today as they were in the time of Plato and Socrates, there are still those who argue that these practices should remain rights all men, gay or straight, are entitled to. On 3 August 2006, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled “When the Beard Is Too Painful to Remove,” which noted that “for gay men in heterosexual marriages, even after the status quo becomes unbearable, the pull of domestic life remains powerful. Many are desperate to preserve their marriages—to continue reaping the *emotional and financial*

*support of wives*, and domestic pleasures like tucking children in at night” (emphasis added), benefits they hope to retain “either by lying, promising their wives they will not have sex with men or persuading [the wives] to accept their double lives.”<sup>1</sup>

An example of the middle category, promising fidelity to a wife, is provided by Ben Christensen’s essay “Getting Out,” from the Fall 2005 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. In his essay, Christensen, a gay man who, in his early twenties, married a straight woman and fathered children by her, argues that

The whole point of the civil rights and women’s liberation movements was to allow blacks, women, and other minorities to break free of what had been their traditional roles. We live in a world where it’s okay for blacks to do what was once considered “white” and for women to do what was once considered “male”—get an education, have a career, etc. Why then is it not politically correct for a gay man to venture into what is usually considered the exclusive territory of straight men—to marry a woman and have a family—if that’s what he chooses to do?<sup>2</sup>

This is a troubling passage, for many reasons. It is simply not true that “the whole point of the civil rights and women’s liberation movement was to allow blacks, women, and other minorities to break free of what had been their traditional roles.” A major goal of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s (itself merely a more recent episode in a long struggle for equality and human rights in the U.S. that includes the abolitionist movement of the 1800s) was to pass and enforce legislation that would remove the threat of violence racial minorities so often lived under. It was not simply about securing a genuine opportunity to vote or go to school or keeping a seat on the bus; it was about living without fear of lynchings, bombings, beatings, and murders. The same goes for the feminist movement: there has been a long struggle to compel lawmakers and law enforcement agencies to treat sexual and domestic violence as the crimes they should be, and to give women such originally rare privileges as the right to retain property and a legal identity after marriage or to sue an abusive husband for divorce. And let’s not forget the role that the threat of violence has played in the gay rights movement: it’s not all about securing insurance for your same-sex partner or the right to adopt; it’s also about living without the threat of being thrown in prison and sentenced to hard labor for the crime of sodomy like Oscar Wilde, or stabbed to death like Sakia Gunn,<sup>3</sup> or tied to a fence and left to die like Matthew Shepard.

Although Christensen claims that “We live in a world where it’s okay for blacks to do what was once considered ‘white’ and for women to do what was once considered ‘male,’” the virtual enslavement of women is still a stark reality in too many parts of the world. It would be more accurate to write that we live in a *society* where *some people* think “it’s okay for blacks to do what was once considered ‘white’ and for women to do what was once considered ‘male,’” but it’s important to note that the only examples cited by Christensen of “white,” “male” activities previously closed but now open to women and racial mi-

norities are the basic human rights of getting an education and seeking rewarding employment. Furthermore, the fact that it might be “okay” for racial and gender minorities to pursue the same goals as white men does not mean they have as many opportunities to do so or receive the same rewards for their efforts.

But the biggest problem with Christensen’s equating his situation with the struggles of the civil rights or women’s movements is that Christensen already has the right he demands: to marry a woman and father children by her. Indeed, he and other gay men have, by and large, always had that right in Western civilization.

Although Christensen’s essay attempts to co-opt progressive discourse and ideology, as in his reference to the civil rights and feminist movements, his stance is actually profoundly conservative. As I’ve noted, the movements he invokes involve long struggles for a wide range of legislation. Christensen makes no mention of legislation in his essay, because what he’s arguing for is not a change in but a more emphatic embrace of a status quo society has only begun to move away from. We should remember that until recently, gay Mormon men were encouraged to marry women—the sooner, the better. Christensen demands not only the continued right of gay men to marry straight women, but approbation and approval for doing so, and he has received even that.<sup>4</sup>

As it happens, I am strongly in favor of legislation opening what has been the exclusive territory of straight men—to marry a woman and have a family—to gay women. But in his *Dialogue* essay at least, Christensen exhibits little regard for the opportunities and rights of women, gay or straight: his concern is with preserving the status quo with regards to the privileges of men, straight or gay. And because neither he, nor the editors of *Dialogue*, nor the respondents to his essay, nor a great many others, seem to acknowledge this, the original question I raised regarding the ancient Greek view of male “duties” remains a vital one, though with a slight twist: What does it mean for a *homophobic*, patriarchal, misogynist society to require men to marry women and impregnate them as part of their duties as members of the community?

Why should a devoutly Mormon gay man care at all about women’s sexuality, given how little attention it receives in Mormon doctrine? Female biology is extremely important in Mormon ideology, of course, as that is what allows women to bear children, and children are central to the Mormon emphasis on the family. But reproduction is only one part of sexuality—after all, one can be a sexual being without ever reproducing. Sexuality also includes physiological states such as arousal, desire, and pleasure, as well as the impact the entire mix has on the psyche or soul. How is *that* treated in Mormon ideology? I’m not saying there’s no room for a nuanced consideration of female sexuality in Mormon thought and experience; I am saying that what is enshrined as scripture thus far reduces the importance of female desire and satisfaction.

Think of Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, wherein marriage is presented as a pragmatic matter of reproduction, in which “virgins” are given unto a man “to multiply

and replenish the earth” (verse 63). Within that construct, the emphasis is primarily on male morality and female purity, in that “if any *man* [note the lack of attention to his sexual status] espouse a *virgin*, and *desire* to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are *virgins*, and have vowed to no other *man*, then is he justified; he cannot commit adultery for they are given unto him; for he cannot commit adultery with *that that belongeth unto him and to no one else*” (verse 61, emphases added). Obedient submission to this law is named a condition of celestial exaltation. Therefore a man may (should?) espouse as many virgins as he desires. But what mention is made, in the entire section, of female desire? Even the stereotypical emotional (as opposed to physical) desire a woman might have for monogamy, for the exclusive regard and fidelity of her husband, is essentially unrighteous here, and women who refuse to be one of several wives are, in effect, consigning themselves to lesser realms in the hereafter.

There’s also the fact that regardless of how God the Father thinks of his daughters, no matter how exalted and honorable women’s roles in the plan of salvation, in the verse I’ve just quoted, the limitations of language reduce women in their marriages to “that that belongeth unto [one man] and no one else”—they’re not even “those who belongeth,” pronouns more appropriate for human beings. Grammatical niceties aside, the general situation would not have seemed striking or strange in 1843, the year this section is dated; wives at that time were indeed, as a matter of civil law, the property of their husbands. But how does this rhetoric used to explain polygamy to the early members of the Church still affect the way Latter-day Saints think even of the monogamous marriages they are expected to enter into now?

**O**F COURSE, IT’S not as if American culture at large is particularly concerned with women’s sexuality—unless it’s used in the service of men’s pleasure. Consider the *Salon* article “Live Girl-on-Girl Action!” which discusses straight high school and college girls who make out with other straight women at parties. These girls are “firmly straight, they say, but they’ll kiss their friends as a performance for guys—either for material gain, like free entry or alcohol, or to advertise that they’re sexually open and adventurous.”<sup>5</sup> Deborah Tolman, director of San Francisco State University’s Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality, tells the author of the article that

In the case of females who get it on solely for male enjoyment, it’s not at all about experimenting with females. . . . “The motivations aren’t about your own desires, they’re about getting guys excited and looking hot. It’s ironic because they’re engaging in sexual behavior, which is supposed to look like it’s about sexual desire. The crucial part of that is that they make sure no one thinks they’re actually lesbians.”

The article goes on to quote Pamela Paul, author of *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our*

*Relationships, and Our Families*, who states that girls aren't kissing other girls because they want to. They're doing it because they want to appeal to boys their age. And for boys their age who've developed sexually alongside Internet porn, their sexual cues are affected by the norms and standards of porn. And that's girl-on-girl action.

And when girls fail to get what they want out of this situation—specifically, a boyfriend—it's their fault, not the boys', because although the girls are doing what the boys like and request, they're not meeting the boys' ideal: boys interviewed for the article acknowledge that they would be happy to “hook up,” or have casual sex with girls who kiss other girls, but they wouldn't want them as girlfriends. (Though how a man finds and courts a girlfriend when he's busy bedding random women has always been something I fail to understand.)

desirable or why our sexual relationship never seemed satisfying. Was it a failure on her part? she wondered. She had sadness about feeling alone, confused and hurt in ways that were nearly impossible to articulate.<sup>7</sup>

Separating from a spouse or partner is never easy or painless, even when you know it's time to end a relationship you're unhappy in; as for determining custody of children, I can only imagine from watching loved ones go through it how harrowing and heartbreaking it must be. Furthermore, the trauma inherent in the breakup of a Mormon marriage is often compounded when it involves an issue requiring or precipitating a devout member's reevaluation of his or her relationship to the Church. Coming out of the closet can be traumatic and lonely enough in and of itself, even if you haven't grown up being told acting on same-sex desires can damn you; add the solitary

*I suspect many gay men still marry straight women imagining they will be “cured,” leaving the woman open to blame when the cure doesn't take. But why should women rather than men bear the burden for male sexuality?*

The same appears to be true for marriages between gay men and straight women: when women fail to get what they want out of the situation—a faithful, loving husband who will cherish them—they are still blamed. For instance, in Steven Fales's one-man, autobiographical play *Confessions of a Mormon Boy*, Fales relates how he married and was unfaithful to his female best friend, and how he handled the prospect of divorce when, after six years of marriage, his “same sex attraction” finally put too great a strain on the marriage:

I turned it all on [my wife]. It was *her* fault! *She* never wore lingerie! *She* wouldn't watch the better-sex videos I ordered from the back of GQ. [She] knew going into this marriage it might come to this. And now that I've finally cracked, she's going to just throw me out?! How *dare* she watch *Will & Grace* and laugh when I was trying to change! She had failed *me!*<sup>6</sup>

In a move straight out of Genesis, Fales abdicates responsibility for his own actions, and blames the woman: she failed to beguile me, and I did seek other fruit. Fales eventually acknowledges that of course his wife was not responsible for his homosexuality or the failure of their marriage. But that didn't stop him from blaming her for it in the first place.

Yet even when women are not blamed, their suffering and unhappiness often go unrecognized or undervalued. In commentary accompanying Ben Christensen's essay in *Dialogue*, Ron Schow quotes a Mormon man who spent eight years in a temple marriage:

It was only after I came out to my wife that I realized how much she had suffered and endured over the years in asking questions like why didn't I find her

agony of envisioning yourself in hell because you want what you're told you shouldn't want, or admitting to yourself that one of the primary institutions you've based your life on is not, after all, an adequate spiritual, intellectual, or ethical compass to guide you through the complexities of your existence, and you endure suffering both acute and profound. Factor in divorce and separation from children, both in terms of missing them and feeling guilty at causing their confusion and pain, and you have a recipe for absolutely harrowing anguish.

I point this out to underscore the fact that I have no difficulty imagining that the man speaking here suffered terribly during his marriage, that admitting his homosexuality to his wife was wrenching. But let's consider another aspect of the situation: how self-obsessed and blind do you have to be to live with someone for *eight years* and not notice that you're making her miserable and isolated as well?

Schow continues:

This young man emphasized the falsity of a prevalent myth: “I saw my struggle with (and against) homosexuality as my own cross to bear. I felt I was the one who was suffering, struggling, trying to make things right. What I failed to recognize was that my wife was also part of the struggle even though she lacked basic information.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, this woman suffered not only because her marriage failed, but because her husband withheld for eight years “basic information” that could have helped her make sense of her life. It's easy to see how this man would feel his sexuality was his own problem, and that dealing with it as he saw fit was his right both as an individual and as patriarch of

his family. However understandable that is, the fact remains that although his withholding of information was not intentionally cruel, it was nonetheless both intentional and cruel, a deliberate choice.

I don't want to minimize or ignore the cruel and vicious ways in which the Church victimizes gay men. But I also don't want to minimize or ignore the cruel and vicious ways in which men who uphold and benefit from patriarchy victimize women, not only politically but personally, in the arena of relationships and sex—and as long as men wield the priesthood in the Mormon church, they do benefit profoundly and explicitly from patriarchy, even when they're gay.

I know it can take a while to figure out one's sexual identity, and that people who eschew sexual behavior during their teens only to marry in their early twenties might not have a firm handle on their sexual orientation. I've known both women and men who figure out after a decade or two of heterosexual marriage that maybe they're not straight after all. I know from watching friends go through it that it's profoundly painful. I also accept that some people are bisexual, and some spouses don't want or require monogamy.

But I also think from observing various marriages and divorces that there's something different happening when men who know ahead of time that they are gay marry women they know are straight, particularly in Mormondom. I submit that patriarchy endows men with a sense of entitlement—witness Christensen's resentment that marrying women and fathering children in a traditional family with a mother and father is still the "exclusive territory of straight men"—that blinds them to the real cost of their actions. Schow quotes a recently divorced gay man who states that "I think a lot of gay men contemplating heterosexual marriage underestimate the impact that their actions have on their future spouse."<sup>9</sup> Whereas women are trained, through doctrines like the new and everlasting covenant, to accept, however grudgingly, that they will not have the exclusive regard or affection of their husbands, that indeed their feelings about their marriage are of secondary importance to the patriarch's wielding of authority.

Both Fales and Christensen stress that they informed their wives of their homosexuality before the wedding, thus ending the deception under which the courtship was begun. I agree that this sort of honesty is called for before one embarks on a commitment like marriage, and of course if the women really want to accept the challenges inherent in such a difficult marriage, that's their right. But there are two points to consider here. The first is that if a gay man interested in marrying a woman wants to be completely honest and above board, the truly appropriate time to make that admission is *before the first date*, before the woman has begun to fall in love or envision the marriage she might have with the man courting her. Second, I doubt that even full disclosure before marriage really improves the likelihood that such marriages will succeed. In a separate response to Christensen's essay, Marybeth Raynes states, "it is difficult, even impossible, to count the costs of being married to a gay person beforehand."<sup>10</sup> I believe the costs are even more difficult to count when the straight person

in such a marriage is a Mormon woman, given how naively and earnestly hopeful Mormon women are on the topic of marriage.<sup>11</sup> And despite Christensen's announced expectation that he will never be "cured" of his same-sex attraction, I suspect many gay men still marry straight women imagining they will be "cured," leaving the woman open to blame—just as in Fales's case—when the cure doesn't take. But why should women rather than men bear the burden for male sexuality?

Even when gay men in straight marriages aren't looking for a cure, they are often still seeking to assuage their own suffering and distress through means that create profound suffering and distress for women, suffering and distress women have been trained to believe they should accept.<sup>12</sup> They have been taught by the culture at large and by Mormonism in particular to value their own sexuality and happiness less than that of the men they are married to, and will do all kinds of things to achieve a "righteous marriage" with a "good man," whatever those things mean.

**S**O WHAT DO we do instead? How do gay men and straight women share the same planet, if not the same bed? While I am not an advocate of marriage between gay men and straight women, I do think they have much to offer each other in terms of friendship. Among the many influential gay men in my life are my boyfriend from kindergarten, my date to the winter formal my senior year in high school, and my ex-fiancee—all are gay returned missionaries. Then there is my best friend Wayne, who grew up gay and Mormon but never served a mission. Understanding their lives and their sexuality has enriched my own.

Wayne and I currently live on opposite sides of the continent, but we always meet up when we return home for holiday visits with family. Over Christmas 2005, we went to see *Brokeback Mountain* together. I was staying with my sister, who is both a dutiful Mormon who avoids R-rated movies and a devoted, knowledgeable fan of good cinema. She knew she wouldn't see the movie, but she wanted to hear all about it when I got home. "Is it really as good as they say?" she asked.

"It really is," I said. "Heath Ledger is amazing. He deserves an Oscar. He reminded me of some of our cousins and uncles," I told her, thinking of relatives who grew up rodeoing and wore their best boots to sacrament meeting. "He does a thoroughly convincing job of playing a taciturn western cowboy."

"I hear both characters have wives," she said.

"Yes," I said. "And that's one of the things I liked about the movie: all the characters are treated with sympathy and respect. The wives aren't the focus of the movie, but they're not neglected, either. The situation does incredible damage to the women, but they're not treated as acceptable casualties. Anne Hathaway's personality becomes as brittle as her bleached hair, while Michelle Williams—oh, it's just heartbreaking."

"Well," my sister said emphatically, banging pots around as she emptied her dishwasher, "it's great that they portrayed it well, but the situation itself is not OK. These guys have got to stop marrying women."

"You looking for an argument?" I asked. "I was engaged to a

gay man, remember? I don't think gay men should marry straight women, either."

"They've got to stop," she repeated. "They've got to stop hiding behind wives. It's not fair to use women like that."

"I couldn't agree more," I said. "And it's a time-honored practice with a name, in case you didn't know: marrying a woman for the purpose of passing for 'normal' in straight society is called 'having a beard' because it makes one look butch, and I think in general, gay men should be metaphorically if not literally clean-shaven. But I also think that if you want gay men to stop marrying straight women, one good way of helping that happen is to let them marry each other." She made no reply to that—as a Mormon Republican, what could she say?—but she at least nodded.

I know the gay community is divided on the issue of marriage—many believe that heterosexual marriage is an inherently flawed and repressive institution, an arrangement in which one partner is always necessarily subordinate to the other. Marriage is therefore, the argument goes, an institution that lesbians and gay men would be better off not emulating or participating in, since what's really desirable is a transformation of all romantic and sexual partnerships into something more respectful and equal. I certainly respect that point of view, but until we achieve that transformation, I feel that if consenting adults of legal age want to marry a same-sex partner, they should have the legal right to do so, regardless of whether or not they take advantage of that right.

I also feel it is in the best interest of straight women to be advocates of gay rights—it's one of those easy situations where the ethical thing to do is also conveniently self-serving. That's baldly stated, perhaps, but I'm convinced I'm right. I don't know if it's necessarily in the best interest of gay men to be advocates of greater rights for both lesbians and straight women, but I know so many gay men who genuinely and passionately espouse the cause of feminism and women's rights. Their own experiences with oppression have granted them enough empathy that they can imagine something about what it's like to be a woman in this culture, and they want to make life easier for their sisters, mothers, friends, and, in some cases, daughters and ex-wives. They know that patriarchy is still patriarchy, even if the patriarch is queer, and they're willing to renounce the privileges patriarchy extends to them as men, in the interest of justice.

I think it's important to underscore that point: gay men must be willing to renounce the privileges of patriarchy if they are truly interested in justice and equality not only for themselves as members of a marginalized community, but for all marginalized subjects. Furthermore, straight people who advocate for greater rights and respect for gay women and men must also critique any discussion of homosexuality that privileges, automatically and without acknowledgment of what is being excluded, men and their concerns over women and theirs.<sup>13</sup> As a male friend who critiqued an early draft of this essay put it, a "form of liberation of one group of people—gay men [which, let us not forget, accounts for around 5 percent of the population]—that ignores the consequences of their ac-

tions on other groups—women [50 percent of the population]—does not amount to a liberation at all." Instead, it raises "the question of whether in the defense of such a generalized form of privilege [i.e., the right to be head of the family in conventional heterosexual marriages], patriarchy doesn't in fact (attempt to) transform the political demands of gay men into demands that in the end provide support for the patriarchy and other sorts or forms of hierarchy and privilege."

Thus, gay men must not react like Christensen, who, when he discovered my feminist critique of his position, was both flummoxed and outraged. The possibility that feminists might object to his demand that he be not merely granted but granted *appropriately*, as his masculine due, the rights of a straight man, never occurred to him. Rather, as he eventually admitted to me, he had "always naturally seen straight men as my enemy, and thus assumed that women and particularly feminists were my allies. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, and all that." He didn't respond, "Because I've actively worked to better the lives of women, I always thought feminists would support me when I claimed, as a gay man, the privileges of straight men." Instead, he assumed that since his enemy was straight men in the collective, he could count on women and feminists in the collective to support him, even as he demands the privileges of a conventional straight Mormon patriarch—the only difference being he acknowledges that he is not sexually aroused by women's bodies. But the enemy feminists oppose is not the straight men Christensen claims the right to emulate. The enemy is patriarchy, an entire system that teaches men, regardless of things like sexual orientation, to expect privileges at the cost of women's well-being; Christensen's views are both products and examples of that system.

**A**S FOR MY own story, I did not marry a gay man, but I was engaged to one, Matthew, in 1988, after we fell in love at first sight. The story has a reasonably happy ending: he had enough integrity and wisdom that he could not permit himself to marry me, knowing that however much he loved me, he would never lose his attraction to men. But it took four years of my wheedling and prodding and begging to extract that confession from him; before that, he kept insisting that his refusal to marry me had nothing to do with sexual orientation, that it was because I wasn't the right *woman* for him. Given how much I loved him, the whole thing absolutely tortured me. His admission that he was gay was a genuine gift, because it allowed me to stop hoping and get on with my life, and from the day he made that admission, I have never ceased to be grateful that he wouldn't marry me.

Because sex is, after all, fundamental to this discussion and to many discussions in feminism, I'll state that we were both Mormon virgins when we met, and we were both Mormon virgins when he called off the engagement.<sup>14</sup> As a result, I would have to speculate as to what our sex life would have been like, and though I consider sex thoroughly central to feminism, the imagined particulars of my unconsummated relationship with this man are pretty moot. Still, I know there was a time when we couldn't keep our hands off each other—that was one



*Matthew Dann and Leo Flynn at their marriage 14 April 2007 at the Maison Communale (town hall) of Forest, a district in Brussels, Belgium. Matt and Leo are flanked by their witnesses, Holly Welker (left) and Emily Flynn.*

reason it seemed sensible to make wedding plans. I know that I loved him body and soul and will love him until the day I die, if not beyond that. I know that after he ended the relationship, I was utterly bereft, thoroughly heartbroken, absolutely devastated to the point of being suicidal—I couldn't imagine life without him. Not only that, but I felt profoundly isolated and was convinced in my heart that all men are gay, or at the very least homosocial. I saw so little evidence of genuine respect among men for women that it was hard to believe men could actually desire these creatures they demonstrated such contempt for.<sup>15</sup>

Mercifully I eventually discovered that sex can be a truly magnificent expression of love and respect and intimacy, something that transforms the way you think not only about sex, but about desire in the first place—pure and simple and complicated and messy, about lust and love and your own libido and your willingness and ability to give and receive pleasure. But sex like that requires great generosity and sensitivity on the part of everyone involved, and while I believe there are some lucky people who simply land in relationships that provide sex like that—I've met people who claimed it happened to them, that losing their virginity was the most glorious experience of their lives—most of us have to work at it, and some of us never achieve it.

Matthew and I are still close friends, by the way, two

decades after we first met and fell in love. It hasn't always been easy, but it's been worth it. We've helped each other through some very tough times, and at this point we've known each other longer than anyone we're in close contact with but not related to. He's been in a committed relationship with his partner for more than ten years. They live in Brussels, and I've visited there a couple of times; I was even an official witness at their wedding, an actual legal ceremony recognized by the state. They have a daughter conceived through artificial insemination; her mother is a lesbian friend of theirs who, along with her partner, has primary custody of the child. Together they're a family—a *good* family.

In his commentary to Christensen's essay, Ron Schow notes that Christensen oversimplifies "his options as either temple marriage or 'a rampant life of unrestrained queerness.' Obviously," Schow points out, "there are many choices between these two extremes."<sup>16</sup> Christensen ends his essay by relating an epiphany that occurred after a "BYU fireside where they tell you to get married. I'd pretty much tuned out the entire thing," he writes, "because it didn't apply to me, but then I got home, sat on my bed, and had a distinct impression that yes, it did apply to me. Yes, I was gay, but that didn't mean I was excluded from Heavenly Father's desire for his children to marry and have families."<sup>17</sup>

I am glad Christensen had that epiphany—I accept its

truthfulness. What I don't accept is his oversimplified and religiously predetermined interpretation (Emily Pearson writes about the danger of taking "every spiritual experience . . . at face value" in situations such as these<sup>18</sup>), that any marriage he might have must be with a woman for whom he feels little sexual desire. While I certainly acknowledge the right of Christensen and his wife to do whatever they want, and while I am enough of a libertarian to think all consenting adults should have the legal right to marry any other consenting adult(s) who want(s) to marry them, I am also enough of a libertarian to insist on my own right to remain skeptical of marriages so thoroughly shaped and guided by androcentric, misogynist ideology—particularly when that ideology is cloaked in the guise of divine decree—and to criticize the rhetoric employed to defend them.

In a coda to his essay, Christensen acknowledges that

I see that Marybeth [Raynes] states my dilemma more accurately when she says that people in my situation choose "between a deep love and erotic attachment plus love." This choice is a good deal more difficult than the over-simplified choice I thought I was making. By choosing heterosexual marriage, I've denied myself the experience of loving someone I am naturally attracted to and my wife the experience of loving someone who is naturally attracted to her.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, I want for these gay men who choose to marry straight women what they seem unable to want for themselves or grant their wives: I want them to be able to form their families and raise their children in unions where both partners are beloved, cherished, and desired body and soul, and I think the world will be a better place for me and all other straight women and men when gay women and men have that right, as a matter of course and without disputation, qualification, or reservation. ☹

## NOTES

1. Jane Gross, "When the Beard Is Too Painful to Remove," *New York Times*, 3 August 2006. Available at <[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/03/fashion/03marriage\\_bg.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/03/fashion/03marriage_bg.html)> (accessed 4 August 2006).

2. Ben Christensen, "Getting Out/Staying In: One Mormon Straight/Gay Marriage," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no 3 (Fall 2005): 121–32, 148–51.

3. Sakia Gunn was a fifteen-year-old who was stabbed to death in Newark, New Jersey, in 2002 for spurning sexual advances by announcing a sexual orientation that excluded the sex of the attackers. Although Gunn's murder galvanized Newark at the time, it received scant attention elsewhere, particularly when compared to the death of Matthew Shepard, and efforts to memorialize Gunn have been relatively unsuccessful. Many analysts argue that Gunn's race (African-American), class (lower), gender (female) and sexuality (lesbian) meant that her murder mattered less in the psyche of the nation.

4. See Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mixed-Orientation LDS Couples Count on Commitment, Work and Love to Beat the Odds," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 4 August 2006. Available at <[http://www.sltrib.com/ci\\_4136232](http://www.sltrib.com/ci_4136232)> (accessed 4 August 2006).

5. Whitney Joiner, "Live Girl-on-Girl Action!" *Salon*, 20 June 2006. Available at <[http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2006/06/20/girl\\_on\\_girl/index.html](http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2006/06/20/girl_on_girl/index.html)> (accessed 20 June 2006).

6. Steven Fales, "Confessions of a Mormon Boy: An Autobiographical One-Man Play Written, Created and Performed by Steven Fales," *SUNSTONE*, December 2003, 40–56.

7. Ron Schow, "Homosexual Attraction and LDS Marriage Decisions,"

*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no 3 (Fall 2005): 133–43.

8. *Ibid.*, 138–39.

9. *Ibid.*, 138.

10. Marybeth Raynes, "Thoughts of a Therapist," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no 3 (Fall 2005): 143–48.

11. *Good-bye, I Love You* (New York: Random House, 1986) by Carl Lynn Pearson and "Irreconcilable Differences" (*SUNSTONE*, April 2006, 42–48) by her daughter Emily Pearson are eloquent illustrations of this point.

12. See *The Smith Family*, directed by Tasha Oldham, Small Town Pictures, 2002. This documentary chronicles the lives of Steve and Kim Smith. Steve died of AIDS after first passing the HIV virus on to his wife. She now lives with a deadly disease resulting from her husband's unsafe sexual behavior.

13. Even so committed a feminist and passionate an advocate of gay equality and human rights as Carol Lynn Pearson can be guilty of ignoring the existence of lesbians. An ad soliciting "stories from or about gay members of religious families" for Pearson's book, *No More Goodbyes—Embracing our Gay Family and Friends in Spite of and Because of Our Religions*, appears on page 57 of *SUNSTONE*, April 2006. Pearson specifies that she seeks "true experiences from gay people, parents, siblings, wives/former wives, friends, that involve religion either as a part of the problem or a part of the solution (or both)" (emphasis added). There is no mention of husbands/former husbands of gay people; not even the gender-neutral term "spouses/former spouses" is used. Thus, the unconscious assumption seems to be that gay is a subset of male rather than of human being; the unconscious message seems to be that lesbian experience doesn't count. I pointed this out to Pearson at the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium; she acknowledged that it was an unfortunate and chagrin-inducing error, and said it was one she would not make again.

14. As evidence of the role of sex in feminism—and the ways in which that role is ignored—I'll relate an anecdote about a panel I attended in 2005, "Advancing Feminist Sensibilities among Mormon Men," the abstract of which read:

Why aren't there more visible and vocal male feminist voices within the Mormon community? The all-male panel will talk about their journeys toward becoming feminists, the challenges they face in maintaining feminist sensibilities in Mormon culture, and ideas they see for encouraging other Mormon men to take more active feminist stances. Audience discussion will follow.

In the audience discussion after the panel, I tried to ask how sex fit into the panelists' understanding of feminism. I was greeted initially by a confounded silence from all four panelists. Eventually one panelist responded, though his answer made clear that he thought I was asking whether or not he enjoyed sex with women. While I was glad to know that he did indeed, I was trying to ask something very different—I was trying to ask if they understood the way sexual denigration is often a primary tool in efforts to disempower women and if being a male feminist had transformed how they understood, experienced, and enjoyed sex. Unfortunately, I was not able to express that at the time of the panel, but even after the panel, when I was better able to gather and articulate my thoughts, I didn't get very encouraging answers. One panelist said to me, "I can see how feminism has real ramifications in regards to sex, but I never thought of it that way; I never thought of feminism as anything but a political movement."

15. At some point, I realized that there are plenty of straight men in the world, and that it is completely possible to feel sexual desire for someone you find contemptible—that, in fact, certain kinds of sexual arousal and activity are fundamentally expressions of contempt, often deliberately so. Although I hope the following examples are not part of the personal experience of most people reading this article, I think it is important to call attention to some of the ways heterosexual sex can involve contempt for women: the brutal attempted date rape described by Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar*, for instance, or sex with a prostitute so a man can feel entitled to call the woman he's having intercourse with "a filthy whore," the point being that denigrating and shaming a woman is a turn-on. Then there's the custom practiced in some Islamic societies, where a group of men rape the virgin daughter or sister of a man who has committed certain crimes, in order to dishonor his family: whether or not the woman's impending shame and pain helps the men who perform the rape become aroused, there remains the fact that debasing and humiliating her is the primary motive for the sexual act, to the point that she is expected to kill herself after it. And there's always the use of systematic mass rape, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Darfur, etc., as a means of both torture and ethnic cleansing.

16. Schow, "Homosexual Attraction," 139.

17. Christensen, "Getting Out/Staying In," 131.

18. Emily Pearson, "Irreconcilable Differences," 42–48.

19. Christensen, "Getting Out/Staying In," 149.