

ADOPTION: A MAJOR ISSUE FOR THE FUTURE

by

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Overshadowed by the current uproar about same-sex marriage is another issue that is probably of equal importance to lesbians and gay men: adoption of children. The traditional view of gays and lesbians as “sexual perverts” and “child molesters” in the recent past has inhibited efforts for any kind of association between homosexuals and children. That stereotype was behind the effort to keep gays and lesbians from being teachers, and it has even been used to deny access to the biological offspring of parents who were discovered to be involved in same-sex relationships.

While headlines focus on the denial of custody rights to parents on the basis of their sexual orientation, quiet progress is being made in many States as judges and social workers stop discriminating against parents simply on the basis that they are gay or lesbian. The work of legal groups like Lambda Legal Defense and the Gay and Lesbian Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, as well as numerous progressive lawyers, have made major strides in this area in the movement for GLBT equality.

Another factor is the simple reality that so many women in lesbian relationships are getting pregnant by artificial insemination, and are raising their children just like other parents. And even gay men are more likely to be raising children produced from a

previous heterosexual marriage than was true in previous decades. As the number of kids being raised in a household with two parents of the same sex becomes more common, society is gradually accepting this reality as a fact of life.

In this regard, the gay and lesbian rights movement has had a resounding success, despite the noisy objections of homophobic conservatives. Likewise, steady progress has also been made on the question of adoption of homeless children by gay and lesbian couples. Yet in this area, long after arguments about gay teachers and child custody have gone by the wayside, we still hear diatribes that gays and lesbians should not be allowed to adopt children.

Adoption, I would suggest, is one of the most important issues for our future. In the first place, many gay men and lesbians do not wish to reproduce, and in an era of increasing overpopulation in the world, it can be argued that this is a more moral choice than adding more babies to the growing human numbers.

An anthropological perspective suggests that society works best when the generations are tied together in close bonds of dependency. In most traditional cultures of the world, there is an explicit recognition of a pact between the generations: I take care of you when you are young, and you support me in my old age. In turn, the same pattern holds true for the younger persons as they mature, when they are expected to renew the effort by taking care of the next generation.

How do childless persons fit into this scenario of inter-generational dependence? Anthropologists studying traditional cultures around the world have found that a range of choice is offered. Quite often, in many cultures, those who do not reproduce remain in especially close family bonds with their parents and siblings. In my book *The Spirit and*

the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture, I discuss the pattern in many aboriginal Native American cultures where homosexually-inclined individuals helped raise their siblings' children. In return, the nieces and nephews were expected to take care of them when they were old. Because of this cultural pattern, it was not necessary for everyone to reproduce. In contrast to the nuclear family pattern of Western culture, homosexuals could easily fit into the extended family kinship system. This is a major reason why cultures with such kinship patterns, like Native American and Polynesian societies, were so accepting of homosexuality. Non-reproducing individuals were simply integrated into the larger kinship system.

Besides being caretakers for their siblings' children, homosexuals in such societies could also adopt homeless children. In fact, among many traditional Native American tribes, when a child was orphaned it was to non-reproductive homosexuals that the society turned as the FIRST choice to become the adoptive parent. This was done for the clear reason that since such individuals were not likely to have a child biologically, they were logically seen as the prime choice to take on the role of adoptive parent. Children were distributed so that every adult had childcare responsibilities, and thus had someone to take care of them when they got old.

This question of care of the young by the older generation, and also care for the elderly by the younger generation, is a major issue for traditional societies. The implications for us today are that, if we really want to ensure gay and lesbian acceptance in society, we should strive to fit into these intergenerational patterns of care for the young and the old. Some might do this by becoming parents, but others can fill these social roles by adoption.

For those of us who do not reproduce, we might give more emphasis to taking on roles as caregivers both to children and the elderly. This does not necessarily mean conventional adoption. For example, many people in poverty in America today are single women with children. It is economically difficult for a single mother to provide for herself and her children on only one salary. She might be faced with steep childcare costs that drain the family finances.

In this situation, it makes economic sense for single mothers to move in with gays or lesbians, and then all of them co-parent the children together. We need to develop an organization to coordinate such a pairing of single parents with homosexuals. Normally, an organization like Big Brothers or Big Sisters would be the logical place to begin building such a project, but those organizations' ties to conservative Christian sponsors inhibits such a development. Perhaps Gay and Lesbian Community Centers that exist in several major cities could establish projects to connect single parents with gays or lesbians. Even newspapers could help, by establishing "Parenting Opportunities" in their "Roommates" section of Classified Advertising.

Another major problem facing society is the existence of large numbers of homeless children. While there is a demand for (usually white) babies by heterosexual couples who cannot reproduce, social agencies often cannot find good homes for older children. Their plight is truly pathetic, as they languish in overcrowded orphanages or marginally survive on the streets. This is especially true for gender-nonconformist children, many of whom later come out as gay or lesbian. Such sissy boys or tomboy girls commonly face rejection by homophobic parents, who may even throw them out of

their house at a young age. Don't they deserve gay or lesbian role models, to help them gain self-acceptance and mature properly? Who will help them if we do not?

Because of our reaction against the "child molester" stereotype, we prefer not to think about this problem. Many gay men and lesbians have retreated from any interaction with the young. It is time for us to get over this defensiveness, in order to make positive contributions to society. From the models offered by Native American and Polynesian cultures, we can envision the potentially important role that non-reproducing homosexuals can make to the development of the next generation of youth. Those cultures do not have the pervasive fear of "child molestation" by homosexuals, because they do not see anything wrong if a child grows up to be homosexual. Much of the hysteria around child molestation in this society today is due to the fear that young people, if experiencing same-sex activity, will grow up to be gay or lesbian. Until we confront this fear, and stress that there is nothing wrong with being lesbian or gay, we will not be able to reduce that hysteria

When confronted with the evidence that the vast majority of child molestation in contemporary society is by heterosexual men, homophobes typically retreat to the position that homosexuals should not adopt because they will become active role models for their children to become homosexual. This fear is contradicted by the facts, demonstrated in many sociological studies, which show that children raised by lesbian or gay parents are no more likely to become homosexual than the general population. Sexual orientation is not something that is decided on the basis of parental role models; otherwise, all children of heterosexual parents would be heterosexual (which is not true).

Again, the supposition of this argument is that there is something wrong with children growing up to be something other than heterosexual. In a sense, it might be argued, it is too bad that more people are not homosexual, since our earth today is so overpopulated by people who are reproducing too much. What is this great value of bringing still more people into our environmentally overloaded world in the future?

If we will get over our defensiveness, the gay community could make a major effort to assist homeless older children, by organizing foster homes and becoming foster parents. Such a trend would help to produce a new generation that would be accepting not only of lesbian and gay people, but would also be more tolerant in general.

A child who grows up in an untypical family will see things somewhat differently. As one who values diversity, I think this is a positive reason in favor of adoptions by all kinds of diverse people. One thing our society needs much more of, for our future progress as a nation, is children who see things from different perspectives. The American workforce badly needs original, creative minds, not stifling conformers.

Homophobic bigots have also made the argument that children raised by same-sex parents may be damaged in their psychological development because of being raised in an untypical household. Does this mean that any people who are untypical should not raise children? Should children not be raised in a household of musicians, on the basis that musically-gifted individuals are not “normal”? Such a question is ridiculous. The social science research clearly shows that what is most important for child development is to be raised in a loving household where children are given maximum encouragement to fulfill their potential.

If bigots would worry less about making everybody "normal," and would instead encourage each individual to reach her or his own maximum potential fulfillment and happiness, our society will be a lot better off in the future.

The question, then, is why homosexuals should be kept from adopting. The point is that, with so many homeless children in the world today, we simply cannot afford to write off a whole segment of the population as unsuitable to become adoptive parents. In the view of many social workers, gay and lesbian couples should be positively encouraged to adopt some of these homeless kids. The criteria for adoption should be solely the adult's capacity to be a kind competent parent, and to provide a nurturing home for the child.,

By this means, by adopting homeless children and by collaborating with single parents, gays and lesbians can make a significant contribution to society. We can also argue for social acceptance on the basis that we as non-reproducers are making a unique and needed positive force for social improvement.