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Why We're Not Getting Married

by Martha Ackelsberg and Judith Plaskow

We love each other, and we've been in a committed relationship for nearly twenty years. We are residents of Massachusetts. But we're not getting married. We fully believe that gays and lesbians should have the right to marry, and we celebrate the fact that a significant barrier to our full citizenship has fallen. In not taking advantage of this new right, however, we can more comfortably advocate for the kind of society in which we would like to live.

Those who have fought for gay marriage have made clear that, in the U.S., important benefits are tied to marital status. Over 1000 federal benefits attach to marriage—benefits relating to social security, inheritance, tax status, child custody, and the like. Further, other significant benefits—most notably, health care—are often linked to marriage. Opening up this status to gays and lesbians makes an enormous difference to those in committed relationships in which at least one partner has access to benefits or resources to share.

But focusing on the right to marry perpetuates the idea that these rights ought to be linked to marriage. Were we to marry, we would be contributing to the perpetuation of a norm of coupledness in our society. The norm marginalizes those who are single, single-parents, widowed, divorced or otherwise living in non-traditional constellations. As the language of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision itself makes evident, a focus on gay marriage can reinforce a dangerous tendency to define a particular form of family as the "basic unit of society."

Seeking expanded benefits through marriage also contributes to what amounts to the increasing privatization of responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, the ill and disabled. Thus, the Massachusetts decision argues that gay marriage is good for society because children ought to be raised by two parents. But such arguments can be, and have been, used to justify repressive "marriage promotion" policies that attempt to control and punish single mothers receiving welfare benefits. At the same time, they lead us to neglect our social responsibilities to provide adequate child-care, day care, elder-care, etc. that would allow all adults who want to work to be able to do so. And a focus on increasing the numbers of people who can get access to health or retirement benefits through their spouses can easily lead us to ignore or deny our societal responsibility to provide basic health care and old age security to all our citizens, regardless of marital status.

It's not easy to walk away from these benefits—especially in a world in which they don't come easily. We are fortunate, in that we do not need to rely on one another's employers for our health coverage, and this allows us the luxury of deciding not to marry.

Nevertheless, as feminists and as lesbians, we have considered ourselves to be part of social movements that were modeling a variety of ways to be in the world, and to be in meaningful relationships, other than through marriage. At this moment, when there is so much focus on celebrating the right to marry, we want to hold up a vision of a society in which basic rights are not tied to marriage, and which there are many ways to organize one's intimate life, marriage being only one of them.

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