



Family Values? Whose Family Values?

“Reporters frequently ask me – “What do you say to the argument that ‘gay marriage’ will inevitably lead to demands for state sanctioning of polygamy and polyamory?” My response – coming from Evan Wolfson – is always, “How about you let us have one spouse before you get greedy.” That usually ends that line of questioning.

There, are obviously, more serious and other ways to answer that question. I would like to say that the very question is another example of the fact that one way our society deals with its absolute inability to talk about sex and sexuality has always been to over-sexualize and to work out its fantasies and demons by projecting them on minorities – long African Americans and now gay people.

But what I really want to say is that straight people apparently have a lot more experience with polyamory than I do – with sixty-nine percent of people saying they know of husbands who have committed adultery, and 60% knew of wives who had done the same. Clearly, I want to say, many – if not perhaps most – straight married people have engaged in a polyamorous relationship at least once, albeit deceitful and ultimately harmful – so go ask them.

I bring this up because we cannot talk about a progressive pro-families movement, let alone the spiritual dimension to relationships and sexuality until we – not only the people in this room, but across the country – are able to speak honestly about the *reality* of the American family, the reality of sex, and the realities of sexuality.

In a nutshell, there is nothing quite as profoundly surreal as the way sex and the family is “supposed” to be in America and the way it really is. And to me there is nothing so profoundly troubling as our own unwillingness to speak the truth about the realities of our families and to fight to protect them.

The president and his right wing allies, for example, speak incessantly about the supposed fact that marriage is a sacred institution between one man and one woman and it hasn't changed for thousands of years.

I'm always unclear about what Bible or history books they're reading. Deuteronomy dictates how property is to be divided among multiple wives; Solomon didn't have a few, he had hundreds. Oh, and let's not forget those other biblical stories of family values, like giving your own daughters over to be raped to protect male guests, impregnating your servant, and then throwing her and her child out, and yes – the old stand by – incest.

The notion that marriage hasn't changed in thousands of years is laughable. Even in the last 50 years here in the U.S. there have been profound changes to legal framework of marriage:

- Until the 60's, women were still essentially the property of men and interracial marriage was illegal in dozens of states;
- Divorce was virtually unobtainable in many, and married couples could not obtain contraception even in Connecticut.

Even so, the forces of political and religious intolerance still proclaim the fiction of marriage “until death do us part” when the reality is that 43% of all first marriages end within 15 years, and the rate goes up to 52% for women under 45.

All across the country, there are divorced, remarried, divorced, remarried politicians demanding that the federal and their state constitutions be amended to save marriage from the gay desecrators. The chief sponsor of the Missouri

amendment, for example, was on her third marriage when she put that state's amendment forward.

Political and most religious rhetoric – and even most of popular culture – perpetuates this notion of “family” as mom married to dad and the kids. In reality, married heterosexual couples with children comprise less than one-quarter of American households, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Almost one-third of families with children in the United States are headed by either single parents or two unmarried parents. And there are significant differences among racial and ethnic groups, with Black families with children 4 times as likely, and Latino families 2.5 times as likely, to be led by unmarried or single parents.

Sadly, however, it is the fiction of what “family” is supposed to be that is driving public policy and tax dollars.

The Bush-Cheney administration – under the thumb of the religious right - is promoting heterosexual marriage and the reinsertion of fathers into single mother-led families as a key solution to child poverty. It is committed to spending hundreds of millions of dollars to “promote” heterosexual marriage through “counseling services, public awareness campaigns and marriage enrichment courses...” Key administration advisors, such as Wade Horn and Andrew Bush, have advocated privileging married couples with children in the distribution of limited supply benefits like public housing units, requiring mutual consent for divorce, and banning access to fertility clinics by unmarried couples.

Folks, this fantasy cruelly ignores the reality that nearly 30% of all children and nearly 70% of African American children are now born “out of wedlock.

And, what about the tens of millions being spent on “abstinence” only programs. Wasted is a better word. Eleven states have evaluated their abstinence-only programs and the results have been dismal. In Texas, more students reported

having had sex after taking an abstinence-only course then they did beforehand. Not only is the money being wasted on these programs is being taken away from HIV and sex education programs which have been proven to work, but there is a growing body of evidence that participants in the abstinence only programs are more likely to get pregnant by accident and more likely to engage in unsafe sex than others. This is promoting “family values?”

Here’s another example: Merck and GlaxoSmithKline are trying to get FDA approval for a vaccine for the human papilloma virus (HPV), the virus that causes cervical cancer. Ten thousand women in the U.S. (and 300,000 worldwide) get cervical cancer each year, and in the 4,000 here at home die from it. Cervical cancer is almost 100% preventable with this vaccine. Yet it is highly likely the FDA will not approve it because of pressure from our friends on the Christian right, who oppose the vaccine because it will, in their eyes, promote promiscuity.

Tony Perkins of the Traditional Values Coalition says, “Our concern is that this vaccine will be marketed to a segment of the population that should be getting a message about abstinence...It sends the wrong message.”

So, women will die because of the Christian’s right’s obsession with other people having sex and enjoying it and not getting sick or dying from it.

And, I could go on and on about the glaring disparities between the reality of sexual lives and sexual practices of huge numbers of Americans and the Father Knows Best – missionary position only myth that is taught and preached.

Sadly, as these injustices and this façade are foisted on the nation, there is little response from the majority of Americans whose own family realities and values are completely different from those being espoused from on high.

We are – it seems – afraid to admit that our families do not meet the “ideal.” In our silence, we join with those who seek to impose a family structure that does not and has never existed.

This silence not only results in an unjust distortion of public policy, but has negative and spiritual consequences for all families who do not meet or desire the norm.

By not standing up for the reality of the American family and countering the one-man-one-woman-with-children for life propaganda, we are co-conspirators in a fundamental denial of the validity and worth and spiritual value of those families and relationships. Rather than nurturing, supporting and celebrating the diversity of family, we are party to attacking it.

The grandmother raising her grandchildren, the gay or lesbian parents, the single, divorced women, the children being raised by several adults, whether related by blood or by choice, are all made to feel second class, inferior. Not only feel inferior, but actually discriminated against through laws and government programs.

The same is true for all those people – all those unmarried people, young and old gay and straight – who constitute the vast majority of adult Americans – who are having sex – and you know they are – that what they are doing is sinful, morally wrong and destructive to the fabric of society. This too causes enormous and negative psychological, spiritual, legal and sexual consequences, including shame, hiding, lying, exploitation of women, unsafe sex to name only a few.

What are some of the answers to this?

Rabbi Michael Lerner has expressed many of them in his book – adequate health care for all, real educational opportunities – among them.

Another is for all of us to stand up to religious and political discourse that exalts one form of family over another.

Another is to oppose legislation that seeks to restrict or prioritize access to services and tax-funded programs on the basis of marital status and to support legislation that supports all families.

Another is to speak out for the principle that sex is good, sex is God-given, sex is a fundamental human need and a fundamental human right. At the same time we must speak out against those who seek to malign, disparage, condemn and event criminalize honest sex between consenting adults.

And finally, it is for each one of us to have the courage to speak openly and honestly about the reality of our own families.

Thank you.