

## DADT III Overview II: Equal Rights for Gays

It would be nice to reverse the time arrow of physics and experience being a strong young man of college age in a gay bar, knowing that “I” was attractive to other men. I’ve never been “fortunate” enough to experience that. But I suspect that most upper income gay men (especially if white) in that age group in western countries don’t really grasp what earlier generations went through.

In recent years, the progress toward full equality when in recognizable family relationships has been surprising. While equality in public life and in upper income classes in the United States and western countries has become an expected social norm, tension over homosexuality among lower income groups and in less democratic or developed parts of the world seems to increase, as does bullying in some (but far from all) of our school systems, especially in rural or low income areas. The tension shows up particularly in social media.

The divide within society today unfolds into a divide across history. The notion of formal equal rights and full respect for due process started to take hold in the early 1990’s. Up until that time, the paradigm for gay life had been the right to be left alone, and to adult privacy.

The issue that started the swing in thinking was the struggle over allowing homosexuals, especially when open, to serve in the United States military, which started when President Clinton took office in 1993. That would lead to the 17-year reign of “don’t ask, don’t tell” (with Clinton’s “don’t pursue” often ignored), until it was finally repealed formally in 2011 under president Obama, after a sudden repeal bill passed at the end of 2010 by a lame duck Congress. During that time, the Supreme Court had (finally, when given a second chance) invalidated anti-homosexual sodomy laws with the 2003 Lawrence v. Texas opinion. I saw the military ban as a particularly pivotal issue that drew in so many other issue threads into its own vortex of social tensions, almost like a storm. At the heart was the discussion of forced intimacy and the supposed compromise of bodily privacy and modesty. But this expanded to a bigger concept, “unit cohesion”, which has a meaning in larger civilian society, “social capital”. The debate over “unit cohesion” sounded like a challenge to emerging libertarian ideas of individualism. All of this bore a curious parallel to my own expulsion from William and Mary over thirty years before. The ban seemed to provide a circular pretext for unequal treatment of gays, because by definition it said that gays could not share the risks and responsibilities of defending the country or community. The debate over the ban seemed to have a curious moral parallel to the furor over the military draft and student deferments three decades before. The tragedy of 9/11 and military challenges that followed brought back a debate over the way the sacrifice of military service is shared. The military ban had always been associated with a denial of many security clearances to gays, although this problem would be resolved during Clinton’s years, with civilian gays able to work for the CIA by 1996.

The recognition of same-sex domestic partnerships would precede the use of the term marriage, but progress in marriage equality in many states, and the overturning of much of DOMA in 2013, occurred much more rapidly than I had expected. From pro-marriage camps, talking points emphasized equal spousal benefits and the effect on children with same-sex parents. Same-sex couples could provide caregiving, and obvious social good. Arguments against same-sex marriage seemed to flow in desperate circles, and seemed to refer to babies and children as abstractions. I had no personal problem with the idea that “marriage” refers to a potentially procreative intimate relationship between

a man and woman, with the openness to the responsibility that follows. But the real problem seemed to be second-class citizenship for “singletons”, those without their own families and children at all. For while “we” often enjoyed lower expenses and more discretionary income, it was becoming apparent (particularly with eldercare) that we were not immune from having to provide for other people, and we could not afford to be in a “second class” situation when this would happen. After 2000, some social conservatives began to argue that low birthrates among affluent classes threatened economic instability, and that society had gone too far in the absolute responsibility it had expected of parents had when they “decided” to have children with sexual intercourse. The childless needed to share the risks, which can be emotional as well as financial.

But until the 1990s, gay life had pretty much been lived in a separate dominion, preceding the “reconciliation” that would push toward equality and a more shared social experience. This was a world of parity, but not full equality. Life seemed like a chess counter-gambit. The main issues had been privacy and due process and being left alone. Why should something be criminalized if it harmed no one and took place in private between consenting adults? Why did others take it upon themselves to barge into our lives, for no reason? After all, we did not have babies out of wedlock and could not threaten other people’s marriages. Or could we?

Actually, the “privacy” period had three distinct sub-periods. Until Stonewall, really horrible things did happen. Police raided gay bars and published the names of people in them. People were fired on the basis of rumor and innuendo. People were subjected to aversion therapy (which is sometimes tried today in very conservative religious communities). One of the worst cases of anti-gay abuse would be what happened to British computer scientist Alan Turing, who practically broke the Nazi secret codes himself, only to be chemically castrated after clumsily telling police he was gay after a household burglary in Britain in 1952.

After Stonewall in 1969, things quickly got better, and a sort of “don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t pursue” mentality settled into the civilian world, at least in larger cities. Gay bars grew, and pride celebrations started. The late 70s were a particularly insular and inward-looking period of urban gay life on the coasts, with the emergence of ideas like the polarity theories of Paul Rosenfels. People did lead double lives, but private social lives in cities and resorts were rich with activities and serial relationships. There was a whole “code of ethics” for this life. The crash came with the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, which gave the right wing new ammunition with public health arguments. Sci-fi doomsday scenarios were proposed whereby gay men had “amplified” HIV in such a manner than some unpredictable event (like transfer to insects) might someday threaten the entire world. Fortunately, like tornadoes, the worst of these speculations did not hold together.

But let’s come back to The Question, and Ask Why. For example, why did William and Mary toss me out of school in 1961? What did “they” (or “you”) want from me? It’s simple and it’s hard. I could say, children. Particularly because I was an only child. In fact, in Muslim culture today this is often very obvious, as women are required to keep themselves available to men for childbearing. In a culture where individuals don’t necessarily have the opportunity to advance themselves with individual cultural expression, having a “lineage” through one’s kids may seem like a fundamental right which homosexuals could take away.

I think a more a propos reason has to do with the fact that having a family and kids requires personal sacrifice and its own kind of risk-taking. Remember, women used to die in childbirth. It’s easier

to get many people to accept the risk if they have reassurance that everyone else has to. Gay men, when around straight men, used to be perceived as distracting or as kibitzers, as arbiters or judges of men as objects of admiration (or not) rather than women. This could be seen as a bit distraction to heterosexual self-confidence. Gay men, curiously, often wanted for themselves what they admired in others, and reflected society's meritocratic values in their process of upward affiliation. Sometimes straight men wanted to see "less competitive" men around them find homely women as a reassurance for themselves. For men to refuse to go along with this, and show others up, was seen as so unacceptable that society would make examples of those who did this.

I understand the desire some people to appeal to the simplicity and automaticity of religious teachings for authority, and the desire of progressives to look to ideas of immutability to deflect from subtle considerations of personal responsibility. Both "sides" on the issues around sexuality need to look more deeply at what drives their beliefs.

I did not develop, within myself, a sense that future life derived biologically from me would be of "value". So I did not develop a sense of meaning in loving someone who would become the mother of "my" child. In recent years, I have sensed more how others feel in this area, and realize why sometimes they are taken back by my aloofness, which is partly explained by my lack of gender-specific physical and then social competitiveness. I did live my own life productively with a certain truce (if not full "equality"); but setting this life up in a world coming out of prohibitionism led me to excessive focus on my own needs, to the extent that I cared less about others, especially in the broader context of some sort of future common good. Indeed, modern individualistic culture sometimes speaks of marriage, family, and the willingness to experience emotional (as well as sexual) complementarity as merely superficial matters of private choice, when compared to tangible personal "accomplishments". Could I have a permanent same-sex relationship that could last for decades and survive aging and physical challenges? That's a perplexing question with no apparent solution. I do feel that the moral questions are not so much about what I said, did or felt, but about what I didn't do or feel. The idea of immutability doesn't remove the concern over the implications of "who I am" for others.

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