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point of view

Why We Decided to Marry

July 1, 2013

Why We Decided to Marry on our 50th Anniversary

by [Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth](#)

After 50 years we tied the knot. We exchanged vows and were pronounced spouse and spouse on June 27, 2013, in the garden of the Red Inn in Provincetown, Massachusetts, surrounded by dear friends who traveled from across the country and Canada for the occasion. Our decision to marry on our golden anniversary was deeply personal and highly political.

We decided to marry because we love each other and have spent our lives together in the most intimate personal and professional collaboration imaginable. We count ourselves lucky to have each found our soul mate early in life. By marrying on our anniversary, we looked forward and backward. We declared our continuing commitment to each other and also celebrated our shared past.

We feel privileged to have witnessed and participated in one of the most significant social movements in American history. The right to marry the person one loves is a milestone in the quest for human rights. Crucial to that achievement is the insistence that our relationships deserve the same recognition and respect as heterosexual relationships. Hence, the marriage of any gay or lesbian couple in the thirteen states and the District of Columbia where marriage equality has been won at long last and at high cost cannot help but also be political.

We met in the summer of 1963 in the Boulevard Lounge, a gay bar in Baton Rouge, perhaps not the most romantic-sounding venue, but one that proved magical for us. One of us was an 18-year-old who had just completed his freshman year and was contemplating whether to declare an English major or pursue a pre-law curriculum; the other a graduate student in English working toward his Ph. D. We were immediately attracted to each other and soon discovered that we shared the same interests and the same values and the same senses of humor.

After a whirlwind courtship, we embarked on a partnership that has worked for 50 years, largely because we complement each other in numerous ways. Where one is weak, the other is strong. One of us is Dionysian in temperament, the other Apollonian. We think we are better as a couple than either of us is alone. During our 50 years together, the dynamics of our relationship changed more than once, but we never ceased loving each other and never lost our ability to make each other laugh.

Over the years, as various enthusiasms waxed and waned and as we pursued rewarding but demanding careers in which we established ourselves as independent voices as well as frequent collaborators, we always acknowledged the preeminence of our bond with each other. Nor did we fail to value the "thousand daily decencies" that make domestic life pleasant.

For each of us, the other became "the ideal companion to whom you can reveal yourself totally and yet be loved for what you are, not what you pretend to be," as Christopher Isherwood famously said of Don Bachardy.

At the time we met, homosexuality was illegal in every state of the union except Illinois, which two years previously had decriminalized sexual activity between consenting adults. In most states, conviction for sodomy, sometimes called "crime against nature" or "unnatural intercourse," was punishable by a long prison term.



Claude (top) and Ted in 1963.

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Understandably, in the early years a great deal of our energy was devoted to concealing our relationship rather than celebrating it. We were "friends," "roommates," "cousins." Only to trusted gay and lesbian friends were we open about the fact that we were lovers.

Many of our straight friends, especially those in our literary-artsy circle at college, knew that we were gay. At least, they assumed so, and we tacitly presented ourselves as a couple. But homosexuality was not a topic that could be discussed freely and directly in the early 1960s with straight people, even straight people who were friends and who knew the score and who were accepting.

Straight friends were equally reticent. To discuss homosexuality with someone who was thought or known to be gay would somehow be crossing a line of decorum. So shameful was homosexuality considered, to discuss it in personal terms would be to commit an embarrassing *faux pas*.

The danger came not from the rarely enforced—and largely unenforceable—laws prohibiting homosexual conduct, but from the social attitudes that those laws mirrored. When we were completing our education and launching our careers as academics, we were painfully aware that we could be expelled even from public universities, lose job opportunities (as indeed we did), or even be fired for no reason other than being gay or for simply suspected of being gay.

Homosexuals were routinely purged from government employment, including schools and universities. Police often raided gay bars and cruising areas and, occasionally, private parties. Gaybashing was widely regarded as a harmless sport, a rite of passage for heterosexual youth. Vice squads in many cities routinely entrapped and sometimes assaulted gay men whom they enticed in bars, parks, and restrooms. The hapless victims would not only be charged with solicitation or attempted crimes against nature, but their names would also be published in the newspapers, often with tragic consequences.

As the decade wore on and homosexuality became more visible in American society, especially in large cities, we became more open and less anxious. Still, we never forgot that casual displays of affection could have serious consequences.

Despite these anxieties, however, the early years of our relationship were happy, full of joy and fun and possibility. It was a time of intellectual excitement and discovery. We were young and smart and the world was spread before us full of opportunity. We even discovered that membership in a secret fraternity had its own rich rewards.

We shared many good times with accomplished friends who demonstrated courage, resilience, and humor in the face of adversity and who—by dint of determination and talent—flourished in a society in which they were disdained. We brimmed over with idealism and assumed as an article of faith that things would get better, not only for racial minorities and women, whose civil rights struggles had finally come to the fore, but also for gay people.

When we moved to Chicago in 1966, we were befriended by an older couple who exemplified the Wildean wisdom that living well is the best revenge. Napier Wilt and Bill McCollum became our surrogate fathers. World travelers and bon vivants, and knowledgeable about everything, they had wonderful stories of gay life from the 1920s forward, to say nothing of their adventures in Europe, India, and Hong Kong. Their model helped shape our future lives, especially their immersion in books and history and music. Later, we celebrated their 50th anniversary with them.

One thing Napier and Bill taught us was the virtue of openness. Although they were discreet, as gay academics necessarily were at the time, they did not hide or cower in a closet or worry overmuch about exposure. The scuttlebutt at the University of Chicago, where Napier served as Dean of Humanities for more than a decade, is that they were once described at a faculty event as the happiest married couple in Hyde Park.

But even as we began our involvement in the gay rights movement in the late 1960s and became pioneers in the study of gay literature in the early 1970s, we trod carefully at first. Like most gay people of the era, we considered protecting our privacy essential. We were glad that *The Advocate* was mailed to us in a plain brown wrapper.

We were haunted by the (not altogether paranoid) fear that the government might round up gay people for "re-education" experiments or other horrors.

We had all heard stories of aversion therapy. To most gay men and lesbians of the day, psychiatric wards were as scary (and as punitive) as prison. The last thing gay people wanted then was to be on some bureaucrat's list of known or suspected sexual deviants.

But it quickly became clear that a mass movement for equal rights could never develop as long as the closet was not just the refuge of

gay people, but also their goal. Only with greater visibility and a willingness to speak out against discrimination and intolerance could justice ever be achieved.

Not surprisingly, after Stonewall, the slogan became "Out of the closets and into the streets!"

Even so, it took a long time for the slogan to be translated into action. In 1972, in answer to a courageous call by the late Louis Crompton, we attended a gathering in a hotel room in New York at the Modern Language Association convention to organize a gay and lesbian caucus within the organization. Fewer than a dozen of us attended, and only three or four of us were willing to sign our names on a petition to establish the caucus.

Those of us who began to publish in the new field of gay and lesbian studies were initially deemed subversive and dangerous and our work dismissed as special pleading. Yet resistance in the academy gradually gave way in the face of scholarship that was justified by its quality and relevance.

Ironically, Anita Bryant's ugly crusade against gay rights, which she launched in 1977 and has often been seen as the first manifestation of the political involvement of Evangelical Christians and the rise of the New Right, also had the effect of energizing the glbtq community and raising awareness of the need to come out.

In response to Bryant's success in rolling back gay rights ordinances in Miami, Florida, Wichita, Kansas, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Eugene, Oregon, newly elected San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk implored, "Gay brothers and sisters, . . . You must come out. Come out . . . to your parents. . . . Come out to your relatives . . . come out to your friends Come out to your neighbors. . . . to your fellow workers. . . to the people who work where you eat and shop. . . . once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake. For the sake of the youngsters who are becoming scared by the votes from Dade to Eugene."

Perhaps the most important consequence of the Bryant crusade is that, in addition to motivating gay people to come out, it also licensed the open discussion of homosexuality. Not only did gay people become activists, but straight people also declared their positions, and gay people and straight people began to talk to each other about homosexuality.



We discovered that some of our neighbors and colleagues were bigots and that others were supportive, that some were open to being educated and others were not. Homosexuality was no longer either the love that dared not speak its name or the subject that could not be discussed in polite company.

Ted (left) and Claude in 1979.

The Bryant crusade also proved that when gay people reached out to allies and helped form coalitions, the forces of homophobia could be defeated. While Bryant had spectacular successes at first, she was not uniformly victorious. Her effort to repeal a gay rights ordinance in Seattle failed. Most importantly, the Briggs Initiative in California, which she inspired, went down to a resounding defeat, which abruptly halted what would certainly have become a national campaign against gay teachers.

Bryant's obsession with homosexuality ultimately destroyed her career. She became an object of ridicule as well as scorn. Her metamorphosis from a likable and talented "good girl" in the public imagination to the very emblem of bigotry was not entirely due to the vilification she received from the glbtq community, but the willingness of gay people to stand up and be counted certainly helped.

Coming out has been crucial to the progress of the gay rights movement in the United States. The simple declaration of one's homosexuality not only freed individuals of the tyranny of the closet and of the burden of shrouding their lives in secrecy, but it also declared a truth that yielded tangible political consequences at a time when our lives were circumscribed by anti-gay laws, blatant discrimination, and unrelenting assaults on our self-esteem.

In the 1980s, the involuntary outing of gay people who had contracted AIDS helped humanize the illness, as many parents and siblings learned for the first time that their children and brothers were gay and that *their* "roommates" and "friends" and caretakers were also gay.

The dismal government response to the crisis prompted heroic action from the gay community, which built on the social and political institutions that had been created in the 1970s. The multi-faceted response to the epidemic included not only medical care and

research, but also social and artistic activism on behalf of those affected by AIDS.

The AIDS crisis also highlighted the vulnerability of our relationships in the absence of any recognition or protection. In the dark days when the epidemic raged uncontrolled, partners who cared for their longtime companions all too often found themselves barred from hospital rooms, unacknowledged in obituaries, and stripped of shared possessions.

The failure of the state to recognize our relationships sparked the campaign for marriage equality that began in earnest in the 1990s, a campaign that has finally achieved traction after the string of defeats during the Bush years, when votes to deprive us of equal rights were cynically wielded as wedge issues to increase the turnout of conservatives in presidential elections.

But as more and more individuals have come out, often at very young ages, the more success we have had in defeating anti-gay initiatives. The more voters know gay people personally, the more difficult it is for them to vote in favor of discrimination.

Precisely because so many glbtq people are now out and are supported by our friends and colleagues and relatives, we seem to have tipped the scales in terms of the struggle for equal rights. For the first time in American history, a majority of voters now favor equal treatment under the law for glbtq citizens.

But it is one thing to campaign for the right to marry, and quite another to decide to marry. No one is in favor of compulsory marriage; nor is marriage necessarily the right decision for every couple.

We know the arguments against marriage. Allegedly, it is a patriarchal institution that no longer fulfills any purpose; it has been abandoned by most heterosexuals, who have more children out of wedlock than within; it imposes antiquated religious values that most people no longer share; etc.

We used to dismiss marriage ourselves by sneering that we did not need a piece of paper from the government in order to love and cherish each other. (And, of course, we didn't, and in fact still don't.)

We joked that maybe it is good that we can't marry because making our relationship legal might spoil it. And, besides, we would add, if we do decide to split up, at least we won't have to worry about divorce lawyers meddling in our lives.

As many of our straight friends and relatives' marriages failed, we—sad to confess—sometimes even took a sly pleasure in the fact that our union continued as vibrant as ever, evidence, we told ourselves rather smugly, that it was stronger than most heterosexual marriages. The flourishing of our partnership as our married friends separated and divorced provided further proof that we did not need the state's sanction for a relationship that was essentially private.

But truth to tell, at least some of our self-satisfied joking and boasting were simply expressions of bravado, a means of coping with the pain we felt at being excluded from a social institution open to everyone but us. We knew that the only reason we could not marry was that gay people were deemed unworthy of marriage. The misnamed "protect marriage" amendments, often enacted by overwhelming votes, served no purpose other than to stigmatize gay and lesbian relationships.

The pain of exclusion was compounded by the resentment we felt at having to spend thousands of dollars to secure a mere fraction of the legal protections that come automatically with marriage, to say nothing of the hundreds of other benefits the government offers to married heterosexual couples but not to gay and lesbian couples.

Yet marriage is not really, or at least not primarily, about benefits. Were it only about benefits, civil unions or domestic partnerships would suffice. If the difference between marriage and domestic partnerships really was only a word, then neither side would have spent the tens of millions of dollars they did in the epic battle against Proposition 8, which was, after all, ostensibly only a disagreement about a word.

But such legal constructs as civil unions, however useful they may be as stopgap measures, do not offer the dignity and gravitas and respect conveyed by marriage.

For marriage is more than a legal contract. It is also a social institution in which both the couple and the community play important roles. That is to say, marriage is necessarily a private and a public institution.

In our wedding, for example, we made vows to each other, but we did not do so in isolation. We did so with friends and family gathered around to wish us well and to offer support.

We also did so under the imprimatur of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The dismal political climate in Louisiana, our state

of residence, which provides no recognition of same-sex relationships and has an ugly history of disdain for gay people, made it necessary to travel to a more enlightened state.

In her historic majority opinion in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, the case that legalized same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, Chief Justice Margaret Marshall pointedly emphasized the reciprocal nature of marriage for the couple and the community: "The exclusive commitment of two individuals to each other nurtures love and mutual support; it brings stability to our society. For those who choose to marry, and for their children, marriage provides an abundance of legal, financial, and social benefits. In return it imposes weighty legal, financial, and social obligations."

In her opinion that extended the right to marry to same-sex couples, Chief Justice Marshall also noted that "The Massachusetts Constitution affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals." She added, "It forbids the creation of second-class citizens."

Yes, we decided to marry as a means of announcing our private love and mutual support, but in doing so we were also insisting that our relationship contributes positively to society as a whole. Our decision also asserted our right to first-class citizenship in a country that loudly proclaims liberty and justice for all.

Our decision was at once personal and political.

One of the readings at our wedding was given by a dear friend who has doubts about the institution of marriage but not about us.

At the wedding, he read Tina Modotti's toast "To Diego and Frida" from Julie Taymor's film *Frida* (2002), which begins, "I don't believe in marriage. No, I really don't. Let me be clear about that. I think at worst it's a hostile political act, a way for small-minded men to keep women in the house and out of the way, wrapped up in the guise of tradition and conservative religious nonsense. At best, it's a happy delusion—these two people who truly love each other and have no idea how truly miserable they're about to make each other."

"But, but, when two people know that, and they decide with eyes wide open to face each other and get married anyway," the toast continued, "then I don't think it's conservative or delusional. I think it's radical and courageous and very romantic."

We happily drank to that.

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About Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth

Claude Summers (pictured, left) and Ted-Larry Pebworth (right) are William E. Stirton Professors Emeriti at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where they taught for more than 30 years. They have collaborated on numerous scholarly books and articles.



Summers is General Editor of gltbq.com. Among his books are *Christopher Isherwood* (1980), *E. M. Forster* (1983), and *Gay Fictions / Wilde to Stonewall* (1990). In 1996, he won a Lambda Literary Award for *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combating homophobia.

Pebworth has been honored for his scholarly work with awards and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Newberry Library, the Lilly Foundation, the John Donne Society, the American Philosophical Society, and the University of Michigan. He is a senior textual editor of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*. As Copy Editor of gltbq.com, he developed the encyclopedia's style guide and developed and maintains the site's intricately interlinked indexes.

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