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# Who is us? Who are them? What is your role in continuing the conversation?

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**Who is us? Who are they? What is your role in continuing the conversation?**

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Keynote Address  
Lavender Graduates' Celebration  
University of Puget Sound  
Tacoma Washington  
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I am honored and privileged to participate in this 5<sup>th</sup> annual Lavender Graduation. Honored, because I admire the students we are here to celebrate for their willingness to share themselves with this campus community. Privileged, because 2004 is turning out to be a very exciting year in the struggle for gay civil rights.

On Thursday, February 26 in San Francisco City Hall I married my partner Holly Senn (who I met in college 23 years ago). I share this fact because I see many parallels between lavender weddings and lavender graduations. Both are public events in which communities gather to celebrate commitment and mark transitions. Both are formal rituals—there is a procession, speeches are given, a kiss or handshake is exchanged, and an official document is issued as a record of the commitment. Our participation in these rituals is one factor that shapes our understandings about societal institutions.

It is precisely the rules and rituals of institutions that make change within them so powerful. The rules and rituals are participation sites in the struggle for civil rights. Like any other couple in San Francisco County, Holly and I paid for and completed a marriage license detailing our places of birth, professions, and parents' names. There has been a change in the ritual. No longer were names recorded under the categories of groom and bride, but as applicant one and applicant two—suggesting, I think, the kind of equity and

flexible roles that are important in all long-term relationships. Our written form was typed, stamped, photocopied on official paper, sealed, and recorded. Just as your graduation diploma will be.

According to Susan Leigh Starr (1989), boundary objects create spaces for interactions to occur, which allow us to negotiate different points of view in a community. I see societal institutions, like marriage and higher education, as boundary objects. The rules and rituals of these institutions give us a space and a structure to have conversations about very difficult questions: Who am I? Who is us? Who are them?

We are all participants in the ongoing conversation about this sameness and difference. For example, three protesters, surrounded by Rosie O'Donnell fans, held the banner, "God and the State of California will not recognize your union;" gay couples, dressed in their finery, signed the marriage license forms formerly reserved for heterosexuals; county clerk staffers gave generously of their time and smiles; over 50 volunteers gave directions, held coats, took photos, performed marriage ceremonies, cheered; six dear friends left their mid-day responsibilities to witness our marriage; President Bush proclaimed that "marriage cannot be severed from its cultural, religious, and natural roots;" (Marech, 2004) Libertarian party members distributed red roses and cards "protecting your right to marry since 1972," news trucks broadcasted to the nation; the anti-gay founder of Focus on the Family spoke to 20,000 people in Safeco Field; and we all are here today at lavender graduation.

As we interact, through conversation, we negotiate relationships again, again, and again. Educational historian, Larry Cuban (1990) argues that school reform isn't really about improving schools, but about schools becoming sites for ongoing conversations

about conflicting values. French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim noted that the structure of society is formed by the constant face-to-face interactions of its citizens (Collins, 1990). San Francisco's Mayor Gavin Newsom used the ritual of wedding to put a human face on gay marriage and created a national conversation about the institution of marriage.

The cultural scripts of institutions intrigue me because in them I see the potential to transform lives, and a more troubling potential to control lives (Schutz, 2004). Is it better for gay people to claim to marriage or to create a counter institution? Is conversation or confrontation needed in the struggle for equity? National and international politics demonstrate that institutions don't provide easy answers when faced with change and transition.

The struggle for civil rights is not only an institutional affair. I have internalized values conflicts and must search for coherence and conflict among the many facets of my identity. In her memoir, Joan Didion (2003, p.18) writes about the challenges of understanding the self, "confusions about the place and the way in which I grew up, confusions as much about America as about California, misapprehensions and misunderstandings so much a part of who I am I can still to this day confront them only obliquely." Feminist scholars emphasize that the personal is political, thus I must question not only the rituals of institutions, but also myself.

I congratulate you on your commitment to intellectual and civic engagement, wish you well in future endeavors, and invite you to become important participants in the ongoing conversation about sameness and difference. In closing, I offer four questions

for you to consider as you move ahead. Who are you? Who is us? Who are them? What is your role in continuing the conversation?

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