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NARRATIVE

Indescribable Freedom: Pushing an Agenda Called “Equality”

KATHLEEN BLUMREICH

On October 18, 2014, my partner of nearly twenty years and I were married in Chicago. It certainly wasn't terrible to stay at the Hyatt Regency, our room having a lovely view of the city and river; nor was it terrible to have our ceremony at the home of dear friends and then go out for a quiet dinner. We were elated to exchange vows, to make officially permanent a relationship that we'd known since the beginning was “it.” What did feel bad was that once we'd returned to Grand Rapids, we were no longer considered married. So far as the state of Michigan was concerned, our legally binding commitment to one another didn't exist. Unlike heterosexual couples who eloped to Las Vegas or tied the knot on some beach in Hawaii, we couldn't look to the full faith and credit clause of the Constitution and expect to have our marriage automatically recognized in all fifty states. Our situation was—and currently remains—like that of someone who has a valid driver's license in Florida not being allowed to get behind the wheel in Missouri without first visiting a Secretary of State's office. Until the Supreme Court rules in *Obergefell v. Hodges* this coming June, we will be in a peculiar limbo, our relationship considered one way by the federal government and another by the powers that be in Michigan.

Much yet needs to change in America. Homophobia is alive and well, as anyone who has scanned social media can attest. Young people, especially, continue to be bullied on school buses, in classrooms and hallways, in locker rooms and on sports fields, in their churches, and sometimes even in their homes by relatives who think that LGBT individuals are sick, disgusting, unnatural. Though most educated people are now too “polite” to voice their prejudices in the virulent language of the past, there are still those who cloak their disapproval of “alternative lifestyles” with qualifiers such as ‘Some of my best friends are gay, but ...’ or worse, ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin.’ Many social conservatives continue to assert that there is a “homosexual agenda” out there, and at

the top of the list is destruction of morality itself. (Somehow, I missed that memo.) Even among otherwise “accepting” or “tolerant” individuals, a too-frequently held belief is that same-sex relationships are patterned according to traditional heterosexual gender roles (“Which one of you is the ‘boy?’”). Yet others draw the line at marriage itself, claiming that same-sex unions are not “real” because they don't conform to the conventional “one man, one woman” model, nor are they procreative, a measure trotted out more for convenience than anything else, given the number of heterosexual couples who cannot or choose not to have children.

All of the above notwithstanding, the rapidity with which the LGBT civil rights and marriage equality movements have affected public policy is astonishing. To be perfectly honest, the fact that I could be open about my identity, much less marry my life-partner, is something I'd never imagined when we merged our hopes, dreams, and yes, households, in 1995. But now, protections against discrimination in housing, employment, medical care are fairly standard.

In retrospect, the brouhaha over domestic partner benefits feels absurd. With federal and some states' recognition of same-sex unions, LGBT individuals have access to the more than 1,000 rights and privileges that legal marriage confers (including, sadly, the “marriage penalty” written into U. S. tax code). And increasingly, all forms of media depict LGBT people as normal human beings who celebrate birthdays and holidays, repair their homes, go on vacation, rear children, eat at fast-food restaurants, watch television, and so forth. Of greater significance, perhaps, to readers of LAJM—regardless of their sexual orientation—is the impact that this cultural sea-change has had on academic freedom, both in terms of what we teach and how that material is received by our students. But first, a trip down memory lane.

Long before I fell in love with my partner and entered into a relationship with her, I was a staunch advocate of feminist and lesbian/gay causes. At college in the late 1970s, I joined consciousness-raising groups, went to political rallies,

spoke up in class about the paucity of literature by and about minorities, flat out told two male professors that their sexism was appalling. I had friends and, later, colleagues who were lesbian or gay, and I couldn't understand why they should be denied the same pursuit of happiness that straight people took for granted. Or failing that, why they couldn't simply be left alone rather than mocked, viewed as perverts, and later, in the 1980s, blamed for bringing God's wrath upon the nation via AIDS, the "gay plague." I truly believed that reason—whether advanced through formal education, civil discourse, awareness campaigns or other sociopolitical tactics—would quickly trump ignorance. I couldn't have been more wrong.

My own naïveté became abundantly clear soon in my professional career. A medievalist by training, I had been hired in 1988 for a tenure-track position at GVSU, then a smallish liberal arts college in west Michigan. Because faculty in the English department were all pretty much generalists at that time, among my regular teaching assignments were classical literature, British survey, and freshman composition, this latter a malleable course that could be taught in a variety of ways. Although I had gone the 'rhetorical modes' route a few times, I decided one semester to use a short-story collection as our primary text; students were asked to write essays focused on the usual suspects: characterization, theme, symbolism, and so on.

Everything was fine until we came to "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather. An old film version of the story, starring a young Eric Roberts, was available, so I showed that in conjunction with the reading itself. According to the film introduction by Henry Fonda, Cather's tale is a critique of industrialized society, its hero thwarted by class restrictions and driven to suicide by the realization that he can never live in high style. When I told my students that Cather was, in fact, a lesbian who had to be closeted for fear of public censure, and that "Paul's Case" is just full of coded language suggesting that Paul's anxiety has less to do with his economic situation than with his sexual orientation, the reaction was hostile, to say the least. Several members of the class protested loudly, arguing that such an interpretation of the story was "gross" and that I had "wrecked" Cather's poignant tale for them. Because I was untenured, because I was teaching in a very conservative region, and because I literally couldn't afford my students' ill will, I let the matter drop. That I was considered safely heterosexual in that I was then married to a man, also made me question whether I had the right to interpret Cather's fiction as I had. Moral cowardice is a tricky thing.

Following that unpleasant experience, for a long while I tried to minimize in-class discussions of controversial subjects like homosexuality. (I'd still like to know who determined that something so personal as one's sexual orientation could be a matter of controversy.) Of course, I remained supportive of my lesbian and gay friends, and in private or in limited professional circles, I could be quite vocal about LGBT civil rights. In 1994, I was appointed to a task force whose charge was to examine the campus climate for LGBT students, faculty, and staff, and I helped draft recommendations aimed at improving that climate.

As with most such reports, ours didn't create the immediate change we'd hoped for. It would be several years before the university's LGBT Center was given a dedicated space instead of being run out of a faculty office, and several years more before the university implemented domestic partner benefits. Nevertheless, the administration had indicated its willingness to listen, to acknowledge that discrimination was real and harmful, and to recognize that the academy as a whole had an obligation to promote social justice.

Change on the smaller scale of the classroom wasn't immediate, either. By the late 1990s, American society was in the midst of a longstanding backlash against progressive movements. Not surprisingly, the university became the locus of many a skirmish and some students were openly resistant to being educated about diversity. They had no qualms about rejecting anything that questioned the universal rightness of WASP culture or that challenged what they'd been taught at home or in church. These students didn't want to hear about feminism, they didn't want to hear about African-American studies (as opposed to "American" studies), and they especially didn't want to hear about Queer criticism, even though it was cutting edge and illuminated heterosexual sensibilities as much as it did homosexual. Nor did these vocal cadres seem to notice that some of their fellow students *were* interested in such issues and that their attempts to quash discussion were creating what amounted to a hostile learning environment.

Although I wasn't prepared to let go an important aspect of my teaching philosophy—the conviction that true learning requires a level of cognitive dissonance—I felt oddly compelled to protect my students from the sort of "discomfort" that had erupted in the "Paul's Case" discussion years earlier. Or perhaps given the chilly classroom climate, I was hesitant to ask my students to confront their prejudices because I wanted to protect myself. In the past, as a partner in a heterosexual marriage, I'd never thought twice about

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chatting with my students about what they’d done over the weekend or sharing with them some narrative snippet of my own. It had never occurred to me *not* to refer to my husband: I wasn’t so ultra-private that my students couldn’t fathom my actually having a personal existence. But now I found myself engaging in ridiculous circumlocutions and playing the pronoun game. At one point, I seriously considered omitting the chapter on Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism in my theory course because I was sick of the negativity that had frequently marred discussion of it. While writing the syllabus for a section of Introduction to Shakespeare, I toyed with the idea that maybe one could just ignore the homoerotic tenor of sonnets 1-126. But it was a student essay on Dorothy Allison’s “River of Names” that nearly sent me over the edge: in it, the student argued that Allison had become a lesbian in consequence of the emotional and sexual abuse she had endured at the hands of men.

In coming out to my students nearly fifteen years ago, I experienced a freedom that is indescribable. . . . I no longer had to feel concerned that students would accuse me of “pushing an agenda.” I was, and still am pushing an agenda. It’s called equality.

Partly in response to that ill-informed piece of literary analysis, I wrote a paper titled “‘Maybe They Can’t Help It’: What to Do about Negative Depictions of Lesbians and Gays in Student Writing,” which I presented at the 2000 NCTE Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A problem remained, however: I was still talking primarily to my colleagues about LGBT issues rather than to my students, the very demographic that would one day take over leadership roles in American society.

As epiphanies are wont to do, mine came quite unbidden, though in retrospect I see that it was certainly provoked. A small group of young women in one of my classes had taken up the position that it would be spiritually harmful for them to read, much less discuss, a short story sympathetic to “the gays.” When I suggested that learning about difference isn’t the same thing as embracing it, one member of the group pulled out a Bible and began instructing the class on Jewish purity laws as enumerated in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. It was 2002 and I had done my homework, as well: I was fully aware of those Hebrew Testament prohibitions which, interestingly, included the eating of shellfish and the wearing of clothing made of mixed fibers. I was also aware that the famous anti-homosexuality passage in I Corinthians—hinging on the term *arsenokoitai*—does not, in fact, condemn same-sex love but rather pederastic relationships grounded in sexual exploitation.

At that moment, however, I wasn’t interested in a fight over scriptural translation and exegesis. I was just tired: tired of hearing that LGBT people were an abomination; tired of hearing that unless “the gays” shaped up right quick, they would burn in hell; tired of being bullied into censorship or quietism. I wasn’t ashamed of my identity or of my relationship, so why should I act as if I were? If I knew that literature is human expression—not “gay” or “straight” expression—why shouldn’t I assign a wide variety of texts? If I knew that LGQ criticism was as intellectually useful and as significant as Deconstruction or New Historicism, why shouldn’t I teach it? If I knew that Shakespeare’s biography was as important to our understanding of his works as Robert Frost’s to his, why shouldn’t my students learn that?

And so, I came out, right there and then. No fanfare, merely a statement that as a lesbian engaged in a long-term, monogamous relationship, I found such attitudes as those displayed by the small cohort in the back of the room to be offensive. Period. We then turned to discussion of the assigned short story. Later that afternoon, a young man in that class came to my office to thank me. He was gay, and tired, too.

It is not my goal through this essay to garner applause for “honesty” or accolades for “bravery.” Rather, I offer my reminiscences in an effort to put one more face on the LGBT civil rights movement, as so many others have already. I realize that to a certain extent I am writing from a privileged position: I am a tenured, full professor at a state university. I don’t have to answer to principals or parents or school boards, and I design my individual courses as I choose, within curricular parameters, obviously. But in coming out to my students nearly fifteen years ago, I experienced a freedom that is indescribable. I no longer had to hide my identity. I no longer had to use grammatically incorrect pronouns or contort my syntax in such way as to avoid pronouns altogether. I no longer had to engage in endless self-monitoring. If I chose to include an LGBT-themed story, poem or play among course reading assignments, I no longer had to feel apologetic or concerned that students would accuse me of “pushing an agenda.” I was, and still am pushing an agenda. It’s called equality.

Today, upwards of 60% of Americans polled support legalization of same-sex marriage on a national scale. Religious leaders from a variety of faith traditions (including the Episcopal Church, Unitarian Universalist Association, The United Church of Christ, conservative and reform Judaism, and nearly 2,000 theologians) have sent a brief to the

Supreme Court urging the justices to rule in favor of same-sex marriage in consequence of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Because coming out of the closet has been de-stigmatized in many quarters, the young adults in our classrooms have grown up knowing non-straight people—neighbors, friends, relatives, ministers—and their media is replete with positive images of the LGBT community. For the majority of millennials, being LGBT is thus “no big deal.” Many of our students openly identify as LGBT or gender non-conforming, too. In the immortal words of Lady Gaga, they “were born this way” and therefore have no need to feel other, lesser than their heterosexual counterparts.

Without question, we live in a reality fundamentally different from that of generations past. As educators, we have an obligation to recognize that fact and to teach our students that tolerance goes beyond mere “putting up with” something they don’t like or understand. True tolerance requires the giving of respect to those different from oneself. For a very long time, the academy has acknowledged the value of multicultural education. Now it is time for teachers of English, at all levels, to go beyond discussions of race, gender, and ethnicity to include literature reflective of human diversity in all of its myriad forms. The only things belonging in a closet are stereotypes, prejudices, and antiquated beliefs about love and sexual identity.

Kathleen Blumreich specializes in Anglo-Norman, medieval, and Renaissance literature at Grand Valley State University, where she is Professor of English and Co-Director of the M.A. in English Program. She lives in Grand Rapids with her partner and their beloved son, a Norwich terrier named Eddie.