Dancing with My Grandma: Talking with Robyn Ochs About Complex Identities and Simple Messages in the Marriage Equality Movement

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SUMMARY. This article is an interview with bisexual activist and educator Robyn Ochs. In it, Robyn discusses her approaches to activism and education, and describes the contexts in which she tries to complicate identities and simplify messages for LGBTQ and straight audiences. She also discusses the significance of marriage equality, and her personal experience after legally marrying her partner on May 17th, 2004, after the state of Massachusetts passed its same-sex marriage law. In addition, she describes the community she lives in, and about the “chosen families” that live there.

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In the early 1990s, when Robyn Ochs was in her 30s, a national magazine named her the “grandmother” of the bisexual movement. In 2001, Heidi Randen, who wrote a detailed article on Robyn’s life, suggested that the nickname was “surely a testament to the newness of the bisexual movement, as well as the magnitude of Robyn’s work” (p. 11). Robyn Ochs was raised in the 1960s by parents and grandparents, and relatives, some of whom were active in the Civil Rights, antiwar, and feminist movements. She grew up in the oceanside community of Far Rockaway, on the southern edge of New York City. The diversity of this community, as well as the political activism of her “pink diaper” family helped Robyn recognize “economic injustice, racism, sexism and anti-Semitism from a very early age” (p. 9). However, it was not until she moved to Boston in 1982 that she found the courage and opportunity to become an activist and educator around issues of sexuality.

After attending a “Women’s Rap” for bisexual women at the Women’s Center in Cambridge, Robyn began meeting once a month with seven other women. They named their group the “BiVocals.” Shortly thereafter, Robyn helped form other bisexual support groups in the Boston area. By September of 1983, these groups joined to form the Boston Bisexual Women’s Network. That same year, a contingent from Boston attended a conference at the University of Connecticut. This conference may have been the first conference held in the United States on bisexuality. Then in 1984, this contingent hosted the second East Cost Conference on Bisexuality. Over the next few years, the Boston Bisexual Women’s Network helped activists in other east coast states form groups and host conferences. By 1985, this loose-knit network of
east coast groups named itself the East Coast Bisexual Network, which later became the Bisexual Resource Center.

Since then, the Bisexual Resource Center has published four editions of The Bisexual Resource Guide, and Robyn has become a nationally known bisexual activist and educator. She has published several articles and essays, taught courses at MIT and Tufts University on bisexuality, and acted as a bisexual community spokesperson in articles that have appeared in Newsweek, Playgirl, and various other national newspapers and magazines. She has been interviewed by Phil Donohue and Maury Povich, and she has co-hosted a cable television show called PRIDETIME. In 2005 she co-edited, with Sarah E. Rowley, a book titled Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World, an anthology of personal writings by authors from 32 different countries. In addition, Robyn keeps a full speaking schedule, lecturing and giving workshops at colleges and universities around the country. But one of the greatest testaments to her life of activism came on May 17th, 2004 when she and her partner, Peg Preble, were legally married in their home state of Massachusetts.

MY INTERVIEW WITH ROBYN

I went to Boston to talk with Robyn about her activism in the bisexual movement, but more specifically about her role in the “marriage equality” movement. As I entered the picturesque neighborhood of the Bourne area of Jamaica Plain, a community on the south side of Boston with a village atmosphere, I noticed the plethora of Pride flags and equality signs scattered along its winding narrow roads. Clearly, LGBT folks and allies occupied a number of the single-family homes in the Bourne neighborhood. On that sunny and warm July morning in 2006, Robyn greeted me at the door with an invitation to join her for breakfast. As she stood in her kitchen flipping apple pancakes, she told me about her three cats (including one who had been rescued from New Orleans after hurricane Katrina), and about her neighborhood and the close relationships she has developed with the folks in her community. After we ate, Robyn gave me a tour of her home, during which she stopped often to share stories about the pictures hanging on her walls. She spoke with love and tenderness, and a modicum of pride, as she told me about each of her friends and family members, and her feline companions.
When we sat down for our formal discussion, I asked Robyn how being a bisexual activist in the same-sex marriage debate shifted the discussion or politics of the movement? She replied:

I care very, very, very much about marriage equality. The marriage equality movement is about so much more than marriage—at its core it’s about equality, about our right to full, 100 percent citizenship.

A major challenge for me is that arguments and strategies that may help people understand bisexual identity are sometimes different from—or even at odds—with strategies that will help us achieve marriage equality. I struggle to find ways to talk about each that do justice to both and harm neither. Here’s an example: when I speak about marriage equality, the thing that moves people is the simple story of my relationship with Peg: “Here I am, and here is my life partner, the woman I love. We intend to spend the rest of our lives together. We want to have the ability and resources to care for one another in sickness and in health. Love is a beautiful and precious things. See, look at the video of our marriage, look at our wedding pictures. Look at how happy we are!” At some level, this discussion is most powerful when it is kept simple. When I’m speaking with an audience, is there an added benefit to discussing my bisexual identity, or to discussing previous relationships? Usually, there is not.

But when the topic is bisexual identity the opposite is true: I find it most effective to present a reality that is as complicated as I can possibly make it. For example, one of the exercises I developed uses the Kinsey scale. I have people situate themselves on this scale, either anonymously by way of a questionnaire that is completed and then randomly redistributed so that each person represents someone in the room, using a number of different measurements. Some of the questions include: “Put yourself on the Kinsey scale.” “In terms of your actual crushes on actual people during the past 3 months, put yourself on the Kinsey scale.” “In terms of your actual crushes before you graduated from high school, put yourself on the scale.” “In terms of your actual sexual experiences, including kissing, during the past three months, put yourself on the scale.” “How about the average of your entire life?” “Now, in terms of your fantasies, put yourself on the scale.” “If you could choose your own
sexual orientation, where would you want to be?” I ask all these
different questions and while there are usually a few people who
stay fixed, more or less in one spot during the entire exercise, most
people move quite a bit. Then I ask folks a question that forces
them to choose: “Now choose just one. Which one are you, gay or
straight?” And people choose. Most people go to one end or the
other of the scale. Finally, I ask folks to tell us which word they use
to describe themselves. The power of this exercise is that it demon-
strates visually how any one person, and sometimes the entire
room, will move to different places on the scale depending on what
question you are asking. It also demonstrates that “straight” does
not necessarily mean “zero” on the Kinsey Scale, and “gay” often
does not mean “6.” And “bisexual” does not necessarily mean “3.”

One of the challenges of speaking about bisexuality is that it has so
many different meanings. In any given conversation, we may be
employing numerous definitions of bisexuality. Are we talking
about behavior? Are we talking about identity? Are we talking
people there may be little correlation between those things. Behav-
ior may not correspond to identity. We may fantasize about things
that we have no interest in actually doing. And some people base
their self-identity upon current behavior or feelings, others upon
recent behavior or feelings. And so on . . . So I just try to make it as
complicated, messy, and as unclear as I possibly can.

After doing–and discussing–this exercise, I ask people to think
more about the multiple and varied definitions of all sexual orien-
tation identities: “You people here in this room are now on the
Committee in Charge of the World. You get to decide where on the
spectrum bisexuality begins and ends. At what point does hetero-
sexual become bisexual, and at what point does bisexual become
lesbian or gay? Where would you draw the lines?” And then I have
everyone silently think of their answers. Then ask them to share
what they came up with. Everybody says something different.
“Oh, bisexuality is 3,” or “It’s 2 to 4.” Or “it’s point 1 to 5.999 or
it’s everything.” One of my favorites was “Straight is 0 through 3;
bisexual is 1 through 5; gay is 4 through 6.” Sometimes they say,
“oh, I wouldn’t use a scale at all.” People have so many different
answers. And then I ask, “Well who’s right?” And the answer is
clearly all of us, none of us. There is no one right answer. So when

I teach about bisexuality it’s all about complication. I think it makes things clearer to make things less clear. By making things less simple, less solid, less clear, less over simplistic, you gain a better sense of reality. You start to see the world more clearly in all of its permutations, in all of its lack of clarity and simplicity.

One reason I do my “Labels and Identity workshop” is because I often hear comments like “I hate labels” or “Why should you have to call yourself anything?” I believe labels can do a lot of damage and harm, but they can also do a lot of good. They’re not real—they’re social constructs that have multiple and varying meanings. But there’s a real political power in treating them as though they were more simple, more real than they actually are. It’s reasonable and productive to utilize labels as the tools they can be. But at the same time, you must constantly hold out a more complex reality. You have to always understand that these labels are working tools but they are not reality. Use them, but you can’t get locked inside of them as though they were real things or concrete boxes. So that’s the challenge of teaching about bisexuality, or teaching about labels and identity in general. The challenge is to make it as complicated as I can. I also teach about the value, about the good things that labels do for us, because I believe they help us find each other. They help us organize politically. They provide a shorthand to help us communicate.

So when you talk about marriage equality to people who are not part of LGBTQQIA lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and allies communities, you are most likely talking to people who have not thought about this stuff a lot. And what is useful is not to make things complicated, but to make things simple. Because in terms of messaging, people need simplicity. They need little, simple, sweet sound bites, slogans, ideas, concepts. And I don’t want to be dismissive when I say that people need something as simple as, “when two people love each other, they should be able to marry.” “Love is love.” “Love makes a family.” “It’s all about equality.” “It’s all about families.” “It’s all about protecting all families.” You know, wishful thinking won’t make families headed by same-sex couples disappear. It just leaves us vulnerable, unprotected, and without the same social support that other families have. That’s bad for children because all children deserve social support and protection. A marriage is
two people making a commitment to take care of each other in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, and if you deny people legal protection you are putting them at great risk. All we want to do is be able to take care of each other. These are very simple messages. When talking about marriage, pick something and explain it as simply and in as straightforward a manner as is possible. Complicating things does not help.

So my challenge, as someone who not only identifies as bisexual but as someone who is a public poster-child for bisexual identity, is to talk about marriage equality in ways that simplify it while at the same time complicating labels and identities. I often feel like I have to choose my message. What can I, as a bisexual person, add to the discussion? I think about this a lot. One of the things that I can add to the discussion is that I have been there and I’ve done that. I have been in serious relationships with men. I have been in serious relationships with women. And honestly, my experience tells me that love is love. A relationship is a relationship, and people are people. When I look at the differences in the various relationships I’ve been in over the course of my life, I didn’t experience men as this way and women as that way. It’s about individual people, and their specific personalities. You know, if I could make a list sorting people by personal characteristics, it wouldn’t much matter if they were male or female. That’s my experience. Relationships are relationships.

For me, it’s not love, desire, or attraction that feel complicated. To me, identity and labels are complicated. All identities are more complicated than they first appear, especially as the questions become more complicated. Lots of people who are straight have had same-sex desires, fantasies, and sometimes experiences. The same is true for people who identify as lesbian. And the other thing I try to do in my workshops is to introduce a more complex, and to include the complexity of gender identity, the realities of transgender folks. Ultimately, linear scales have serious limitations. Think about the exercise I described earlier. If you are transgender or gender queer, how do you answer these kinds of questions? What is your opposite? What is your same? Sex? Gender? Sex/gender? So I try not only to complicate the obvious, but I also try to point out the ways in which the tools we are using are limited in their actual usefulness, and how the tools, used uncriti-
cally, leave some people out. But yet they are still useful as tools, as long as we understand the limitations.

In my workshops, I try to make people really dizzy. I tell people that if they walk out of the room feeling very confused and with their head spinning, then I have done a good job. I will feel like I have succeeded in my mission. Anyone who walks out feeling that they now understand everything clearly, missed the point. So in those kinds of workshops it’s really about complicating, complicating, and complicating, and arriving at a more nuanced, subtle, and complicated understanding of everything.

But then, when I talk about marriage equality— it’s like here I am, I’m 47 years old, I’m in love with a woman, I want to spend the rest of my life with her, and I want to be able to have the same rights and protections as anybody else. And my next-door neighbors are two women with two beautiful little children, and I want their family to be protected too. The message is that simple. That’s what works for people. We are real people with real stories. We feel the same pain that everybody else feels, the same love and the same joy, and we deserve the same protections. And so that’s the contradiction sometimes, when I’m talking about this stuff: which message am I on?

And on some level, it’s really that simple. On some level, all of this stuff I’m talking about is just so simple when you relax your preconceptions. We are so locked up in the ways we were taught. When you talk to someone who has never thought about this stuff before, there’s a lot at stake because you are destabilizing their platform. When selecting a strategy, I focus on what I am trying to accomplish. Who is my audience, what is their starting point, and what will it help them to learn? If I start deconstructing gender to an audience of people who still aren’t quite certain that bisexuality—or even homosexuality—exists, I will be wasting both their time and my own.

I cover a wide range of topics. I do homophobia workshops. I do workshops on labels and identity. I do workshops on bisexuality, and bisexuality and feminism, and marriage equality workshops. And each of those is really complex. I could sit down and talk to you for hours about each of those. So I think about my audience
and I think about my message, and I try to stay on message. And sometimes I feel like I’m leaving a piece of myself out.

My passion varies from moment to moment. Sometimes I really, really want to talk about marriage equality. And sometimes I really, really want to talk about identity and labels. And sometimes I can’t do both, so I have to decide where the need—and interest—is greatest.

I asked Robyn if she had faced any obstacles or resistance from within the marriage equality movement because of her bisexual identity. She pondered the question a few seconds and then replied:

I’m not one hundred percent sure. I do know that I often get turned into a lesbian. Even when we were on the cover of the Washington Post, on the day after marriage equality started in Massachusetts. The title of the Washington Post article was “A Long Considered Rush to the Altar,” and it said, “a lesbian couple” right underneath the headline. And when I read that I thought “uh huh.” I know it wasn’t our journalist, that it was the headline writers, but that kind of thing—ok so you get turned into a lesbian and then so? So then what? Does that matter? How much does that matter? Who does that matter to?

And here are some of my answers. It matters to me as a bisexual activist that people in the LGBT community understand that bisexual people are activists for equality, that transgendered people are activists for equality, that we are here. That we are here, that we are active, that we are doing our part, that we are fighting the good fight, and that we are part of the struggle. And so when we get erased it makes me frustrated because it would be easy for people to think that we’re not here. For example, there was a march in New York a couple of nights ago, after the New York City court ruled against the marriage law. And there was a big demonstration that night in New York. There was one in Manhattan. There was one in Albany, and several others all over the state. And I found out about them from a bi-activist who had been there, and who wrote on the bi-activist email list. Then when I read the headlines the next day on 365gay.com, it said that, “lesbians and gays come out in large numbers to protest.” And that same old feeling of “lesbians and gays and who else? Hello, who
else was here? Hello, we are here.” I felt frustrated because we are here. We are always here. And so part of me, in that context, wants to say “huhum, huhum! You are missing part of reality.” So on that level it really matters.

In terms of messaging to a straight world, I don’t think it matters that much. It matters that people know that bisexuality is a legitimate option or identity, and that it exists. But in this particular moment, in this particular discussion, is it gonna matter personally to a lot of people? Less. Less. So in that discussion it matters less. But it still bothers me. And one of the questions around marriage equality is, “what are you going to call it?” Is it lesbian and gay marriage? You know, when you are messaging, when you are a marriage equality organization and you are messaging, do you talk about lesbians and gay men being able to marry? Or, do you talk about same-sex marriage? Personally, I like same-sex marriage because that includes everyone.

I often see people (even people who get it), they still talk about lesbian and gay marriage, and lesbian and gay couples. I mean, I am a woman in a marriage with another woman. Therefore, we could be considered a lesbian couple—small “l” I guess. But not lesbian with a capital “L” because only one of us identifies as lesbian. But then when you try to separate us out, when I try to say that this is not a lesbian marriage because one of us identifies as bisexual, I don’t want that to feel to anyone that I am trying to distance myself from lesbians. Because, (I like to joke that some of my best friends are lesbians, and I’m married to a lesbian) I have been part of this community for almost 25 years. So it’s not about separating from lesbians. It’s about being seen clearly as someone with a different identity from lesbians, as someone with my own identity.

But in terms of resistance from within the lesbian and gay community, that’s something that I really can’t answer with a definitive statement. I’m sure that if I identified as lesbian, it would make it easier to make me a poster-child. But then again, if I had children, it would be easier to make me a poster-child. Or if Peg and I had long hair, and looked like the lesbians on The L Word, it would be easier to make us the poster-children. There are lots of different reasons we’re not the perfect poster-children. When you’re organizing a statewide marriage equality thing, and you’re looking for
your plaintiff couples or your public voices, we’re not really what you’re looking for. But I have not felt resistance in a direct way. I just know it’s true. And this is actually an issue that all communities face.

So when you are thinking about a community and you need a public voice, and you need three people to represent our community on a panel or we need three people to go meet with the mayor or the governor, how do you choose those people? Do you choose people who those people you are talking to will feel most comfortable relating to? Might not be a bad idea. Do you choose people who represent the diversity of the community? That might be a really good idea. But sometimes those things are very much at odds. So then what do you do? How do you decide? Are you going for the most realistic cross sample or the one that’s going to have the best rapport with the people you’re talking to?

And everybody deals with this. When I go out to speak (I’ve been part of the group “Speak Out” here in Boston for almost 25 years, and I used to do the annual training every year) this was a big question. Like when you go out to speak, how do you represent yourself? How do you dress? What if you have someone with purple hair or a Mohawk and 900 piercings, and you’re going into a place where this is the only gay person they are ever going to talk to? One could make arguments like, “absolutely this is the person who should go because this person is part of the community.” And I believe that. One could also make the argument that people are going to come out with a rather skewed perception of what the community is, or what lesbians look like, or whatever it is, based on this one person who might not be too representative. And what the Speakers Bureau said was, “you make your own decision about how to represent yourself, but do understand that you are representing yourself and that every little detail about you will get noticed. And if you want to go out in your Mohawk and 900 piercings that is your choice, but understand or just be aware of what you are doing, how you’re doing it, and what your impact is. Just be thoughtful.” Which was actually a good resolution.

And that’s not to say that a woman with a shaved head should not go out and speak. It’s just to say that people have their prejudices. But there are also people in our community who say, “those people
should never be allowed to go out there. Those drag queens give us all a bad name. Those ‘Dykes on Bikes,’ all those people are giving us a bad name. We should only be showing them our lipstick lesbians.” I do believe everybody has the right to be seen and heard, but I also understand that sometimes it can have its costs, and that who you put out there can make a difference in terms of accomplishing what you want to accomplish. And it’s the same thing in the bisexual community. Which bisexuals do you put out there, and who gets to decide?

When Robyn mentioned “the bisexual community,” I asked her if she had a sense that there is a real, tangible, or physical bisexual “community?” She answered in the affirmative, but suggested that where to begin finding the bisexual community is on the internet. However, she also said:

But some cities have real, physical, live communities. There’s the Bisexual Women’s Network in Boston, and there’s a group called “Biversity,” which is a social group that meets twice a month. Boston is hopping! San Francisco is hopping! Minneapolis is hopping! New York is hopping! Some other strange places, that you wouldn’t expect, are hopping because there were people who were doing some really amazing work. But overall, if you’re in most places, you’re not likely to have a support group or organization.

You know, one of the things that I see changing is that the success of the bi-movement (such as it is) is having a profound cost to the bi-movement because many student groups are much more welcoming than they were 20 years ago. Most students who identify as bi don’t have the need to go off and make their own groups. They can be part of the larger alphabet soup community. And, even though it might be uncomfortable at times, overall it is much more comfortable, and that means that people aren’t feeling such a need to go off and create separate bi groups. In the old-days, we were so profoundly unwelcome that creating our own group was the only option. We formed our own groups because we had to. So in a way, our success is costing us in that direct way, in that people aren’t feeling the need. And that is great because I don’t want people to feel that they have to go create their own planet out there.
And I think that’s even happening with the bigger LGBT community. The straight world is getting less hostile overall. It used to be that gay people hung out with gay people. Now I see a lot more mixing. With college students it doesn’t matter. The really cool kids are hanging out with the really cool gay kids, and lesbian kids, and bi kids, and transgender kids, and queer-don’t-identity kids. And I love that because it makes me feel like we’ve done our job, or like we’ve evolved.

There’s so much that’s changed though. I love it. I love it. I mean, the fact is that when I remember back to when I was a teenager, I didn’t know that “gay” existed until my junior year in high school. And then I only knew because a friend told me that a couple of our male friends were gay. That was it. I knew there were two or three gay men in the whole world. There were three in my high school, that I knew were gay, and that was it. So that was my idea of “gay,” just these three people.

There was no other place to get information. And then, I went to college and there was a lesbian and gay group on campus, so there was more information. But it was still really scary. And I remember there were twins in my women’s studies class, and their parents were trying to get my lesbian professor fired because “lesbians shouldn’t be teaching children.” I mean this was the times, the early 70s. And by the way, my lesbian teacher was Esther Newton, the anthropologist. She was my advisor. When I came to college I randomly got assigned to her. She was pretty scary. I think she was under so much attack that she was pretty defensive. I think it was really hard to be an out lesbian professor in the 70s.

So think about the times. There was nothing on television. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. So anyway, we have all this. We have the situation now where kids have Will and Grace, and The L Word, and Queer is Folk, and tons of stuff in films and movies–newspapers–there’s something in the newspapers everyday now about marriage. It’s a huge public discourse. And there’s the internet. I mean there’s only so much information you can get by looking up words like “lesbian” in the dictionary.

So I feel like the knowledge base is so different now. But the fact is that people feel like they are protecting their kids from this whole
discourse, but the kids are hearing it everywhere. And what I think the parents need to do is help the children filter it. Help the children make sense of it, make it something they can talk about or ask questions about. Cause you can’t avoid it these days. It’s everywhere. Kids are getting the information and what they need is a way to process it. They need a system to process it in whatever way parents think is sensible. But what they can’t do is block it out. Cause it’s there. It’s everywhere. So that’s the difference in the times.

But it also depends on where they are, because one of the things I’ve seen is there are huge regional differences. I mean, there are some states that GSAs [gay/straight alliances] are in every high school. Massachusetts for instance, Connecticut, Minnesota, I mean there are some schools that have so much support for LGBT youth. There’s GSAs in schools. There’s after school groups, and there’s all kinds of stuff out in the community. And then there’s other states where there’s absolutely nothing. So, I don’t want to draw any sweeping conclusions. The realities are so different. But at least people have information now, and that’s the difference. People have more information now.

Within the marriage equality movement, I asked Robyn why it is important for her to retain a bisexual identity. She replied thoughtfully:

One of the things that has come up is there are a lot of different voices in the bisexual activist community, and some of the voices very strongly support marriage equality. But there are other people who don’t, or who don’t think marriage should be the focus. Just like lesbians and gay men, there are some people who are not one hundred percent for it, and don’t think it is really important. And I struggle with that. I often feel really frustrated because I didn’t wake up one morning and think “oh this should be the central organizing topic for our community,” But right now it is. It’s up there, and we have to respond to it. It’s really important.

But it’s really about equality. It’s not about marriage. It’s about equality. And I’m not one of those people who thinks that everyone should get married, or want to get married. I’m not one of those people who think everyone should be monogamous, or everyone should be in the same kind of relationship I’m in. I don’t
believe that. I think everybody should be in the kind of relationship they want to be in. People who want to be single, more power to them. People who want to be in more complex relationships involving more than two people, more power to them as long as everybody’s ok with it. And people who want to be in monogamous relationships, more power to us. So for me, it’s not about saying everyone should or shouldn’t get married. But I struggle sometimes with the hostility that some people feel toward marriage. Because I’m not saying everyone should get married. I’m saying that everyone should have the right to choose. Everyone should have the choice to embrace or reject that institution, and it should be no one’s choice but their own.

And some of the rhetoric of the marriage equality movement has been a little bit disturbing, a little bit scary. Some feel it’s like we’re saying “oh, we’re just like everybody else.” Well actually, we are just like everybody else. But everybody else isn’t that simple either. Everybody else is really complicated as well. Straight people are not all monogamous people who want to be married. A majority are, but there are a lot of other people out there who are straight and who have chosen different kinds of relationships. Or straight people who don’t want to be in relationships at all. I mean there are so many different ways that straight people are, and the LGBT community has the same complexity. We are complicated just like they are. And any kind of rhetoric that pretends we’re not disturbs me because I think we need to embrace all of us. And I think we need to use rhetoric that does not cut people out.

This happens sometimes with the argument that “if we let gay people get married then the next thing you know we’ll have polygamy.” But the fact is, some people are already practicing it. And then people say “oh no, we don’t support that.” My response is, “that’s not what we are talking about right now. That’s a different discussion.” And it is a different discussion. But I think we can separate the discussions out without trashing other people’s choices. That’s not the discussion on the table right now. And to attempt to join them is, I believe, an attempt to distract. “Oh the next thing you know they’ll want to marry their goats and their sheep, their dogs and their cats.” But that’s not what we are talking about either. That’s a way of distracting and dividing.
So people who do not want to get married, I want to see them support marriage equality, because it really is about equality and our right to choose. And people who do want to get married, I want to see them make their arguments without putting down anyone else or belittling other relationship choices. Because I may be monogamous, and I may be a person who wants to spend the rest of my life with one person, but that does not mean that everyone else needs to want that too. That’s what works for me. So we need to have a conversation based on respect.

With so many important issues in the world, I asked Robyn why is it so important for the whole LGBT community to support marriage equality. She said:

Teaching has made me so much more aware of how other issues connect to issues of marriage equality. I taught a course called Family Values, as in “family values,” “family” being the euphemism for our community. We did a whole bunch of topics including marriage equality. We also did “aging” as a topic, and that scared me!

Reading stuff about the lack of protections, and also about the amount of dependency on external caretakers, and if you don’t have the right to live with your partner when you get old, if you don’t have the right to visit them or make decisions about their care, or the right to keep your home. There are things protecting married couples, federally protected married couples. I mean when you think about how much you have to spend of your assets in order to get Medicare, you know, what counts as an asset? And the home that heterosexual couples share is not counted in that calculation, but if you are not legally related to your partner then you could be forced to sell the home you’ve lived in for fifty years. And then where do you go? You still have to live somewhere. And so it’s things like that, just realizing what that could mean to same-sex couples.

I show my students If These Walls Could Talk 2. In the first episode, when the woman falls off the ladder and dies, what happens to her surviving partner? And I also give them a bunch of short stories by Becky Bertha. I also give them Dirty Old Men, which is about a guy in a nursing home. He’s a gay man with Alzheimer’s,
and he can’t be himself. He’s just trapped. It’s just these amazing, moving, things about what can happen to us. And so for me, that’s what marriage equality is all about. It’s much more about equality than it is about marriage. And I think once we have marriage equality we can’t be denied any other kind of equality. It’s the big ring. It’s the big ring on the marry-go-round. And I want it. And we are going to keep it here in Massachusetts.

I wrote an article that just came out this week in the local paper. I did a whole series on marriage equality (having people tell their stories) and I talked about Massachusetts. I said, “a very strange thing happened to me this year. I sat down to pay my taxes.” This year I owed a lot of money, more than I ever owed before. So I sat down and wrote the federal check, and I felt sick to my stomach knowing what was going to happen with that money. Knowing that a big chunk of that money was going to be used to pay the interest on the national debt. It’s just that feeling of paying my federal taxes and feeling sick knowing that my taxes were going for war and all these horrible things. And then going to pay my state taxes and actually thinking “yeah!” I feel like I got my green card, my citizenship. Two years ago when I got legally married, I got my full citizenship. It’s really cool. And then I wrote about the “welcome to Massachusetts” sign, and how when I drive across the border in my car and I read “welcome to Massachusetts,” I take it personally. And I do feel welcome here. I think I ended that article by saying that we should change the license plates and we should call Massachusetts the “equality state.” That’s how I feel living here. I feel so lucky.

And it wasn’t like I moved to Massachusetts to be in the first state that got marriage equality. I was fortunate enough to be living here already. It’s great. It’s an unbelievably good feeling. I’m tired of fighting to keep it! I’m looking forward to the day when that’s done because there are so many other things that demand our attention.

And they keep talking about Massachusetts as the only place with marriage equality, but we have other places too. We have Canada. We have Belgium. We have the Netherlands. We have Spain. And we’re gonna have South Africa this year, before the end of 2006.
And just the fact that almost all of the western European countries have some sort of civil union. And then there’s New Zealand.

When I went to the Netherlands it changed me. I went to the Netherlands in 1998, just after marriage had become equal there. And it was an amazing feeling. It was truly an amazing feeling because I had never imagined that possibility. I’ve written about this. I went home and I thought, “wow.” I met these guys who were married, and I just wanted to keep pinching them. Like, are you real? I get that a lot now when I travel around. But for me, that was an amazing thing. As I had dinner with them, I just kept looking from one to the other and thinking “these guys are married to each other. Really married! And its legal.” It was so amazing.

And then when I went home and we were waiting for the Massachusetts supreme court to rule, I remember thinking “I hope we get civil unions like Vermont. I hope we win this.” And then when we didn’t, when they came out with their decision that gave us equality, that’s when I started to change inside. Because when I read the Supreme Court decision, it was very powerful. It said something about–separate is rarely, it ever equal–and it talked about the fact that we deserved full equality. And it changed me. I thought, “actually, you know, we do deserve equality.” We do. We deserve equality. We deserve it just like anybody else. We pay taxes. We are citizens. We deserve the same rights to all civil benefits and protections. And now, I believe it even more strongly. There’s no doubt in my mind. We deserve to be treated just like anybody else.

Now, when I travel around, people respond to me like I did to those guys in the Netherlands. One young man from the mid-west said to me, “I feel like you are a space traveler from the future and you’re here from the future I hope to have some day.” It gave me the shivers. It made me want to cry because I think he should have it now. When I look at the stuff that’s happening around the country I feel sick. I do understand that change takes a really long time and that it’s a long process. And you really have to be in it for the long haul.

I also realize that in the last five to ten years we have made changes that were unimaginable. We’ve come so far in so short a time, so when I start to feel frustrated I try to remember that. I try to re-
member that in the 1960s and even the 1970s, people were getting kicked out of college for being gay. Yeah, and then by the 1980s I’m actually getting paid by colleges to come talk to their kids about LGBT issues. That is huge! You know, most colleges that are not based in some religion that doesn’t support LGBT people, most colleges have some type of institutional support. So just looking at that, that’s huge! Things are different. It’s huge! Now, with the concept of equality, we are having conversations that would not have been possible ten years ago. People are changing and support is going up. Unfortunately, it’s still definitely very low in some places, but in every single place it’s much higher than it was ten years ago. Every place.

Even the worst places, the most hostile places, support is going to go up. And every place that has marriage equality or civil unions, every state, every country in the world that has protections in the law, support goes up after the law is passed. So for instance, after Vermont’s civil union, support for gay people and equality is rising. Massachusetts, since we’ve had marriage. All these different places, California, Canada, Spain, support is going up. I feel that the future is going to be good. Better than the present. The future is going to be a whole lot better than the present and we just have to keep our eyes on the big picture and keep on fighting. Not keep on fighting, but keep on persevering. You know, we have to keep on pushing for equality and we can’t lose perspective.”

I asked Robyn what it was like to be married. “Now that you and Peg are legally married, what does it feel like inside the relationship? Outside the activism, outside the speaking, what does it feel like for the couple? Does it change anything? Does it feel different? What does it do inside the relationship?” Robyn grinned broadly and said:

It was magic. And it’s funny; cause what’s changed is the external validation. We were committed to each other before, but what changed is having that kind of excitement and enthusiasm from the people around us. That kind of public manifestation of support. As LGBT people, we’re just not used to it at all. It was just really amazing. It was just this thing that filled up the whole world. It just made the whole world sunny and happy and warm and beautiful and welcoming. We felt a sense of welcome for our relationship. And that was the most giddy, ecstatic, happy feeling. It was beauti-
ful, and that affected our relationship, because I do believe that one of the reasons traditional marriages have so much pomp and circumstance is that there’s real value in those things. There is something substantial about having witnesses, having support, being embraced by your community in a way that I never expected to know.

I had decided that I would never get married until such a time as I could marry anybody. If I couldn’t marry anybody, I wasn’t going to marry anyone. So even if I ended up with a male partner, I had already made the commitment that I wasn’t going to get legally married. And who would have expected this! So I never thought I was going to get married. I never thought I would be able to marry anyone. You know, I’ve been to 17 weddings in Massachusetts since May 17th, 2004, including our own. And almost all of them had their parents there. And that was really amazing just watching, one after the other, watching sisters and moms. For me, the absolute highlight was (we got legally married on May 17th) our celebration on September 4th.

We had 128 people at our celebration. It was a big event with a swing band and the whole bit, and for me, one of the absolute highlights was dancing with my grandma (who at the time was 92) at my wedding. I was 45 years old. I finally got to do that. The last of all my siblings. The oldest and the last. Yeah, that was just amazing, dancing with my grandma. Yeah, it was, dancing with my grandma. It just makes me want to cry.

I commented that I was jealous of how supportive Robyn’s blood family was of her marriage, and she responded with the idea that family can also be chosen.

Even in this neighborhood, I think we have created a lot of family. Cause I know that some of my neighbors don’t have good relationships with their families, or they have uneasy relationships, and some of them don’t have any relationship with their families. But I also think that we have created a family of choice here. For instance, my neighbors next door, they have boys who are four and one years old. Those boys are my nephews as much as my blood nephews are, and I see them almost every day. These people are my extended family, and they feed us about once a week. You
know, we have dinner with them a lot and we hang out in the yard. In a way, we are creating what most American families don’t even have at all anymore. But we have it here, by creating families of choice. Most American families are isolated in the nuclear family thing, without the extended family around. And I feel like here, we have rebuilt that. We have it.

Hanging in Robyn’s living room is a framed plot-map of her Bourne area neighborhood. Each plot where an LBGTQ person lives is shaded in pink. In bold letters, the title reads “The BAGAL MAP.” I asked Robyn what the map meant, and what it was like living in the Bourne neighborhood. She smiled and said:

I just have such a strong sense of community here. One of our neighbors made up the plot-map of the neighborhood on his computer. All of the houses where LBGT people live are colored pink. So that’s the BAGAL MAP of our neighborhood. Our neighborhood is called “Bourne Area Gays and Lesbians,” but I actually made up another name for our area. “BAGAL Bits,” for the “Bourne Area Gays and Lesbian, and bi, intersexed, and trans folks.” So there are over one hundred families on the map of our little neighborhood. The thing about this neighborhood, I guess because its modest single-family houses mostly, it’s heavily, heavily, heavily coupled, and there are lots and lots of families with kids. There are so many gay people in this neighborhood, and there are so many kids, so many spawn of gay people.

And some people have been here for thirty years. Yeah, we have parents with grown kids now. But for some reason the “under six crowd” has just taken off. Yeah, and now the oldest of the kids is actually applying to college. But what is actually amazing is that one of my friends grew up in this neighborhood, diagonally behind us, and he’s gay. And when he grew up here, it was really a straight place. He didn’t know any gay people. And when he comes home now, he loves it because there are three women-couples all adjacent to his parents’ house. And he just loves that fact because it makes him feel like he is coming home in a way that he didn’t when he was growing up. And it makes him feel all bubbly just watching his dad talk to the women-couples over the fence. And he loves how much his parents love all the neighbors.
It’s a great place to live. But we did something to create it though. We’ve been doing some recruiting. We recruited our close friends next door. And not just because we knew they would cook for us, but because we wanted to have good friends next door. We have so many good friends right here, and so much of our socializing is done within a block. You can’t walk in this neighborhood without stopping to chat. It’s really funny. Sometimes it can take a really long time to walk down to the subway. There are more women, but it’s pretty even. It’s about sixty/forty.

The other thing that’s really special about this neighborhood is the straight people. It really does feel like a comfortable place for everybody. It’s funny though. There is no neighborhood-wide group for everybody, and sometimes some of the straight neighbors are a little bit jealous about BAGAL, and they say things like, “I wish we had a BAGAL too. I wish we had a list.” Because BAGAL has an email list. And that’s often how information about the community spreads, if there’s been a crime or something. We inform each other, and then we tell our other neighbors. But, in a way, I would love to have a BAGAL for the entire community, because that’s still missing. We have a block party every year for everybody. But I really would like to have a group for everybody because that’s one of those things, it’s not just BAGAL that makes this neighborhood special. It’s the other neighbors too. So there it is. It takes extra work to cross certain boundaries, but once you’ve crossed them it’s wonderful.

CONCLUSION

Queer scholars like Valerie Lehr, argue that the traditional concept of “family” is founded on the oppressive patriarchal model of marriage, an institution that excludes people on the basis of race, gender, social class, and sexuality. “The ‘family’ problems that gays and lesbians face in the United States,” Lehr argued “are much more extensive than what marriage rights can address” (1999, p. 10). Lehr suggested that fighting to enter an oppressive system like marriage limits the truly revolutionary potential of the queer movement. She argued for a radical discourse in which family care is discussed as a function of community, one in which the democratization of family could “keep alive a movement that addresses family and private life even if liberal demands begin to be met” (1999, p. 10).
Likewise, Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann argued that the conservative lesbian and gay movement seeking marriage rights wants acceptance for their “normal” families rather than redefining the entire concept of family itself, which they suggest is a relatively recent and “short-lived phenomenon” that has not worked for many Americans (2001, p. 3). The lesbian and gay movement, they argue, marginalizes those queer (working-class, racial, and transgendered) families who might negatively affect the otherwise “normal” image of conservative lesbian and gay families. Bernstein and Reimann argued that the entire concept of the “traditional family” needs to be redefined, and that “queer families present new challenges to the privatized-nuclear family, contradicting the sexual dimorphism upon which the ideal family is based” (2001, p. 3-4).

Like the “families” on the BAGAL MAP, my research on the families lesbians build in other places and contexts suggests that LGBT folks all over the country are what Chela Sandoval calls “multiply displaced figures” who form families that are not “quite as imperializing in terms of a single figuration of identity” (2000, p. 172). LGBT people may or
may not share bloodlines or family structures that resemble the patriarchal model, but they do provide the love and support that is often withheld from people whom the patriarchal legal system refuses to protect. Furthermore, I would also argue that they do meet Valerie Lehr's criteria for democratizing the private life of the family, because as Robyn's narrative demonstrates, even after same-sex couples legally marry, family care is still a "function of community" (1999, p. 10). In no way does marriage equality jeopardize the goals of the queer movement, nor
does it obscure the ways in which LGBTQ families have redefined the “traditional family.”

LGBT families are democratic, and their care is a function of the community because rather than depending solely on a bloodline, they share a similar consciousness which allows them to transcend patriarchal models of family and claim each other as relatives in a web of familial connections that support them in homes, neighborhoods, and community spaces across the country. In other words, LGBT families are structured in a matrix of ideas held together by what Sandoval called the “apparatus of love,” (2000). And while this “apparatus of love” is solid in terms of human will and behavior, it is not yet a legally recognized or a federally protected institution in America.

Like queer theorists who seek to blur the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, Robyn Ochs’ work to complicate traditional categories of gender and sexuality does not ignore the very real and tangible need to legally protect LGBTQ families. And while her work involves deconstructing hegemonic ideologies by complicating identities and sexual categories, her messages about “chosen families” and “marriage equality” are quite simple. LGBTQ families of choice need and deserve the same rights and protections as heterosexually headed families, and like heterosexuals, they also deserve the simple right to dance with their grandmothers at their weddings.

REFERENCES


