

Girls Can't Marry Other Girls

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"Girls can't marry other girls" he said with an uncertain tone the other day at breakfast.

I turned to my wife to see if she'd heard this one before and if so, how she had responded. Mike, our five-year-old has this amazing imagination. From him, I expect to hear: "Oscar can beat up dinosaurs!" Our dog often assumes superhuman characteristics in Mike's make-believe world. I imagine a cartoon Oscar in Mike's mind with Popeye calves and Jackie Chan's fighting capabilities staving off the various evil-doing postmen on their daily rounds.

I don't expect this, however.

Mike's conversation topics sound like random words pouring out of his mouth without order. "We saw a shark today in Lake Harriet. Tommy doesn't like pink. What would happen if my bike could fly?" In trying to figure out what he's trying to say or what happened to him that day, I feel like a frustrated puzzler forcing pieces together that don't match; bending the edges and twisting the corners. Once in a while the pieces actually fit together by accident and Mike hits on a subject that makes logical sense. This only adds to the confusion because it sounds like something profound coming out of his mouth when there's no way he really *gets* what he's talking about.

My wife responded to him "Of course girls can't marry other girls, silly. Only mommies and daddies get married" then she turned her eyes to me and under her breath said "unless they move to Canada or something."

Until recently I hadn't ever considered the topic of gay marriage. With the presidential race revving up, I'd seen more op-eds in the Tribune, but my wife and I'd

never actually had a conversation about it. Why did Mike bring it up? Did he see an episode of *Will and Grace* or something?

“I wondered if he’d ask us about that.” She whispered to me over the dishes. Mike was in and out of the kitchen carrying on some sort of superhero battle between his Incredible Hulk action figure and his G.I. Joe as well as persistently wondering what was for dessert. “Ice cream? Brownies?... Can I have some cake?”

“About what?” I asked.

“About that girl in his school... The one with the lesbian moms.”

Who? I thought... What two moms?... Lesbians? I vaguely remembered meeting two women in the fall at the playground one afternoon when picking Mike up. I just thought they were two separate moms. Moms of two *different* kids. Not the *same* kid. I had no idea they were *together* together. Not a *couple*.

One of my friends in college was gay. We played football together at St. John’s. It was an all-male Catholic school, so the topic just never came up. A couple of years after graduation, I sat next to him on a flight to Denver. We were talking about the sticker shock of our first home purchase when he mentioned the home improvements he and “Dan” had left to do. I tried to remember if his brother’s name was Dan and if they’d bought the house together, but didn’t ask. He then told me that after the Denver trip they were planning on taking a cruise “We’re really needing to get away.” I finally got it – He’s gay. I thought. Huh. I never even suspected. He’s gay. I asked how he met Dan and he said “I think you met him. Didn’t you take that econ class with me in our senior year? Dan was that guy who always blurted out the wrong answer, remember?” I didn’t

remember anything but the C I got in that class after too many all nighters studying for the exams.

I wondered if he and Dan were still together. If they wanted to get married. If he was still with Dan, they would have been together now for what? 15 years? I looked at my wife of that many years and thought about how we met and got married.

I never really considered it. In retrospect it doesn't feel like a deliberate decision. It was all laid out for us. My wife and I have known each other forever, growing up in the same parish community in St. Paul. When she went to St. Bens and I went to St. John's people just expected that we'd get married after graduation. So when the time came, it just seemed natural to propose and set a date. And then we moved, got jobs, bought a house, had Mike, and then and then and then. Some strange unending series of events leading to this moment: me drying dishes next to my wife. My wife of fifteen years. My wife of fifteen years who seems so certain about this issue. And me. Me. Some kid who fumbled his way through high school and college. Me who slept through my senior econ course, and fell into a marriage, mortgage and kids. Me, wondering what the right thing is to say to our four-year-old son with his friend at preschool with two moms. Two moms who can't get married. I was worried about the birds and bees conversation with him. Not about the bees and the bees.

So what's the big deal? Sure, I sort of cringe thinking about two plastic guys in tuxes on top of a tiered wedding cake. I imagine Mike's Hulk and G.I. Joe action figures elbowing each other on the top of the cake, deciding who would be leading whom back down the isle. The bulky figures taking up most of the top, smallest tier and stepping into the border frosting with its embossed flowered outline. And frosting all over Joe's black

combat boot. I'd be a liar if I told you I wouldn't be uncomfortable if Mike brought home Jack instead of Jill one day.

I turned to my wife: "How did you know what to say to him?"

"What do you mean?" She said "They *can't* get married. That's absurd!"

Not the issue, I thought.

I wondered about my St. John's pal and his "Dan" and their life together. Was their life like ours? Was he overwhelmed by the details of it all? Getting up, getting kids off to school, paying bills, trying to lose weight, mowing the lawn, going to church, visiting family? Are they stereotypical gay guys with scrupulous homes and tickets to Key West? Or are they more like us just grinding out our lives and trying to figure out right from wrong? With or without a ring, was his life different than mine?

He grew up in exactly the same way that my wife and I did. We took the big leap from St. Paul to Minneapolis (not without our families grumbling about how far away we were moving and—gasp—to the "big city"), only to find ourselves in a parish whose priest's family owned the corner bar in our old neighborhood in St. Paul. It's true what they say about the Twin Cities. I'd hate to be a newcomer and try to break into the family circles. I wondered if their block had parties and if their neighborhood had pot lucks. I wondered if they had close families and were apart of a parish that accepted and loved them.

A bumper sticker I saw the other day said "Americans are comfortable seeing two men holding guns but not each other's hands." There will definitely be harder conversations to have with Mike than one about two people loving each other.

Later that night I overheard Mike's Hulk action figure asking his G.I. Joe if he wanted to get married. I plopped down next to him to see how the drama would unfold. I imagined how Carson on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* would advise the Hulk in this situation. "If you're going to propose, do it right! On your knees and show him a rock!" "Hulk! I'm a boy. Don't be silly. Boys can't marry other boys." Mike said in his gruff G.I. Joe voice, "That's adsurd."

He got the word wrong but the message from his mom spot on.

I didn't correct either.

Out of the blue the other day on the way to breakfast she said matter-of-factly: "Girls can't marry other girls." We looked at each other and both felt that same punched-in-the-gut feeling.

"MikeCarney said so."

My mind whirled. I immediately got defensive. What does being able to marry have to do with commitment?

How can you have a discussion around the politics of the Defense of Marriage Act with a preschooler, however precocious? What kind of Sex-And-The-City conversations is she having with this kid? The other day she said "MikeCarney doesn't like me *that way*?"... I wanted to ask "*what way*", but decided that I didn't want to know the answer. I imagine them debating the constraints of monogamy and commitment over milk and Goldfish crackers at snacktime. I envision his easy let-down: "Megan, it's not you, it's me..."

Furthermore, what kind of conversations is MikeCarney having with his *parents*?

“That’s just not true, Megan” I implored. “Your mom and I are married!”

A lie.

We daydreamed about running off to Banff, or Boston, or San Francisco. We’d whisk off with a couple of witnesses and get a paper to offer her some kind of legal and, therefore, legitimate proof of our commitment to each other when – in some time *way* in the future when she’s 21 or something—we hoped to put off this line of dialogue. Going to Banff would be like eloping but we’re too old for our parents to care. Plus, it wouldn’t be as much fun as Vegas (I don’t think there’s been an Elvis sighting on Lake Louise). And, anyway, it wouldn’t legally even count upon our return to Minnesota. That’s the debate we’re having among ourselves. Maybe we’re just justifying an expensive vacation.

I resorted to Megan’s style of argument: “Barb and Lynn across the street are married. And Chris and Annie are married. And Tommy and Joey...”

I doth protest too much.

At breakfast through the lethargic language of spelling we debated our options. “Should we C-O-N-F-R-O-N-T his P-A-R-E-N-T-S and ask them why they told him that girls can’t M-A-R-R-Y other G-I-R-L-S?” It’s like speaking in code in front of an NSA agent, though, because she is prematurely learning to spell, or at least learning to piece together some meaning from the pronounced words among the spelled-out ones in the way that one can step back and tell what the puzzle will look like long before it is finished. “WHOSE PARENTS???” She asked. Soon we’ll be learning Bulgarian or some other obscure Slavic language just to be able to discuss sensitive matters in her presence as I suspect Pig Latin is already neatly under her belt.

It all felt like a betrayal to me. I haven't felt ashamed of being gay since I was 15 and caught fumbling with my first girlfriend in the basement of our small-town-Owatonna home. That constant fear of footsteps on the stairs followed by the panicked jump to the other side of the couch and a self-conscious absorption of whatever documentary the television had fallen to by happenstance prior to the *tête-a-tête*. Coming out of the closet was a freeing experience after all, but here I was right back inside and our daughter was suddenly one of the footsteps on the stairs! A republican in three-year-old's clothing defending the true state of marriage as between a man and a woman, well, in her case, between Barbie and Ken at least. (Despite our best attempts, keeping the disproportionately sized and oppressive female figures out of the house was impossible, and her devotion to the dolls has, over time, become tolerable. She has, after all, her own will).

I moved to Minneapolis from Washington D.C. and was struck by the difference in commitment between the two towns. No one is committed in Washington D.C. Everything is on the political four-year-cycle. Relationships, restaurants, neighborhoods, jobs, everything. I once heard a story on *This American Life* about a corner in the *Adams Morgan* neighborhood, which served as a revolving door for various shops and restaurants. During my 6 year graduate school stint in the close to, but cheaper and therefore more dangerous than, neighborhood misnamed *Mount Pleasant* with its urine fragrance, I witnessed at least seven different businesses on that corner.

My one serious relationship during that period of my life was no exception. I remember one conversation we had after we had been living together for over a year in which she emphatically asked me not to put my stuff on her dresser as she didn't want

our stuff to mingle. It would, after all, be much more difficult to split up when she would move.

I met my long-time partner in Minneapolis, Minnesota. At the time of our meeting, literally all of her friends had been in 10 year committed relationships whereas none of my friends were even dating anyone on a steady basis... O.K. one couple was approaching the two-year mark, but even they were on the rocks. And it wasn't just a difference in couples and relationships. People in the Twin Cities seemed committed to everything: their city, their community, their local mom-and-pop hardware store, and their gardens (Minneapolisians crowd into Bachman's, the local garden chain and drop hundreds—even thousands—of dollars each May in preparation for the shortened growing season). Furthermore, everyone in the Twin Cities is *from* the Twin Cities. The area is notoriously hard on newcomers who can't break into the social circles consisting of extended families and long-time neighbors.

When I landed a job in the Twin Cities area, I welcomed what I perceived as a culture of commitment and practically fulfilled a lesbian one-liner by U-Hauling into her life on the second date. She is the epitome of Minnesota commitment having lived no more than one short hour away from her parents (during college) and even then returning on weekends for laundering and reassurance, ultimately moving back in to their home during law school. Whenever we attempt to leave the region for even the shortest of visits, some barrier blocks our attempts: a forgotten cell-phone, a family emergency, or a fender-bender. We've even considered moving across town to be within walking distance to Megan's kindergarten but we're too committed to our neighbors to leave them.

So what difference does a piece of paper make when we are at least as committed to each other as our heterosexually-oriented-legally-married counterparts? Does not a commitment by any other name smell as sweet? I thought it made no difference. At least until breakfast that day. I had no retort, after all, to MikeCarney. Girls, in fact, cannot get married to other girls.

On the way home from Megan's preschool the other day, I tiptoed around the random patches of ice on the sidewalk with Megan on my shoulders, heavy with a day's worth of experience. In avoidance of any more big topics, I bring up only innocuous things: "did you like the PB and J in your lunch?" Of course, the topic of marriage is the least of our worries. Wait until she hears our version of the birds and the bees. I can just imagine it: "Mom, where do babies come from?" "Well Megan, there was this poor med student out in Berkeley...." As we approached the VBS (very busy street) she said, matter-of-factly, "Dinosaurs can't get married." This gave me some perspective. At least, for now, she's on to a new dilemma; the fact that her two moms can't get married according to MikeCarney doesn't worry her for long. Maybe we can protect her from such concerns until she's old enough to form her own opinion.

Maybe not.