

A HOUSE LIKE ANYONE'S

“What I can't understand is, why would you want to be married?”

A tone of baffled protest. The little lift on *married*. After all, as two women over fifty sharing enviable lives—contented as any married couple with over a decade together, welcomed and respected members of our Quaker community—what did we need to prove?

The three elders sitting in our living room were gentle men whose lives testified to their Quaker principles: seek that of God in everyone; speak truth to power; remove the causes of war. Social justice, equality—their life's work. They were also personal friends who had sat here often enough to put their feet up; we'd shared spiritual insights and friendly interest in one another's lives for eight years. Yet tonight, they sat awkwardly.

True that as lesbians our request for marriage under the care of Berkeley Friends Meeting was unprecedented in 1985, but it did not arise from the void. The question of same-sex marriage was already being discussed within our Pacific Yearly Meeting. An activist Friend eager to move beyond the theoretical, encouraged us to apply. So, we wrote, Mem and I. Actively asking.

“Marriage is not just a private contract and personal mystical experience,” we wrote, “but an act of worship in community...”

The Sub-committee on Marriage and Personal Ties usually responds within a few weeks by sending a “clearness committee,” three Friendly visitors who meet with the couple to assess their readiness for marriage. Our letter, dated August 15, was instead met with four months of silence. In November, we heard that the Sub-committee was unsure what we were asking for. We

wrote again, forswearing any claim to legal rights. A clearness committee was finally dispatched, less to assess our readiness, it seemed, than to help them understand our request.

Tonight, Dick, our convener, announced on arrival that he hadn't wanted this assignment. "It's damned if you do, damned if you don't. I called ten people before I could find two who would serve." This revelation was our first hint of just how unready Friends were to entertain our request.

We settled into preparatory Quaker silence. Dick mumbled a prayer for our gathering, then rephrased his opening challenge.

"Why *marriage*?" he asked. "Why not a 'religious ceremony of commitment?' We've heard that used in cases like yours."

Cases like ours. I thought of a potluck supper we'd hosted soon after we joined the Meeting. We'd been warmly embraced as a couple and Mem's guard was down. One guest concluded his self-guided tour of our home by remarking, loudly, "This is a *nice* house. Just like anyone's!" The next day, I made a joke of the man's bald surprise. "Flush toilets, by gosh! Just like anyone's!" But Mem, for whom such encounters, intentional or ignorant, were all too familiar, found it hard to laugh.

It was not my place, tonight, to challenge Dick's expression. I was the imposter, "straight" from birth, veteran of two heterosexual marriages. Mem was the real deal. Growing up in a small Midwestern town in the nineteen-fifties, she had self-identified as lesbian in early puberty. She tried to bow to convention, but at twenty-one, engaged to be married, she fled the altar, unable to go through with the lie. With her first paycheck from her new teaching job, she bought her own wedding china, renouncing all claim to marriage and children and the status they bestowed. She'd just be an old maid school teacher, for all anyone knew.

Given her past, Mem's request that Friends approve her marriage against all social norms and possibly their own beliefs required no little courage. It had been healing to feel embraced as a couple. Would our petition alienate our community? How could Mem make them understand that marriage by any other name would still bear the mark of "otherness"?

She offered them her story.

At age seven, Mem told her mother, "I'm going to marry Pamela when I grow up!" Her mother answered, "You know what they do with girls who like girls? Lock them up and throw away the key!" Invasive supervision, badgering, condemnation followed. Mem became a model daughter, leaking no clues to her secret thoughts and feelings.

At twenty-five, she escaped to California, where, teaching, she found fulfillment in her students' achievements and friendships among fellow teachers, but brought no special "other" to faculty affairs. Twenty years along, a colleague asked for her signature to put Proposition 6 on the ballot, the Briggs Initiative to "get the gays out of our schools." She declined.

Our Quaker committee understood the threat was real, however invisible Mem made herself. But their faces also reflected the deeper pain: to be so utterly unknown, and even hated if she were revealed.

Mem described her tight-knit circle of lesbian friends, women who successfully passed at work but remained socially isolated from the larger community. Comforted by their friendship, she nonetheless longed to live openly, in a community with grandparents, husbands and wives, children of all ages. Her friends warned she'd be hurt, taking a "straight" lover, joining a church.

Mem paused, to smile. "They couldn't believe I'd asked to be married."

"Nor could we," Dick murmured, ruefully. The air around us had softened.

“So, joining Berkeley Meeting as a couple was liberating,” Mem said. “I loved sharing the work. Speaking my truth. Quaker deliberations, so thoughtful—so long!” A chuckle went around. “Best was feeling *I was just like anyone else.*”

Mem paused. Could she show how much that meant?

“Not long after we became members,” she remembered, “I attended a threshing session on homosexuality. I’d just learned “threshing” meant people could air difficult feelings without fear of attack. I had trepidations about going, but the testimony was enormously positive. At the end, someone across the room called out, ‘Why don’t you ask us to marry you?’”

Mem smiled, recalling the moment. “I told them I hadn’t earned that, yet, but I would like to someday.” She turned to Dick, her old friend from gardening days on Property Committee.

“You know, I don’t think, after all, that our work together these years has been about earning anything. Why would I need to *earn* the same name for my marriage that you use for yours?” She held Dick’s widened stare in an almost tender gaze. I breathed with her, sensed her come to rest in the Quaker silence.

In five meetings over the next two months, our little committee reached unity. Dick wrote a strong letter “heartily recommending” approval of our request for marriage. “The Light is the Light,” he said to us. “We first discern, then grow to meet it.” These Friends had grown. Perhaps others would follow.

But Dick’s letter did not persuade. Instead, the Pastoral Committee recommended further discernment by the Meeting as a whole, a process that would consume us for two more years.

Quaker “unity” need not mean “unanimity.” The ideal is to bring everyone to a level of acceptance that prevents on-going discord. A Friend who disapproves of a decision may “stand aside” to let an otherwise united Meeting go forward. Reaching unity can be hard, sometimes

taking long enough that those bringing a request withdraw in defeat even though their petition is widely supported. Two men in an East Coast Friends Meeting had been laboring with their community for seventeen years. Our commitment would be tested.

Threshing sessions on same-sex marriage commenced. Attending the first few, we were buoyed by overwhelmingly supportive testimony. Finally, Mem and I were asked to absent ourselves from the next session to allow nay-sayers unembarrassed expression. Sitting home, we smarted under imagined blows. The following Sunday, after worship, Friends we knew to be supporters went their way without greeting us. Mem was devastated. I imagined these Friends, ashamed of what they'd heard, shying from pain they couldn't redress. One supporter suggested to me that Mem shouldn't take it all so personally. I wondered what it would look like to take it *impersonally*. Was that what I was doing, in my comparative equanimity? It helped when Friends brought their doubts directly to us and, in mutual prayer, felt their concerns melt away. Those encounters were blessings.

In August, 1986, one year after our letter of request, our neighboring Grass Valley Meeting received a similar request from two younger women. In May, 1987, less than a year later, the marriage was approved with a few Friends standing aside. The wedding followed in good order. We sent loving congratulations, painfully aware that our own request, now nearly two years old, had still not been brought before our Business Meeting for a decision.

Berkeley Friends rallied, asking us to keep on, thanking us for what we were doing. One card said, "Good things are happening in the Meeting." We drove to Monterey to watch sea otters and remember we were more than a "cause." I asked Mem if she was ready to withdraw. No, not yet. It felt important not to let the Meeting fail, for its own sake, not just ours. She

wanted Quakers to live up to their ideals. And we knew many of them wanted that as badly as we did.

We were still waiting, October, 1987, when the Meeting Clerk reported that, although the Sub-committee on Marriage and Personal Ties had still not unified to approve our request, the Pastoral Committee would bring the matter to the October Business Meeting for a decision. I felt Mem's confidence soar.

Twenty-two present. Three wavered, two would not be moved. An estate lawyer on the Sub-Committee, our steadfast opposition, shook his head in disbelief that we were still asking. "Marriage has been between a man and a woman since Pauline times! Who do we think we are?"

No unity.

We came close to giving up. Word came that the gay couple back east had finally been approved by their meeting for marriage under its care. Our stern opposer was a young man, who would no doubt outlive both of us. We moved glumly through November, sharing a pale Thanksgiving, looking a question at each other.

"*Not* into the New Year," we agreed.

AND THEN!

Mem pasted these words in our scrapbook in headline caps. At December's Business meeting, Friends "joyfully approved" our marriage under the Meeting's care. The lawyer stood against, and a sweet, former Catholic stood aside, pleading "irreducible ignorance." Two couples stayed home, possibly to express dissent. The discussion confirmed the need to reach unity based on the wisdom of those Friends present at the meeting. (The Minute that was approved that evening named just the two of us. Six years later, an inclusive Minute replaced the limited one after only five minutes of discussion.)

On January 9, 1988, in the old Quaker Meeting House at Walnut and Vine, Mem and I exchanged our homemade vows: "I will try to support you in your growth wherever it takes you." We signed our Quaker wedding certificate, a huge parchment with calligraphy spelling out the date and occasion. Below our names, two hundred and thirteen signatures bear witness: young children, great-great-grandparents, colleagues, lesbian friends, gay men, one who would die within the year, another who would later marry in his own Quaker meeting. Between us we had six close family: my three blood relatives (mother, sister, son) and Mem's three family stand-ins (surrogate daughter and two of her oldest friends from her lesbian family). The larger Quaker family turned out in force; this was their triumph as well. A non-Quaker friend, attending out of loyalty and curiosity, later described how her doubts had evaporated during the service. "I never witnessed anyone get more married than you two did."

Nor, it seemed, had I. Our marriage, the ceremony itself, at the last minute took on the emotional depth I had been missing. No longer a Cause, this was our pledge, witnessed.

A subliminal anxiety subdued my joy that day. While our scrapbook photos show Mem's beaming face, wet eyes, a hundred hugs, I knew the woman I accompanied to the Meeting House was ill, past exhaustion, would be barely able to speak for days. In 1985, just before our quest for marriage began, a debilitating chronic illness had forced Mem to resign from her thirty-year teaching career. Giving up a profession that demanded her all, she was able to endure the harrowing journey we'd been on for twenty-eight months. But now the illness claimed its price.

I continued as I had been. The marriage in my heart, long ago accomplished, obscured for me Mem's growing discomfort with her uncertain status. We both understood she'd likely never work again, which wasn't a financial concern at present. But what if something happened to me?

Around that time, the AIDS epidemic was hitting gay men disproportionately in the Bay Area, exposing their exclusion from protections afforded legally married couples, primarily spousal health insurance, death benefits, and hospital visiting rights. Like these ill men, Mem knew the affirmation provided by a religious blessing was not enough to forge a legal unit out of two people unrelated by blood. In important ways, she was not my family, nor I hers.

In December, 1984, in response to a gay city employee's proposal, the city of Berkeley became the first to extend health coverage to same-sex partners of city and school employees. The proposal used the term "domestic partnership" for the marriage-like arrangements of unmarried couples, allowing them to campaign for legal recognition as family units without challenging religious sanctions by calling it marriage.

Interestingly, the anti-gay Briggs Initiative, Proposition 6, which Mem had politely declined to sign in 1978, had helped induce a shift in public consciousness. When early polls showed voters 65% in favor, a group of Bay Area activists issued the call, "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Hundreds of gay men and lesbians all over the State came out to family, friends, colleagues, neighbors. People discovered how many gays they knew and loved. With support from leaders like President Jimmy Carter and then-Governor Ronald Reagan, Proposition 6 was overwhelmingly rejected by voters.

Gays were increasingly perceived as people with houses just like anyone's. From 1985, when we applied to be married, through the end of the nineties, California cities, and ultimately the State, approved Domestic Partner policies modeled on Berkeley's. The process was initially piecemeal, with intermittent bulletins. Caught up in work, I paid little attention, but Mem followed avidly. One morning in 1991, she said, "Get your bag. We're going to City Hall." In the car, she told me, "We're signing the Domestic Partner Register."

Instant vision of our house in flames. Houses all over Berkeley. A homophobic pyromaniac with access to the list of names. I accepted the possibility, trusting that our signing might help shift the probabilities.

At the registrar's counter, we produced IDs, mortgage papers showing joint tenancy since 1979, an announcement of our Quaker marriage (irrelevant.) We signed forms, pressed inky thumbs into a book. I paid. No kiss. Going home, I glanced at Mem. Saw a woman who knew what needed to be done; was looking ahead to the next step. I thought, "This is how things change." I felt glad to have a signature to put on the line.

Later I asked Mem what signing the register changed.

"Maybe nothing, yet. You don't seem to realize how vulnerable I am. If you died, I could have to fight your family to keep my share of our joint property. They would want to take everything they could for your son." I denied the danger, but she knew such assurances are chaff in the wind. We made wills, each bequeathing the house to the other. Of course, if wills are challenged, the legal family generally wins. But at least I'd made my wishes known.

Another decade of legislative yo-yo: domestic partner bills passing, vetoed by successive governors, tweaked and re-submitted. Along the way, Mem lost her mother. Turning sixty, she took a new name that shared my surname. Was I family now? She had no other.

These urgent steps—wedding, legal registry, name change, wills—seemed in the end to operate like patches sewn on a jacket, little advertisements of how we wished to be seen. The changes we would face next operated from within.

The illness, and with it, Mem's loss of meaningful work, presented our biggest challenge. We slid into traditional gender roles we'd always meant to avoid: the breadwinner and the wife. I commuted across the Bay, traveled to conferences, took vacations at Mem's insistence. My trips

made her glum. Once I offered to stay home. “Ha,” she said. “You think it’s you I miss. But it’s my life I’m missing—I want to be the one on vacation, or going to a job I love!” Instead, moving between debilitating fatigue and spells of acute nerve inflammation, she prepared our meals, cared for the dogs, kept up with house and garden. Watched TV when her eyes couldn’t follow a page.

I got it that I couldn’t fill the emptiness in her life. I sensed her faith in our marriage slipping away. A year came when she asked me to put our framed wedding parchment in the basement. “Historical interest only,” she called it. Shortly after, she resigned her membership in Berkeley Meeting. Her sense of safety and wholeness among Friends never recovered from our over-two-year gauntlet. I felt disloyal every time I attended Meeting for Worship.

Years earlier, I’d been drawn, like other Friends before me, to study Buddhism as a further approach to meditation. My Zen practice, a life buoy during these years, now became, for a time, Mem’s greatest grievance. How could I voluntarily go away to stare at a wall, something she spent whole days doing under sentence of illness? My occasional weekend retreats convinced her I was planning to become a monk.

Yet it was Zen that saved her. She found a different Buddhist temple from mine and began to absorb the teachings. She learned how to shift focus from hateful conditions she couldn’t change to the gifts of her own awareness in the present moment. New friends were drawn to her kindness and intuitive wisdom. Although our wedding certificate was laid aside, that ceremony had perhaps removed one pebble from her shoe. Now she could walk on, loving life as it was rather than grieving what it wasn’t. Maybe she and I could even find new footing.

Throughout the final decade of the century, Mem followed the expansion of legal rights for unmarried partners, which culminated in the sweeping Domestic Partner Act of 1999. That

year, I finally put Mem on my employee health plan. We couldn't know I would be taking her off after just two years.

The ultimate irony: It was she who would leave, not I.

One day, at a Zen retreat, I was told to call home. Mem picked up on the first ring and asked me, point blank: "If I wanted to move to Mt. Shasta, would you want to come with me?"

I was nonplussed. It turned out she had discovered after my Mother's death several months earlier that the inheritance coming to me would be enough for me to buy her half of our house. She could start a new life in Mt. Shasta, California, under the sheltering wing of Shasta Abbey, the founding site of her Zen tradition.

Immersed in my job, my city, own Zen center, I had to admit I wasn't ready to uproot. We revisited our wedding vows: "I will try to support you on your path, wherever it takes you." Our parting felt like delivering on that promise—a deliverance into new life for her, new perspectives for me; deliverance from unhappy patterns we could no longer find our way out of. The move had a rightness that made it seem inevitable.

And what ended? When Mem and I ceased to share a roof after twenty-three years together, were we a gay marriage that failed? Or a marriage that, just like anyone's, had changed?

I had no sense of failure during the months I helped Mem prepare for her move, or after, delivering her to Mt. Shasta in multiple trips, coming home to our empty house. But I was bereft. And I did not feel unmarried. I couldn't stop sending care packages; we talked incessantly on the phone. (A friend called this "de-courting.") She kept my name.

The compulsion to be in touch dwindled after a few years to periodic emails. I kept needing to know how she was. She reported on body and spirit, adventures with dogs, new friendships. I reported major events—my son's mental breakdown, complicated by his father's suicide; his subsequent recovery from addiction leading to a job in counseling; his wonderful wedding in the Meeting house; the tragedy when his wife, whom I adored, was killed in a car crash.

Her news, my news; we never referred to what was in *The News* those years. California voters, who had widely supported the Domestic Partner act of 1999, solidly maintained their opposition to same-sex marriage. The public could grant same-sex couples each of the two wings that flew a marriage—legal rights and religious blessing—just not the name of the bird. In 2000, a dozen years after our Quaker wedding, voters passed Proposition 22 banning the use of the word “marriage” for same-sex unions, even as the legislature added 18 new rights to the Domestic Partner Act. To no one's surprise, same-sex couples continued to appeal for the distinction to be abandoned.

Well-meaning liberals sometimes asked, “What's in a word?” It was easy to forget that “separate but equal” really means “equal but separate.”

I watched developments as if from another planet, mystified by my detachment on Valentine's weekend, 2004, unmoved by pictures of wildly happy same-sex couples getting married by the dozens at San Francisco City Hall, courtesy of Mayor Gavin Newsome, in defiance of Proposition 22. A court order immediately stayed the marriages but did not void them. Back and forth the battle went, with more marriages in 2008, when Proposition 22 was deemed unconstitutional. It was immediately replaced by Proposition 8, submitted as an

amendment to the state constitution. This, too, won its necessary half of the vote, tying things up in new stays and appeals for another five years.

Finally, on June 28, 2013, after a complicated series of Proposition 8 rulings, the right to marry was granted to all Californians, and the courts managed to make it stick.

AND THEN! Exactly two years later, on June 26, 2015, the U. S. Supreme Court did the same for the nation. That weekend, Pride Day in San Francisco was over the top.

And where were we, Mem and I, that glorious day?

In 2009, my correspondence with Mem had fallen into a hiatus, possibly because of a misunderstanding. Three years later, clearing a rarely opened cupboard, I unearthed a little book of Mem's I knew she'd want and mailed it with a friendly card. Her warm email of thanks held the news that she was dying of cancer.

It was a slow death, for which I will always be grateful. Rich correspondence resumed, and when she could no longer manage email, phone calls brought me her beloved voice for the first time in years. When she died on March 2, 2015, I sat at her bedside waiting for the monks from the Abbey. They included me in the ritual chants and preparation of the body. At the end, dressed in a monk's white robe, with shaved head and transcendent smile, my Mem had the look of a Buddha.

At the memorial, I carried her picture. I was Family, after all.

Today, I stand at our front window, gazing into the garden she planted and that I've kept tended. I imagine her hand slipping into mine. Our fingers tighten and release. For a moment, she is here at my side. For a moment more, that is all that matters.

THE END