

Queering the Family

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Many of us are still smarting from the setback on November 4, when Proposition 8 to ban gay marriage passed in California. Even as we plan our next steps in the wake of that defeat, we need to remind ourselves of what it can mean to create queer families even in the face of opposition, what it means to serve with your very life a kind of love that breaks the rules. As lovers who challenge conventional notions of who may love whom, queer people have the potential to show forth in a particularly vivid way the God-given capacity to love in spite of all obstacles—in spite of homophobia, in spite of state sanctions, in spite of family expectations, in spite of workplace discrimination, in spite of rejection from our religious communities, in spite of all of the accumulated wounds incurred by being people who do not conform to cultural norms. The radical notion embodied in this kind of queerness is the notion that anyone can love everyone. The Creator has vested in us the capacity to cultivate deep bonds of affection with ANYBODY, no matter how unlikely, and to enter into solidarity with all life. We have the capacity to make a circle with NO ONE OUTSIDE IT, to define ourselves as one interconnected life community. This is a radical act in a culture driven by self-interest.

Likewise, the notion of family has the potential, never guaranteed, to challenge conventional ways of being by fostering and affirming deep bonds of affection. Through these bonds we become ready and willing to lay down our lives for each other. Martin Buber calls this kind of genuine bond an “I-Thou” relationship, as opposed to an “I-It” relationship. In “I-It” relationships the other person is valued only insofar as he or she is useful in serving one’s own self-interest, whereas in an “I-Thou” relationship, the other person is cherished solely for who she or he is. The loss of our ability to enter into “I-Thou” relationships may be at the root of the national obsession with “traditional family values.” In a culture that teaches us to prize material wealth, productivity, and status above all else, we may rarely, if ever, feel seen by another human being, much less experience authentic, self-giving love from someone. Is it any wonder, then, that we venerate the family—the one institution that celebrates loving relationship above wealth and status?

Of course, as many of us know, families also have the regressive capacity to destroy love and to thwart life. Distorted and disfigured familial love is used to manipulate, shackle, and threaten family members. The notion of family can be invoked to solidify barriers between insiders and outsiders, to dam up the flow of love and hoard it in a way that actually destroys love and thwarts life. In the face of this possibility, we have to ask ourselves, “What do I want to form a family FOR?”

Families that are truly queer—truly dislocated from conventional ways of being—resist the empire-inspired temptation to hoard, regulate, and limit love. Rather than turning in on themselves in an attempt to contain love, they strengthen each other’s capacity to release love outward into the communities they touch. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus

teaches that the people of God, the chosen people, are to be queer in this way. They are to act like salt, like light, and like yeast. A little bit of salt can flavor the whole broth. A little bit of light can brighten a significant corner of the community, and a little bit of yeast can leaven the whole loaf. Our task as queer people and queer families is to queer not just our own lives but the whole world.

The challenge facing queer people in this historical moment, following the passage of Proposition 8, is to use even this setback as a catalyst to revolutionary love. God has created us with the capacity to use EVERY circumstance as an opportunity to love. In this instance, that means resisting the impulse to scapegoat other communities, the impulse to retreat into entrenched identity positions, and the impulse to linger over and fetishize our own wounds until they become idols that prevent us from loving across boundaries.

Identity politics, like regressive notions of family, trap us in stories of “us” and “them,” creating an oppositional force to fight against. Focusing on the self-interest of our own identity groups, we get so caught up in resenting, protesting, resisting, and fighting off the deathliness that we project onto the oppositional force that we never get around to creating life, and worse, we reproduce our own oppression by subjugating others. The LGBT community has often fallen into this trap.

This is not queerness, nor is it real family. This is simply business as usual.

But if we shift instead to thinking of queerness in terms of radical love across boundaries, we come into contact with the fullness of life community. We can suddenly see that each of us is one cell in a vital living organism that is the earth ecosystem. As cells, we are not separate from anything or anyone. My life and my freedom is dependent--intricately bound up with--your life and your freedom. I become fully human and fully alive by honoring, serving, protecting, and fighting for your full humanity and full aliveness, no matter who you are. Within this paradigm, we can use what is killing us to connect to the suffering of everyone else on the planet. We can enter into solidarity with all life and work together for our common liberation.

Our status as love warriors gives us a unique power. Outside of the power to shout and shoot, outside the power of the empire, there are yet other forms of power which arise out of our being bound up with the ground of life, the river of life, the tree of life. The grass that grows into the light through asphalt also has power: not power to command, to rule, to manipulate, but a power which comes to life from a relationship. This is the power of queer family.

So what, concretely, can queer people and queer families do now, in the wake of Prop 8?

First, we can commit to seeking our own healing and the healing of others. This means we stop whining, blaming, scapegoating, and making excuses and get down to the real work of healing. Where are the barriers to our own ability to love across boundaries?

Where are we serving death rather than life? We can confess these wounds and limitations in community and allow the Spirit of Life to heal them.

Second, we can start building what Christians call the Kingdom of God or the Reign of Love. From a position of dislocation, we can transgress all the rules about who can love whom and who can fight for whom. This is what it means to be queer, to be family. We can create collective freedom projects in which white men champion the freedom of women of color, in which women of color aid white men in overcoming addictions, in which middle class people assist homeless people in getting off the streets while the formerly homeless counsel inner city youth. You see where I'm going. We can enter fully into relationship across lines of difference and devote our energies to resisting and stepping outside systems of domination that are killing us all.

This is what it means to queer the world. And we don't need any certificate of marriage to do it.