

ESSAY

THE LONG GAME

TWENTY YEARS OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE
AND THE MORAL REVOLUTION
THAT MADE IT POSSIBLE

by Rosaria Butterfield

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE



My Christian neighbor knocked on my door and asked if we could talk. I smiled, but he looked uncharacteristically burdened. My just-waking toddler snuggled on my hip. Her hair smelled of apple juice and yogurt.

“I have been praying for a woman who is—or was—a lesbian professor from Syracuse University,” my neighbor said. “Her name was on a prayer list for the graduate students in the philosophy group. I have been praying for her since 1997. I think she is you.”

I felt gut-punched.

“Are you—were you—Rosaria Champagne?” my neighbor asked gently.

With those words, my compartmentalized life imploded.

It was 2008. Prop 8—a California ballot proposition and state constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage—was dominating the news while I tried vigilantly not to notice. After all, I’d been busy: When the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003 declared anti-sodomy laws unconstitutional in *Lawrence v. Texas*, and then—San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom ushered in gay marriage in February 2004, I was a newly married church planter’s wife caring for a baby—and a traumatized teen adopted out of foster care. That May, as two Massachusetts women became the first legally married same-sex couple in America, I trying to live 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

As a new Christian and a new wife, I was experiencing exuberant Christian liberty and freedom from my past sins. But my memories persisted. Not as homosexual longings but as residue, like dirt lodged in grout. If my old sexual sin had passed away, why was it still a source of shame? Why couldn’t I simply erase it from my biography?

Maybe it was, in part, because the day I opened the door to my neighbor, I also opened the door to my past. And I was appalled to see a straight line between my biography and the

lawlessness that was then only beginning to corrupt the precious sacrament of marriage.

April 25, 1993, March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. I sang along on a day crisp with sapphire sky and Indigo Girls rocking “Closer to Fine.” Gay Pride boded good tidings. We marched 300,000 strong in the center of U.S. power under sturdy and mature cherry blossom trees. I boasted a new butch haircut, piercings in my right ear (because in those days, left was right and right was wrong), and a wife-beater tank, perfect for the uncharacteristic April warmth. My girlfriend’s formidable hand on my back and her raspy alto voice singing in harmony meant one thing: I had arrived.

I was a newly minted Ph.D. holding a tenure-track post at a prestigious research university. Loud and proud. Out of the closet and bold at the lectern. Teaching packed courses in queer theory and women’s studies and coordinating student activism, I would later become a “tenured radical.” On that historic day in 1993, my girlfriend rode her Harley with Dykes on Bikes while I traipsed in my Birkenstocks with lesbian moms bearing sippy cups and strollers. My corner of the march rivaled any Moms Club for durable sensibility.

My partner and I were wholly egalitarian. If you had told us that in just over two decades, independent women like us would be calling each other “wives,” we would have thought you nuts. Why, we would’ve asked, would anyone burden good people with such a heteronormative institution?

The 1993 march displayed the gay rights movement’s internal contradictions: Sippy cups and sadomasochism marched in the same direction under the same banner.



Participants parade through Washington during the 1993 gay rights march.

We postmoderns had made peace with contradictions and dismissed all moral criticism as patriarchal and hegemonic.

ACT UP was there, chanting “Act Up! Fight Back! Fight AIDS” along with “End the Ban Now!” ACT UP activists laughed in the face of both condoms and common sense. Looking back, I believe their over-bright insouciance masked the soul-agony of death. It was at funerals—so many funerals—that the internal contradiction of gay rights hung heavy with unresolvable grief.

Just before the 1993 march, I had attended a symbolic gay marriage. It would not be the last gay marriage I attended, but it was certainly the largest.

About 1,500 same-sex couples assembled at the National Museum of Natural History with dozens of ministers, organ music, photographers, along with rice confetti (which is now frowned upon because it’s hard to clean up—is there a metaphor there?). The wedding ceremony was titled “An Interfaith Ceremony of Commitment.” We

observed, but my lesbian partner and I were not among the premarital assembled.

The march displayed the tension between queer activism and mainstream gay rights. As a radical academic, I was smitten with queer theory, with its fringe embrace of transsexuals and denial of stable categories of sex and gender. But I also saw the political expediency of leveling the legal playing field, of breaking the two-tier system that kept gays and lesbians classified as “other.” It wasn’t as easy as it sounds: To gain this respectability would require convincing garden-variety Americans to go soft on sodomy.

What would it take to get everyday Americans to extend to gays and lesbians the right hand of fellowship?

The answer was clear: gay marriage.

By 1989, the gay rights movement understood the moral advantage of full marriage over domestic partnerships, but this would require a radical change in how the movement presented itself. Neuropsychologist Marshall Kirk and advertising executive Hunter Madsen became the unlikely image consultants to make gay look normal even as the AIDS epidemic—in the early ’80s called GRID (Gay-Related Infectious Deficiency)—solidified the idea that “gay” equaled “deadly plague.” The duo published a handbook of gay

etiquette, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the '90s* (New York: Doubleday 1989).

Kirk and Madsen's rules are straightforward:

Keep the message focused on the normalization of homosexuality. The authors declared it in plain English: no public sex and no gay disturbances until gay marriage is the law, and Christians see us as victims.

Find easy-to-manipulate churches, especially mainline Presbyterians, to get on board and help promote the idea that gays are victims.

Give potential protectors a just cause by reassuring Americans that the issue is anti-discrimination, not gay rights.

Make gays look good by reclaiming or inventing a noble history. Anyone single, over 40, and dead could be marshaled to the cause as a gay forebear.

Make victimizers look bad. Create a media link, for example, between Nazis and "hysterical backwoods preachers" and distinguish this from open-minded pluralists and liberal, loving pastors.

By the time of the 1993 march, Kirk and Madsen's book was considered seminal reading for gay activists. It was the road map. The game plan. With the march and mass marriage both stunning successes, we returned home with a team and a cause: We could practically taste our respectable freedom and moral inclusion.

It didn't take long to plunge back to earth. When Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act into law in September 1996, we felt betrayed. The act limited marriage to the union of one man and one woman and further declared that no state could recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.

While gay marriage was seemingly stuck in the twilight zone, my life was bustling with students, political petitions, speeches before lawmakers, op-eds in local newspapers, and disciplining a generation of young lesbian graduate students. Sometime after the 1993 march, we dropped the by-then bourgeois stability of "gay and lesbian" and embraced the rebellion of "queer." Queer, as defined by David Halperin, is "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant ... is an identity without an essence." The problem with "gay" and "lesbian" is that it looked back to pathologies, abuse, and sin. Where "gay" and "lesbian" sought to normalize aberrance, "queer" embodied no pathology that required a cure, no sin that required forgiveness.

Thus, my ACT UP and transsexual friends saw me as a sellout when I co-wrote the domestic partnership policy at



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2003

The U.S. Supreme Court declares laws against sodomy unconstitutional in *Lawrence v. Texas*.

2004

Gavin Newsom, mayor of San Francisco, directs the city-county clerk to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. On May 17, two Massachusetts women become the first legally married same-sex couple in the United States.

2008

California voters approve Proposition 8, amending the state's constitution to ban same-sex marriage. The ban is soon overturned through the courts.

2015

In its 5-4 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the U.S. Supreme Court legalizes gay marriage in all 50 states.

2020

In *Bostock v. Clayton*, the Supreme Court adds LGBTQ rights to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

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my university, which allowed gay and lesbian couples to legally cover their partners on the university's medical insurance plans. We all knew this was a forerunner for gay marriage laws. ACT UP and company wanted to focus on unfettered sexual equality, not grafting gay couples into the heteronormative tree. I was running in the opposite direction of the radical queer activism I claimed to value.

My tenure book was published in 1996, which meant I could turn my attention to those I believed were stirring up American homophobia: Bible-believing Christians.

I started to obsess about them. Although few, they were vocal. Also, they didn't play fair. Blind to the fact that I and my friends were on an aggressive quest to warp the sexual design that had stood since Genesis, I became convinced it was actually the Christians who were on offense. Why, I wondered, would they not simply leave consenting adults alone?

When the Christian men's movement, Promise Keepers, set up shop in the Syracuse University football stadium, I wrote an editorial for a local paper: "Promise Keepers Message Is a Danger to Democracy." A week later, I received a response, a letter from a local pastor. His name was Ken Smith, and God used him to change my life forever.

Ken's letter invited me to dinner at his house, so I called him on the phone to ensure he wasn't a nut job. He graciously invited me to his home the following week, letting me know I could bring a friend. That was gracious, I thought, but I knew I wanted to go alone. When he gave me his address, I realized I knew the house. It was a few blocks away from mine, on one of my favorite running routes.

When I arrived at the Smith house, Floy, Ken's wife, hugged me warmly. At the dinner table, Ken pulled out my chair for me. Chivalry? I almost laughed out loud.

We made small talk, and I learned that Ken had been an English major and loved books, which became his segue to the Bible. Ken insisted that if I wanted to understand why Christians wouldn't leave consenting adults alone, I would need to actually read the Bible, not just talk about it. Then, in a straight-shooter way that would appall DEI coordinators

everywhere, Ken set the terms of our relationship: "Rosaria," he said, "I can accept you as a lesbian, but I do not approve." That tension between acceptance and approval would later become crucial to my salvation.

From my perspective, Christians were the only people who stood in the way of our full moral inclusion. I suddenly found myself eager to read this book that had seduced so many. Ken's Bible teaching was parsed over hundreds of nourishing meals, law and grace served with rice and beans. I devoured the Bible's imposing heft seven times in two years, grappling with its unapologetic patriarchy even as I found curious comfort in a good Father, a Creator God who makes patterns of nature concur with His purpose.

Of course, I flinched against the Creation mandate. I rejected the idea that my lesbian feelings were in rebellion, marring and distorting the image of God in me (Genesis 1:27-28). My feelings were genuine, were they not? Innate. How could they be anything but pure? Yet, the Bible presumed Adam's sin made me a morally culpable sinner, not an innocent victim (Genesis 3:15). I learned that Jesus came to set the captives free (Isaiah 61:1-3). I heard He was bigger than my lesbianism (Matthew 11:28-29). I later came to believe that Jesus, the God-man, suffered, died, was buried, and was resurrected to justify people like me.

The Smiths unashamedly embraced the Bible, every word of it, as true. What's more, they believed the Bible knew me better than I knew myself. I rejected this out of hand, of course. Still, I kept reading and meeting with the Smiths. Secretly, I considered them unpaid research assistants for my book on the Religious Right. But God had other plans.

God's Word took root in my heart and grew, shaping my thoughts about everything, even my 19th Century Literature class. I started rethinking Satan's hubris in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and the soulless creature's pathos in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). What was Milton getting at when he had Adam lament, "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me, man? Did I solicit thee from Darkness to promote me?" Mary Shelley inscribed these lines from *Paradise Lost* in her opening to *Frankenstein*

to make a point: God was like a mad scientist poking around in our lives without permission. But Psalm 100 assured me that “without our aid He did us make.” If God made man and woman in a pattern for a creational purpose (Genesis 1:28), that made lesbianism no bueno from the get-go.

Ken taught that John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life,” meant that God wanted to be in relationship with His image-bearers.

I was secretly astonished. The God of the universe wanted a relationship with me? And He secured that through the blood sacrifice of His Son, the Savior? And He communicated all this in a Book more magisterial than I could bear?

What the Smiths taught me permeated everything. The Apostles’ Creed, which I had memorized in Roman Catholic churches and schools, resurfaced in my conscious memory, and I found myself audibly exhaling it over 10-mile Sunday morning runs. Conversations with the Smiths were candid and edgy. Pastor Ken once observed, “Rosaria, your problem is you think what is ethical by your standards creates what is true and beautiful. But the Bible says the opposite: Objective truth determines what is beautiful and ethical.”

This is what real love looks like.

My lesbian partner brought me coffee one morning while I was reading my Bible in a corner of my home office.

“Why do you waste your time like this?” she scolded.

I felt exposed. The Word of God had gotten bigger inside me. My lesbianism and atheism no longer appeared to me like choices. Rather, they were attacks against my Lord, Prophet, Priest, and King. I wondered if I was on the road to becoming a closet Christian.

Tenure and faith came simultaneously, and repentance brought both terror and freedom. Terror because I saw all I had once loved slipping away. Freedom because God’s grace makes all loss good: “As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation, so there is no sin so great, that it can

bring damnation upon those who truly repent” (Westminster Confession of Faith 15:4). Freedom brought responsibility. I broke up with my lesbian partner and joined the church as a covenant member a few months after conversion. Taking vows before God established the course of my new life.

I was not converted out of homosexuality, but converted I was, and therefore, went to war against my homosexuality. Why? Because God hates it, that’s why. Grace isn’t cheap or easy: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

The Puritan John Owen helped me understand that we mortify what God hates and “vivify” what God loves. During

one long prayer session, I asked God to help me love what He loves. I saw from my church what God loves: Biblical marriage, families, children, building something that matters. Catching a glimpse in the mirror of my ugly, sprouting butch haircut, I laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of that prayer. But God didn’t laugh.

I used my tenure wisely, changing my research field from queer theory to Christian literature, opening my home for Bible studies led by the elders in my church, and being available for students and colleagues who wanted to know what on earth had happened. While on research leave to study Christian education, I met Kent Butterfield, a godly man and seminary student who believed in gospel transformation. On May 19, 2001, the Lord allowed me the greatest earthly privilege: to be Kent’s wife. I have been Biblically married for almost as long as I have been a Christian.

June 2015: In *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court of the United States, in a 5-4 decision, legalized gay marriage in all 50 states and added the “dignitary harm



Plaintiff Jim Obergefell speaks to members of the media after the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a ruling legalizing same-sex marriage on June 26, 2015.

clause,” expanding the legal definition of harm to now include failure to “affirm” one’s LGBTQ identity. Five years later, in *Bostock v. Clayton*, the Supreme Court added LGBTQ to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. And just like that, homosexual “orientation” went from a fringe 19th-century Freudian mistake to our nation’s reigning idol. Today, 30 percent of Gen Zers (18- to 25-year-olds) believe they “are” LGBTQ—a steep jump from 3.4 percent in 2004.

The gay rights movement has won its prize: legal marriage in all 50 states. So why isn’t the gay revolution over? Why didn’t activists declare victory, pack up, and go home? Because the gay marriage movement was never merely about legal inclusion. Civil unions and domestic partnerships were largely secured in the U.S. by 2015, so legal protections were already locked. No, the campaign for gay marriage was always a moral revolution, not a legal one. Activists thought the freedom to marry meant freedom from that quiet internal soul-whisper that something isn’t right. They were fooled into believing that contrary voices came from the outside, from Christians and rednecks, when in fact it was baked in at the Creation.

Man didn’t make marriage, so man can’t modify it. And Christians who believe that moral good emerges from the legal maneuver that created “gay marriage” deny the truth of Scripture, the victory of the Savior, and the power of the gospel. Homosexuality is found in the flesh, forbidden in the law, and overcome in the gospel.

What ought we to do? How now shall we live in this post-Christian, post-*Obergefell* world? We must not be distracted by the vitriol and danger of our day. We must bring the gospel to those people who have become casualties of the LGBTQ movement, including Christian parents whose adult children have cut them off. And we must labor as Christian statesmen, speaking truth to school boards and legislatures, actively speaking boldly in the public sphere, and trusting Christ with the consequences. Should the Lord bless our work, we will see reformation in our churches, revival in our land, and freedom through repentance and faith of those currently captive and enslaved to homosexuality. Even as the whole world rages, our labor is not in vain. ■

—Rosaria Butterfield is an author, pastor’s wife, and former professor of English and women’s studies at Syracuse University. Read more about her in *Backstory* on p. 72.

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