

A BARREN STRAIGHT WIFE WATCHES THE PROP 8 TRIAL

I actually don't know whether I am officially (that is, physically) "barren" or not.

I know, though, that not long after I got married, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. My doctors told me right away I'd go through six months of intensive treatment, followed by five years of hormonal treatment. The hormonal treatment, Tamoxifen, was originally developed as a fertility treatment until they discovered it caused birth defects. So between the six months of acute toxins and the five years of birth defect inducing hormonal treatments, my doctors simply assumed that that would take me to the age of 40 at which point I would be too old to have kids. And while mr. emptywheel and I considered, for maybe a second, going through the very dangerous (because it involved high levels of hormones) process of saving eggs, and while we could have insisted I stop the hormonal treatment after two years, we ultimately decided that we could be perfectly happy being an aunt and uncle.

And, having made the decision to remain childless, my husband and I promptly plunged deep into discovering what "in sickness and in health" really meant.

Going through that kind of challenge taught me a lot about marriage. There was the adjustment, for both of us, of me losing all my hair (except, unfairly, that on my calves, though mr. emptywheel removed that for me with duct tape). There was the quiet companionship, the two of us together at home—with me usually asleep by 8—a big break from the athletic team-focused social life we had shared since we met. There was the legal nightmare when mr. emptywheel almost lost his visa and work privileges, and with them the health benefits paying for my care. And there

was the quiet relief at the end of treatment, the two of us staring up at the southern sky together from a hut in a fishing village in Brazil.

I may be barren, but I think any couple that makes it through such life-changing events together gets full claim to the title of marriage.

But, as Audrey Bilger points out, the Prop 8 proponents envision not just denying that title—marriage—to same sex couples. They would deny that title to a lot of straight couples, too, couples just like Mr. Emptywheel and me, who remain childless. And they would go further in imposing their gender roles on all of us, with stupid husbands (really, they did make a point of saying men were less intelligent than women!) whose job it is to keep their daughters chaste and women defined primarily by their breast feeding and—later—cooking.

Defenders of the ban on same-sex marriage believe that husbands and wives have specific roles, determined by their sex, and that without role models of two opposite-sex parents, children will grow up to think they can do whatever they want. As they see it, same-sex marriage is the outcome of individual liberty and the right to pursue happiness – gone too far. They target all who resist the idea that biology is destiny. No matter that the bulk of academic research shows that gays and lesbians make good parents. To the so-called marriage defenders, science is no match for sacred texts and the way things once were and are supposed to be.

There's a reason the pro-Prop. 8 defense team fought to keep this trial from being broadcast on the internet. They prefer the ballot box to the witness stand because their message is far more persuasive and well cloaked when it's

delivered in carefully crafted sound bytes about defining marriage and protecting the family. In a trial, however, the reasoning behind their pitch must stand up to legal scrutiny. If one man and one woman are necessary because procreation is the “central or defining purpose” of marriage, as the lawyers defending the constitutional ban have argued, then what do they really think about straight couples who choose not to have children? Should unwed mothers be forced into wedlock? This is where it gets scary – for everyone!

Such questions didn’t come up much during the 2008 campaign because the anti-gay marriage forces largely succeeded in controlling the terms of the debate. Frank Schubert, head of the PR firm that ran the Yes on 8 campaign, in a recap panel presentation to the 2009 American Association of Political Consultants Pollie Award Conference last year, explained how they crafted the message. Schubert noted that since most voters are moved primarily by self-interest, and since, in preliminary focus groups, most heterosexual subjects indicated that this issue had nothing to do with them and that they didn’t see how same-sex marriage affected their own lives (sound familiar?), the best approach to move such voters was to appeal to unknown scary consequences, fabricated or not. As his associate Jeff Flint put it, “Something could happen that you may not like so you need to vote yes [on Prop. 8] to stop that from happening.”

[snip]

It’s time for straight voters to see that they’re being had. The enforcement of “traditional” marriage – one primary goal of the anti-gay marriage movement –

would affect the entire population, not just because marriage is a basic civil right, which of course it is, but because Americans should be free decide how to build their own family life. While many thrive in conventional roles as fathers out in the workplace and mothers in the home, not everyone wants – or is even financially able – to live that way, and no one should force them to do so.

Go read all of Bilger's piece. It's the best explanation I've seen for why—aside from the really obvious point about defending equal rights for all—everyone should be watching the Prop 8 trial closely.