We ARE Family

Defeating the Shame Game in the Fight for the Freedom to Marry

by Samiya Bashir
African American lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have long fought to stake our claim to the American promise, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, of the equal right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," and we’ve done it for the most part while acquiescing to our community’s demands not to live too loud, not to act so free, and not to flaunt any happiness we come by, or decry the violence and discrimination we suffer, too broadly in public. Oftentimes, playing into the assumption that who we are is something of which to be ashamed, we are told that it is our responsibility to keep quiet, go away or fade into the background while continuing to fight undaunted for the equal rights of the rest of African America.

Most of us didn’t grow up as the only black person in our families, although that’s a claim which is getting more difficult to make as the structure of families in America continues to change. But, a great many black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people did grow up believing that they were the only ones in their families, peer groups and communities who were “different”—whether it was true or not. We were raised to believe that there was something shameful about who we are, and in an atmosphere where our families were already under attack, where our collective humanity seemed always in need of assertion and protection, many of us grew up with the idea that remaining silent about our difference was the only way to guarantee our safety, and that of our families and communities.

At a time of escalating division and destruction of black communities—across region, class, and gender as well as sexual orientation—it is frustrating that the latest assault is being joined not only by those who might benefit from division within the black community, but also by those who also stand to lose so much: ourselves, our families, and our friends.

This is exemplified in one of the most divisive weapons hurled against black LGBT individuals, couples and families in the current fight against equal marriage rights. Those who oppose us, while claiming to love us, warn that we must be denied equality in order to preserve and sustain the struggling black family. In truth, we too are members of the black family and our struggle remains compounded by our continued exclusion from the rights, responsibilities and protections marriage provides.

Supporting Black Families

History has shown that when it is time to speak out against injustices leveled at African American communities, we are there—often at the front lines. Yet, where is our community when it is time to support us and our families? Those of us engaged in the struggle for equality are told—from the pulpit, the dinner table, the punditocracy, and the halls of congress—that it is time to put down “moral relativism” and stand up in support of narrowly defined black families.

It is long past time to stop pretending that lesbians and gay men have not always been an integral part of the black family. Black lesbian couples, for instance, parent at rates similar to black, married opposite-sex couples (61-69 percent). By contrast, black lesbian households report a 21 percent lower annual income than black, married opposite sex households. Our families, without access to the rights, responsibilities and protections afforded by marriage, are at risk.

The issue goes far beyond tolerance when, without the security that marriage affords, our families face the real prospect of losing their home, or custody of their children, in the tragic event of one parent’s death, or losing a loved one because no one in the family can consent to emergency care in a time of need. Are our children less deserving of health insurance coverage?

Is it right that committed, hard-working lesbian and gay couples struggle with increased difficulty putting food on the table or saving for our children’s education when so much of our often-lower combined wages must go to increased tax burdens and legal fees to contract for the few—but not all—basic rights we can when those rights would automatically be afforded by marriage? It is this self-serving brand of “moral relativism” that stands in the way of stabilizing all of our families. The preservation of the black family must be all-inclusive if it is to succeed.

Washington Post columnist Colbert I. King wrote, “I do believe that [lesbian and gay couples] are subject to prejudice and that they are forbidden the same rights and safeguards that heterosexuals enjoy, including the right to marry. That, in my book, is wrong. There is justice to their cause that should be ours, too. Leaving the security of the majority to stand up and say so ought not be so hard in 2005. Sadly, for many Americans, it is.” We are heartened by the support of many prominent black leaders from Coretta Scott King to Carol Moseley-Braun, and from NAACP Chair Julian Bond, U.S. Rep. John Lewis, Bishop
John Selders, Rev. Peter Gomes, and Harvard Prof. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to former Surgeon General Dr. M. Joycelyn Elders.

These leaders understand that any argument purporting that fairness for our LGBT-headed black families is a threat to those headed by non-gay couples is nothing but a bright red herring. The fight against marriage equality actually destabilizes black families, and does nothing to improve the lives of non-gay African Americans struggling to keep their own marriages together, raise their children and give them a good education.

Brothers And Sisters!

Black lesbians and gay men are also not immune to the need to stand up for our own safety and security. We have to ask ourselves: Whose movement is this? The right wing has been allowed to successfully frame the struggle for our liberation as solely about the rights of white, wealthy gay men. But this civil rights struggle belongs to people of color as much as it does to anyone else. And it belongs to LGBT and non-LGBT folks alike, as does any movement to end oppression and ensure civil rights for all. Once we, and our anti-racist allies both within and outside the movement, embrace this reality, we are able to lay the groundwork for healing and unification. My own organization, for instance, a founding partner of both the National Black Justice Coalition and the National Latino Coalition for Justice in Marriage, is composed almost entirely of fiercely-committed people of color.

Black LGBT communities can no longer afford to play Monday-morning quarterbacks when our lives remain at stake. According to the 2000 census, African Americans represent 14 percent of cohabiting lesbian and gay couples in the U.S., a percentage point higher than our representation in the general population. We are also more likely than white couples to be raising children, more likely to hold public-sector jobs—those with a higher availability of the domestic partner benefits currently threatened by anti-gay, anti-family ballot measures—and less likely to own the homes we share. Discrimination in marriage affects us disproportionately and leaves our families—LGBT and non-LGBT—weaker and less able to thrive. It is essential that we stand up taller, increase our visibility and demand our civil rights; but we need the help of our entire black family to succeed.

In 2004, 11 states passed constitutional amendments banning lesbian and gay couples, and their children, from ever having access to the full range of rights, responsibilities and protections afforded by marriage. In most cases the African American community did not show up in support of safety, security and fairness for our families. In Detroit, for example, 58 percent of voters supported a constitutional amendment to exclude lesbian and gay couples from marriage, many with the idea that in doing so they were voting to support black families. In some areas black support for discrimination in marriage was even higher. These numbers are not as high as the right-wing would like, but our community has had enough experience with discrimination and exclusion that to support it at numbers even as high as these is a shameful act.

U.S. Rep. Tommie Brown (D-TN) had it right when she said, “I do want the record to show on this day of our Lord that this seventy-and-a-half-year-old African American woman cannot bring herself to vote for bad public policy simply because the masses are [in favor]. You see, I am from a time and generation when the masses said that I was not even a person.”

In 2005, Kansas joined the growing list of states to write discrimination against our families into their constitution. In November, Texas voters will have the chance to decide the question of equality in their state. “[T]his is the politics of divisiveness at its worst,” said Texas State Rep. Senfronia Thompson in a bold speech to her fellow state representatives. “I know something about hate and fear and discrimination. When I was a small girl, white folks used to talk about ‘protecting the institution of marriage’ as well ... Fifty years ago, white folks thought inter-racial marriages were a ‘threat to the institution of marriage.’”

“Members, I'm a Christian and a proud Christian,” she continued. “I read the Good Book, and do my best to live by it. I have never read the verse where it says, 'gay people can't marry.' I have never read the verse where it says, 'thou shalt discriminate against those not like me.' I have never read the verse where it says, 'let's base our public policy on hate and fear and discrimination.'”

In 2006, Alabama, Indiana, Wisconsin, South Carolina, Colorado, California, Arizona, Florida, Tennessee, South Dakota, and Virginia will also face anti-gay, anti-family ballot measures. We may not be able to beat them all back, but we need the help of our family, our friends, and our community to win where we can, and raise awareness about the harm this does to all of our families where a full win isn't possible.
We ARE Family
In his much-acclaimed speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, Illinois Senator Barak Obama asked his audience this question: “Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or do we participate in a politics of hope?” The answer to this question is crucial as we roll up our sleeves and move forward in the continuing fight for equal rights and equal protection. As we look at how we engage in this work, it is important to keep the focus on the future we wish to create, not the opposition fighting to tear us down.

Yet, the fact remains that it is time to turn this shame game on its head. Loving, committed couples and their children, people who work hard and pay taxes just like their parents did, are not the ones who should be ashamed of their lives or their families. Those who stand in opposition to fairness for our families are the ones who should be ashamed.

Lying With Dogs...

As a child, my grandmother taught me that it is important to be mindful of the company we keep. The slow-burn infiltration of African American churches by the religious right is affecting a shift from the black church tradition of liberation theology to one based on discrimination and exclusion. This summer, at Rev. T.D. Jakes’s wildly popular MegaFest, over 100,000 participants were welcomed with gifts and a long-armed embrace by Rev. James Dobson’s virulently right-wing Focus on the Family.

“James Dobson’s entrepreneurial spirit and personal political agenda,” said former National Gay & Lesbian Task Force chief Kerry Lobel, “has turned racism, sexism, and homophobia into a profitable business.” Joining hands with such deceptively-named organizations, whose leadership has only recently severed outward ties with racist, segregationist, bigoted platforms, is bad enough. Rev. Gregory Daniels, senior pastor of Chicago’s Greater Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church and president of the right-wing, pop-up group United Voters for Truth and Change, embraced the trend head-on when he boldly declared, “If the [Ku Klux Klan] was opposing same-sex marriage, Rev. Daniels would ride with them.”

Has our collective memory become so short-sighted that members of our community are no longer ashamed to stand with those who, except when politically inconvenient, hasten and boldly cheer our destruction? Have we lost the ability to see how the discriminatory, divisive tactics we are being recruited to support so directly lead to an agenda that will eventually be our own undoing?

By co-signing onto the right-wing talking points which claim that “civil rights” belong only to African Americans, we are rapturously signing away our own political power. Once “civil rights,” as supported by our Constitution’s Bill of Rights, belong not to all Americans but only to one group, then our entire community has lost the civil rights battle for good. What lurks further inside the snake hole of the right wing agenda—which a simple look at the current fight to keep alive both affirmative action and the voting rights act will illuminate—is the desire to re-frame all civil rights as “special rights.” Today it’s lesbian and gay couples and their families; tomorrow it’s all of our families who are pinned with the label of asking not for equal rights, but so-called “special rights”.

Let us not be fooled. Our opposition is fierce, cutthroat, and out-resources us by a margin of at least 4:1. But a mere look at our history should be enough to help us remain undaunted, especially with stakes as high as these. Over 1,100 rights and responsibilities come from equal marriage protection for our families—our community hinges on a win, and right now, despite the odds, we are winning.

A recent national poll, released by the Pew Research Center, reports that a majority of Americans (53 percent) are in favor of legal recognition for lesbian and gay couples that would offer many of the same rights and responsibilities as non-gay married couples. In a shift from some post-election declines, 35 percent of Americans said they support a complete end to discrimination in marriage, while an encouraging Los Angeles Times poll shows that fully 44 percent of Californians support marriage equality for lesbian and gay couples.

The poet Claude McKay put words to the continuing fight of minorities against those who, strong and
determined, wish us to remain oppressed. "Though far outnumbered," he said, "let us show us brave." When we look at the millions of dollars, the long head start in infrastructure, and the fork-tongued claim to moral authority our opposition asserts, it is important for us to "show us brave." While we are in the minority in numbers, our cause is strong and our cause is just.

But few will understand that unless we believe in ourselves and assert it with the passion of conviction. It is up to us to give to those who may not understand the importance of the issue, but who believe in fairness, the information that they need to understand why this equal rights fight is central to the American promise we are purporting to defend both at home and abroad.

Opponents of equal marriage rights are targeting black churches because they are assumed—in a roundabout, self-fulfilling prophecy of an argument—to be more conservative than their white counterparts. Black churches, the argument goes, are the last places you’d expect to find LGBT people. The truth is that lesbian and gay Christians have assumed leadership positions within the church for as long as the church has been around. At least 85 percent of African American LGBT people report some sort of religious affiliation. Unfortunately, just as in the military, where we are also disproportionately represented, we often serve in silence.

Coming Home

Lesbian and gay African Americans, and our non-gay friends and families, no longer have time to hide in the fringes and remain silent about the importance of our lives. This is about more than pride; this is about justice. Every day that one of us goes into our house of worship and serves in silence is a gift that we give to our opposition. Every week that we allow our families, our schools, or our neighbors to deny the humanity of our lives, our partners and our children is a step backward, an ink-stain blotting out our right to equal protection under the law.

When I speak to groups about the importance of marriage equality, I am often asked why I care so much when I’m single and have no children of my own. The very question denies me both my community and my responsibility to it. I wonder if they would have similarly questioned the well-off African Americans who lent their cars to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I think about being raised in a family that didn’t eat grapes for years in support of farm workers we’d never met; or of the millions of women and men who have long supported a woman’s right to choose even though they may never have to make that difficult decision for themselves.

"In the end," said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Opposing marriage equality does nothing but hurt black families, especially the most vulnerable, from those headed by two women (who earn less, even, than their male counterparts), to those headed by single mothers who need the protections, such as those offered by domestic violence laws, that many of the current anti-gay amendments actually take away.

Winning the freedom to marry is a crucial goal in the battle to stabilize and protect all of our families, and it requires the support of all of us, LGBT and non-LGBT, to stand up for the equal rights of our entire community. I remember the year that my mother called me, elated, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day with the news that, in honor of Dr. King, she had joined the support group Parents Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG). Although both my sister and I had been sending her articles and information for years as dutiful lesbian daughters, it was the first time she’d stepped out on her own, in public, to meet others who were seeking support for themselves and their families, and demanding equality for their LGBT loved ones.

Of course I was thrilled and proud. I felt honored that my mother had taken that step for me, my lesbian sister, and our entire family. I know that every time she speaks out—whether it is in her church, in her sorority meetings, in the grocery store or out with friends—it carries the weight of the majority that I simply do not have when it comes to speaking about equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons.

Certainly, if I have children, I hope that I can offer them all of the benefits and protections that they need to grow up healthy, smart and strong. I hope that my children grow up never expecting or accepting less than equal access, equal rights, and equal protection under the law and in society. But our need to engage in the movement for marriage equality is about more than our own families. It is about protecting, uplifting and empowering our community as a whole, creating a society that treats its minorities as full citizens, and exempts no one from the promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."