

## **GAY AND STRAIGHT RITES OF PASSAGE**

**BY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Probably no area of social life is more commonly thought of in terms of nature and individual psychology than sexuality. When people talk about sexuality, they frequently use terms like “instinct,” “biology,” “hormones,” and so on. It is certainly true that sexuality is an important feature of most individuals’ lives and psyches, and it is also true that when we’re in the realm of sexuality, we often feel in the grip of something emotionally volatile and beyond our own control, and hence, part of nature or some other force outside of us and outside of man-made, social things. Could it be, though, that the “outside” force that infuses sexuality with such emotional, bodily, and sensual volatility, is society itself?

In this chapter, I discuss rites of passage as they relate to sexuality. I discuss the rite of passage that, in the gay and lesbian community, is referred to as “coming out.” Then, I discuss the phenomenon of the temple marriage in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (“the Mormons”). I have chosen these two examples of rites of passage not because they are extraordinary, unusual, or exotic, but precisely because they are so typical. These rites shed light on sexual meanings that apply to us all, gay or straight, Mormon or otherwise. By examining these rites we can gain a clearer picture of the way sexuality is social, not merely psychological or natural. These rites of passage enable us to see how sexuality is something that has to be learned, performed and enacted, socially, and not merely something instinctual or natural.

Before I discuss coming out and temple weddings, though, let’s look more closely at what a rite of passage is, exactly.

### **THE RITE OF PASSAGE**

Think of your favorite book. That book is composed of long and short sentences that turn into paragraphs, paragraphs into pages, pages into chapters, and so on. Now, imagine what it would be like if someone suddenly removed all of the punctuation in this book of yours. All of the periods and semi-colons, all of the dashes and commas, indeed even the separation of one paragraph from another – all of this is gone, and what you are left with is one, long, run-on sentence. You could probably read this book, but chances are it would not make much sense, and eventually, you would give up. In other words, it is the punctuation that gives the book meaning. The pause that is indicated by a comma, for example, actually gives the sentences you read a meaning that might otherwise escape your attention. Punctuation tells us how to read a sentence, when to accentuate certain words or phrases, even what emotions to convey while reading.

Rites of passage are the punctuation of social life. They are conveyers of meanings, meanings that, due to the nature of rites of passage, come to be felt deeply by individuals

who participate in them. For our discussion here, rites of passage have several important characteristics, many of which were originally formulated by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960). I want to summarize some of those features here in order to help us understand both coming out and Mormon temple weddings as sexual rites of passage.

First, rites of passage involve the removal of the individual from the everyday world. This removal can be real or imaginary, partial or total, but some separation of the individual from the usual world he or she inhabits must occur. Rites involve the invention of an alternative “space” where the rituals associated with the rite of passage unfold. The isolation of the individual from his or her typical, everyday life is essential, because it helps to focus his or her attention on the features of identity, self-hood, community values, and symbolic meanings that the rite of passage conveys. Hence, baptisms are held in churches, inductions into secret clubs and sororities in dark basements, and so on. Separation tells the initiate that he or she is about to participate in something extremely important and sacred.

Second, once the individual is isolated, he or she undergoes a significant and intense process of re-learning. Rites of passage affirm for initiates very specific communal values and norms, ethical codes of conduct, and bonds of solidarity. Rites always involve some refashioning of the self and identity. An individual who passes through a rite is a different person once he or she finishes; their identity, sense of self-hood, and sense of social obligation changes. Sometimes the change in consciousness that occurs with the rite is minimal – for example, when college seniors go through a graduation ceremony. Other times, though, features of the self and identity are either drastically amplified, or erased entirely, and the change in selfhood and consciousness is far more radical – such as when draftees are trained to serve in the military. But all rites, in the end, always involve a transformation and refashioning of the initiate’s sense of self.

Third, rites of passage involve the reshaping of symbolic boundaries and meanings. They confirm for the initiate his or her membership in a group and, in doing so, often change his or her relationship to the broader social groups he was once a member of. Once a rite is completed, and the initiate re-enters his or her everyday world, that world can appear very different to the initiate. Initiates can perceive some or even all of their typical social relationships with members who are not a part of their new community in very different terms; individuals who were once friends and intimates can suddenly appear to be strangers. The things that once passed as common sense, moral, and “normal” can suddenly seem backward, wrong, and odd. The rite of passage can thus convey for the initiate a sense of being different from his or her peers.

This brings us to a final characteristic of rites of passage. Because the transformation of selfhood is so central to their purpose, rites of passage tend to be fairly emotional events for their participants. If you think about rights of passage you have been through – a baptism, perhaps, a graduation ceremony, or induction into a special club – you’ll probably remember that these rites tend to invoke fairly strong feelings. You might have felt a slight tingling in your neck when your classmates threw their graduation caps into the air, or an equally emotional feeling when learning a special hand-shake. Emile

Durkheim (1915) referred to this feature of rites of passage as “collective effervescence.” The rite of passage is often invested with intense feeling, and this emotional volatility makes the impact of the rite profound for the initiate. Durkheim believed that rites evoke such strong emotions because the initiate experiences a fusing of his or her own identity with the identity and consciousness of the group. During the rite, an individual’s sense of themselves as separate fades as their membership in a broader collective takes over. Rites are emotional events because, when we participate in them, we are participating in a drama that transcends our own particularity as individuals.

Let’s now look at two examples of sexual rites of passage – coming out, and Mormon temple weddings. Because these rites of passage convey meanings – just like the punctuation in a book – it is through them that both gay and heterosexual identity become meaningful.

### **COMING OUT – A LESBIAN AND GAY RITE OF PASSAGE**

Because we live in a society where heterosexual identity is most often presumed, it becomes necessary for individuals who are not heterosexual to disclose their sexual identity. By now, the phrase “coming out” is fairly common, at least in American culture. This phrase commonly refers to the disclosure of homosexual identity by gay and lesbian people – to themselves, to friends, family and loved ones, and even to bosses, co-workers, physicians, and other people they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Such disclosures can seem like intensely personal, private, and individual matters. But coming out is also social. Coming out also often refers to becoming a part of a more or less visible lesbian and gay community and culture. Coming out is a rite of passage and, as such, it has features that transcend the particularity and individuality of individuals who “come out.” Coming out, because it is a rite of passage, does not mean simply revealing a gay or lesbian identity that was already there; it means that, by coming out, individuals’ sense of self is altered. They *become* gay.

The phrase “come out” or “coming out of the closet” dates back to the 1970s and gay liberationist politics. Gay liberationists encouraged other gay and lesbian people to “come out of the closets and into the streets.” By coming out, the liberationists did not only mean telling oneself and others about one’s homosexuality, although this was part of the process. Rather, coming out meant changing one’s consciousness. Coming out meant becoming aware of the way society demeans and denigrates any form of sexual expression that is not heterosexual. Coming out, as one liberationist put it, requires “rejecting the society within us” and attaining a “gay consciousness” (“Murray” 1973). Coming out, liberationists realized, might entail risks – of being rejected by family, or fired from a job, for example – but liberationists encouraged gay and lesbian people to “reject the values of the system” and to think of their homosexual desires in positive, prideful terms, rather than negative, homophobic terms.

Coming out, then, for liberationists, was about far more than simply disclosing one’s sexual identity to others. It was about a change in consciousness, a shift in the way one perceived and viewed the world. It was also about espousing new values. For example, gay liberationists encouraged gay people to be less materialistic. They believed that

American materialism – the intense focus on making money, having the best job, buying the nicest house, etc. – was responsible for sexual alienation. They believed Americans were so busy making money and being materialistic, that they did not have time to have fulfilling personal lives. And when an entire culture is alienated sexually in this fashion, one of the outcomes is the invention of stereotypes and sexual “outsiders,” like homosexuals, whose sexuality is demonized and perceived as a threat. For this reason, coming out entailed espousing more non-materialist values, being less individualistic, more community minded, and trying to be less alienated from one’s own sexual expressive capacities. Coming out, in other words, was about far more than just saying “I’m gay.”

Gay liberationism did not last very long in the world of lesbian and gay politics, but the notion of coming out and coming into a lesbian and gay community certainly did. About thirty years after the emergence of gay liberationism, an anthropologist named Gilbert Herdt (1992) did an ethnographic study of coming out amongst gay teenagers in Chicago, Illinois. Herdt studied the interactions amongst teenagers at “Horizon,” a gay and lesbian youth center. Herdt argued that while coming out is often understood in psychological terms, it is actually social and cultural – a rite of passage.

The teenagers in Herdt’s study experienced Horizon as an alternative space, an “inside” place set apart from the “outside world” of their everyday lives. Thus they were, as we would expect, isolated from their typical worlds while at Horizon. This provided them with a sense of safety from homophobia, a place where they could “be themselves,” but Herdt also argues that this safe place also worked to focus their attention on the significance of same-sex desire in their sense of self and identity. “.....” The way in which Horizon was experienced by Herdt’s subjects gave them a sense that what was discussed there was extremely important, both personally and socially.

The teenagers Herdt studied also experienced coming out at Horizon as a significant process of re-learning. Horizon was not simply a place where they would disclose their identities; it was a place where their identities were made. They *became* gay and lesbian at Horizon. And this meant becoming part of a gay and lesbian community that espouses different values than the broader, “straight” world. For example, the teens had to re-learn the meaning of homosexuality. In the outside world, they learned that homosexuality was sick, abnormal, and disgusting. But at Horizon they learned more positive definitions of homosexuality. In addition to re-learning the meaning of homosexuality, the teens in Herdt’s study learned a different set of communal values. The rule at Horizon was to always be non-judgmental, to not discriminate on the basis of race, class, or gender, and to accept those who dress, act, or speak differently than oneself. The teens at Horizon believed equality of this sort was very important, because it set them apart from the outside world, and it ensured that they would not commit the same injustices as their straight counterparts on the “outside.” Thus, coming out at Horizon entailed far more than just disclosing their lesbian and gay desires and identities to each other; it required a refashioning of their individual consciousness, their subservience to a ritual process, to ethical codes, solidarities, and collective values that transcended them as individuals.

Coming out, then, is a sexual rite of passage. It is through coming out that gay and lesbian people become gay. All of the features of the rite of passage I discussed above are present in coming out. Individuals are isolated from their everyday lives, even if just minimally. They must undergo a process of relearning, where they reject negative definitions of homosexuality and adopt a more positive, affirmative view. Coming out entails a shift in consciousness, where individuals come to view others outside of their new group very differently than they did before, and where individuals suddenly feel very different as they move about the world outside of their new community. And, as one can imagine, coming out is intensely emotional, not only because it is personal, but because individuals who come out are participating in a drama that transcends them and that binds them to a community and that community's values.

Of course, homosexuality is a marker of difference in our society, and one might be tempted to think that rites of passage only apply to those who are "different," but as the next section makes clear, heterosexuality is something that has to be achieved through rites of passage, too.

### **THE MORMON TEMPLE WEDDING – A HETEROSEXUAL RITE**

Heterosexuality in American culture is normative. This means that the basic idea that heterosexuality is "normal" and "natural" is so strong, the performance of it, and the social features of it, often pass before us without being noticed. We might be led to believe that only gays and lesbians have rites of passage, since their sexuality is marginalized. But, in fact, heterosexuality too involves complicated rites of passage through which the meaning of heterosexuality, and the values it rests upon, are conveyed. We do not often think of there being a "heterosexual community," but there is one, and like gays and lesbians, heterosexuals must engage in certain rites of passage in order to become full members of this community. And, like gays and lesbians who come out, participation in rite of passage changes the consciousness of heterosexual participants. Heterosexuality, it turns out, has to be achieved.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or "The Mormon Church," was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith. Smith claimed that he had been visited by one of God's angels, Moroni, and that this angel had revealed to him the story of Christ's gospel on the American continent before the arrival of the European colonists and pilgrims. Most historians believe that Christianity only arrived on this continent with the arrival of the Europeans, but Smith argued that a lost Israeli tribe had traveled to the Americas long, long before Columbus or other Europeans. This tribe, the Nephites, brought the gospel of Christ with them. Smith wrote this revelation, and hundreds of others, down in what is now known as *The Book of Mormon*, the central text of the Mormon faith.

Like all religions, Mormonism is replete with rites of passage, symbols, and rituals which are used to stylize their belief system and to solidify their bonding as a community. The Mormon temple marriage is *the most important* rite of passage in Mormon life. Little can be known directly about this rite since only the most devout Mormons are ever allowed inside a Mormon temple. Those who wish to marry there must pass a strict interview

with their Bishop in order to receive a “temple recommend.” And what goes on inside temples is guarded with the utmost secrecy – secrecy which adds to the emotional intensity and significance of the marital rite. Although little can be known directly about the Mormon wedding, a few ex-Mormons have written about their experiences. In the overlap from these accounts, we can glean a partial understanding of how this secret rite of passage works, as well as how it is connected to very specific heterosexual meanings. Two books that give very similar accounts are *Leaving the Saints* by Martha Beck, and *Secret Ceremonies* by Deborah Laake.

Both Beck and Laake write about their temple wedding as the most important day of their life, and as the day they had looked forward to since their youth. As Mormons, they had been taught by their parents and church leaders that there are three levels of heavenly existence. Only Mormons who are married in a temple ceremony can ever be permitted to the highest, “celestial kingdom” of heavenly after-life, where they will become Gods themselves and rule over their own earth-like planets. And, importantly, when Mormons are married in the temple, they are “sealed” to each other and to each others’ families for eternity. Individuals who do not marry in the temple will not make it in to the celestial kingdom, but will instead be relegated to one of the lower levels of heaven and, quite importantly, will not be sealed to their families – which means that they will be alone *for eternity*.

The temple ceremony itself, as described by Beck and Laake, is highly ritualized. Upon entering the temple, bride, groom, and their respective immediate families must shower and remove all of the “earthly” impurities from their bodies. All individuals who work in the temple wear white, and only white. Unlike most heterosexual weddings, Mormons who marry in the temple often marry in groups, so the ceremonies are less centered around the happy young couples than on the very important lessons the ceremonies convey to them. Importantly, bride and groom prepare for the wedding ceremony separately. In fact, all of the rituals except for the last one are sex-segregated. Many of the rituals are targeted toward women, since men undergo extensive temple rites when embarking on the 2-year long Mission nearly all college aged Mormon men participate in.

After showering, women undergo an “anointing.” Special oils are rubbed on specific areas of her body, including her genitals, and prayers for her “fruitfulness” are said by the female temple attendants who anoint her. When she is finished being anointed, she is presented with her “temple garments” (men must wear these, too). Temple garments are underclothes which Mormons believe protect them from Satan. Temple workers instruct initiates that these garments can only be removed when showering and that, when they are worn out, they must cut off the insignia (signs on the garments that are thought to have derived from the insignia of the Masonic Temple, of which Joseph Smith was a member) before throwing the garments away. After men and women receive their temple garments, they are told something very important: their name in the afterlife. Mormons believe that after death, the devout become Gods in their own heavenly kingdoms, and the learning of one’s afterlife name is an essential part of this rite of passage. After learning their names, bride and groom finally put on their wedding clothes. These look

much like the same clothes one wears at any wedding, except that men wear a small hat, and both bride and groom wear small green aprons that are meant to symbolize the fig leaves worn by Adam and Eve (the first heterosexuals).

The actual wedding ceremony begins in “The Creation Room,” a spacious chapel with murals depicting the creation of the world by God. Upon entering this room, brides sit on one side of the chapel, grooms on the other. Then, the couples and their family watch a movie. This movie depicts the creation of the earth by God, Jesus Christ, and the archangel Michael (Adam). This movie (which, before the age of the VCR was enacted live by temple workers) instructs the couples about the central place marriage between men and women occupies in the creation, not just of the earth, but of the entire universe. It is while watching this movie that the couples recite their vows to each other, including, for the women, a vow to abide by The Law of Obedience, where women promise to obey their husbands so long as their husbands are obedient to God. After reciting this and other vows, initiates learn a special handshake which Mormons call “The First Token of the Aaronic Priesthood” (probably also borrowed by Joseph Smith from Masonic rituals). This and many other gestures are ritualistically performed during this ceremony, including one gesture which involves the simulation of cutting one’s own throat, a penalty for revealing temple rituals to anyone.

The wedding culminates when couples enter “The Celestial Room,” which is ornately decorated with beautiful murals depicting heaven, and crystal chandeliers. It is here that the most important ritual in this rite of passage unfolds. Bride and groom are divided from each other by a sheet which hangs from the ceiling. This sheet represents the “veil” which separates earthly from heavenly life. With men on one side, and women on the other, couples are instructed to meet each other at the “five points of fellowship”: foot to foot, knee to knee, breast to breast, hand to back, and mouth to ear. The sheet has a large slit cut through it so that couples can touch each other in this fashion. Once embraced through the “veil,” couples practice the various handshakes and gestures they have been learning throughout the wedding ceremony. Then, with her mouth pressed close to her new husband’s ear, the bride whispers her afterlife name and the groom, in turn, pulls his bride through “the veil.” This action symbolizes the Mormon belief that, in order for a woman to be permitted into heaven, she must remember the secret and sacred gestures, and be pulled through by her husband. Importantly, the bride never learns her husband’s afterlife name.

Like coming out, the temple marriage bears all of the marks of a rite of passage. Individuals are isolated from their everyday lives; they undergo significant re-learning and self-transformation; the rite of passage shifts symbolic boundaries and meanings for them; and, as many would surely report, the wedding is characterized by the kind of “collective effervescence” we discussed earlier. Many of you probably find the details of this particular rite of passage quite strange. Indeed, in American and elsewhere, Mormons have often been persecuted for their religious beliefs and for the secrecy which surrounds temple rituals. Like homosexuals, Jews, and Catholics, Mormons have historically been thought of as “different” in America.

But, are Mormons really *that* different? Through this rite of passage, Mormons adopt two identities, one fairly obvious, but the other less so. In an obvious way, it is through the wedding that young Mormons finally *become* true Mormons. Their beliefs and social bonding to the rest of the Mormon community are solidified. But less obvious is the fact that through this wedding young Mormons *become* heterosexual. Through the movie about the creation of the universe, Mormons learn that heterosexuality is central to the universe and that marriage is an institution created by God, not man. Through the movie and the anointing, Mormons learn that procreation is a heavenly duty, and that children are God's gift to humanity through marriage and marriage alone. Procreation and child rearing are such sacred heterosexual duties, bride and groom learn that they will continue procreating after death, when they will become Gods themselves (the men, at least) and create souls to populate the earthly planets they will someday rule over. Heterosexuality links them to the divine origin of the universe, and makes them eligible for Godly status in afterlife. And, finally, through the Five Points of Fellowship ceremony, Mormons learn that heterosexuality does not simply involve procreative sexual relations between men and women, but absolute obedience and subservience of women to men. Their salvation after death depends on it! A Mormon woman who does not remain devoted to her church and husband will not be pulled through the veil.

Is this version of heterosexuality Mormons learn different than the one most heterosexuals undergo? My guess would be: no. When those of you who are heterosexual get married, you will likely exchange rings, signifying your joint ownership over each other. And this ownership will not be an equal one, since most of you who are women will take the last name of your new husbands, signifying the superior status of men. At most of your weddings, the person who marries you will recite lessons about the importance of having children and a real "family." You will all say prayers that convey the message that your weddings are special, and sacred, and that being heterosexual makes you closer to God and "his" laws. No matter how strange you might think the temple wedding is, most of you will go to elaborate detail in planning your own weddings, including the expensive gowns and tuxedos, the high-end caterers, and the fantasy honeymoon in Hawaii, the Greek Isles, or Las Vegas. According to the sociologist Chrys Ingraham, heterosexuals spend about \$32 billion a year on these weddings. They do so in order to claim membership in a very important community, one they believe was created by God, and one that entitles them to certain God-given rights and privileges. Many heterosexuals wouldn't view heterosexuality as a "community," and they also wouldn't view heterosexuality as something that has to be ritualistically enacted and performed, but they are a part of a community, and as the Mormon temple wedding illustrates, heterosexuality can only be achieved through very complicated performances and rites.

## CONCLUSION

Rites of passage are the punctuation of social life. They convey meaning and tell us what is important, sacred, and valuable. They solidify communal bonds. They give us ethical codes to live by. And they change our sense of ourselves, often times quite dramatically. Through coming out, gays and lesbians *become* gay. Coming out is not

only about disclosing one's homosexuality to others, but usually also involves seeing oneself as gay in a new, more positive way, as well as solidifying one's bonds with others in the gay community. As Herdt showed, coming out often involves adopting very specific values – such as the value of tolerating differences. Marriage – for Mormons and others – is the key rite of passage through which heterosexuals *become* heterosexual. It is through the marital rite that women learn to be obedient to men, that both partners learn the Godly pricelessness of procreation, babies, and families, and it is through this rite that heterosexuals internalize the belief that their sexuality is connected to God, the origins of the universe, and the continuity of time. Without these rites, neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality – at least as we know them – would exist.

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