


split personality

The LGBT community has a strong history as a political and social counter-culture. On the other hand, contemporary struggles seem to surround legal and political equity and mass media exposure. Does one necessarily negate the other? Does political and social assimilation mean we've won or lost? Are we gaining civil rights or allowing our differences and struggles to be washed away along with our history? Is this community on the verge of switching paths and intentions?

SPLIT PERSONALITY is a conversation sponsored by the Atlanta Pride Committee aimed at exploring contemporary critical and popular opinion about our identity, in theory and application. The dialogue takes place between cultural theorist and English Department Chair at Tufts University, Lee Edelman

(No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Duke University Press), and senior writer for National Journal, correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly and guest scholar in Governing Studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C., Jonathan Rauch (Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights and Good for America, Time Books)



"...this time the family values are on our side."

Jonathan Rauch

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JONATHAN RAUCH: Being different and an outsider, though a burden in childhood, brings an increment of empathy, of originality, of self-awareness, of perceptiveness, that can elude those who grow up taking their sexuality and their place in society for granted. In that respect, being gay is like being Jewish (which I also am): for all the inconveniences and occasional insensitivities one endures, being a member of a minority guards against complacency. It keeps us on our toes. It forces us to pedal where others merely coast.

The Jews, I think, have it about right. They have shown they can integrate without losing their "edge" and that they can retain their distinctiveness without carrying a chip on their shoulder. That is where gay people are headed, as the encrustations of oppression and repression and social torment burn off. The great boon of legal and social equality will not be that it makes us more like each other or more like everybody else, but that it will make us more like ourselves: free to be who we are, outside the pariah role that for centuries we have been cast in.

Even in the perfectly tolerant world that we all dream of, the experience of growing up gay—the process of self-discovery, the consciousness of difference, the added complexities of coping and maturing—will always distinguish us. What it need not do is warp us. A lot of what we have called gay culture, and what our adversaries like to call the "homosexual lifestyle," has little or nothing to do with homosexuality and much to do with the distortions which deprivation and repression work upon the human spirit. If gay culture was counter-cultural and sometimes anti-social, that was because straight culture and society were anti-homosexual. Unable to marry, we often valorized promiscuity; told our love was shameful, we often valorized mechanical sex; menaced with disgrace, jail, beating or even death, many of us hated our society, as it seemed to hate us. But the long night is ending. When I give talks about my book on gay marriage, the gay men (almost always men, not lesbians) who

object that marriage will make us too ordinary and conventional are always in their fifties or, usually, older. For younger gay people, to be homosexual is ordinary. Ordinary and different. As it should be.

EDELMAN: Jonathan Rauch gets one thing right: gay culture "has little or nothing to do with homosexuality" itself. But surely that's not news. Culture, by definition, is something added to one's natural condition, not something present from the beginning. By describing the specific formations of minority cultures as "distortions," Rauch gives his game away. Whatever the religion, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation we may claim as our own, history has "distorted" us all. It shapes both *who* we think we are and *what* we think about ourselves and others, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. That's what it means to assume a social identity in the first place. Produced in response to a social norm appalled by the power and possibilities of sex, gay culture, *as seen from the perspective of that norm*, will always seem "distorted." It will always be open to the charge of promoting "promiscuity" and embracing "mechanical sex." But those charges really come down to this: gay culture celebrates sex itself and the right to one's own enjoyment. For some that means sex with numerous partners, for others committed relations with one. Our culture has plenty of room for both without needing to institute a party line or to normalize desire. Despised, imprisoned and murdered for affirming our desire *against* regulation, we surely know better than to undertake such regulation ourselves.

Rauch proclaims optimistically that "the long night" of homo-hatred is ending. But his words reinforce the moralism that serves to keep it alive. He may say that he wants a world in which gays can be both "ordinary and different," but gays with values *different from his* are called "warped," or "distorted" or old. How different is this from the homo-hatred that called us perverted or sick? Moralism always makes perverts. Some of

those perverts will declare themselves queer. And the queer will show how those moralists get off on condemning the enjoyment of others. The question, then, at the end of the day, isn't whether or not to get married. Those who want to do so deserve that right; their desires deserve that fulfillment. No, the question is whether, to assure that right, we're willing to join the assault on those whose desires are focused elsewhere. Are we so in love with the hope of our own eventual normalization, of our own acceptance by straight society, that we're willing to shill for a culture of hatred if it promises not to hate us? For my part, I'd prefer by far to line up with the warped and distorted and old than to be the one labeling others this way while deluding myself into thinking I'm marking the end of hatred's "long night."

RAUCH: So let's talk for a minute about marriage and morality. In my travels promoting "Gay Marriage" (both the book and the concept), I've met more than a few perceptive gay and lesbian folks who don't accept the idea that same-sex marriage will be no more than a legal option—an entrée on the lifestyle menu. These folks understand that marriage will change us. It will give same-sex love a destination, from the first crush and the first kiss. The very prospect of marriage is changing many of us already, as young gay people find themselves not just dating, but wondering, "Is this someone I might marry?" And society is not indifferent toward marriage; it *prefers* marriage. Relatives, neighbors, friends and colleagues honor and celebrate marriage as something special because, by creating and stabilizing families, marriage makes society stronger and lives healthier. (Married people, on average, are better off on a wide array of emotional, physical and financial indicators, even after accounting for confounding factors.) Parents of gay people, like other parents from time immemorial, will nudge their children to marry and settle down. In society's eyes, gay marriage will not just be allowed; it will be expected.

Everyone views the world from a moral platform; even to condemn judgmentalism is, of course, judgmental. Lee Edelman is every bit the

moralist I am; it's just that his moral scheme (which he labels "gay culture") "celebrates sex itself and the right to one's own enjoyment," whereas, in my moral scheme, sex and enjoyment have their place but are no substitutes for love and duty. Gay-rights advocates do ourselves no favors when we try to avoid drawing moral distinctions (a mistake our opponents seldom make). What oppressed us for centuries was not moralizing, but *false* moralizing. The remedy is not to pretend to rise above moralizing (an evasion that fools no one), but to make our own stand for a morality of equality, responsibility and love. Those are, of course, the values of the gay-marriage movement, which is a turning point precisely because it is re-moralizing the gay-rights debate. Only, this time, the family values are on our side.

LEE EDELMAN: No matter how much sex you get, you'll never really "get" sex. The power of sex, like the pleasure of sex, derives from its incoherence, from its unpredictable ways of combining disgust and desire, shame and pride, the reality of unrestrained fantasy and the fantasy of access to immediate reality. The queer movement's originality lies in its investment in this incoherence. We've put vast social energies to work under the

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Lee Edelman

banner of sexuality, a massively anti-social force that the law in all its various forms (the family, the church, the state) attempts to organize and control. Given this contradiction, is it any wonder that in various ways we want queerness and normativity both? Or that some queers respond to the lure of the norm by stigmatizing queerness itself? But here's the thing that queers have been teaching—and that not even queers want to hear: sexuality refuses *all* categories, exceeds *all* norms, defies *all* boundaries. It fucks up every effort to normalize or regulate how we fuck. Wherever the law imposes itself to make sex conform to its order, sexuality circumvents it,

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finding new ways of getting off. Queerness first and foremost avows, as a matter of political principle, the messiness, the disorder, the incoherence of getting off.

In a culture as pruriently puritanical as ours, and as violently moralistic, what could be easier than scorning the thought of a politics of getting off? We're wise to be suspicious when anything—whether it's gay marriage or the rise of gay parenting, openly gay Republicans or openly Republican gays—is sold to us as an index of the gay community's maturation. Such language buys into the punitive norms of the countless pseudo-sciences that have vilified queers as immature, as afraid of "adult" commitments, as incapable of growing up and facing the "challenge" of the "opposite" sex, as stuck in a sterile narcissism.

Though the equal *opportunity* to marry may be a value worth pursuing, queers don't need the destructive myths of maturation in which it comes wrapped. Those myths merely mark our enslavement to the propaganda of heterosexual narcissism. Queers, it turns out, can't begin to compete in the narcissism sweepstakes with straights who have packaged marriage and kids as proof of moral responsibility instead of as particular, mass-marketed forms of narcissistic gratification. (What's being said by the rounds of applause awarded on TV talk shows whenever a heterosexual announces an imminent wedding, anniversary or birth? "Hurray for our way of fucking! It's selfless, caring and mature!" Straight culture loves itself a lot.) Gay marriage may be good for some, but it won't be good for queers at large if we turn it into a moral mandate, forgetting what makes us queer. And that, of course, is our resistance to the coercive norms that try to domesticate sex, as if one size fit all, as if it weren't the queerness of sex that makes it worth having in the first place. The good news, then, is that whether or not gay culture buys into wholesale assimilation, queerness will erupt in other places to do its indispensable work of destabilizing the social order through the incoherence of sex.

RAUCH: Back in 1996, I contributed to a collection of essays, edited by Bruce Bawer, called *Beyond Queer*. It aimed to sketch a future for American gay life beyond the ghetto of "queerness," beyond the idea that, to

be authentically gay, we had to buy into a cultural stereotype of alienation, promiscuity and radicalism.

Of course, some people *are* alienated, promiscuous and radical, and that is their right. But the debate is over. Not "over" in the sense that one side won, so much as in the sense of obsolete. The idea that homosexuality is somehow inherently alienated, promiscuous or radical—that, indeed, it is inherently anything at all, except homosexual—now appears nothing more than quaint to countless openly gay men and lesbians who are building secure, stable and loving lives for themselves and their children. They are marrying, running for office, joining PTAs. Are they selling out? Hardly. In much of America, building an "ordinary" gay life still takes extraordinary courage, the ability to face down skepticism and sometimes hostility from many who would like to confine homosexuals to precisely the stereotypes that Lee Edelman embraces.

When I spoke recently with a young, gay friend who married his partner in Massachusetts, he said it had never occurred to him *not* to want marriage. "I wanted the stability, I wanted the companionship, I wanted to have a sex life that was accepted, I wanted to have kids. For me, it's not a choice. A marriage evens you out." I guess those who believe that "getting off" is a revolutionary politics, as opposed to an orgasm, may wince to hear words like these, but I hear love, commitment and especially the nobility, so long denied us, of service. The gay-marriage movement is just one aspect of the epochal shift from gay rights to gay responsibilities. We seek the responsibilities of mentorship (nurturing and raising children), military service (defending our country) and marriage (the lifelong care of another). We are leaving the ghetto behind, for good. The gay community is joining the American community. That's what I call revolutionary.

EDELMAN: Jonathan Rauch doesn't get it. He imagines that every right-thinking queer must get teary-eyed when a same-sex couple opts to tie the knot. In his narrowly either/or view of the world, those who don't must be wedded, instead, to a belief that queers should be "alienated," which means, as he sees it, "promiscuous." Like the neo-conservative movement that feeds him his rhetoric of gay responsibility, his



us vs. them perspective rests on a bedrock sense of righteousness that never doubts the superiority of the things on which it gets off. Oh, but his politics, he likes to maintain, isn't linked to getting off. Instead he's into responsibility and selfless renunciation. Oops, did I say that he's "into" those things? That implies that he actually gets off on them, and he's so not into a politics that talks about getting off. So let's accept that he embraces what he calls the nobility of service (we won't tell him how many people get off on imagining themselves as noble) and the "revolutionary" cause of imposing normative values on the world. How boldly he praises the courage of queers whose trips to the altar demonstrate "the ability to face down the skepticism and sometimes hostility from many who would like to confine homosexuals to the stereotypes that Lee Edelman embraces." What an image! What a turn-on! The resolute queer on his wedding-day approaching the chapel like Gary Cooper in the climactic scene from *High Noon*, while Lee Edelman—alienated, resentful, promiscuous—tries to gun him down. Alas, Lee Edelman isn't the stereotype Jonathan Rauch supposes. He and his partner of twenty-five years got married three days after Massachusetts law provided for same-sex unions.

Then why do I insist that queerness affirms the politics of getting off? Why don't I join in the celebration of gay responsibility? The answer to that is simple. Contrary to Rauch's erroneous claim, proposing a politics of getting off is quite different from saying that getting off is itself a radical politics. We haven't endured these centuries of shit only to become the enjoyment-police who make neo-conservatives weak in the knees. We know that the evangelists for children and family, the ones who proclaim their own selflessness ("We've sacrificed ourselves for our children! You narcissists wouldn't understand!"), are actually getting enjoyment from what they try to palm off as duty, service or social responsibility. It's the same with that subset of heterosexuals who think that their way of fucking has something uplifting and moral about it just because it coincides with dominant cultural norms—and because, of course, it produces kids and kids, well, they're the future. They're what life is all about. And anyone who doesn't realize that is obviously a pervert who belongs in jail, or, better yet, in hell. Excuse my stifled yawn. Get off on caring for kids if you want. Raise families,

gardens, money, the flag: whatever raises your spirits, or whatever raises your dick. But don't expect me to buy that it isn't connected to getting off. Because getting off has consequences extending beyond mere orgasm. As Rauch demonstrates, it induces some to confuse their own enjoyments with moral values that they then feel fully justified in making others adhere to as well.

I got married because it works for me, providing my path to enjoyment. But that particular path is no better—no more "responsible," no more moral—than the path to enjoyment taken by those Rauch scornfully labels "promiscuous." What isn't over, but ought to be, is the "epoch" when we have to take seriously those who present our alternatives as either "promiscuity" or marriage, either gay rights or gay responsibility. So let's make one thing clear: the responsibility of gays is to enjoy our rights, which are never ours alone. They're the rights of all to enjoyments not bound by the narrow vision of moralists who piously denounce the enjoyments of others—then get off by imposing their norms.

EDITORS NOTE:

The split in opinion about whether our shared cultural, social and political institutions tend to support or suppress our multicultural citizenship is always up for grabs. In the context of this project, Rauch draws parallels between the rights of homosexuals and traditional American "family values" through the rhetoric of a shared heritage of civil rights. Edelman, on the other hand, challenges mainstream norms by suggesting that blanket assimilationism is informed by and complicit with social and political systems that restrict the meaning and abilities of certain (queer) identities. This project expresses some important ideas concerning the pros and cons of social and political assimilation, as well as some contemporary positive and negative impacts of LGBT history. We invite you to read additional text and post your comments and thoughts on our website.

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