

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF THE RIGHTS ASSOCIATED WITH MARRIAGE

✘ The Third Way thinks it learned something worthwhile by offering a bunch of apparently straight people who have full civil rights a chance to judge the motivations of those who don't.

At Third Way, for example, we went beyond traditional polling and conducted a series of innovative and intensive one-on-one interviews – akin to the sort of market research tool used by the Fortune 500. Those interviews proved revelatory and have profound implications for extending marriage to lesbian and gay couples.

We started with a simple question: “What does marriage mean to you?” People spoke of the kinds of things you hear in a wedding ceremony: lifetime commitment, responsibility and fidelity. They called marriage “a big step” and “the most important decision of one’s life.” Nobody talked about legal rights or taxes.

Then we asked them why gay people might want to get married. The overwhelming answer? “I don’t know.” But when we probed deeper, we found that they did have some idea – they had heard the messages from LGBT advocates. They would talk about how gay couples want rights, benefits, equality and fairness. Not surprisingly, that led them to the idea of civil unions, because they told us that if you want legal rights, you should have a legal contract. But that (in their minds) had nothing to do with

marriage.

To them, all the talk about rights indicated that gay couples “just don’t get it” – that they couldn’t really understand the true purpose of marriage.

Of course, the problem with their little project is that most people with full civil rights have a difficult time seeing the benefit of those rights because they’ve never had to think about doing without them. The Third Way’s little project would have far more validity if they actually talked to people who had married for the rights it grants couples.

Like me.

You see, described at a very crass level, Mr. EW and I have a Green Card marriage.

That’s not how we thought of it. Rather, after having lived together for about a year or so, we were facing career choices that might have forced one of us to move to a remote city. We knew we wanted to stay together as we embarked upon the career changes we were considering. But we also recognized that that would be far easier to do if we were married, not least because Mr. EW’s visa was at that time tied to his job (and, of course, also because if we moved we could share health benefits). So on a Thursday, we decided to do it. And the following Monday, we got married. Our reception was a night with friends and our brothers at the local Irish pub.

(The picture above isn’t actually from the wedding; it’s from the celebration we had in Sedona the following year. The best picture of from the wedding day—of Mr. EW carrying me over the threshold of the Irish pub—is in some box somewhere.)

And that Monday—the day we swore our lifetime commitment before a judge for the legal benefits such an oath would give us—was 10 years ago today.

Now, don’t get me wrong. There has been plenty

of that stuff that straight people who don't have to think about these rights cite when they think about marriage: commitment, responsibility, fidelity, the whole in sickness and in health bit. And we've been pretty schmaltzy in recent days as we think about how great the last decade has been together. But we are also aware—acutely so, when we see friends who for no rational reason aren't granted the same rights we have enjoyed—how much easier those rights have made it for us to sustain our commitment to each other.

So while it's very easy for the Third Way to congratulate itself that it got a bunch of people “from Middle America” to complain that gay men and women deprived of civil rights “don't get it,” it's a fundamentally dishonest project. The people who “don't get it” are those who pretend they can separate the institution of marriage from society's full recognition of that institution, legally, through the rights it conveys.