

What's in a word? Plenty, if the word is *marriage*.

Marriage is central to our culture. Marriage legally confers many hundreds of benefits, but that is only its material aspect. Marriage is an institution, the public expression of lifelong commitment based on love. It is the culmination of a period of seeking a mate, and, for many, the realization of a major goal, often with a buildup of dreams, dates, gossip, anxiety, engagement, a shower, wedding plans, rituals, invitations, a bridal gown, bridesmaids, families coming together, vows, and a honeymoon. Marriage is the beginning of family life, commonly with the expectation of children and grandchildren, family gatherings, in-laws, Little League games, graduations, and all the rest.

Marriage is also understood in terms of dozens of deep and abiding metaphors: a journey through life together, a partnership, a union, a bond, a single object of complementary parts, a haven, a means for growth, a sacrament, a home. Marriage confers a social status—a married couple with new social roles. And for a great many people, marriage legitimizes sex. In short, marriage is a big deal.

In arguing against same-sex marriage, the conservatives are using two powerful ideas: definition and sanctity. We must take them back. We have to fight definition with definition and sanctity with sanctity. As anthropological studies of American marriage have shown, they got the definition wrong. Marriage, as an ideal, is defined as “the realization of love through a lifelong public commitment.” Love is sacred in America. So is commitment. There is sanctity in marriage: It is the sanctity of love and commitment.

Like most important concepts, marriage also comes with a variety of prototypical cases: The ideal marriage is happy, lasting, prosperous, and with children, a nice home, and friendships with other married couples. The typical marriage has its ups and downs, its joys and difficulties, typical problems with children and in-laws. The nightmare marriage ends in divorce, due perhaps to incompatibility, abuse, or betrayal. It is a rich concept.

None of the richness we have just discussed requires marriage to be heterosexual—not its definition, its sanctity, its rituals, its family life, its hopes and dreams. The locus of the idea that marriage is heterosexual is in a