

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Relationships That Are Meaningful

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There was an editorial cartoon in a recent edition of *The New York Times* that depicted a decrepit Hugh Hefner with his new, young, bride-to-be, Little Orphan Annie. It will be the third marriage for 84-year-old Hefner. His fiancée, Crystal Harris, is 24. The media played up the story that she received a \$90,000 engagement ring. Most people speculate with confidence what Hefner is getting out of the relationship.

The day before seeing the cartoon, I spent most of my time at a party with a very cool married couple who have three children in their twenties. We talked excitedly about politics, gay people serving in the military, John McCain's sad state of mind, gay marriage, and our shared experiences of growing up in the volatile 1960s. We then focused on the 60-year-old husband's disability. He was playing hockey with friends four years ago, and an accident on the ice left him paralyzed from the chest down. He now counts on his wife to do most everything for him, including cut his food. He has feeling and mobility in his two thumbs, which allows him some dexterity in his electric wheelchair. He drives, shops, goes to movies, and continues enjoying his work as a developer. But his wife is always nearby. How might an editorial cartoonist portray this couple?

My spouse, Ray, doesn't face anything as debilitating as being paraplegic, but he has been seriously handicapped by chronic back pain. He recently asked me, "What do you think about us?"

"I think we're doing great," I replied. "Say more about what you're thinking."

When he clarified his concern, I assured him that I would always be there for him. "You are not a burden to me."

When I look at Ray, I see both the man who is often bent over with suffering, looking less physically able than he did when we excitedly came together in our twenties, but I also see the man who loves me more than any other person in the world, and whom I love more than any other person. And I see the guy with whom I feel the freedom to grow daily, even after 35 years together.

An article on what constitutes a happy marriage appeared in *The New York Times* the same day as the cartoon about Hugh Hefner's engagement. The gist of the piece was that relationships that last a long time are not necessarily meaningful and satisfying. In the past, marriages served economic and social purposes that are less important today. People enter and stay in relationships now for "self-expansion." We use relationships to accumulate knowledge and experiences. Research shows that the more our relationships enable us to grow, the happier we will be, and the longer we will stay in them.

This dynamic is generally true in most forms of relationship. People often come together with the hope of gaining access to new life experiences, or affirmation of their own. When needs are no

longer met, interest wanes. For many people, when the money runs out, when influence drops, when sex becomes boring or non-existent, when that which was once experienced as special becomes expected or mundane, or when growth is hindered, many of us withdraw emotionally, if not leave, or we see others do the same to us.

If a couple, regardless of sexual orientation, begins to stagnate with routines that are clung to for safety's sake, they may end up celebrating their 50th anniversary, but they may also feel stymied and stuck.

Friendships can be the same, but are easier to end. When people no longer feel that their relationships are serving their needs, they often pull back, or are less enthusiastic about spending time together. The enthusiasm that was mutually expressed in the beginning—the \$90,000 ring—waned slowly, but surely, when the new becomes old, and there are no apparent reasons for hanging out.

Many of us sometimes speculate what other people see in each other, and why they stay in their marriages or friendships. But no one can know the mind or heart of others. We can guess what young Crystal Harris might feel if Hugh Hefner suddenly lost his status and money. Some of us would bet that she would divorce him. But how are we to know? Only Crystal could say whether there were still ways in which her marriage to Hefner enabled her to grow.

According to Dr. Gary Lewandowski, a researcher at Monmouth University in New Jersey, "People have a fundamental motivation to improve the self, and add to who they are as a person. If your partner is helping you become a better person, you become happier, and more satisfied in the relationship."

Sometimes, it's sex, money, prestige, or other coveted goods that initially brings us together with another person, and when those attractions lose their draw, it can change the way we feel about him or her. But, then again, some of us come up with different reasons for staying together. Maybe our friend or beloved doesn't have what made them attractive to us at first, but we've grown to find other things in the relationship that help us be happier than we would be without our mate.

Most of us won't have our relationships made fun of in an editorial cartoon for the amusement of the world. We'll be spared such public judgment. But if we drew a picture of ourselves with our spouse or a friend, what would the cartoon look like? Would both of us be smiling?