

A Summer Afternoon in Providence

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On Sunday, July 18, I took the commuter rail from Boston to Providence for an afternoon rally. The National Organization for Marriage is conducting what it calls the Summer for Marriage Tour 2010, and landed at the foot of the Rhode Island State House on a warm, breezy day to encourage citizens of that state to defend marriage as the union of one man, one woman. Over two hundred people gathered under the trees of the Capitol's south lawn to hear speeches, get their marriage tour t-shirts, and prepare for an upcoming legislative battle in that state over the definition of marriage. The crowd reminded me of a church picnic gathering: Lots of families, kids running around, and smiling adults chatting. The idyllic feeling continued even as the first speakers delivered their remarks. Then a red-shirted army of chanting picketers suddenly emerged from around the western side of the State House and the time of white martyrdom began.

White martyrs are those who witness to truth and faith in ways short of dying. No one died at the marriage rally in Providence but the uninvited demonstrators' ensuing attempts to disrupt and silence were met with the power of quiet determination and the luminescence of common courage. Rhode Island defenders of marriage refused to be provoked and stood their ground with inspiring dignity.

The National Organization for Marriage has organized the rolling rally to reach twenty different cities during July and August, going from Maine to Minnesota and from Florida to Washington, D.C., stopping in locations where the marriage issue is a broiling political potato. The group's President, Brian Brown, is travelling the whole route with his wife Susan and six children in a brightly decorated RV, accompanied by a small crew in a van to help manage the trip's technicalities. Joining the Browns for the New England leg of the trip and speaking in Rhode Island was Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse, an expert on the economic aspects of family structure, and a surrogate doting grandmother for the Brown children.

Dr. Morse was at the podium when the insurgents approached. First, the sign carriers and noise makers crowded the listeners from behind. Then a few banner-waving protesters ran around to the front, screaming "bigots" and "haters." Dr. Morse kept her composure, finished her remarks, and was followed by Brian. That's when several menacing individuals stormed the podium and thrust their faces into Brian's, repeatedly shouting at him to shut up. Brian refused to get riled and continued his speech over the din. Before long our entire group was surrounded and the venomous cacophony continued. Many of the placards employed mockeries and vulgarities. The tension was stomach-squeezing.

When the Capitol police, finally, started to intervene, I looked around me and saw the most remarkable thing. I did not see clenched fists, bulging eyes or reddening cheeks. I could not detect any sign of "fight or flight," anger or fear. I saw heads bowed and hands folded, or eyes raised and arms extended. A frail

woman next to me, surely no veteran of political street theatre, had a look of what I can only describe as deep compassion. A man to my left spoke more in wonder than in any tone of disgust or contention, saying softly, "this is what hell must be like." The picnic had become an inferno, and yet the picnickers did not succumb to the burning.

Other speakers, locals representing Rhode Island, expressed in words what I witnessed around me. They talked of loving their challengers, of forgiving the offenders' transgressions against the freedom to gather without conceding that freedom, and of bearing witness to the truth without rancor or condescension. And they talked of the need to become active despite formidable opposition and to persevere despite the costs.

Brian closed out the rally by observing that the disruption of the peaceful gathering in Providence on a lazy summer afternoon was only a foretaste of what will occur if same-sex marriage is legalized. What transpired on the public sidewalks that day will be repeated in other public venues, such as the schools, the courts and the halls of the legislature. Proponents of tolerance cannot tolerate what they deem to be hatred and bigotry and the law will have to reflect that harsh judgment.

Readers living in Massachusetts can still hear the echoes of the debate in our own state. It is quiet now, but that outer calm only muffles an inner conflict. Decisions continue to be made behind-the-scenes to aid and abet the radical policy change imposed upon us by the Supreme Judicial Court's 2003 decision to legalize same-sex marriage. Just one example: In a time of severe economic turmoil, the latest state budget paired sharp cuts in essential services for the poor and struggling with dramatic increases in funding for programs that affirm the same-sex lifestyle.

The Summer for Marriage Tour is a tale between two book covers, so to speak, with the front cover already embossed, and the back cover still being prepared as this article is being written. The opening cover was the ruling in early July by Boston Federal District Court Judge Joseph Tauro in two cases in which he ordered the Federal Defense of Marriage Act (or DOMA) to be struck down. The closing cover will be the soon-expected ruling by San Francisco Federal District Court Judge Vaughn Walker on the constitutionality of California's Proposition 8. Both DOMA and Proposition 8 define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

Take a look at the webpage listing the marriage tour's itinerary to see where the next stops will be (<http://www.marriagetour2010.com/>) and alert your relatives and friends in those areas about the need to show the same local support that Rhode Island's marriage defenders courageously exhibited under such trying circumstances.

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