Viewpoints

Downs and ups where the rubbery meet the road

FALLING: The road came up to meet me, as the Irish blessing goes, but I did not feel blessed at all. It wasn’t a road but a concrete landing at the Oak Park Green Line station, Dec. 11. One slip on somewhat slushy stair, and down I went on both knees, like St. Paul leaving his saddle on the way to Damascus. Nothing so memorable as the world turns, but shocking nonetheless.

The knees hit the concrete before you could say here-I-come, and there I sat with legs beneath me, hyper-ventilating, still holding on to the railing. Zowie!

The para’s had me in the ER in 15 minutes. I called the lady of our house on my handy cell; she came running. The X-ray machine provided the bad news—tendons no longer attached to knee bone, both legs. In due time, 24 hours later, the tendons had been reattached, and I had acquired two inconvenient friends, ankle-to-thigh casts on each leg. Forty-eight hours after that, I was in our living room, having been gotten out of my hospital bed hours earlier by my doc and having walked a few steps.

The rest is a tale of being patient, not especially in pain, getting in and out of bed, walking around, trying this, trying that with physical and occupational therapists’ and visiting nurse’s counsel, and in general being pampered by lady of house and five of six kids, one of them being out East with husband and kids of her own.

One trick was simple enough—elevate monitor and keyboard and stack up reams of paper for mouse and leaning and compose and surf and stay in touch with the world. Standing time was limited but adequate.

Another was more complicated: #2 Son fastened a bar diagonally to the window frame next to the toilet. Holding firmly to it, I eventually was able to lower and raise myself from one of a house’s most important fixtures.

Then there were books and back issues of magazines and a $15 hand-held radio from R-Shack and TV with its panoply of talk and NFL and bowl and Bulls games and in time chairs with arms into which I could lower myself to sit and watch and read and listen. Lot of heavy lifting of self, as while holding triangle hanging over my special bed.

And family and friends who visited and brought soup or whole meals, but most of all family. Eventually, I did away with the walker. Getting around became routine. For Christmas dinner I stood at end of table, weakening early but

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What comes after coming out

A lesbian experience in Oak Park

By BETSY RITZMAN

Editor’s note: This is the second in a series of commentaries based on Temple University anthropologist Jay Ruby’s “Oak Park Stories,” an ethnographic study completed in 2006, reflecting on the issue of diversity in the village. Rev. Betsy Ritzman, L.C.P.C., is a local minister and psychotherapist who provides individual, couples and family counseling at AltCare Health Center. She has lived in Oak Park since 1987 and was a 2007 recipient of the Oak Park Area Leadership Award.

I just had the pleasure of reviewing major portions of the ethnographic study of Oak Park which Jay Ruby conducted a few years ago. I was invited to comment on the portions that include the lives of two partnered lesbian mothers, Rebekah Levin and Sophie Kaluziak, who are long-term Oak Parkers. It was a test of endurance, since an ethnographic study offers a lot of raw material, including many video interviews and several articles. Even so, I can imagine in years hence the great value of that slice of history.

What struck me first as I watched the interviews (after I recovered from Jennifer Vanasco’s comment that Oak Park is “post-gay”) is how much loss is involved in being in the vanguard of the burgeoning social order. Yes, Oak Park is a community of considerable comparative privilege for lesbian and gay people. The work that can be done toward building a healthier, more inclusive community here can hardly be conceived in most other places. Building an inclusive community creates an environment where we choose to abandon clear images and models woven by centuries of social convention. We do this in order to (with our lives and families) live into a hoped-for future. Standing against social tradition and convention—and in my mind on the side of truth and justice—requires a capacity to risk many losses. This is true of all challenges to the social order on behalf of inclusion, not just issues related to sexual orientation.

First among these losses is the sacramental container and holding environment of marriage, with all its trappings. One of the important trappings is that marriage carries a broad, cross-cultural social context in which it is understood as a commitment of permanency as well as joy and fulfillment. It has never offered any real guarantees, but it’s a framework that can be expected to often—if not always—transcend the challenges of hard times and even strange characters. It is a social contract that places obligations not only on the individuals involved but also on their community. Without that “assumption of forever,” which is a social construct that actually matters and contributes to the relative health of human beings, a vacuum simply fills its place.

Couples or families can do a lot toward building their

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Passive opposition still

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own contract with one another, but they cannot build a social contract. Whether they wish to participate in these prevailing social constructs or not, many of the advantages of social frameworks like marriage fall toward couples if they seem to “pass” for married (as in the case of straight couples who don’t marry) and fall away from them if they do not seem to “pass.”

Couples like Sophie and Rebekah thrive under their own inventiveness and the respect of family, friends, some neighbors and considerable portions of their community. However, to greater or lesser degrees, other non-traditional couples are set adrift from this important social contextualization. For any family finding a way to thrive while building their own social fabric is a daunting task. Well funded, highly educated and sophisticated couples have great resources to bring to this task. But toss in a little chronic illness, racism, poverty or a family’s rejection of their gay teen and watch the resources and creativity disappear. Injustice quickly takes the upper hand, even in Oak Park. A substantial force behind the fight for marriage equality is the belief that such equality will one day mend a serious tear in the fabric of our community and our larger society, a fabric which holds us all — not just queer folk.

Despite the fact that divorce is now more prevalent than marriage, it is still experienced as a departure from the way things are supposed to be. And as frail an institution as it is, marriage at its best is one of the important building blocks of family life. Creating a family without that set of social constructs or assumptions within one’s self and one’s community is challenging, sometimes frightening.

It is both poignant and jarring to hear Bekah and Sophie contemplate adding children to the mix of their lives, absent that “assumption of forever.” Poignancy emerges in the respectful and loving tones with which they consider their compatibilities and differences in their expectations of the life they are creating together. It is simply jarring to hear two people who are so devoted to each other consider how one of them might have a child “as a single mother.”

Having given 14 years to what we call marriage and having ourselves raised a pack of reputedly wonderful kids in a lesbian family, my partner and I understand how expansive, tolerant and creative one’s mind and heart must be to take on this project of social engineering/future building with the raw materials of one’s life and one’s family. Still, between the courage and creativity that resonates a deep sadness for the losses we, and our kids than ought to be expected. When my partner and I were dressing for our wedding and preparing our children, then 9 and 4, my son calmly asked if the police would be there. He understood that our marriage was not legal, and thus that it must be illegal. Here, in this most progressive village and without any outward appearance of hatred or harassment, he was steeling himself for what he understood would be the ensuing debacle. God forbid.

It is a fearful thing to me that all hands are not yet on deck, even in Oak Park, when it comes to our civil rights. These ethnographic interviews of Sophie and Bekah hint at the true make-up of our neighborhoods when they touch on their experience of canvassing for signatures to support Oak Park’s domestic partnership registry, which passed in 1997. While it was clear that the vocal opposition to the ordinance mostly came from a small group of unrepentant Christians, many other silent voices enacted a passive opposition. There’s that’s for you and those that’s agin’ you. And then there’s the misdirection—maybe the majority—of folks who are willing to share real estate values, neighborhoods and schools but unwilling to be transformed or relinquish their secret biases.

They are too busy holding onto what they’ve got to think about what others might not yet have. These are the folks who teach their kids the internally inconsistent and ungody “hate the sin but love the sinner,” not so much by what they say and do but by what they don’t say and don’t do.

We have come such a long way, but without this transformation, Oak Park will never discover the difference between “being progressive” and actually progressing. This process looks like it’s been stalled on all fronts—in our schools, in our deepening economic elitism, in the lack of supportive, transitional or economical housing and in the passivity many of us demonstrate in response to that torn and, at times, shredded social fabric surrounding our neighbors who are different or disadvantaged in any way.

Building the future has always been a job for those who have been oppressed out of options. However; building a community for the future requires all hands on deck. It requires all—yes everyone—of us to find a way to leverage our influence on behalf of others at the table; to be willing to be transformed and to work together—on ourselves, our neighbors and our community.

The website in which Jay Ruby describes the 5-year making of “Oak Park Stories” can be accessed at http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/opp. Each of the four CD-ROMs and the one DVD that comprise Oak Park Stories can be purchased separately or as a set from Documentary Educational Resources by phone at 617/926-0491, by e-mail at docued@der.org, or by website at http://www.der.org. The complete set is available at the Oak Park Public Library and at the Historical Society of OP-RF.