

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## Our American 'Modern Family' Is Now Old Hat

By: Walter Olson and Steve Pippin – May 30, 2013

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*As thousands protested the recent legalization of gay marriage in France -- and the U.S. Supreme Court gets ready to weigh in on the issue in June -- HuffPost's "International Spotlight" presents the views of three gay couples, all raising children, in France, the U.S. and also Canada, where gay marriage has been legal for eight years. Tomorrow: France.*

Because *Modern Family* is our son's favorite TV comedy, we once asked him which of the characters he thinks he's like. His first choice was Luke, the youngest Dunphy kid, whose role is famously written to sound like a real 13-year-old instead of a sitcom 13-year-old. Then he thought of Manny, the son of the Sofia Vergara character, who's "like me because he doesn't have any brothers or sisters" (or at least didn't then). "Besides," he added thoughtfully, with a glance at us, "his dad's really old." Wincing at that, and happy to change the subject, we asked whether he identified with Lily, the toddler being raised by the Eric Stonestreet and Jesse Tyler Ferguson characters. Oh, definitely, he said: "She has silly daddies."

Perhaps we were preordained, or at least self-selected, to play the role of silly daddies: As guys of our ilk go, we're ultra-stable, low-drama types with a 30-foot-deep nesting instinct and scant interest in nightlife. Before we got around to considering parenthood seriously, several parents in our circle of mostly straight friends had urged us to do so.

It was the women especially who kept pushing. "Have you ever considered becoming a parent?" an Obviously Competent Mom would say over the second glass of wine. "You should."

"Thanks. I see the logic and value in the vote of confidence, but don't you think as a parent I would count as adorably clueless?"

"Guess what? I was too!" our O.C.M. would reply. "So are most of us when we start. You'd be surprised how fast you learn. Most of all, your kid does the teaching."

That helped, but it took more. Around 2002 or so, the comedian and talk-show personality Rosie O'Donnell stirred up a big media fuss against laws in the state of Florida that kept gay persons from becoming foster or adoptive parents.

We've never seen any of O'Donnell's shows, but she made a difference for us. Before she started that conversation, it counted as a socially daring act for a gay person to embark on deliberate parenthood -- on the daringness scale, somewhere between moving residence to a houseboat and dyeing one's whiskers green. Now it began to seem more publicly familiar and acceptable.

The other half of O'Donnell's message, the part about how many kids are waiting for families, was also needed. Sure, many fortunate kids in the natural order of things will quickly find some terrific mom and dad eager to scoop them up, but many others wait while no one shows up at all. What if one of those waiting kids were pretty much certain to get a better deal in a family like ours than anywhere else?

So we read up on parenting classics like Jean Kerr's *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (quoting Moss Hart's credo of parental resolve: "We're bigger than they are, and it's our house").

If we were expecting to run into some sort of epic struggle against discrimination and prejudice, we found nothing of the sort. For the most part, other parents are too busy trying to cope with the same basic problems that you are -- such as figuring how to remove boiled carrots mashed into carpet -- to waste time arguing about differences of family structure.

When gay marriage went on the ballot last year in our own state of Maryland, opposition TV ads suggested that a family without a parent of each sex wasn't much of a family. If only they knew how hard and long we'd thought about our own version of that question. What was our son missing by the lack of a mom? How best could we compensate? I'd be surprised if millions of single dads raising kids -- widowers, or divorced men with custody -- don't agonize over the same questions.

There's a well-known trans-Atlantic paradox about gays and family law: In Europe, many countries were much faster than the United States to enact gay marriage into law. Yet those same countries have been much slower and more reluctant to ratify parenthood by gays, and adoption -- over there often administered by monolithic state agencies -- remains off limits even in the Denmarks and Norways. Part of the difference, I think, is that while getting to marriage requires a change in law -- and we in America tend to take our time on that -- founding a family is seen as something that every American has the right to go out and do. And so by the time our "family policy" experts noticed that gays were becoming parents on purpose, it had already become a substantial social phenomenon, hundreds of thousands of families strong.

It's a contradiction, and yet it's not: The United States is seen as distinctively "conservative" among the world's great nations, yet it's also the world's arch-incubator of innovative social change. Don't wait around for permission; it's not as if anyone's stopping you! If it's worth doing, go for it, and let the law catch up in its own time. It works, again and again. And it's so American.