

Allow Me to Retort

by Jameson Simmons

Anyone familiar with Joe's semi-regular column "[The Weekly Log](#)" at Poop Reading (and if you're not, you're dead to me) knows that he frequently tackles a handful of varied topics each Friday, and last week he covered NBC's *Chuck*, a turn of phrase coined by Kent Hrbek, and gay marriage. Joe and I have plenty in common, including our enjoyment of a lively and (mostly) respectful debate. But we happen to disagree strongly about all three of last Friday's topics, so it seemed like a nice time to present an alternative view. And, for a change, I'm going to try to get through my whole side of the argument without bursting into tears.

Joe began by hailing baseball player Kent Hrbek for (possibly) inventing the term "f-bomb" to refer to the word "fuck," among other awesome contributions to baseball and mankind. I first became aware of Kent "Buy a Vowel" Hrbek in 1991, when he was yanking Ron Gant (of my beloved Atlanta Braves) off first base to tag him out in Game 2 of a World Series the Twins went on to unjustly win. Based on that introduction, I have always assumed he was an evil thug, a mustache-twirling villain with a throaty, insouciant laugh. I assumed he kicked puppies and punched children. I don't actually watch that much baseball, so I didn't really think of him again until last Friday, except for the occasional night I'd wake up – teeth clenched, covered in sweat – from some nightmare about another Kent Hrbek rampage strangling the nation with unrepentant evil mischief.

Finding out he (may have) coined the phrase "f-bomb" fits right in line with my imagined history of his deplorable and baseless behavior. For me, "f-bomb" is second only to "vajayjay" as the most unspeakably vile neologism to be visited upon our culture in recent memory. Both are the product of weak minds who want to say something naughty but somehow believe that making it cuter makes it more palatable. When someone says "vajayjay" you think of a vagina – that's how language works, a descriptor identifies a referent. Both words create the same response, one just sounds ridiculous. When someone says "f-bomb" or writes "f—" in a magazine, your brain automatically substitutes the word "fuck." And, hopefully, your brain also thinks, "What an infantile moron this person is, for believing that certain words – which he obviously knows – must be abstracted in order to carry on a conversation." "Vajayjay" has a slew of other problems: society's inability to come face to face with the focal point of feminine power, the mislaid assumption that reproductive functions are somehow "naughty" – the whole thing infuriates me. But "f-bomb" is nearly as bad, because it ascribes this ground-shattering destructive force to the utterance of the word "fuck" (a word I adore and use constantly). Plus, it just sounds stupid. I suppose I'd prefer "fuck-bomb," which sounds even dumber but at least it removes that aspect of its speaker giggling behind his hands at what that mystical F must stand for.

Next, Joe sings the praises of *Chuck* on NBC, a show I enjoyed a lot last season, but have been struggling to maintain interest in these last few months. I only kept watching because I knew it was about to be over for good, so I figured I might as well see the whole thing. When the Internet clamor to stave off its cancellation sprang up, I was momentarily worried that my plan would be ruined, but I remembered this is NBC we're talking about. They've got to clear the decks for Leno.

I agree that *Chuck* has done a good job investing us in the Chuck/Sarah relationship – although, this being television, there's really no such thing as "Will They/Won't They", it's all degrees of "When Will They?" But lately, I often find *Chuck* episodes tedious because every farfetched scrape he gets into is destined to be swiftly resolved in some new and more farfetched manner, so the credible peril is low. This being television, I know they're never going to kill Chuck or Sarah (though these days *House* is keeping us all on our toes), and I'm happy to overlook their invincibility or the implausibly high number of international weapons-trafficking incidents that occur within driving distance of the Burbank Buy More – but in return for that, I expect some kick-ass action or some intriguing story lines. Lately, it's been the yo-yo of Chuck and Sarah (Will she betray him to save the mission, or betray the mission to be with Chuck? Repeat.) alongside Chuck's attempts to remove the Intersect from his brain. (The Intersect being the intelligence database that gives Chuck his CIA status and gives the show its purpose, this amounts to little more than an extended helping of [schmuck bait](#).) Last year, Chuck came across Sarah while she was under the influence of a truth serum and asked her whether she would ever want to be with him. She said no, and he did his best to accept that. Then Casey said something to her later about how fortunate they were that the CIA had trained them to withstand that truth serum. **That's** interesting Will They/Won't They. In 2009, it's mostly been opportunities for Sarah to go rogue in order to protect Chuck's feelings, which are tidily resolved when they return to work and pretend they only went off-book as an undercover tactic. The subplots with Jordana Brewster and Chevy Chase have been great (I would've even liked them without favorites like Chase and Brewster in the roles), but so much of the endgame has seemed like the writers were grasping at straws each week – fates swinging wildly in one direction, then the other.

And so, I bid *Chuck* farewell (I hope) – it was certainly better than plenty of shows, but it may not have really been built to go the distance. The finale in particular, which the show's creators have said would cause riots if no third season followed, seemed like a perfect illustration of its limited-run appeal. (Spoilers to come!) Chuck, finally free of the Intersect, is suddenly forced to re-upload it into his brain, and this time it comes with tactical fighting skills to go with the classified documents from before. Makes for a fun (and

finale-worthy) last scene of Chuck kicking ass, but seems completely unsustainable for another season, because if Chuck is indestructible, he's no longer the lovable schlub who's in over his head. He's Jason Bourne, and he can just go live in a hut somewhere with Sarah if he wants.

So, let's say he did. There's no third season of *Chuck* to provide any evidence otherwise.

For all our disagreement around the same-sex marriage debate, Joe and I definitely agree that Miss California (or anyone else) has a right to express her honest belief about the issue. Our society is vigorously debating the question right now: that means one person's opinion on the matter will often differ with another's. Obviously, I think her opinion sounds like that of an intolerant, short-sighted person (or a person who, for the purposes of maintaining a viable presidential candidacy, will say the "right" thing since it's clear to almost anyone he doesn't truly believe it anyway – such is the state of American politics). More obviously still, it is the right of intolerant, short-sighted morons who disagree with her to make a big show out of shaming her for stating her views. But doing that is still a bush-league move, if for no other reason than its elevation of Miss California to thought-leader status. Why do we care what she thinks, even if she disagrees with us? Take Obama to task when he says it – even O'Reilly or Limbaugh, since they lead the conversation in their own way – but Miss California? Until she shows up on *The Amazing Race*, who cares about her at all?

Now, for the rest of the matter, I don't mean to single Joe out – his reasons for opposing gay marriage are not the only ones out there, but in the realm of reasoned and thoughtful debate, they stand out. Most of the other arguments you hear against it are bizarro slippery-slope constructions (Santorum's "man-on-dog"), unabashed intolerance ("God Hates Fags"), etc. Joe's views on this aren't any more correct than the others, but at least his ideas can be addressed reasonably. His basic points are: gay marriage is not a civil rights issue; and it's fallacious to assume that men's and women's roles in running a family are interchangeable. The former is unfortunately founded on nothing more than hard-hearted semantic maneuvering, and the latter opens up some fascinating lines of questioning, but sadly none apply directly to the gay marriage debate.

Joe is probably right that the debate boils down to people who see gay marriage as a civil rights issue vs. people who don't. I never really thought I saw it as a civil rights issue until he made me think about it. Mainly, I think it's completely inevitable that, sometime in the next 50 years, we will look back on today and shake our heads in wonder that we ever restricted gays from marrying, just the way we shake our heads today that we ever prohibited miscegenation or women's suffrage. Like those restrictions, this one is destined

to fall, because free societies tend toward fair and equal treatment. So it seems like anyone who opposes it now is wasting their time flailing against the inevitable, like some fundamentalist trying to ban sex from all Hollywood movies. Stated in those terms, I guess it turns out I think of it as a civil rights issue. I don't think you can pretend that it isn't, just because gay men and straight men have equal rights to marry the same set of people (unmarried women who are not blood relatives). Sexuality – whether learned or innate – has to come into the question when discussing romantic relationships and commitments. You can't ignore it and define the "right" as simply the right to marry *someone*. When marriage is concerned, the right cannot be defined as anything less than the right to marry *the person you love* (so long as he or she is unmarried and not a close blood relative – from now on, let's just assume that part).

The "person you love" part is absolutely essential to the issue, and to ignore it is to thumb your nose at the rights of gays as people. Because a gay man (or woman, but let's face it, nobody who gets squeamish about gay issues has lesbians in mind when they do) doesn't say, "I'd like to get married. It seems fun and you get free mixers and gravy boats. Who's available?" He says, "My commitment to my partner is absolute; I want to merge my life with that person's and have our union legally recognized." Hopefully a straight couple thinks the same thing. Marriage is pointless if it isn't centered on a bond of love. (I mean, plenty of marriages aren't, divorce is rampant in this country, and that only makes it sillier when people say gay marriage somehow tarnishes the institution – but gays should have just as much right to try and fail at marriage as anyone else, so let's focus on the ideal case.) Imagine you're adrift at sea in a life raft with one other survivor – he's deathly allergic to strawberries and you're not. All you have left to eat is a giant tub of strawberry jam. Do you say to him, "Well, technically, you don't have to starve because you have just as much right to all this delicious jam as I do"? If you do, you ignore the basic foundational components of "eating" (to gain nourishment and survive) just as telling a gay man he's free to marry a woman ignores the basic foundational component of marrying (to be with the one you love).

My grandfather died last week, and my father was named executor of his estate. Watching the amount of paperwork and bureaucratic logistics that must be completed in his completely normal and ordinary case made me think about the crux of the marriage issue. Marriage is two things: a church ceremony and a recognized legal status. Gays don't need to fight for the church ceremony – if their church won't marry them, they can found a new one. But the legal status is key. For better or for worse, in our system it has evolved to stand for a great many rights and entitlements that can be established with the swipe of a pen for heterosexual couples, but gay couples are locked out of all that. Insurance, death benefits, divorce rights, Fifth Amendment status, hospital visitation and decisions about medical treatment, property ownership and transfer – not to mention discounts at the

gym. Yes, a gay couple can draw up lengthy legal paperwork to establish many of these rights by contract (and why someone hasn't posted a free packet online to do just that is beyond me), but it's an arduous and involved process, and even then you can't necessarily get everything. I'm in agreement with Douglas Kmiec, who appeared on *The Colbert Report* to promote his book *Can A Catholic Support Him [Obama]*? – he says churches should handle the church part of marriage, and define it any way they choose, and the state should handle the legal contract, and make it open to anyone. (Because, frankly, it's true – preventing you from marrying your cousin doesn't prevent incest and preventing you from marrying a married woman won't eliminate adultery. Let the contract be the contract – you choose who you want to be committed to, and the state affirms that choice.) If we can do all that – open up identical rights and legal processes to gay couples as straight couples – but we just can't share the word "marriage"... well, then someone's just being absurd. After all, a same-sex marriage will always undeniably be a "same-sex marriage" which is different from "heterosexual marriage" or "marriage classic" – so there you go, they have separate names, too.

The other issue is whether same-sex parents are as good for a family as a traditional heterosexual couple – a mom and a dad. To begin with, this seems like the debate for or against gay adoption, not gay marriage – not every marriage is meant to produce children, and not every child is born to married parents. To assume that preventing gay marriage will prevent children from being raised by a same-sex couple is like thinking you can prevent inbreeding by blocking a guy from marrying his cousin. Cousin lust cares nothing about a piece of paper (believe me, I know) – if that guy wants to mate with his cousin, you're not going to stop him with a marriage certificate; you're going to need chemical castration.

But let's say for the sake of argument that sanctioning a certain kind of marriage sends a cultural signal that a certain family unit is acceptable and normal. (A fallacy, since at this point the sheer number of same-sex families overrides any such signal. Your view of what's normal in the world goes by people you know, not the rules on file at the county courthouse.) What evidence do we have that same-sex parents will necessarily be less effective than heterosexual parents? Granted, men and women are not alike in every way. A girl may not be able to slam dunk or change the bottle on the water cooler, but plenty of tasks can be accomplished with identical skill by either gender – and plenty of things that "men" can do are beyond the reach of a typical dude. (I can't dunk to save my life.) The point is, sure there are variations between men and women, but there are just as many variations among men and among women – the point of a set of parents is to model a loving relationship, not for one parent to bake pies and the other to change tires. It takes a village, after all: any female perspective that the child of two dads is lacking at home, he'll get from a loving aunt, or a schoolmate's mom, or whatever, just like every kid does. Not every gay couple will be ideally equipped to raise a

child, but certainly not every couple joined under our current marriage law is up to the task either. If a mom and a dad make a good couple and a dad and a dad don't, what's the status of a mom and an asshole? Or a dad and a drunk? It's absurd to suggest that gays should be singled out for guilty-until-proven-innocent status on this one, considering all the other varieties of parents we have in place without restrictions. We don't have data on any of these arrangements – I mean, regular listeners of Loveline have more data than most of us, but this isn't rigorously controlled scientific study. Such a study is impossible, because far too many variables factor into the parenting equation. Restricting the genders of parents is the wrong way to go about ensuring that every child grows up in a home that is well equipped to raise him or her. I'm all for mandatory parenting classes and requiring a license to have a child – it would weed out a lot more unwitting (or unwilling) parents while arming the rest with some basic common sense. I'd love to see that, but I'm 100% certain we'll see federally recognized gay marriage first.

Anyway, as Joe said, this isn't an issue on which we're likely to change a lot of minds. But still, we have to try, don't we? Otherwise, this wouldn't be the Internet!
