

Author challenges gay men to lead societal change

By Louis Weisberg

Staff writer

Many gay men view the legalization of same-sex marriage as the culmination of the LGBT civil rights movement. For them, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling was a historical arrival point for gays in terms of social acceptance, as well as an opening of the doorway to full assimilation.

In his book *Gay Men and the New Way Forward*, Raymond L. Rigoglioso looks at "the whole question of what's next after gay marriage."

"Do we fade into the woodwork or come out of the woodwork?" he asks.

An author and personal coach, Rigoglioso's answer is that this moment in time affords an opportunity for the beginning of an era of gay leadership. Gay men have long been cultural and thought leaders, he says, and society would benefit if they applied what he calls all of their "gifts" to society at large.

Rather than looking at the acceptance of same-sex marriage and social assimilation as an end point in the gay movement, he regards it as the halfway point for gay men. He urges them to go farther, to reach their full individual potential and use their gifts to the benefit society.

Rigoglioso facilitates "Gay Men of Wisdom," a program that helps gay men discover and utilize the beneficial traits that often come with being a gay man. Those include having the valuable perspective of outsiders to traditional society, as well as the ability to blend traditionally masculine and feminine traits. "Gay Men of Wisdom" focuses on 14 gifts common among gay men, and Rigoglioso's book is organized around them.

He says he incorporates his background in

personal coaching into his work with gay groups and individuals.

Unlike psychotherapy, coaching doesn't focus on what's wrong with you but rather on what's right with you — the strengths you have that will get you where you want to go, Rigoglioso says. "It's about holding a mirror up and saying, 'Here's who you are, here's what you can do.'"

Both his program and book reflect this approach. They invite gay men to explore and embrace their gifts — "those traits that society has judged, minimized or failed to appreciate," as he explains them on his website — and then share them with other men to create a new vision of manhood.

"We model a balanced form of manhood that all men are going to need to survive on this planet, because otherwise we'll destroy it," Rigoglioso says.

Rigoglioso has faced criticism that his ideas reduce gay men to stereotypes, but he disagrees. He promotes a much more nuanced way of looking at gay men, each of whom is a unique individual, possessing different gay gifts and possessing them to varying degrees, he explains. In his work with groups and individuals, he encourages men to discover and embrace their personal gay gifts rather than struggle against them in order to conform with an idealized style of masculinity that has destructive components, such as aggression, a disregard for women and nurturing, and the need to dominate rather than cooperate.

"We don't have to be conscious that we're doing it," he says about

exerting influence and leadership. People influence others around them simply by the way they behave, he says.

According to Rigoglioso's analysis, the growing visibility of gay men has had a dampening effect on male bonding.

"Before WWII, it was common for men to be some-

what affectionate with each other," he explains. "Those platonic male friendships evaporated after the term 'homosexuality' came out. Once it became identified, there was this slow evaporation of male friendship to the point where male friendships are structured and hemmed in by very narrow limits."

But Rigoglioso says millennials, who've grown up with positive gay role models, are changing perceptions about what they call "bromance."

Rigoglioso says most people who aren't part of the dominant culture struggle with accepting themselves due to pressure to blend in.

"Heterosexual WASPS are at the top (of our society), and there's all this pressure to be part of the dominant group," he explains. The struggle to look and behave like the dominant group deprives society from the benefit of unique gifts that members of other groups have to offer.

Rigoglioso believes that marriage is one of the areas of life in which gay men can help lead society.

"I believe we will reinvigorate marriage in ways that will bring benefits to the dominant culture," he says. "That's what we do. We innovate."

The dynamics of a marriage between two men will be different for many couples than those of a marriage between a man and a

woman. For one thing, men are by nature more sexually charged, he says.

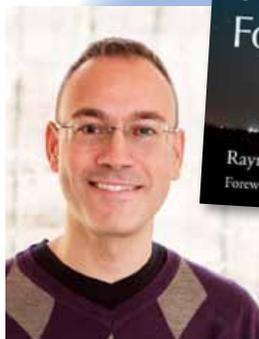
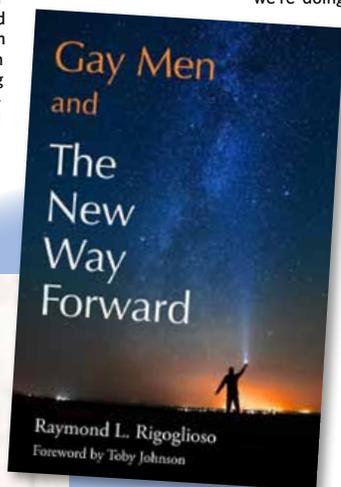
In a heterosexual marriage, women, who are generally more relationship-oriented than sexually oriented, put limits on sexual exploration. While many male couples choose monogamous relationships that reflect ideal heterosexual relationships, others create their own rules when it comes to monogamy.

The same is true of power sharing. Conventional society teaches men that they are the "head of the household" — the protector and decision maker. On the other hand, two men together must learn to negotiate power sharing — a process that heterosexual couples would benefit from learning.

Rigoglioso says society is in a cultural phase in which gay and heterosexual couples can learn from each other how to create successful unions that work for them on a personal rather than institutional level.

Exposing marriage to new ideas from gay relationships and opening up gay relationships to incorporate heterosexual strategies is a key way in which gays and heterosexuals can share their gifts with each other.

Rigoglioso believes that society will emerge from this phase with stronger and more fulfilling marriages for everyone.



THE NEW WAY FORWARD

Raymond L. Rigoglioso will read from his book *Gay Men and the New Way Forward* and introduce his Gay Male Gift Workshop 1-4 p.m. on Oct. 4 at the First Unitarian Society, 1342 N. Astor St. in Milwaukee. Tickets are \$55 in advance, \$65 at the door. For more information, go to www.gaymenofwisdom.com.



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