

"This is a wonderful book. You will love it, you will weep at times. It is an incredible demonstration of the power of real values."—JON STEWART

# ZACH WAHLS

WITH BRUCE LITTLEFIELD



## *My Two Moms*

LESSONS OF LOVE, STRENGTH,  
AND WHAT MAKES A FAMILY

## Praise for Zach Wahls and *My Two Moms*

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“*[My Two Moms]* is a wonderful book. You will love it, you will weep at times. It is an incredible demonstration of the power of real values.”

—Jon Steward

“*[Zach Wahls]* lit up the Internet when he delivered a passionate plea to the Iowa House of Representatives in support of gay marriage. Take a look at him . . . a hero.”

—Ellen DeGeneres

“The most extraordinary thing about his family is its ordinariness and its foundation on that extraordinary substrate called love.”

—*The Washington Post*

“This book is full of so many practical, often simple, commonsense lessons, quotations, and tips on being a parent, on being a kid—frankly, just being a good person.”

—*The Huffington Post*

“Few people have such a moving personal tribute to the power of motherhood.”

—*The Daily Beast*

“Wahls’s heart is in the right place. A sincere first effort that aims to chip away at stereotypes surrounding same-sex parents.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Wahls has a fresh voice, and while still relatively young, his evenhandedness and willingness to use his own experiences to address larger social issues is admirable and will likely appeal to all walks of life.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A remarkably engaging, moving story of his experiences, both normal and out of the ordinary. . . . A compelling book that has something for all audiences. All things considered, any reader would be hard-pressed to deny that, if the outcome is any indication, his moms transcended normalcy and did an extraordinary job raising him.”

—*Windy City Times*

“*My Two Moms* is an engaging portrait of a young man coming of age. With its unthreatening, personable tone and an underpinning of the best kind of persuasive rhetoric, it is the perfect book to act as a bridge between LGBT families and those who aren’t so sure about us. Both groups can learn much from it.”

—*Bay Window*



ZACH WAHLS

**Zach Wahls** is a bestselling author, speaker, advocate, entrepreneur, Green Bay Packers part-owner, sixth-generation Iowan, and a commentator on youth- and LGBTQ-related issues. He is the founder and owner of both Iowa City Learns and the Eastern Iowa Renewable Energy Coalition. His writing has appeared in *The Daily Beast*, *The Des Moines Register*, *The Daily Iowan*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Lean Forward*. A video of his heartfelt testimony before the Iowa House Judiciary Committee about his life with two moms was YouTube's most-watched political video of 2011. He lives in Iowa City.

**Bruce Littlefield** is a bestselling author and journalist whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *People*, and *USA Today*. He is also the author of *Moving In: Tales of an Unlicensed Marriage*. He lives in New York.

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# My Two Moms

Lessons of Love, Strength, and What Makes a Family

Zach Wahls

*with*  
Bruce Littlefield



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*For Zebby*

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## *Preface*

One of my recent lectures brought me back to my birthplace in central Wisconsin. I was slated to speak to students and faculty at each of Mid-State Technical College's three campuses: Wisconsin Rapids, Stevens Point, and Marshfield, my hometown. After the talk in Marshfield, I headed up to Wisconsin Rapids for an interview with a nursing student curious about the best way to interact with same-sex couples and their families when providing medical care in a hospital.

The young woman and I talked for a while. She explained that her brother was gay, and she cared deeply about the comfort and well-being of her patients, but I slowly started to get the sense that she was considerably more religious than she was letting on. About forty-five minutes into the conversation, she disclosed that she was, in her words, a "Jesus freak." However, she went on to explain that she is among a small minority of biblically convicted Christians that believes homosexuality to be a sin, but also recognizes the right of homosexuals to marry a person of the same sex.

I explained my story, how I was conceived, how my moms met, the challenges we faced as a family when my mom Terry was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis—a devastating autoimmune disease that put her in a wheelchair—and the legal obstacles we had to overcome. I talked about their 2009 wedding and how I got to be the best man and give the toast at the reception. She asked questions about how to make families like mine feel comfortable, how to refer to significant others, and slowly she began to share more of her own story.

Amanda had been married two years earlier in a small religious ceremony attended only by herself, her husband, and her pastor. Their union had taken place at the Great Recession's onset, and they could not afford a public ceremony with friends and family. They therefore decided not to file for a marriage license until they could forge their commitment in a public setting. I listened as she explained that in the interim period between their religious ceremony and their public and civic one, she had to check the "single" box on her 1040 form when filing her taxes. "It felt like I was lying," she told me, and then paused. "It hurt."

"Yeah," I said. I understood. "That's what my moms had to do for fifteen years. It's what gay couples all across this country deal with every day."

She looked up at me with clarity in her eyes. "That's wrong," she said softly. Despite being a straight, conservative Christian woman from central Wisconsin, she understood the pain my moms felt.

I nodded, and in that moment I realized that people don't need to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender or have an LGBT parent or parents to know and understand the challenges families like mine are forced to endure.

We just need to listen.



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## Introduction

First things first: If you're Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church or Representative Sally ~~homosexuality-is-more-dangerous-than-terrorism Kern~~,\* I suggest you calmly and carefully put this book back on the shelf, as though you never touched it. Hopefully no one around you noticed, and you'll be able to make a clean getaway.

Everyone else, hang with me for a few pages. Yes, even those of you who think my conception was "unnatural" or pity me for my "tragic" upbringing and are convinced that I'm effectively a victim of child abuse. I don't expect my story to convince every one of you that being gay isn't a "choice" or that same-sex marriage should be legal or even that I reached adulthood undamaged by the sexuality of my parents. I promise that I'm not going to ask you to attend a gay wedding and sing show tunes, and I'm not going to try to brainwash you with the "gay agenda." (Although that's probably exactly what I'd say if I were, if there really happened to be some kind of collusion among gays to "convert" people.) No, this is nothing sinister.

What I'd like to do is tell you about my family—my sister, Zebby; my two moms, Jackie and Terry; and our dog, Theodore—and the values my parents instilled in me as I matured into a young man.

In the early 1990s, this country first began a serious, public conversation about same-sex marriage and LGBT rights. Gays were openly entering stable, loving relationships. They were starting families and even raising children through adoption or "artificial" means. Naturally, they wanted to have access to the civil rights, liberties, and protections married straight parents enjoy and use every day to protect their families and loved ones.

But some folks didn't want that.

It was and is a contentious and difficult issue—an issue that has only gotten larger as more and more gay people come out of the closet, settle down, start families, and have kids.

Since the conversation began, a lot has been said and written about the kids being raised in "gay families." (By the way, I find this label silly. My moms don't live in a gay house, drive gay cars, or have a gay dog—as far as we can tell.) But we, the kids of gay parents, haven't really contributed much because we were busy growing up, and adolescence is hard enough as it is without having to respond to society's incessant questions about your family structure. Further, even though there are an estimated two million children of LGBT parents in the United States, of the folks I know raised by openly gay parents, none of us are more than twenty-five years old.

I didn't have to be the kid to write this book. I wasn't trained for this or groomed to be a spokesperson. I was never instructed in the dark arts of subliminal messaging, and I didn't ask to become the subject of national (and, believe it or not, international) media attention because of who my moms are.

I just wanted to defend my family.

Had that defense, my testimony before the Iowa House Judiciary Committee, passed unnoticed o

never been submitted in the first place, I never would have been forced to confront the skeptics' questions that came after the committee hearing. I definitely had been asked questions about my parents while growing up, but they were most often aesthetic in nature and largely noninvasive. Usually, those asking were either too polite to intrude or, more often among the inquisitive members of my generation, they figured that having gay parents really wasn't a big deal. As I got older, the questions slowed to a trickle and then stopped almost altogether.

But that changed. After my testimony went viral, conservative bloggers and talk-radio hosts ripped my words apart, offering line-by-line analysis and condescending, often dehumanizing, personal suggestions to "miscreants" and "child-abuse victims" like me.

All this in response to a teenager's six-hundred-word, three-minute speech.

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On the evening of Monday, January 31, 2011, I was in Des Moines, Iowa, our state capital, to explain my opposition to Iowa House Joint Resolution 6—a proposed constitutional amendment that would redefine marriage in our state to be limited to one man and one woman and would also eliminate the possibility of civil unions between same-sex couples in the future. This is a debate still being waged all fifty states and across much of the world. My testimony touched on my family life, my personal successes, and a few observations I had to offer about growing up with same-sex parents. I had no idea it was going to change my life.

The following morning, the Iowa House Democrats posted a video of my speech on YouTube (without my knowledge). By Friday, it had more than a million hits and had been covered by every major American media outlet except Fox News (shocking, I know). Our whole family had been interviewed on live, national television from my moms' living room, and I was slated to appear on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* the next week. When asked about the speed with which the video went viral, a YouTube spokesperson told my local newspaper that what had happened was the equivalent of "catching lightning in a bottle," a feat made even more incredible by the fact that I didn't even know I was holding said bottle in the first place.

For reasons I still cannot fully explain—though among them certainly are the facts that I am a straight man, an Iowan, an Eagle Scout, and decently accomplished for my age—I, the medium, became the message, a message that resonated both among those who support the advancement of LGBT rights and those who do not.

So here we are—me writing, you reading—a book that serves as a reply to many of the questions aimed at the kids of gay couples and individuals. But I can't claim to speak for all of us or for the entire gay community. Childhood experiences, whether or not you have same-gender or mixed-gender parents, vary widely. For example, aside from my sister, I'm the only kid I know with gay parents whose biological parent was single at the time of conception. And I don't need to tell you that growing up in Iowa City, Iowa, is different from growing up in Greenwich Village. This is the story of only one family—though I hope this inspires other kids to share their stories—and the thoughts and recollections of only one person.

This book is an exploration of the values my moms taught me, values driven home by my journey to Eagle Scout—the Boy Scouts of America's highest rank—and how they pertain to the questions folks have for kids like me.

It is a response to all those who say I am "different."

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While this is a reality I was at first hesitant to acknowledge, ultimately, there is no doubt that I have always been different. Folks from all walks of life have been informing and reminding me of this difference since I was a young child, and they continue to do so today. But it is on rare occasion that they explicitly define what this difference is, and I suspect the hesitancy to do so is the result of a culture that by and large craves conformity whenever possible and finds comfort in its largely homogenous nature.

I am different insofar as I am defined by a number of traits I do not share with the majority of my peers. Among many things, I am the son of a same-sex couple, was conceived using assistive reproductive technology, and scored in the 99th percentile of the ACT. I am also an Eagle Scout, a small-business owner, a Unitarian Universalist, and a state championship-winning debater.

My family, too, is undeniably different from the American mean. Two moms is a familial construct that was considered novel until only recently, though it is still disparaged as invalid by a shrinking—though increasingly shrill—minority. That minority would have you believe that this difference is all defining, that it disqualifies my mothers from access to civil marriage (though the Iowa constitution would beg to differ), and that it renders my family undeserving of all the rights, privileges, and protections enjoyed every day by “straight” families.

Yet my moms’ same-sex relationship is just one difference among many that are found in families of all shapes and sizes.

At a young age, my family experienced the cruel reality of a chronic autoimmune disease. My mom Terry was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at the age of forty-four, a development that, at nine years old, I could not even begin to understand. And, as a result, there is another significant difference between the Reger-Wahls household and the rest of America: After twelve years of struggling with multiple sclerosis, the one treatment that has worked for my mom is a radical change to her diet, so you’ll find no gluten-based foods in our cupboards and no dairy products in our refrigerator. Though—and don’t mention this to her—you’ll find plenty of both at my apartment.

Yes, I can certainly see my family’s differences—and I can acknowledge my own—but I must confess, however, that I am unable to actually *feel* those differences. I have, after all, no control group against which I may compare the experiences of my life, no memories of a more “normal,” one-mom-and-one-dad past against which to weigh the present. Though society regularly informs me that my family structure is different, I feel as though I’m being told that I am wearing different colored socks. Yes, you might not like how they look, but beyond inciting the occasional bout of aesthetic displeasure, how does it affect your life?

I know mixing socks is purely a visual example. Being raised by a lesbian couple is substantively different from being raised by a straight, mixed-gender couple. But I suspect you would find yourself incapable of discerning either the sex of my parents or color of my socks from simply shaking my hand and having a conversation over coffee. In fact, to date, not once have I ever been confronted by an individual who realized independently that I was raised by a gay couple. Not once. And I’ll be surprised if that changes over the next twenty.

But besides the obvious, what were these substantive differences? Well, I learned how to shave from my best friend’s dad and how to tie a tie from an article in *Playboy*. I had to carefully explain to an Indian visa officer that I left the “Name of Father” space blank on my visa application because I don’t know it—I’ve never met the man, nor do I plan to. The sexuality of my parents, and the rejection

they felt from the Christian faith in which they were both raised, led them to embrace the more accepting teachings of Unitarian Universalism, another meaningful and substantive difference from the American mean.

Yet when I declared before the Iowa House Judiciary Committee during that hearing on House Joint Resolution 6, that “the sexuality of my parents has had zero effect on the content of my character,” I was not bearing falsehood. I believe this with all my heart to be true. After all, one’s sexuality does not determine a person’s response to discrimination. That response is informed not by the color of your skin, your gender identity, your sexuality, or any other immutable characteristic, but by the beliefs you hold and the values you prize—*the content of your character*.

As I write this, much has changed since my testimony before the Iowa House of Representatives and the viral aftermath that followed in its wake, and there are still days when I have a hard time believing this is all real. As I received invitations to speak at political events and fund-raisers, in classrooms and boardrooms, I couldn’t help but ask myself, what could I, then still too young to order a beer, possibly have to say that you don’t already know? But as I’ve traveled around my state and across the country, folks who were once on the fence or downright opposed to LGBT rights have told me that my story has changed their minds. In the years following, I’ve realized my experience has a resonance—a relevance—I had completely failed to understand.

And while this tale could begin in any number of places—our family’s move from Wisconsin to Iowa, my mom Terry breaking up with her longtime girlfriend, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Iowa, the day I ran home from kindergarten to tell my moms I wanted to join the Cub Scouts—the journey upon which I have most recently embarked has a clear starting point. The chairman of the Iowa House Judiciary Committee called out my name, I took a deep breath, and then I stepped forward to a lectern in the Iowa House of Representatives to defend my family and the marriage of my two moms.

*Good evening, Mr. Chairman. My name is Zach Wahls. I’m a sixth-generation Iowan and an engineering student at the University of Iowa, and I was raised by two women.*

\*Yes, she actually said that: <http://bit.ly/qj5GV2>.

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## CHAPTER 1

### “*Be Prepared*”

**M**ine has always been a sit-down-and-have-dinner kind of family. So when I announced at a Sunday night supper that I was preparing to testify the following night at a state hearing on gay marriage, the four of us launched into a hearty conversation on the topic. Zebby, my then sixteen-year-old sister, was still shocked that anyone could possibly be opposed to the union our parents shared. Jackie, my nonbiological mom (also known as “Short Mom”), wanted to know who would be there and how many people might show up, her protective den mother instincts kicking in. Terry, my biological mom (or “Tall Mom”), was eager to hear the remarks I had written so she could help me fine-tune them.

My moms always used our dinner-table conversations as a way to prepare my sister and me for the daily challenges of life. From simple reminders to do our homework and practice the piano to the more complex task of teaching us how to deal with a school bully, these nightly dialogues were both safe harbor and a staging ground.

It was around the dinner table that they introduced us to the book *Teaching Your Children Values* by Linda and Richard Eyre, which gives parents a yearlong, month-by-month plan for teaching their children values, such as self-discipline, perseverance, kindness, and honesty. Every night since I was a young child, we’d share examples of that month’s value. Although I’d usually just toss out a quick example en route to whatever was on my plate, over the course of nearly two decades, these moral explorations sank in. My moms equipped me with a strong sense of right and wrong and taught me that the world is rarely black and white.

It was around the dinner table that they carefully informed us of Terry’s multiple sclerosis diagnosis. They explained why she had been falling down so frequently and why she would sometimes spend entire days in the master bedroom, paralyzed by pain. They walked my sister and me through what this development would mean for our family’s future. They described the differences we might start to see as her MS progressed, and they delicately revealed that there was no cure.

It was around the dinner table that they prepared me for my Eagle Scout board of review, the final step a young man takes on his way to the highest honor the Boy Scouts of America has to offer. Jackie asked me questions about the history of Scouts and what the symbolism of the badges, patches, and ranks were. Terry tested my knowledge of the Scout motto, law, oath, and slogan. I could rattle off these precepts forward, backward, and while patting my head and rubbing my stomach.

The Scout motto: Be prepared.

The Scout law: A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

The Scout oath: On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

The Scout slogan: Do a good turn daily.

And so it was appropriate that, once again, we found ourselves sitting around the dinner table, discussing the testimony I'd be delivering the following evening to defend marriage equality before the Iowa Legislature. As excited and intrigued as we all were, none of us could have predicted what would happen next.

"Wait a minute," Jackie said. "The hearing's tomorrow? And you started writing your testimony yesterday?"

"Yeaaaaah," I replied in a long drawl, my trademarked I'm-not-as-ready-as-I-should-be smile plastered across my face.

"So much for 'being prepared,'" she said with a laugh.

She didn't know the half of it.

I'd only found out about the hearing a few days before it was slated to take place. I actually wound up scrapping the version I presented to my family that night almost completely and worked into the wee hours of the morning preparing a new draft. Over the course of about ten hours, I had gone through four vastly different takes, each one focused on an entirely separate part of the same-sex marriage debate, before settling on the aspect I knew best: my family. Satisfied, I printed the final draft and called it a night.

The following morning, as I stood in front of the mirror and pulled my tie snug, the motto of the Boy Scouts ricocheted through my mind: "Be prepared. Be prepared. Be prepared," as though, for some reason, I wasn't. But I had worked hard to pull my testimony together at a moment's notice. And in some ways, it felt like my entire life had been lived in preparation for the day's events. Glancing back in the mirror, I double-checked my suit—I wouldn't have time to come back to my apartment before leaving for Des Moines after the day's classes.

I knew the people I'd face at the hearing—particularly those on the "other side"—would be judging more than my words. They'd be looking at every square inch of my appearance and examining every aspect of my demeanor, hoping to spot a stray sign that my parents hadn't raised me right, as though their "lesbian parenting" would manifest itself as some sort of telltale physical defect. The kids of heterosexual parents at the hearing would not endure such scrutiny.

Not even close.

It was on that last night of January 2011 that I climbed into my well-worn Pontiac Grand Am and drove off to Des Moines, utterly unaware of the journey that lay ahead.

I plugged in my iPod and cued up Kanye West's latest album. On my Speech and Debate team in high school, I had discovered that the best way to know if you have something down is to try to recite it while listening to music. And that's how I practiced my speech as I made my way to Iowa's capital, mumbling the words that were—unbeknownst to me—about to change the course of my life.

I pulled off I-235 West onto East 15th Street in Des Moines. In the gray distance, through the snowflakes, I could see the gold dome perched atop the Iowa capitol, glowing with a pale shine against the dark night sky. I found a parking spot and made my way toward what I knew would soon become a rhetorical firefight, but I was largely unperturbed. As a state-champion high school debater, it is a rare instance when I take an argument personally. As the son of a married lesbian couple, I had developed

thick skin and quick reflexes.

I was ready to defend my moms.

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To put it mildly, gay marriage is a contentious issue. It tends to engender passionate responses from just about everyone and often provokes the worst in all of us. For those seeking marriage equality, easy accusations of bigotry, ignorance, and homophobia fly without remorse. The traditional marriage advocates are quick to label their opponents as godless sodomites seeking to advance the “gay agenda.” Or something like that. But reality isn’t so simple. The fact is that the conversation from both sides is driven by fear: fear of social and legal disenfranchisement on the one hand, and of the loss of religious tradition and an assault on normalcy on the other.

As I stood beneath the rotunda in the Iowa capitol, stumbling through muted rehearsals of my testimony, the significance of the night had not yet sunk in. With dozens more speakers present than would be able to have the floor for three precious minutes apiece during the two-hour legislative hearing, I realized my testimony might not even be heard. I chatted with other marriage equality supporters, while anxiously waiting for my name to be called.

When it was announced that I would be the fourth speaker, I walked through the doors of the Iowa House chamber and into a standing-room-only crowd. Immediately I noticed the TV cameras, which were all pointed at the speaker’s lectern. I hadn’t realized that our speeches were going to be recorded. *Of course they are, I thought. This is a hearing on gay marriage. What were you expecting?*

Certainly not that.

The only other time I had visited the capitol was for an elementary school field trip, and back then the room had been empty. Now, a college student, I could see that it was far larger than I remembered. And tonight it was filled with people and an energy that can only be described as unbridled and unpredictable.

Knowing I’d be speaking shortly, I took a spot and stood against the wall. After about ten minutes of opening remarks from the Iowa House Judiciary Committee chairman, Richard Anderson, the state lawmakers in attendance introduced themselves.

I was taken aback by how many political figures were present. Had I known there would be so many legislators in attendance, I would have, I don’t know, shined my shoes or something. I suddenly realized I was more nervous than I had thought.

When my name was announced, I walked toward the lectern, turning to face the room. All eyes were on me. My hands were shaking as I took a deep breath, tapped the start button on the timer of my iPod Touch, and set it down. I had three minutes to make my case.

*Good evening, Mr. Chairman. My name is Zach Wahls. I’m a sixth-generation Iowan and an engineering student at the University of Iowa, and I was raised by two women.*

*My biological mom, Terry, told her parents that she was pregnant, that the artificial insemination had worked, and they wouldn’t even acknowledge it. It actually wasn’t until I was born and they succumbed to my infantile cuteness that they broke down and told her that they were thrilled to have another grandson. Unfortunately, neither of them lived to see her marry her partner, Jackie, of*

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fifteen years when they wed in 2009. My younger sister and only sibling was born in 1994. We actually have the same anonymous donor, so we're full siblings, which is really cool for me.

I guess the point is that our family really isn't so different from any other Iowa family. When I'm home, we go to church together. We eat dinner. We go on vacations. But, you know, we have our hard times, too; we get in fights. Actually, my mom Terry was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2000. It is a devastating disease that put her in a wheelchair, so we've had our struggles. But, you know, we're Iowans. We don't expect anyone to solve our problems for us. We'll fight our own battles. We just hope for equal and fair treatment from our government.

Being a student at the University of Iowa, the topic of same-sex marriage comes up quite frequently in classroom discussions. You know, the question always comes down to, "Well, can gays even raise kids?" And the conversation gets quiet for a moment, because most people don't really have an answer. And then I raise my hand and say, "Actually, I was raised by a gay couple, and I'm doing pretty well."

I scored in the ninety-ninth percentile on the ACT. I'm actually an Eagle Scout. I own and operate my own small business. If I was your son, Mr. Chairman, I believe I'd make you very proud. I'm not really so different from any of your children. My family really isn't so different from yours. After all, your family doesn't derive its sense of worth from being told by the state, "You're married, congratulations!" No, the sense of family comes from the commitment we make to each other to work through the hard times so we can enjoy the good ones. It comes from the love that binds us.

That's what makes a family.

So what you're voting here isn't to change us. It's not to change our families. It's to change how the law views us, how the law treats us. You are voting for the first time in the history of our state to codify discrimination into our constitution, a constitution that but for the proposed amendment is the least amended constitution in the United States of America.

You are telling Iowans that "some among you are second-class citizens who do not have the right to marry the person you love." So, will this vote affect my family? Would it affect yours?

Over the next two hours, I'm sure we're going to hear plenty of testimony about how damaging having gay parents is on kids. But in my nineteen years, not once have I ever been confronted by an individual who realized independently that I was raised by a gay couple.

And you know why?

Because the sexual orientation of my parents has had zero effect on the content of my character. Thank you very much.

I think I remember the crowd cheering as I walked back to my spot against the wall, a vague memory confirmed later by video evidence. I am certain I was sweating. Thank God I decided to wear a suit jacket.



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Three nights later, our family was once again huddled around the dinner table. But instead of eating dinner, we were trying to figure out what the camera crew setting up in our living room wanted us to wear. We were an hour away from a live interview on national television, and, needless to say, none of us really knew what we were doing.

We had gone through a lot together in our life as a family, successfully navigating the grueling trials of multiple sclerosis, legal challenges, and social discrimination, and we had learned a lot along the way. We were prepared for a lot of things.

But we weren't prepared for this—not even close.

As soon as the interview was over, a cell phone rang. It was Jackie's mom, Grandma Esther, a graying Catholic woman living in central Wisconsin, and she skipped hello to get right to her point. She demanded to know why I had referred to Jackie, her daughter, as "Mom." Jackie was at our kitchen table holding her cell phone to her ear, still dressed in a freshly pressed shirt and slacks, and watched as she struggled to maintain her composure.

Guilt flooded my mind.

I had insisted that the interview be of the whole family, not just me. Despite Jackie's shyness—something most people forget about after they've gotten to know her—she had begrudgingly agreed to take part. Now she was being forced to explain to her own mother why I, her son, would refer to her as "Mom." I wanted to interject that Esther had never questioned Zebby or me when we called her Grandma, but instead, feeling the tension of the call, I stayed silent.

I was engulfed in emotion, unsure what to do, so I just stood in our living room as the camera crew went about disassembling their lighting rig. Abruptly, Jackie flipped her phone shut. The conversation was over. I walked over to the table and looked at her. There were no tears in her eyes, but I could feel the defeat in her heart. She looked up, and with a knowing nod, I wrapped her in a hug.

This should have been a celebration, a moment of triumph. But even as we stood in the afterglow of the preceding forty-eight hours—amid the pride and love both of my moms had felt as my defense of our family had been played over and over again on national TV—all I could feel was that as far as we've come, we still have a long way to go.

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## CHAPTER 2

# *Obedient*

When I was young, we would visit Grandma Lois's house in northeastern Iowa. Terry's mom always had quite a collection of board games for us to play. As soon as we'd get to her house, I'd give her a kiss and then head right to her hallway closet to dig through the assortment of colorful boxes stacked in it. There were, of course, the usual suspects, like Monopoly, Scrabble, and Chinese checkers, but there was also my personal favorite, Life. I think Life was Grandma's favorite, too, as she played it with Zebby and me almost every time we visited.

The game reproduces a person's travels through life, from college to retirement, with jobs, marriage, and maybe even children along the way. I think one of the reasons I liked the game of Life so much was that in it you get to grow up, and when I was a kid, I always wanted to grow up. In addition, there are three things that separate the game of Life from other board games. First, the board has small mountains, buildings, and other three-dimensional objects. Second, there's the spinning wheel, which whirls around like the one on *Wheel of Fortune*—Grandma Lois's favorite show. Third, the playing pieces are tiny plastic cars in a variety of colors, each with six holes in the top to accommodate the blue and pink "people pegs" that are placed in the car throughout the game as each player gets married and has or adopts children.

During one of our first games—I must have been around seven years old, definitely before sex had ever crossed my mind—we were playing and I "got married." I put a blue peg in the passenger's seat of my game piece next to my own blue piece.

Grandma Lois glanced at me with what I now recognize as a quizzical look.

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" she asked.

"Yep," I said, confidently. My best friends were all boys. Duh.

"Well," she said, taking a thoughtful pause. "I guess there isn't any rule against it."

"Why would there be a rule against it?" I asked.

Grandma Lois just smiled. Though I didn't always pick a blue peg and Zebby didn't always pick a pink peg, Grandma Lois always happily rode through Life with a blue peg at her side and fond memories of her deceased husband, John, in her heart.

In the game of Life, she could pick whomever she wanted to ride next to her.

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Years earlier, when Terry had told her parents that she was looking into artificial insemination, they immediately told her it was a horrible idea. Having grown up as a fifth-generation farmer's daughter in rural Iowa, she knew her parents wouldn't be jumping up and down with joy, but she hadn't

anticipated their utter disdain and how vehemently they opposed the idea. Her mother went so far as to tell Terry that she would not only be putting her career in jeopardy but also that society would never accept the child of a lesbian mom. Her dad ended what she describes as a “jarringly memorable” conversation by telling her, “You’re out of your goddamned mind.”

But Terry Wahls had always been one to give her parents her opinion and had a habit of standing her ground when she knew she was right. At the age of nine she’d protested her father’s decision to label their farm “John Wahls and Sons.” Such a naming pattern was the typical farming convention of the time, but Terry thought “John Wahls and Family” was more appropriate. After all, if she was going to be getting up at five every morning to work on the farm—not to mention the ceaseless effort of her mother—the name of their farm ought to reflect that. Grandpa John gave it some thought, and despite his initial reservations, begrudgingly agreed that “John Wahls and Family” was indeed more appropriate—but he refused to adopt the alternative name, holding fast to society’s convention.

This time around, however, she was less confident in her convictions. What if her dad was right and she was out of her mind? It wasn’t until she had the chance to discuss her conundrum with some other family members that she fully made up her mind to move forward. She was having a pizza dinner with her aunt Cora; Cora’s sixteen-year-old daughter, Shannon; and a few of Shannon’s high school friends. The girls told Terry that they didn’t think it would be a big deal for a kid to have a lesbian mom, and (fortunately for my sister and me) Terry believed them.

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My mom has been telling me the story of how I came to be since I first started nursing. I was born under atypical circumstances, after a series of somewhat spectacular events and what amounted to an act of civil disobedience. It took a failed in vitro fertilization (IVF) cycle and a few unsuccessful attempts at artificial insemination (AI) before the fertility efforts finally took, and a single, thirty-four-year-old lesbian physician living in conservative central Wisconsin in 1990 became pregnant.

Got all that?

Like so many other women, Terry Wahls had always imagined herself as a mother. She wanted to experience the joys and trials of raising a child and all the life-enriching experiences that accompany motherhood. But she was a single gay woman, and society told her no at nearly every turn, making her journey to parenthood not just difficult, but practically impossible.

In the late 1980s, Terry was working as an internal medicine physician in Marshfield, Wisconsin and dating another female physician. When Terry shared her hopes of having children, the woman she was dating made it clear that she didn’t share those dreams and promptly broke up with Terry. For the next several years Terry privately struggled with the thought of becoming a mom, wondering if she could raise a child as a single parent and, if she could, if that child would be okay with a lesbian mother. There were, after all, no guarantees. Further, if she did decide to have a child, how exactly would she go about it? As a doctor, she knew that the ticking biological clock wasn’t just a metaphor. The longer she waited, the lower the likelihood that she’d be able to get pregnant. She’s told me that she finally realized it wasn’t about making the right decision; it was about making a decision and living with—and learning from—the consequences.

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Terry made an appointment with her friend Bruce, the fertility expert in her clinic, and considered herself lucky to be a doctor with partners who would help her. But, after getting a sperm donor catalog, Terry got bad news. Her ultrasound, which had been intended to check if her eggs were ready for insemination, ended up revealing an ovarian mass that would have to be surgically removed before she would be able to get pregnant. Her inner physician feared the growth might be cancer, but it turned out to be a cyst and “full of blood,” as I remember her telling me. Terry didn’t have cancer. She had severe endometriosis, which was completely clogging her fallopian tubes. This meant that any attempts with artificial insemination would be highly unlikely to succeed—perhaps impossible. It’s interesting, and perhaps significant, to note that even if Terry had been straight and married to a man, she still wouldn’t have been able to get pregnant by the “natural” method. Without reproductive technologies—like IVF or AI—she would never have been a mother, regardless of her sexual orientation.

Terry began to wonder if her mother was right. Maybe she should just give up trying to get pregnant.

The last remaining option would be IVF. The procedure would require daily doctor visits for ultrasounds and lab draws for a couple of weeks at a time. Since the clinic where she worked didn’t have an IVF center, Terry looked for a year to find an IVF clinic to enroll in. Bruce suggested the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which she considered feasible because it was only two and a half hours away. When she called a doctor at the clinic, he was initially very friendly, talking in a collaborative doctor-to-doctor manner. He told her that they had great success rates for women with severe endometriosis. Then, he asked, “What is the problem with your husband that requires the use of donor sperm? Maybe we have a way around that for you.” When she replied that she would be doing this as a single parent, his tone switched from warm and fuzzy to cold and icy. He abruptly said, “We do not *do* illegitimate children in our clinic,” and hung up the phone without waiting for a reply.

Terry couldn’t find any IVF clinics in the Midwest that would accept a single woman—to say nothing of the fact that she was gay. Months later, at a Women in Medicine conference, Terry recounted the doctor’s rude comments to her colleagues. The female doctors at the seminar were outraged, and one of them, a physician at the University of California, San Francisco, vowed she would get Terry into the IVF program there.

Now that she had a clinic, all Terry had to do was pick a sperm donor.

She still laughs every time she describes how pitiful the sperm donor catalog for humans was compared to the elaborate breeder catalogs for prizewinning bulls that her dad received during her childhood on the farm. Those catalogs included glossy, color photographs of the bull, and along with the bull’s name were listed its pedigree, trophies, awards, statistics for its offspring, and the name of the farmer. The human sperm donor list included no such photographs, no pedigrees, and since it was listing anonymous donors, no names.

All Terry had to do was answer a series of questions about the traits she’d prefer in a potential donor, such as skin color and complexion, eye color, hair color, height, weight, and education level. Straight couples usually try to match the sperm donor’s characteristics to those of the husband, but that wasn’t an issue for Terry. She didn’t really care if the donor’s hair was blond or black, curly or straight. She just wanted the donor to have completed at least two years of college and be tall. Not just because she was tall herself, but she strategically thought that if her children might face bullying because of their mother’s sexuality, a couple extra inches might be helpful.

She received a list of donors who met her criteria, but all she had to base her final decision on was two basic biographical lines about each guy. She picked donor number 1033, a six-foot-five fellow

studying to be a tax attorney, who also said he played basketball and classical piano. Though Terry knew it was still a long shot, she began giving herself the necessary hormone injections in her buttocks twice a day. When she arrived in San Francisco, everything seemed to be going well. Doctor told her that the ultrasound looked good, and she was producing plenty of estrogen.

On Halloween morning in 1990, she walked to the clinic through San Francisco's Castro district and its sea of gay men in various entertaining costumes—including drag queens, lots of leather, and one Native American whom she remembers “looked like he escaped from the Village People.” But when she arrived at the clinic, she got more bad news. The doctors told her that her ovaries had fizzled out. She only had two, maybe three, eggs ready to go. It was not enough to harvest and do the IVF, so they canceled the cycle but let her have the donor's sperm through a plain, old-fashioned turkey-bast insemination. Given the scarring on her fallopian tubes, it was the mother of all long shots. (No pun intended.) After, she had dinner with friends and flew back to Wisconsin.

The night Terry got home, she wrote in her journal that it was time to give up on the dream of having kids. She was so certain her chance of getting pregnant was zero that she didn't even bother to get a pregnancy test.

And then a miracle happened. One of 1033's sperm had fought its way through her collapsed fallopian tubes and found a way to unite with one of those two viable eggs.

Terry Wahls, the single lesbian physician from rural Iowa now transplanted to central Wisconsin was pregnant.

She immediately called her parents to share the news. “I'm pregnant, Dad,” she said into the phone as she sat alone at her kitchen counter. “I'm gonna be a mom.”

Terry wanted her father to say something—anything. But there was nothing, just the empty space of stunned silence. “Didn't you hear me, Dad? I'm pregnant.”

And then finally her dad asked, “Well, have you heard that the price of corn is inching up?”

I think it says something about Iowans that, when uncomfortable, our go-to conversation topic isn't the weather: it's the price of corn.



I was born July 15, 1991. I was named Zacharia, because my mom believes strong names begin with “Z,” and Zacharia was a professional-sounding name that also had a “rather pleasant nickname.” Like most of Terry Wahls's decisions, this one was deliberate and well thought out. And thank God, because the other name she liked was Wolfgang.

When Terry returned home from the hospital with me, she checked the local newspaper for my birth announcement. There wasn't one. She presumed that the hospital had not provided the information to the newspaper, so she called the Labor and Delivery suite. “Dr. Wahls,” they said, “didn't you know, the paper won't print any announcements for single mothers?” She was appalled. How could the paper refuse to print public information? She thought that perhaps it wasn't really the paper, but more likely the Catholic hospital trying to interject its religious values into the world.

She called the newspaper, and after talking to a few people, she finally got the editor on the phone. “We put in announcements for all sorts of things,” he told her, his tone impatient and bothered. “The price depends on the size of your announcement.”

“What?” she asked. “How can our newspaper refuse to publish my son's birth announcement?”

“Don't act surprised,” he said. “I know you've already been told that we only announce *legitimate*”

children.” Wincing, she noted that word again, which implied questions of validity, of worth and meaning. She let the editor know that she didn’t understand how printing her name and her son’s name, both a matter of public record, could be a problem for the newspaper. The editor informed her that the paper would be taking a legal risk by printing anything unless they knew the woman was married, because of “potential problems in regard to proving paternity” and “to protect the interests of the child.” Unable to believe what she was hearing, my mom promptly notified him that she would be speaking with her attorney and hung up.

She was still stewing, pondering the best course of action, when she received a call from the same editor, whose voice sounded decidedly different from their first call. Even over the phone, she could tell he was nervous by the anxious tempo of his speech. “You were correct, of course, Dr. Wahls,” he told her. “Because you did not want to name the father, we can announce your son’s birth. Unfortunately, we’ve already missed today’s paper, but we’ll get him into Friday’s paper.”

Though thrilled, Terry Wahls didn’t stop with her own personal satisfaction. She asked the editor if this meant the paper was changing its policy. He tried to avoid her question, instead asking about the correct spelling of my name and my grandparents’ names.

She repeated the question.

He told her that the corporate owners of the newspaper had to be involved in any policy changes, which would take time. Couldn’t he simply put her son’s name in the paper? Wouldn’t that make her happy? But Terry’s never been one for special treatment and quickly told her that she would be more than happy to pay for an attorney to advocate for all single moms who did not get their birth announcements in the paper.

That did it. The policy was changed, both by the paper and Saint Joseph’s Hospital. As my mom later discovered, the hospital did indeed have an unwritten policy that said it would not release information concerning births by unwed mothers.

That Friday, for the first time in Marshfield’s history, a single mother and her son made the paper. “Terry Lynn Wahls ‘Mom’ and Zacharia Patrick Wahls ‘Zach’ proudly announce Zach’s birth at 9:26 pm on Monday, July 15, 1991.” In addition to the birth announcement, there was an added bonus. My mom had changed the paper’s procedures. Though I was too busy crying and nursing to enjoy the victory, it was a happy moment. The headline on the editorial page read: “Unwed births now accepted,” and the article began: “Society is changing, and our policies are changing with it,” a political reality that, over the ensuing two decades, would manifest itself in more ways than Terry, and most members of the LGBT community, ever imagined.

My mom sent my birth announcement and the editorial to Aunt Cora, with a note that said, “Here in Marshfield, the world is changing. And you know what? I can hear the cheering. It is coming from lots of people. My mom was wrong. There are plenty of people who think it is OK.”

As I grew up, I’d discover there were also plenty of people who thought it wasn’t.

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## The Merits of Obedience

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When my mom sees something wrong, she has always been willing to fight to have it fixed—even if other people think she’s just being a pain

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in the ass. She's a living example of how to change rules when the rules are unfair. Such ability requires a strong sense of right and wrong, the capacity to carefully work through a problem, and the sheer will to keep going when you are rejected and denied at every possible turn.

She's taught me that, for things that matter, there are times when you have to buck conventional wisdom and question tradition that exists only for tradition's sake. This isn't to say that you have to disobey the law or try to radically redefine the world—it's to say that obedience and respect are both good when you are obeying something for the right reasons.

In the 1990s, conventional wisdom said that single, lesbian women couldn't be mothers. Conventional wisdom said that unwed women had illegitimate children. At other times, in other places, people were told by conventional wisdom that the color of one's skin made slavery okay, that wives were property of their husbands, that marriages were arranged, and that the sun orbited the earth. Although the wisdom of the crowd is important and the lessons of tradition are valuable, ultimately we are each responsible for our own decisions and must make our own judgments on what is right and what is wrong and act accordingly.

This was a sentiment echoed by my time in the Scouts, which taught us that even though a Scout should obey the rules and laws of his community, country, family, school, and troop, "if he thinks these rules and laws are unfair, he tries to have them changed in an orderly manner rather than disobeying them."

And this is true of my mom. While she was swimming against the current trying to get pregnant with me, she didn't stop obeying the speed limit or paying her taxes in protest. She still believed in the value of regimented discipline, maintained a strict exercise program, and was not about to let me be a slacker. As I grew up, the lessons she had learned from her parents while growing up on that small farm in rural Iowa were passed on to me. I did my homework, kept up on my chores, was in at curfew, and limited my gaming time to less than an hour a day (most of the time).

Trust me, I didn't need a dad to teach me obedience.

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One evening after my mom got home from work, we were taking a walk around our neighborhood. Terry was pushing Zebby in her stroller, and I was bouncing around them and singing a nonsensical song I had made up. I had just lost my front tooth and had money in my pocket from my new best friend, the Tooth Fairy. One of the lines was something like, "Oh, how fun it is to be a fairy . . ." I didn't know that the word "fairy," in its modern context, is often used as a derogatory term for being gay man. At that age, I didn't really even know what "gay" was. I was just happily singing about a fairy, and my mom stopped me in the street and said, "Hey, Zach, you can't say that."

I was confused. "Why?" I asked. "What's wrong with being a fairy?"

I was too young for her to explain the euphemism to me. “Zach,” she said with a smile. “You just don’t want to call yourself a fairy. All right?” I was very respectful of her wisdom, so I simply took her word for it. Obeying her request, I changed my tune.

The because-I-said-so line is occasionally acceptable when the parent—or any other authority figure—has meritorious explanations at other times. By demonstrating a thoughtful decision-making process about what I was and was not allowed to do, my moms built a strong, trusting relationship, making obedience easy.

“Because I said so,” on the other hand, is a poor legal explanation for anything. But, fundamentally, it is the core legal argument beneath the “sanctity of marriage.” Britney Spears’s fifty-five-hour marriage and Kim Kardashian’s seventy-two-day marriage both uphold the “sanctity of marriage,” but my moms’ sixteen-year commitment doesn’t?

Why?

“Because I said so.”



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