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Marriage after long debate

Louise Rafkin, Special to The Chronicle

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"I really feel married," Page McBee says. On the eve of her 30th birthday, she's off for a weeklong honeymoon in the Yucatan. Michael

Braithwaite, 31, her spouse since September, a former skeptic about marriage - "a patriarchal institution on its way down in flames," she says - finds her current state amusing and authentic (and, ironically, not legally sanctioned).

"We came to marriage after long debate," says Michael, who works at the San Francisco Zen Center planning public programs. "And it is working for me."

Back in 2004, when the city's same-sex marriage brouhaha was heating up, these two former roommates were busy elsewhere. They met in 2000 while in college in Boston, and they even lived together for several years. After graduation, both moved elsewhere: Michael to Los Angeles, Page to Pittsburgh. But in 2004, a meet-up in San Francisco sparked something unexpected. Writer and teacher Page was in town giving a reading, and over drinks at a Haight Street dive, both felt the tinge of romance. "Shocking," Page says.

"Very shocking," Michael agrees, who had enjoyed single life and was oriented to dating men. "Boys," she corrects, smiling.

Cross-country trips led to a move here in 2005. Neither wanted to be that cheesy couple espousing forever-together promises that eventually implode, but Michael admits she was ensnared in a romantic frenzy. "I even wrote poetry," the former cynic says.

"And there were mix CDs," Page adds, drolly.

Domestically entwined ever since, the two are now ensconced in an Oakland apartment. Dedicated to cultivating creative lives, they write for a fashion blog, travel Northern California and, last year, began a discussion about marriage that spanned months.

"We eventually focused on marriage as an interpersonal ritual," says Michael who, noting divorce statistics even in her own family, reconsidered her prejudices. Page, for her part, examined her



romantic ideas about permanence. "The gay marriage debate has enlivened the idea of marriage; everyone has had to examine just what it is," she adds. Middle ground was found; a date set.

And then the couple was mugged, at gunpoint, by a man who is now in custody on murder charges. "Violence eclipsed our sense of possibility," Michael says. The bliss of their approaching wedding paled in the shadow of fear. They fought and struggled.

But as friends and family stood close, their commitment and faith eventually brought them together atop a Mendocino bluff. With 35 friends as witnesses, they choose love over fear. "I feel a deep stillness that comes from having confidence in ourselves and in our relationship," Page says.

Just like the year leading up to their ceremony, Michael says she knows that their relationship will undergo change, from day to day and from year to year. In the meantime, they're off to a warm beach and honeymooning.

"And scuba diving," Michael says excitedly. "We're going to try that, too."

What did you vow?

Page, right: "To be myself, and to support Michael to be herself."

Michael: "To be true, and let the relationship grow."

Louise Rafkin has contributed to the New York Times and NPR's "All Things Considered." Couple suggestions? Send a story to onthecouch@sfchronicle.com.

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