

Hawks On Lampposts

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My family's current situation puts me in a car for hundreds of miles each week, with plenty of time for observing the Minnesota landscape, noticing details, pondering big questions, and making grand declarations. Details like hawks on lampposts, lots of hawks on lampposts. Big questions like, "What's the matter with those hawks? Don't they know those aren't trees?" Grand declarations like, "That's not natural!"

Interracial marriage was declared unnatural—and prohibited by law in the United States (and the colonial predecessors to the states) for more four hundred years. A 1664 law in Maryland banned marriage between whites and slaves—and made white women who entered into such marriage slaves to their husband's master for as long as the life of the husband.

Other colonies, and in time states, followed suit with laws forbidding interracial marriage, and punishments that reveal cooperation between civil and religious authorities in upholding them. The Commonwealth of Virginia, for example, banned all interracial marriages in 1691. Punishment included exile, and fines for the birth of each child of such marriages—with one third of the fine going to the British Crown, one third to the church, and one third to the person who informed authorities of the birth.

Pennsylvania banned interracial marriage in 1725 but repealed it in 1780 as it moved toward abolishing slavery. More than sixty years passed before Massachusetts became the second state to repeal its anti-miscegenation law, in 1843.

The first of three attempts to outlaw interracial marriage by constitutional amendment was proposed in 1871.

In 1883, in *Pace v. Alabama*, the U. S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that state-level bans on interracial marriage did not violate the 14th Amendment.

In 1922 Congress passed the Cable Act, retroactively stripping the citizenship of any U.S. citizen who married "an alien ineligible for citizenship". Earlier anti-miscegenation law targeted primarily marriages between whites and African Americans or whites and American Indians. The Cable Act targeted marriages between whites and Asians.

In 1964, nearly two hundred years Pennsylvania struck down its ban, the U.S. Supreme

Court unanimously ruled that laws banning interracial sex violate the 14th Amendment. Three years later, in 1967, in *Loving v. Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously overturned the 1883 ruling, declaring finally that state bans on interracial marriage do violate the 14th Amendment.

1967. Fifty-two years ago. And I bet any interracial couple or family member you ask today would tell you that they've been told—more than once—that their marriage, their family, their love is *not natural*.

The timeline regarding same sex marriage laws is strikingly similar to the one I've just raced through, but much shorter. Not because individuals of the same gender haven't always loved one another and formed lasting unions but because they have had to be even more cautious and more hidden than interracial couples. Why outlaw something that is unseen, or denied to even exist by mutual, unspoken agreement?

Nevertheless, eventually and perhaps inevitably, the laws came. Or rather, we conceived, drafted, and passed the laws. In 1973 Maryland, 309 years after it banned interracial marriage, became the first state to ban same sex marriage.

In 1996 President Clinton signed the Defense Against Marriage Act into law. DOMA said that neither the federal government nor states had to recognize same-sex marriages that were solemnized in other states.

Vermont became the first state to legalize civil unions between same-sex partners in 2000.

The following year the Netherlands became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage.

In 2003 the Federal Marriage Amendment was introduced to the House of Representatives. It would have added language to the U. S. Constitution stating that marriage should only occur between a man and a woman. Between 2004 and 2006 23 states banned same-sex marriage. In 2008 California banned same-sex marriage by popular vote, through the passage of state ballot measure Proposition 8.

In 2011 President Obama told the Department of Justice to stop defending DOMA in court.

In November of 2012 Minnesota became the first state to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment that would have codified an already existing state statute banning same-sex marriage. Just six months later, sooner even than same-sex marriage proponents originally thought possible, Governor Dayton signed into law a bill allowing same-sex couples to officially marry beginning that August. That same year, 2012,

President Obama publicly stated his support for same-sex marriage, and Maine, Maryland and Washington became the first states to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote.

In 2013 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down section three of DOMA, ensuring that the federal government must recognize same-sex marriages that had been performed in states where they were legal. The Supreme Court also ruled that there was no legal standing to defend Prop 8 in California, effectively allowing same-sex marriage in that state. Seven more states legalized same-sex marriage.

On June 26, 2015 same-sex marriage became legal in all fifty states with the U. S. Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

Again, what was once decried as *not natural* has been legalized and even enjoys widening acceptance (in this country and a handful of others, at least). But even as the campaigns to overturn ban or enact laws gathered support and changed the legal landscape for same-sex couples and, many GLBTQ+ warned that focusing on marriage was a gesture of privilege that distracted from life and death issues endangering our community every day.

According to a 2012 survey conducted by the Williams Institute at UCLA Law, 40% of homeless youth are GLBTQ. Only about 7% of youth identify as GLBTQ, so that homelessness rate is all out of proportion and even more heartbreaking than the bare, unacceptable in its own right, fact that about 1.6 million youth in this country experience homeless each year. Of the GLBTQ youth who find themselves homeless, 46% ran away because they experienced rejection at home, 43% were forced out by parents, and 32% experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse at home.

When David Kaufman, in this morning's reading, mentions 'violence in the streets' he is no doubt referencing the not infrequent murder of trans women, particularly those of color, bullying of GLBTQ youth, as well as the rejection that sends so many GLBTQ youth into the streets in the first place. And 'discrimination in the workplace' refers to the fact that many states have few or no laws protecting GLBTQ folks against discrimination by public or private employers.

Religious objections are often cited as the reason behind employment discrimination, just as they were and are still used to reject or protest same sex marriage, or to prevent gay or lesbian couples from adopting—or forcing them to adopt their own children rather than naming the non-gestational parent on the birth certificate. Religious objections seem to me a code word or dog whistle for 'not natural'. Something that's

prohibited by religious law must be against God's law, and therefore must be unnatural. Same-sex marriage aside, being gay, lesbian or otherwise outside the binary gender mainstream, is proclaimed "not natural" dozens, hundreds, thousands of times a day, if not in so many words (though often in precisely so many words), than in the laws that fail to protect or actively do harm, in school district policies that discriminate or school authorities who fail to enforce policies that would protect, even in the sort of benign oversight Kaufman describes: *most parents are straight therefore the parent I see in front of me must be straight.*

Knowing that a sermon exploring only marriage is too limiting, given that not everyone is, has been or aspires ever to be married, I asked some colleague what other aspects of our lives, our world, beyond interracial marriage and same-sex marriage are now or once were proclaimed "not natural"; where have our ideas about natural and not natural evolved over time, as reflected in our laws, our language, social norms. My colleagues' eager replies suggest that this could easily turn into a series!

They called forth non-binary gender identity; the *right and wrong* ways of doing church; women as strong, independent persons in their own right, with agency and the right to vote, own property, speak in church, travel without male guardian (see the recent story of the Saudi teen). They called forth birth control and assisted reproduction and all sorts of medical advances from antibiotics to blood transfusions to extreme life-saving interventions (see the Chinese scientist claiming to have helped created genetically modified human babies). They called forth food—taboos and norms and organics and G.M.Os. They called forth reincarnation and old souls.

And one colleague suggested *You can raise the question: does there remain any such thing on earth as a purely 'natural' state untouched by human interaction?* I think I'm prepared to leave us with that question—and not solely as a matter of expediency.

After months of noticing hawks on lampposts, months of getting unreasonably upset about hawks on lampposts, months of asking, 'don't they know those aren't trees?', months of declaring, 'that's not natural,' something occurred to me. I've seen birds on telephone wires all my life. Birds on telephone wires are no more (or less) natural than hawks on lampposts. Telephone wires were not part of those birds' natural habitat 200 years ago, but I never say to myself, *don't they know those aren't branches?* I never say or even think, *that's not natural.*

What's up for discussion as natural or not natural, and why not, and should our understand shift, all these things are always changing. If you played the classic album

Free To Be You And Me for your kids or your students, or if like me you listened to it yourself growing up you might remember the lilting strains *when my friend William was five years old, he wanted a doll, to hug and hold*. Or maybe you remember the taunting refrain *a doll, a doll, William wants a doll*. Because William's desire for a doll created such consternation in his family I decided that *William's Doll*, the Charlotte's Zolotow book on which the song was based, would be the perfect story for this morning. Then I realized that a lot changes in 47 years. We still struggle with gender equity in toys and clothing for children, but we're onto whole new levels and areas of discussion of natural and not natural. So I chose *I Am Jazz* instead.

In this morning's second reading Wislawa Szymborska writes *They all felt awkward. No one spoke. That's how it goes with universal truths*.

Too often that *is* how it goes with universal truths—or with challenges to what might not be universal truths after all. But that it isn't how it has to go. The feeling *awkward* part is perhaps inevitable. But not the *no one spoke* part. We get to choose whether or not to speak, and how to speak. To slip our truth preemptively into the conversation—*I'm a twin, and my husband is a twin, so we're managing just fine*. Or to be bit more blunt—*There is no mother — their other parent is a dude*. Either way or another way altogether, unless we speak our truth and the truth of those we love we'll never get from *that's not natural* to *it's the law now* to *what were we thinking?* to *hunh!* *Is there a hawk on that lamppost? I never even noticed*.

Amen.

Answer A Different Call

Out with the old; in with the new. Everything old is new again. There is nothing new under the sun. Folks, we've got ourselves a whole new ballgame. Or....Now is always dawning and setting in this very instant. And you are who you've always been and always will be. When the calls come:

- Return to old ways!
- No, clutch hard to the current ways!
- No, replace it all with novelty!

When the calls come, listen deeper, hold steady a long moment longer. Choose neither old nor current nor yet new. Answer a different call:

- The one that is true and right beyond old, beyond current, beyond new.
- The one that is just and compassionate before what was, through what is, into what shall be.
- The one unwavering with love as now dawns and sets in the one eternal moment.

When the calls come:

- Go back to who you used to be!
- No, don't ever change!
- No, reveal, discover, create the new you!

When the calls come, listen more closely, hold steady a long moment longer, and still another. Choose neither backward nor forward nor yet stasis. Answer a different call:

- The one more honest than intimations of old perfection.
- The one more courageous than assurances of present sufficiency.
- The one more alive than promises of future possibility.
- The one that whispers and sings and declares "You are you are you. Enough. Beloved. Suffused with the holy. And a gift to all creation. You are, as now dawns and sets in the one eternal moment."

Amen