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The marriage amendment, from all angles

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Will Minnesota 'right the culture' or part with valued workers, citizens, friends?



We Minnesotans are blessed to live in a state that others envy, study and model. Minnesota is home to more Fortune 500 companies per capita than any other state. The Mayo Clinic and General Mills are regulars on Fortune's "Best Places to Work" list.

We tout the nation's best biking trails and more theater seats per capita than any other metro area outside of New York City, and we're recognized for being the best region for working mothers.

Dubbed one of "America's Top Brainpower Cities," Minneapolis leads the nation with 93 percent of its citizens earning high school diplomas and claims the highest volunteer rate in the country. We consistently lead the nation in voter turnout.

And, to top it off, several Minnesota cities are cited as some of the best places in the country to live. We are indeed blessed.

This year, we have another blessing -- of an unusual sort. We have the opportunity to decide as a community if we will amend our state Constitution to include a ban on the right of same-sex couples to marry.

My prediction and my hope is that we will resist. Our history suggests we will.

With all of Minnesota's accomplishments and high rankings, it would be easy to be lulled into complacency. But a review of our past suggests that we are always mindful that culture is not inherited. It is created anew by each generation.

We are especially adept at asking ourselves: "Is this who we want to be?" "Are we living our values?"

And if we don't like the answer, we have many times "righted the culture" to better reflect those values in our institutions, our corporations and our communities.

After all, it was a very different culture in the late 1940s, when Minneapolis was known as the "anti-Semitism capital" of the nation. In an attempt to remind citizens of a higher principle, then-Mayor Hubert Humphrey retorted in anger, "All men are created equal, and if we don't believe it ... maybe we should stop saying it!"

It was a very different culture in some of our own households just a couple generations ago. Many of us have stories of the uproars created when a Protestant and Catholic wanted to marry -- not to mention a Jew and a Christian.

It was a very different culture in the United States when, at one time or another, 40 states prohibited interracial marriage until 1967, when the Supreme Court ruled anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional.

Minnesota stood apart as one of only 10 states that didn't give in to the racial biases of the time. And it was a very different culture that greeted me as a female in the early '60s -- just out of college with an honors degree in economics and no place to use it. I quickly found that job opportunities for women were heavily skewed to teaching, nursing and secretarial work. Fortunately, Paine Webber took a chance on me, and I became the first female securities analyst in the state. On one condition: I would sign my recommendations "MC Nelson." I was told no man would take stock advice from a woman. But "MC Nelson's" recommendations

were well-received, and I felt I had struck a blow against the injustice of the situation for those women who would follow by doing good work.

I had done my part with the platform I had at the time to right the culture.

While not perfect, we have consistently, through the generations, righted the culture to more clearly define who we are as Minnesotans -- a people of integrity, inclusiveness and decency, with an overriding sense of the common good.

Wouldn't it be presumptuous of us to impose today's biases on same-sex marriage on future generations? Do we want to shackle our grandchildren, perhaps for decades, with the vitriolic debate and sometimes violence that have preceded the great human-rights victories of our nation?

Fairness, righteousness and equality are strong arguments for voting against this amendment. Like many, I was taught to do unto others -- to love thy neighbor (not just some neighbors) -- and I was also taught that everyone has inalienable rights, the pursuit of happiness being one. But there is also a compelling economic case. As a CEO, I can say with certainty that to constitutionally mandate discrimination is bad for business and bad for the economic opportunities of all Minnesotans.

In a globally competitive world, we must attract the best talent available, period. Increasingly, companies are evaluated for their ability to create work environments that value diversity, promote gender equity, and are working-mom- and gay-friendly.

These rankings are frequently referred to during the interview process by top talent who can be selective -- even in a down economy -- about where they choose to work. We can't afford to lose these workers to more welcoming communities if we are to remain competitive.

This is why Carlson, like many Minnesota companies, has worked hard to be a model of inclusivity and respect.

I am reminded of a column by the late humorist Erma Bombeck. In a rare, serious moment, Bombeck wrote about the value of volunteers and worried that their contributions are often undervalued.

She asked us to visualize ourselves standing on a dock waving goodbye to a ship loaded with America's volunteers and then to ponder what our lives and our society would be like without them.

Today, I think of this imagery in other terms. I see myself at the dock waving goodbye to a ship filled with friends, family and colleagues -- all of whom happen to be gay. People who through a lifetime of ups and downs have laughed with me, supported me and enriched me.

I wave goodbye to the hundreds of highly talented employees who have helped make Carlson a globally competitive and respected company. And, most painful of all, I wave goodbye to my daughter.

As we enter the voting booth this November, wondering whether the moment has once again arrived for Minnesotans to right our culture to reflect our values and national leadership, please pause and ask yourself, "Who am I willing to wave goodbye to?"

And then vote "No."

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