Marriage: Statehouse vs. steeples

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Hopefully by the time most of you read this, the Indiana House will have come to its senses and voted against House Joint Resolution 3 (HJR-3), the proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

I’m writing this because I’m not so hopeful.

Let me begin by stating my personal belief: The term “marriage” refers to a religious institution, one that I believe has no place in a government that separates church and state.

HJR-3 not only infringes on the civil rights of same-sex couples by denying them the same rights as opposite-sex couples, but it also violates the separation of church and state by attempting to pass legislation based on religious rationale.

It is a blanket violation of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, which prohibits the government from making any law respecting an establishment of religion.

The amendment, which was approved last Wednesday in a 9-3 vote down party lines in the House Elections and Appointment Committee, was originally assigned to the House Judiciary Committee.

But when it became unclear if the Judiciary Committee had enough votes to move the resolution along, House Speaker Brian Bosma—who had previously said that he would treat it “like any other bill”—reassigned the resolution to a more favorable committee in a last-minute effort to ensure it was brought to the full House.

While same-sex marriage is already illegal in Indiana by statute, passing HJR-3 as a constitutional amendment would make the ban even more permanent. It would not only define marriage as being between one man and one woman, but also add that “a legal status identical or substantially similar to that of marriage for unmarried individuals shall not be valid or recognized.”

In other words, HJR-3 would effectively prohibit

the state from authorizing or even recognizing civil unions in the future, and it would forbid employee benefits for same-sex couples.

Passing this amendment is dangerous. In addition to prohibiting private companies from providing benefits to domestic partnerships, it could lead to the repeal of local anti-discrimination laws. This makes Indiana look intolerant to outside job seekers.

That’s why a number of the state’s business leaders testified in opposition to the amendment, including Eli Lilly and Co. and the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. Representatives from these corporations expressed concern about their ability to recruit and retain the best employees possible if this harmful amendment were to pass.

Indiana University has also publicly opposed the measure. The university currently extends benefits to its employee’s spouses, including those in same-sex relationships. Jackie Simmons, vice-president and general counsel of Indiana University, testified at the hearing, voicing concern that the university’s same-sex beneficiaries would be denied the same rights as other couples.

Defeating HJR-3 means maintaining the best faculty and talent on all Indiana University campuses. It means ensuring that current and future students have access to a second-to-none education and are not forced to look out-of-state due to religious beliefs imposed on Indiana’s residents, businesses and universities.

HJR-3 is supported by a number of religious institutions. Glenn Tebbe, executive director of the Indiana Catholic Conference, gave testimony in support of the ban, citing “the truth about marriage according to God’s plan and laws.”

Even if traditional marriage is the only kind acceptable in God’s law, it is irrelevant to the discussion of civil rights in a secular government.

Other testimony in support of the measure argued that social-science research suggests “gender-different human parenting is necessary—culturally and biologically—for the optimum development of the child.”

This is an insulting myth that has been debunked time and time again.

Some argue that the word “marriage” has already been defined, whether by God or society, as being between one man and one woman and should not be redefined.

The word “marriage,” however, is defined and used in a number of ways: the marriage of two atoms, being married to one’s job, or the “marriage of painting and poetry,” to name a few—none of which are an offensive redefinition of the word to any Christian I know.

Ultimately, the argument against same-sex marriage can be reduced to a religious view of the institution. I respect (but respectfully disagree with) those who hold this view. I may not hold the same things sacred, but I certainly believe that all people should be afforded the right to hold whatever religious convictions they desire.

I cannot, however, begin to comprehend the rationale that an individual’s religious beliefs must be reflected in his government. How many Supreme Court cases must the First Amendment endure before we accept that church and state are to be kept separate?

As long as the religious term “marriage” exists in a secular government, it not only should, but must be offered to all citizens equally.

Perhaps anti-marriage-equality activists, like those advocating the passage of HJR-3, should redirect their focus. Rather than working against the legalization of gay marriage, why not work to remove the religious institution of marriage from government altogether? Marry in your churches. Marry in your temples. But so long as you’re marrying in our statehouse, understand that it is not the job of our government to “maintain the sanctity” of your religious sacraments.

To contact your local representative and voice your opposition to HJR-3, visit: www.freedomindiana.org
Let’s talk about the way we talk about women

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A few weeks back, I involved in a conversation about the representation of women in American politics. As the discussion progressed, Hillary Clinton naturally entered the conversation, and I was surprised when someone made a comment that went something like this:

“I never used to have a problem with her, but lately she has really let her looks go.”

I’ll preface by admitting that I am an unabashed Hillary #fangirl.

I believe she was a fantastic First Lady during her husband’s governorship in Arkansas, where she battled education reform in a state with historically low levels of performance. Her interest in public policy continued during her time in the White House, where she advocated for national healthcare reform. When confronted with a public spectacle of deeply personal relationship issues, she handled them with grace and elegance.

Her public service continued after she left the White House, when she served as the first female senator from New York, as well as Secretary of State. In that position, she traveled to 112 countries, more than any of her predecessors, making her one of the most influential Secretaries of State in U.S. history.

Now that I’ve got that off my chest, I’m not writing this with the intent of touting Ms. Clinton’s accomplishments, or even to defend her from the comment about her looks. Had the person I was in conversation with attacked her policies or stance on a certain issue, perhaps I would be writing in defense of her policies. Their attack, however, was not directed at her politics, but her appearance.

I was initially genuinely surprised by what I considered to be an incredibly careless and sexist remark. After all, it doesn’t require a great deal of intellect to know that a woman’s abilities are not determined by her appearance.

But then I started to think about the seemingly endless list of etymological snafus about women in politics: A Fox news commentator referring to Texas Sen. Wendy Davis (D) as the “Abortion Barbie,” accusations that Nancy Pelosi, former Speaker of the House, has undergone numerous plastic surgeries; the left’s criticism of Sarah Palin’s $150,000 wardrobe budget during the 2008 presidential election; the results rendered by a Google search of “Janet Reno.”

The list goes on and on, and I believe we are long overdue to start paying more attention to the words we use and the way we talk about female politicians.

Compared to other democracies, America does not rank well in terms of the representation of women in elected office. This is not surprising considering the scrutiny these women endure.

While the media examines their male counterparts’ proposals for health care, immigration and economic reform, women are more likely to be seen in the media for a change in hairstyle than their actual policies.

This is not only unfair, but dangerous, as studies have found that commenting on female politicians’ appearance, even in a positive way, trivializes their candidacy. It decreases their credibility with voters and damages their ability to get elected.

The problem with the way we talk about women extends beyond their appearance to their character, as well. The media tends to focus more on women’s character traits than it does males, but even in comparing the two, women tend to get the short end of the stick.

An assertive male politician is seen as a leader with charisma, while women with the same characteristics are labeled as ruthless and overbearing. Why is it that the characteristics we see as positive in male politicians are viewed so negatively in women?

Watching your words can be difficult. I write these words with a twinge of hypocrisy, as I recall a remark I made during the 2008 presidential election. A friend of mine was talking about the reasons he supported Sarah Palin, to which I replied something to the effect of:

“Sarah Palin is beautiful, but she should be a Land’s End model, not the vice president of the United States.”

I doubt that my friend remembers my jab at Palin, but I do, and I still feel guilty about it. Not because I’ve had a change of heart and wish she had been elected, but because I had ample verbal artillery to explain why I didn’t support Palin, but was too lazy to use it. I forfeited the opportunity to argue the problems with her policies for a cheap shot at her appearance.

And for that, I am sorry.

I believe the words of Hillary Clinton when she said that “Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world.” I think it’s time we start treating them as such.

With 2014 being an election year and a number of female politicians seeking a spot on the ballots, the issue of how we talk about women in politics will certainly continue to resurface. With the political debates that lie ahead, I hope each of us will remember the importance of thinking before we speak, and considering the meaning behind our words.
I still remember the words of a friend who was by my side in the ER after I attempted suicide. It was seeing me there, he later told me, my mouth still black with charcoal and my eyes raw and red with tears, that he realized everything he had done to take care of me in my darkest hour still wasn’t enough to stop me from hurting myself. 

Truth be told, he was exactly right: There is no single cure-all for depression. Treatment for mental illness requires more than empathy and support. Even the most loving friends and family lose loved ones to mental illness, and even the best therapists lose patients to suicide.

In 2012, President Obama challenged Congress to reform the national mental health care system. More than two years later, nothing has been done.

The death of Robin Williams reignited, if only momentarily, conversations around mental health reform. I was surprised in the days following his death by the remarks I saw and heard, even from my own friends.

“If only he knew how loved he was. If only he’d reached out for help.”

I struggle to understand how people can’t see that mental illness isn’t something you can just will away. Being sick is not selfish, and knowing you’re loved, even reaching out for help, isn’t always enough. I know, because I’ve lived it.

Before moving to Louisville, I attended Brigham Young University. BYU, respectfully, didn’t offer me an environment for positive personal growth. Admittedly, it took me too long to realize that.

BYU is a private Mormon college, and I hold the value of its education in high regard. But as my 22-year-old self struggled to make sense of a confusing collision of religion and sexual identity, the weight of my depression, paired with a series of toxic relationships, became too much to bear.

I knew I was loved and I sought out help. And even though I was going to therapy and taking my medication, I couldn’t get out of bed. I called out of work and skipped my classes. I couldn’t eat, but still went on seven, eight, sometimes nine mile runs at 4 in the morning, just to prove to myself that I still maintained some control.

My deteriorating emotional and mental state seeped into every facet of my life: falling behind in classes, losing credibility at work, extreme weight loss.

I had friends, some of whom I have since lost, who were the most generous, patient and understanding people I have ever met. Friends who would lie with me night after night, sometimes without exchanging a word, just so I knew I wasn’t alone.

In spite of a strong support system and access to resources to help me recover, things weren’t getting better. In fact, I only got worse.

Though we can’t know exactly why some see suicide as their only option, we do know that mental illness is taking the lives of too many people: too many brothers and sisters, parents, children and lovers.

We also know that access to mental health care is getting harder, not easier.

For some, the Affordable Care Act has helped bridge this gap. A provision allowing parents to keep children on their health-insurance plans has aided millions of young people to seek treatment.

Many others, however, remain uninsured for a number of legitimate reasons. Even those who carry coverage for mental health care struggle to find the help they need. As reimbursement rates continue to drop even further, many therapists are forced to take only out-of-pocket patients. This limits access to mental health care to the wealthy, effectively neglecting some of the most vulnerable of our population.

The need for mental health care reform is real. We can help foster this change by having open conversations and breaking down the stigmas that surround mental illness and seeking help.

This is why I have chosen to share my story.

Eventually, my depression got the best of me. I saw no hope for happiness. I was blinded to the beauty and opportunity in the world around me. I had lost my will to fight, and to no fault of my own or anyone of those who were so desperately trying to save me.

In the days, months and eventual years that ensued, I continued to battle the feelings of insecurity and inadequacy that accompanied my depression. I made progress and sometimes encountered setbacks. But I fought every day to break the harmful thought patterns and physical rituals I had become addicted to.

That is something I have learned about depression: Even when we learn how to cope with mental illness in healthy ways, our brains never forget how to be depressed. Even with all the right tools, we can still fall back into old habits. This is why inclusive mental health care reform is so important.

Just as diseases like diabetes require constant monitoring, those suffering from mental illness also deserve access to effective, holistic treatment. Chronic mental illness requires individualized medical attention, with access to affordable resources.

Four years have passed since I attempted suicide. And though I still struggle to forgive myself and accept forgiveness from those hurt by that experience, I never want to go back to the dark place depression led me.

I no longer feel guilty and flawed for being sick. I no longer believe that the more I hate myself, the more room it makes to be loved by someone else. I no longer surround myself with people who exacerbate my insecurities and uncertainties.

But these realizations didn’t come overnight.

It wasn’t one friend, one session with my therapist or one dose of my medication that inevitably saved my life. It was a combination of all these things. I recognize the role each played in helping me recover and am fortunate to have had access to them.

We can catalyze action now initiating conversations about our experiences, successes and failures, and breaking down the stigmas. IU Southeast has organized a Mental Health and Wellness series this year to help to do this.

We should be participating in these conversations. Finally, with midterm elections approaching, we can help fulfill President Obama’s challenge by electing candidates who will work to create reform now, rather than waiting for the next tragedy to take action.