

Good Old Fashion Family Values

Sermon by Sara LaWall

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I want to read you something.

What is the Natural Family? The answer comes to the woman and the man who take the risk of turning their love into promises of lifelong devotion. In doing so, they will discover the story of the family, at once an ideal vision and a universal reality.

And yet, the Natural Family—part of the created order, imprinted on our natures, the source of bountiful joy, the fountain of new life, the bulwark of ordered liberty—stands reviled and threatened in the 21st century. Foes have mounted attacks on all aspects of the natural family, from the bonds of marriage to the birth of children to the true democracy of free homes.

This is from the Natural Family: A Manifesto written by two conservative Christian men; a joint project from the [Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society](#) and the [Sutherland Institute](#). They go on to dictate a platform, which states the following:

- We will build a culture of marriage, where others would define marriage out of existence.
- We welcome and celebrate more babies and larger families where others would continue the war on families.
- We will find a way to bring mothers and fathers back home, where others would further divide parents from their children.
- And we will create true home economies, where others would subject families to the full control of big government and vast corporations.

Are you worked up yet? Are you cringing and silently fuming? I sure did--it was a personal challenge to read all 42 aggravating pages. Are they really suggesting that availing all people of the fundamental freedom of marriage will define it out of existence? When this country finally found the courage to give African-Americans the right to vote, many thought it would be the end of civilized society as we knew it. Look at us now – a Black man could be our next president!

No doubt we will hear “Natural Family” become a political buzzword. And, if we did not know the contents of this document, it is a good buzz word. In this era of organic food and alternative energy, we all want to be “Natural” sounds important and we can appreciate the significance of family so who wouldn’t want to be a “natural family?” For many of us the families that we have both created and chosen, whether in our own homes or in our wider community feel like the most natural places, filled with love and loyalty, support and promise. Our families are highly valued.

The word family (along with values and morality) has been co-opted by evangelical communities and right-wing politicians with a very narrow and divisive definition: one man, one woman--married with many children. If you do not fit that definition you are not a “natural family”. They fear those that are different from them. Our UUA president Bill Sinkford described it perfectly; “The religious right finds threat to the family pretty much everywhere it finds difference. To them, “family values” are rules that require everyone’s family to look like their families, love like their families, and believe in the same things as their families—or else be excluded from the definition of “Family”. That definition excludes huge sections of our populations and communities and ignores significant values vital to successful families; values like respect, dignity & most importantly LOVE.

I do not come from a natural family – we do not fit this definition. My parents were divorced when I was very young, my mother lived with several men while I was growing up but never remarried. As a youth I was able to recognize that had we remained a “natural” family” my childhood would have been more tumultuous and chaotic. I would have turned out very differently. My father remarried had two more children—they are my sisters. He now lives with a divorced, ex-nun, who regularly attends mass. We are a motley crew; we’ve had a few dinners with ALL of us together, my father, his two former wives,

current girlfriend and all the children, and sometimes it gets awkward. But we are happy and we love each other fiercely – how is that not natural?

Around three and a half years ago, An African-American woman walked into a local hospital. She was in labor. She was also a drug addict—it is likely she was high or coming down from one at the time of her delivery. When her baby boy was born she turned him over to social services and a couple of days later walked out of the hospital. That little boy was sent to a foster home with 2 dads where he joined two other foster children. The social worker told the dads that a sibling was likely within the next year (if they were interested in another) the mother been here before. The baby was adopted shortly thereafter. This little boy is a true gift to his dads and they adore him, he is the center of their universe and I have never seen them happier in the 10 years I have known them. Their son's eyes light up when he is with his daddy's. This blissful life is the only life he's ever known. He is happy, and treasured and loved. How is that not natural?

This definition of "Natural Family" is flawed. While they espouse the desire to "bring families back together" they neglect those children for whom being with their "natural" family would prove disastrous or those who have no family at all. More than 100,000 children are in foster care in the State of California. Many of these children would not survive being in their "natural families". Now, I know the other side would argue these families were not all that natural to begin with, but these 100,000+ children, from wherever they come, cannot be ignored. They need families and an overwhelming majority of them will never have one. They will be bounced between foster homes, group homes and even the street. If gay and lesbian parents are increasing the opportunities for these children to experience families, then we, as a state and a nation, should be cheering, not petitioning. These children deserve a family—they deserve love.

And our love is certainly not limited to foster children. Children all over the world need loving families. However our children come to us – by and large they come because we have made a significant and deliberate choice to expand our lives, sometimes with great sacrifice, all so we can share more love.

It may be a cliché, but LOVE truly makes a family. This is our manifesto. Love is the alternative we offer, a place where all families have value and where our family values include open doors, open minds and open arms. Our first principle charges us to affirm & promote the inherent worth and dignity of every human being and that is easily extended to families. It makes sense that as religious liberals we give a loud public voice to our family values. That we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of **every family**.

Giving a loud, public voice to their agenda is where the other side is successful. This is why people are all too familiar with their definitions of "Family Values". It is time to change the conversation. This November we will have a chance to put our family values on the public stage. And that is exactly what we must do. Thankfully, the supreme court of California has extended the right and benefit of marriage to same sex couples and we have had a glorious summer of weddings. But unfortunately the same groups who support this narrow, fear-filled view of the family are calling into that right to question. A ballot measure, Proposition 8, seeks to amend our state constitution to limit marriage to a man and a woman, thereby banning marriage between same-sex couples.

During our national General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists, I attended a meeting specifically addressing how we, as UU's and people of faith, can help defeat this ballot measure. I was pleased to hear that it is winnable – but not such that we can be complacent. We all must stand up and sign-up to ensure that equality is upheld for all people and all families in the state of California.

I had a lengthy conversation with Lindi Ramsden, the executive director of UU Legislative Ministries of California, they are working tirelessly on this issue, and she shared with me that their big focus will be phone banking. Their consultants tell them this is the most effective tool to engage the small margin of undecided voters. Phone banking—that's it? I can do that. I am no expert on this issue by any means but I do know it is time for me to stop talking about it and to act. It is time for me to live out our principles and our faith in a tangible and public way.

Lindi gave a great call to arms during our district in-gathering at GA when she said that this is the Civil Rights issue of our time. She confessed that confrontation bothers her and phone banking scared her but that if the people during the civil rights era, also were fighting for freedom and equality, faced fire hoses, billy clubs and worse that she could probably handle a bit of rejection & hostility over the phone. I just sat there feeling very small and thinking of course I could do that too. So, I signed up to phone bank. I committed to Lindi that I would donate at least one day a week. I can fit that in. After all, I have time for my book club and yoga class and hours of television—CSI will have to wait until I came home. I hope you too will join me.

There are other things you can do too. UU Legislative Ministries Action Network has set-up a PAC to which we can contribute directly. Many of our newlyweds have also created wedding registries asking that as a wedding gift, guests contribute to the campaign. And the Equality for all organizers will be on our patio regularly this summer to provide us ample opportunity to volunteer. In fact today kicks-off the 100-day countdown to Election Day –100 days—that's it!

Really, all the volunteering and work we will do in the coming months is a great opportunity. It is a chance to represent our faith and our church in a powerful and public way. It is a way to share our family values and our deep and abiding respect for all of humanity with others. It is a way to expand our community

So as we commit to doing this work for freedom and equality, I'd like to suggest a few of our own "Good Old Fashioned Family Values worthy of holding up to the world:

FAITH: We are a people of a deep and abiding faith—just like the other side. But here is the difference: your faith and my faith can be radically different and we love each other anyway. In fact, at our best, we embrace our differences and see them as opportunities. We encourage our families to seek their own path.

LOVE: We love our children just as much as they do. We love our spouses & partners & boyfriends & girlfriends. Love makes a family and we stand on the side of love.

FREEDOM: We believe marriage is a fundamental freedom, a civil right, whose benefits should extend to anyone willing to say "I do".

JUSTICE: We believe in justice--in making this world a better place when we leave it by helping others, helping our planet and fighting for those issues we hold most sacred.

Lindi was right, Marriage Equality is the civil rights issue of our time and quite frankly I'm fired up!. It is about freedom, equality, justice and love. And whether or not you have children, it is also about family—and ALL families matter.