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Fiddling While Rome Burns

by Jonathan Wilson

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CALENDAR

- ▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, March 3 @ Hoyt Sherman Place.

The speaker will be Tom Kane, Executive Director—Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.
- ▼ R.S.V.P. by Tuesday, February 28 to Jonathan.Wilson@lawiowa.com or 288-2500 by phone.

We’re all aware of the debate swirling around marriage for same gender couples. Six couples have filed suit to have the Iowa ban declared unconstitutional. The Iowa Family Policy Center is planning a protest, pushing for a state constitutional amendment that would purposefully reduce our constitutional commitment to equal treatment under the law for all law-abiding citizens. The Center has claimed that the suit represents an attempt to redefine “traditional marriage.” That’s not true, but even if it were, the Center fails to articulate how such a change would hurt anyone.

It isn’t true because “marriage” as it exists today is the product of a dynamic, evolutionary process over centuries of time. In that time it has changed dramatically. Each transition in the process has had its flat-earth opponents, but each has improved the institution. Marriage was itself an improvement over a prior social disorder when cavemen could copulate with anyone appealing that they could catch.

In its earlier forms, marriage was a societal recognition that a man had established a property right in one or more women. They were his to the exclusion of others, and he could do with them pretty much as he pleased. Around that construct developed a system of barter that gave birth to dowry and a father’s right to select his daughters’ husbands. Presumably, the “dogs” among the daughters required more dowry. Some cultures have, as yet, opted not to progress much beyond that tradition.

Western culture has made further progress, however. Love entered the picture, was grafted upon the institution, and gave rise to the expectation that people should be able to select their life partners. That choice, and the life commitment accompanying it, should be celebrated. More changes followed as love prompted people to select across religious lines. When I was growing up, I was not permitted to date Roman Catholics. As it was explained to me, a Protestant could actually fall in love with one of them and marriage had enough challenges without that one added.

In time, love also prompted people to select partners across racial lines and, fittingly, in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*, the United States Supreme Court struck down the last of our state anti-miscegenation laws that had criminalized inter-racial marriage.

Not every choice panned out. Some were bad choices from the start; others became destructive over time as time and circumstances prompted couples to grow apart. The law, however, as recently as the days when I was in law school, required proof of “fault” to dissolve a marriage (which was defined at the time as a civil contract between



JONATHAN WILSON

two *persons*—with no mention of their gender). The requirement to prove fault prompted courts to fashion doctrines of recrimination (if both parties were at fault, their faults were neutralized and they couldn't divorce) and condonation (if married couples copulated after one had committed a known act constituting fault, the fault was canceled and the divorce denied). The Iowa Supreme Court finally set the limits on condonation when it refused to allow a farmer to use it to avoid divorce just because his wife slept with him after catching him fornicating with farm animals. Some marriages needed to end even in the face of admitted condonation.

The machinations around fault failed to account for changing social mores even among good Christians whose Master expressly forbade divorce and viewed remarriage as sin. Thus was born no-fault divorce, and the only requirement was the insistence of one party that there had been a breakdown in the marital relationship such that the legitimate objects of matrimony could not be achieved. That was followed, within the last ten years, with adoption of the “one man / one woman” wrinkle. Because it was never clear which of successive, “sacred” marriages politicians were wanting to protect, they didn't go so far as to require one man / one woman / one time, leaving us with marriage in Iowa today of one man / one woman / one at a time. Not exactly what Jesus had in mind I suspect.

Now we can argue endlessly about how many of God's children are same-gender oriented. It doesn't really matter. There appears to be agreement that *some* of God's children are gay, and there ought to be agreement that the law and society should not be encouraging them to stay closeted and marry unsuspecting heterosexuals. That's unhealthy I can attest. It is only the reluctance of the religious right to give up the promiscuity stereotype ascribed to gay people that stands in the way of gay marriage. It's a false stereotype. A stronger case can be made that straight people are too typically promiscuous. They have been the exclusive abusers of sacred marriage until just recently, and they alone celebrate promiscuity. Ever heard of Don Juan or Cassanova? What do you know about them?

There was an article in the paper recently indicating that we have passed the “tipping point” in global warming and dire circumstances are unavoidably in our near-term future. And we're furiously debating who should be allowed to couple and enjoy state recognition and equal rights. I cannot imagine a more classic case of fiddling while Rome burns.

—Jonathan Wilson

Secretary of State Chet Culver Speaks at February Meeting

by Bruce McCabe

January's guest speaker was Chet Culver, whom many expect to become the Democratic Party's nominee for governor of the state in this fall's election. He spoke some of his accomplishments as Iowa's Secretary of State for the past eight years, but focused mostly on his run for governor.



“Iowa is at a crossroads,” Culver asserted in what turned into a confident and energizing stump-speech. “Will we continue the progress of Governor Vilsack, or will we turn back the clock? Will we lead Iowa forward, or turn the state over to a George Bush clone [Iowa Congressman Jim Nussle, the presumptive Republican nominee]?”

“With our manufacturing capacity and agricultural history, along with a workforce second to none, we're sitting on a gold mine. As Governor, I would make the creation of renewable energy and alternative fuel industries the primary focus of our economic development efforts. We will lead the nation by setting up a \$100 million Iowa Power Fund specifically targeted at investments in renewable and alternative energy—which will not only help Iowa declare its independence from overpriced foreign oil—but, most importantly, create good jobs with good benefits close to the land in every corner of the state.”

On issues of special importance to First Friday Breakfast Club members, Culver outlined three achievable goals:

- (1) Adding sexual orientation to the protections of the Iowa Civil Rights Act;
- (2) Working to enforce non-discrimination, espe-

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cially in the key areas of housing and employment; and

- (3) Making all Iowa schools safe for all children, with zero tolerance of discrimination against LGBT students. Culver’s passion on this particular issue—he is a former high-school teacher—was especially impressive.

“I care deeply about the challenges Iowa faces,” concluded Culver, “but, as a proud progressive Democrat and a proud fifth-generation Iowan, I have an even greater faith in Iowa’s promise. I ask for your support, and I look forward to the opportunity to earn it in the coming campaign.”

More information is to be found at Chet Culver’s Web site: www.chetculver.com.

—Bruce McCabe

DON’T WRITE OFF ALL REPUBLICANS!

by Terry Harris & Jim Sellards

On Iowa Equality Day, we two Democrats spent a very successful morning at the State Capitol meeting with state representative Janet Petersen (D), who was in complete agreement with our viewpoint on gay issues. Her stance was not unexpected.

Next we asked to meet with our Senator, Brad Zaun, a Republican. We approached this meeting with a certain amount of trepidation simply because he is a Republican. We need not have worried! Within moments, Senator Zaun was greeting us with friendly handshakes. We introduced ourselves by saying we were there to let him know there are gays in his constituency. With a big smile he replied that, for personal reasons, he was very much aware of that, and he realizes that being gay is not a choice. He turned out to be very sensitive to the gay issues we mentioned. He is fully supportive with regard to zero tolerance of bullying, and informed us that he and another Senator had pushed hard to get the anti-bullying bill passed last year. It lost by a small margin. Senator Zaun understands that gays are only asking for equal, not special, rights.

When we asked him about civil unions, he, without hesitation, said he completely supported them, including all the rights that go along with them. In all of his responses, we might have thought he was simply being political, telling us what he thought we wanted to hear, until we brought up the big question: What was his position on same-sex marriage? Then we realized he was be-

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BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP to Jonathan.Wilson@lawiowa.com for the March 3 meeting by Tuesday, February 28. Or you may call him at 288-2500. The speaker will be Tom Kane, the Executive Director of the Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.



Thanks to Jonathan Wilson for his introduction of our February speaker, Chet Culver, Iowa’s Secretary of State.



The following is an up-coming concert by FFBC member Nicholas Roth:

March 31, 2006 - 8:00 p.m.

Solo Recital and Masterclass Salisbury House—Des Moines, IA

www.salisburyhouse.org/events/special_events.php

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ing honest with us. He paused, then said he had to tell us that if the constitutional amendment banning them came up for a vote now, he would probably vote for it—but he said that when it is being considered, he wanted us and others to talk with him further about it. It seemed to us that he was willing to reconsider his position.

He encouraged us and others to continue to let him know about our concerns, and gave us some advice: talk to the leadership; grass roots are important; be persistent; and numbers are important.

On this last point, we were saddened by the modest attendance at Iowa Equality Day, and hope that greater effort can be put forward to improve attendance next year.

Not once during our contact with Senator Zaun did we feel any negativity on his part. Later in the morning, when we were gathered at the LGBT table in the rotunda, we saw Senator Zaun at a distance, walking through the area. Did he pretend not to see us? Did he give a perfunctory wave and then hurry on? NO! He changed his course and approached the table, meeting and easily talking with everyone who was there.

We dare not write off every Republican. We need all the friends we can get!

—Terry Harris & Jim Sellards

THE PRODUCERS

Review by Gary Kaufman

If you enjoy movie musicals, you will love *The Producers*. This is the movie version of the Broadway musical that won 12 Tony awards in 2001, the most of any play in history. The musical was based on the Mel Brooks movie for which he won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 1968.

It is almost unprecedented for a movie of a Broadway show to have four of the major Broadway cast members—Nathan Lane, Matthew Broderick, Gary Beach, and Roger Bart. The film benefits from having actors who have lived and breathed these roles daily for hundreds of performances. The film lets them preserve that perfection for posterity. The result is a film that is almost roll-in-the-aisles funny.

The film opens at the Shubert Theater in New York City. It is opening night of the latest Max Bialystock production, *Funny Boy!* The ushers are all excited singing, “It’s Max Bialystock’s latest show. Will it flop or will it go?” The audience rushes out and the verdict is in, “It’s the worst show in town!” Max (Nathan Lane) had once been hailed as the “King of Broadway,” but has had a long succession of closing-in-one-night flops. In Max’s office the next day, Leo Bloom (Broderick) arrives to examine the production’s books. He notes that he raised more than it cost to produce the play and then makes the theoretical observation that, “Under the right circumstances, a producer could make more money with a flop than he could with a hit.” Soon the two of them are searching for a sure-fire flop using the worst play, the worst director, and the worst actors to guarantee “success.”

At first Leo refuses to agree to the scheme, but we are shown his dreaded working environment with a cigar-smoking John Lovitz at his meanest presiding over

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an office of accountants. Their lives are so miserable they sing, “Unhappy. Unhappy. Very very very very very very very very unhappy,” which is just the way Lovitz wants them.

Leo muses about his secret desire to be a Broadway producer. The “I Want to be a Producer” musical number is a tribute to the grand musicals of the 30s when a small act in a nightclub magically transforms into this enormous stage production. In this case, from the dull office, out pops “beautiful girls, wearing nothing but pearls,” and Bloom dreams of “having lunch at Sardi’s every day” and to “wearing a tux on opening night.” And “having a great big casting couch,” adds the tap dancing girls who by now are tap dancing in front of a gorgeous art deco set with Leo’s name in lights. Then an elegant staircase appears on which the girls and Leo descend. Broderick shows off his surprisingly good dance moves and singing skills. Leo is eventually transported back to the office, and he quits his job, calls his boss, a “Certified Public ***hole,” and joins Max in their quest to “produce a giant Broadway flop!” Now that’s a number. Mel Brooks repeatedly pulled out all the stops in his Broadway musical transformation of his original movie, and they are faithfully reproduced in the film.

Will Ferrell shows off his skills as Franz Liebkind, the Nazi who insists Leo and Max perform “Der Guten Tag Hop-Clop.” Will Ferrell’s comedy shtick while singing lyrics such as, “dancin unt drinkin till we get stinkin” works amazingly well. Uma Thurman gets to show off her skills with her song, “When You Got It, Flaunt It,” a seductive number to which Max responds, “I want you to know, my dear, that even though we are sitting down, we are giving you a standing ovation!”

The two that just about stole the show were Gary Beach and Roger Bart who were recreating their Broadway roles of Roger De Bris (the worst director in the world) and Carmen Ghia, “Mr. De Bris’ common-law personal assistant.” They are a very “Mary” couple. Some might be offended initially by such effeminate gay stereotypes, but as the film goes on and you see how good they are for each other, and that they have so much giddy fun together, you are happy for them, and they present a positive gay role model to the public. They show Max and Leo how to have a successful Broadway musical as they sing, “Keep It Light, Keep It Bright, Keep It

Gay.” “Oedipus won’t bomb, if he winds up with mom,” they claim. With the all-gay staff joining in the number and bringing out Sabu, the champagne boy, to celebrate, everyone forms a conga line at the finish for about the gayest number ever produced in the history of movie musicals.

Such is the over-the-top nature of most of the numbers and the story. It is a joyous, fun romp. I think it is clearly one of the top five movies of 2005. If you do decide to go to the movie, be sure to sit through the credits: there is a hidden ending piece that you will not want to miss.

—Gary Kaufman

Dancin’ The Slow Dance!

They came down the aisle,
Side by side,
Arm in arm.
Left foot right foot,
Forward together,
They’re dancin’ the slow dance now.

Not for them intricate steps of a Tango, Rumba or Waltz,
No Boogie Woogie, Charleston, or Cha Cha Cha
He doesn’t sweep her around the floor or dip her way
back,
But they still move together,
Slow dancin’ to the music of life

You can tell theirs has been a long dance
The way they move together
A joy to watch for those who see.
(Most don’t see them).
Just an old couple moving slowly through the store

But there is rare beauty in their movement
Side by side,
Arm in arm,
Left feet forward.
Right feet forward
They’re slow dancin’ the last dance together.

—Jay Cole Simser

FFBC

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Des Moines, Iowa

MARCH 2006

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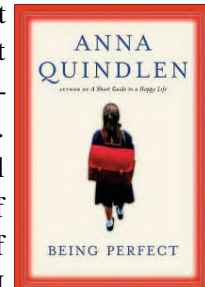
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From the Editor Being Perfect Should Not Be Your Life's Goal

I received a small book as a gift from my best friend. Written by essayist and novelist Anna Quindlen, *Being Perfect* presents the author's view of who she was and who she is today. Quindlen explains that when she was a high school student, she strove to be perfect in every way. "If there was a test to be taken, I had studied for it; if there was a paper to be written, it was done. I smiled at everyone in the hallways because it was important to be friendly, and I made fun of them behind their backs because it was important to be witty. And I edited the newspaper and cheered at pep rallies and emoted for the literary magazine and rode on the back of a convertible at the homecoming game and if anyone had ever stopped and asked me why I did those things—well, I'm not sure that I could have said why. But in hindsight I can say that I did them to be perfect, in every possible way."



The author proceeds with her thesis by saying that the person she was then is unrecognizable to the person she is now. She explains that being perfect is difficult because the rules keep changing, and when she entered Barnard College in 1970, she switched within a few months from her preppy self to the perfect uniform of overalls, turtlenecks, and clogs. She asserts that perfection is nothing less than imitation and that no great things ever develop from that. Her antidote to perfection? "Begin with that most frightening of all things, a clean slate. And then look, every day, at the choices you are making, and when you ask yourself why you are making them, find this answer: Because they are what I want, or wish for. Because they reflect who and what I am."

Through inner reflection and hard work, the author asserts that nothing will come of the "I wish" syndrome. It takes courage to fail and then move on from there. Perfection does not allow for failure, but it is from failure that we can improve. "Remember all of yourself," she writes, "the flaws as well as the many strengths. Pursuing perfection makes you unforgiving of the faults of others."

The book is profusely illustrated with many photographs and can be read in a matter of minutes. It may be a short read, but it is long on wisdom.

—Steve Person