

Planks need to be fitted but not too tight

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I had to replank a small portion of our barn's floor this week, which got me thinking about marriage and family.

Our three-story barn is framed and clad in rough chestnut that was cut here about 100 years ago. Its corners rest on unmortared limestone rocks. The central alley is planked with oak boards that are 15 feet long, 12 inches wide and two inches thick.

Over the years, rain and snow rotted out the first couple of planks nearest the barn's sliding doors. One-inch-thick boards had been nailed in as replacements before we came, perhaps 40 years ago.

The difference in thickness had always bothered me just enough to be bothered by it. It was now my turn to replace the replacements.

I had to fill a two-foot-wide gap across the alley.

In my various hoards of possibly useful spare materials, I came up with six 16-foot-long, one-inch-thick oak boards ranging from four to six inches wide.

I'm not one to gloat in front of the local marital skeptic, but my faith in the inevitability of using archival junk from historic projects was vindicated once again. In this case, the squirrel found the nuts he had stashed 30 years ago, which, I will point out, is not even a blink of an eye in geologic time.

By putting down two layers, I could bring the replacement boards level with the original planking. This would eliminate the little bump that has tripped me for three decades. I'm confident that equivalent bothers will rush in to fill my gap

I preferred locust, which I didn't have, to oak, because it's more resistant to water rot. Still, a 50-year barn repair would be good enough to avoid having to do it over during my lifetime. This is a good rule to follow as you age.

At first glance, this was a simple job. Pull up the old boards, stick in the six boards one layer at a time and screw them into the chestnut sills with half-inch-diameter, six-inch-long lag bolts.

No farm-repair job is as simple in practice as it is in theory.

Boards, particularly long ones, can warp in various ways. They bow, where the ends turn up. They crook, where a flat board curves into an arc.

They cup, where the long edges of the board pull toward each other. They twist, where one edge or corner is not flat. Most of my six boards did all of the above.

So I eyeballed this way and that. Then I figured and fiddled, tweaked and trimmed, rearranged and fit, pounded and levered and finally swore a fair amount until I got them situated properly.

Whereupon I discovered that my buried treasure caches of old supplies did not include the lag bolts. So I tacked everything in place to make do until I got to the hardware store.

As I wrestled with what an English carpenter friend once referred to as “the perversity of materials,” I was thinking about the debate over same-sex marriage.

In Virginia, as in most other states, it’s ridiculously easy for a male and a female to get a marriage license.

Virginia requires that you and your spouse cannot be the same gender; both of you are not currently married; the two of you are not too closely related (Virginia is OK with first cousins); and both of you are not so mentally incapacitated or infirm as to “...lack the capacity to consent to the marriage.” I’d guess that most Virginians can say, “I do,” without screwing it up.

A few states still check for venereal disease or females with rubella. Most set 18 as the minimum age for marrying without parental consent.

From government’s point of view, marriage is a right that qualified individuals exercise by obtaining a license.

Like voting, marriage is a voluntary act with only a few requirements. A few states, like Alabama and Virginia, prohibit those who have been declared “mentally incompetent” by a court from voting. Those incompetents who have avoided court get to vote.

No state prohibits men and women who are not heterosexual from voting.

Marriage unlike voting establishes elements of a contract between the consenting parties. If you get divorced, you learn about these elements real fast. No state prohibits men and women from entering into contracts with others of the same gender.

Marriage in America is a secular act when a government-issued license is obtained to make it lawful. As of 2010, 15 states and the District of Columbia recognized some version of common-law marriage, which is marriage without a government license. Each jurisdiction imposes a set of tests before it will formally recognize that two persons of opposite gender have achieved common-law-marriage status

Some marriages -- the estimates I found range between 40 and 80 percent -- are carried out within a religious ceremony. For the purposes of the law, marriage need not be conducted within a religion or through the auspices of a religious authority.

I understand why some religions and some religious individuals object to same-sex marriage on religious grounds or because it offends their sense of morality.

But I don't understand why the religious objections of these citizens should control government policy for all citizens.

Nor do I understand why same-sex individuals who do not share these religious beliefs should be prohibited from exercising a public right to qualify for a marriage license and get married in either a civil or religious ceremony of their choice just like heterosexual Americans.

A civic right available to one citizen should be available in the same way to all, regardless of differences in religion, country of origin, gender, property-ownership, race, ethnicity, first language and the sex of the consenting adult you have sex with. That's been the direction that American society has taken for the last 150 years.

Eleven countries -- Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, South Africa and Sweden -- now allow same-sex marriage. So do nine states—Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, Washington and the District of Columbia.

The more interesting regulatory question to me has to do with qualifications for family.

We have no minimum standards or license requirement for starting families, within marriage or outside of it. Any bozo can be party to making children, and many bozos do, indeed, party.

With the exception of adults who are abusive, totally incompetent or negligent -- which we determine after the fact rather than before -- most anyone can take on raising children. I use "raising" in a very loose sense.

States do not regulate who can start making children and forming families. No one wants to reach into that can of worms.

There's a reasonable public-safety argument for having government set some minimum conditions under which citizens can start families. It would boil down to answering questions about how much harm two individuals are likely to wreak on their kids, intentionally or unintentionally.

In and of itself, a childless marriage that doesn't work only harms the two adults. But a marriage with children between two adults who aren't capable of parenting can damage generations.

Of course, the prospect of government determining who can and who can't have children is so dangerous and repugnant to any society that values individual freedom that it's best to just put up with the collateral damage we do to ourselves.

The planks in my barn's floor are not unlike the members of a functional family.

The individual pieces have to fit together. They can't be laid in at cross purposes.

But sufficient space has to be left between each one to allow for personal growth, which is another name for swelling.

Each board has to do its part for the floor to function.

No one wants boards in a floor to be of different thicknesses or individuals in a family to rub each other the wrong way.

But I know that everybody needs to learn to live with a few bothers in a floor or a family.

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