I come from a conservative family, but in my almost four complete years here at UMass I have had the opportunity to learn about different perspectives that have changed the way that I view the world very significantly. A few months ago I got to have the marriage equality conversation with my uncle, and I was happy that he not only took my arguments seriously as an adult thinker but also was willing to consider that what I said had some merits. In light of the national conversation surrounding marriage equality that has been occurring while California's Proposition 8, which restricts marriage explicitly to opposite sex couples, is put before the Supreme Court, I would like to revisit my smaller conversation.

I have to say very seriously, first, that my uncle is one of my favorite people in the world, and he is kind and rational and intelligent. He has never made me to feel belittled because of my age or my gender, he has never dismissed my beliefs about anything but rather always wants to hear my rationale. That being said, if my uncle’s ideas about issues of social justice do not resemble mine, it is because our exposure to these issues has been extremely different.

I can’t remember how our marriage equality conversation came up, but I remember how it ended. My answers about this topic were unequivocally in favor. My uncle agreed with me, it is ludicrous that LGBTQ people in this country are often treated like second class citizens, that they don’t have the same legal protection over the custody of their children, that their families are not recognized as legitimate in the same way that the families of heterosexual people are, that they cannot freely visit their loved ones in the hospital or make important decisions in regards to health or finance together in the same way that heterosexual couples can.

But, my uncle said, he was wary about allowing gay and lesbian people to “get married.” Why not a civil union that has the same benefits and protections? I was curious about why he felt this way. He explained to me that the word marriage is
defined to mean the union of a man and a woman, and he was uncomfortable with degrading language.

I think this is one of the weakest arguments against marriage equality, held up as a screen to cover what really lies beneath it - fear of what is not understood, fear of what is different, fear of losing your own privilege - but also perhaps one of the easiest arguments to counter, and not with any kind of appeals to empathy or humanity or equality, but with linguistics.

Because language, as I've learned in a few classes here, cannot be “degraded.” Language is fluid and constantly changing. We are perfectly capable of learning the meanings of new words and of learning new meanings for old words. In fact, we do it all the time. When my uncle proposed that when he was in high school, that marriage could mean the union of two men was unheard of, that no one would understand marriage to mean that, I countered by pulling my cellphone from my pocket.

When you were in high school, I replied, no one would have understood the word “phone” to refer to a device that you carry in your pocket that can receive calls, send texts, and access the internet. In fact, when you were in high school, what were texts? What was the internet? Certainly not what I mean when I say any of those words now. But you can understand me perfectly when I say them, because we are capable of reassigning meanings to words as we need to. No one would accuse me of degrading the word “phone” by calling what I keep in my pocket a phone, even though originally phones were large and had to be plugged into walls and could not access the internet or send texts.

My uncle conceded that this could be a fair point that he would think more about. There are other arguments against this line of thinking - that separate but equal is never really equal, for instance, is one - but I was happy to leave our conversation at that. One step at a time, I'll call it a win for unlearning prejudices.

It happens over and over again in conversations with people whom I love and respect, whom I know to be intelligent and compassionate, that I find myself swimming upstream against a current of gender, race, class, or heteronormative privilege. However, I know that participating passively in systems of oppression is something that we all have been socialized to do. Just as Beverly Tatum says, we wouldn’t classify ourselves as smog breathers, but if we live in an area with polluted air we can’t help but breathe in the smog, day in and day out. It is not our fault if we are affected badly by our toxic environment. But it is our fault if we recognize that our environment is toxic and we do nothing to fix it.

It's hard for me to have conversations like this with my family, because I know that my ideas now don't align with much of what had seemed obvious to me while I was growing up. It's hard for me to listen to adults I look up to say things that I know to be problematic. However, I don't know how anyone can ever change their minds about anything without some kind of push in a different direction, which is why, no matter how difficult these kinds of conversations can be, when my loved ones say things that are troubling to me I try not to bite my tongue and let them slide, assured that they are good people with good intentions. I try to ask questions and to present different view points where I can, because if no one ever does anything, we'll never have clean air.